

Bennoch church: 8th May 2016

The clue is in the name - Numbers. It is all about counting. For the people of Israel, who were on their way to the Promised Land, there is need of an army, for how else are they going to invade that territory and claim it for God? There were going to have to do it by force. There was no other way. This census, was in effect, God conscripting his army. All fit men over the age of twenty were being registered for military service.

That was the next stage of the journey they had to plan for. The Law had been given at Mount Sinai and now they were on their way to the Promised Land. Guided by God through a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. However, that invasion would have to wait 40 years and is other story altogether. In Numbers chapter one, the counting had a purpose. It was to find out their military strength.

What is the strength of the church today and how would you measure it? The Church of Scotland counts its membership and it stands at the end of 2015, at approximately, 350,000. In 1956, it was about 1.2 million. We all know that this figure contains many people who never attend or support the work of the church. So in terms of strength, was are actually weaker than the figure suggests.

There has been recent research done by The Mission and Discipleship Council of the church, seeking to identify what is

called the "*Invisible*" church. This is from the Church of Scotland web site.

This Easter, the number of people who hold the Christian faith as central to their lives is much greater than church attendance figures suggest.

A new study investigating why people stop attending church has discovered two thirds of church-leavers maintain a strong personal faith. Falling church attendance has been described as 'a hemorrhage akin to a burst artery' and this research is the first to make a thorough exploration of the world behind the statistics. Its findings challenge assumptions that declining numbers of people sitting in pews on Sunday mornings are synonymous with a decline in Christian faith and the Christian community.

"I discovered the number of people who attend church services are the tip of the iceberg of the total Christian community" says researcher Dr Steve Aisthorpe, whose findings are presented in a new book, 'The Invisible Church'. "I conducted extensive and rigorous research in Scotland and made a careful study of related research from other parts of the UK and across the Western world. I found that changes in wider society and in the practices of Christian people mean attendance at Sunday morning worship can no longer be seen as a reliable indicator of the health and scale of Christian faith. There is decline in Christian faith in Britain, but it is considerably smaller than previously assumed."

The research commissioned by the Church of Scotland suggests Christianity in Great Britain is in transition, rather than decline. This is an issue for wider society because faith-based organisations in the third sector are increasingly involved in public service provision and an accurate picture of faith-based communities is vital. It is also an issue for churches, who want to maintain the relevance of their worship services to their members and the wider community.

Statistics can tell you anything. Statistics can support both sides of any argument, at the same time. The devil is in the detail and needs to be well understood and interpreted.

On the other side of the coin, is census Sunday, where more than 4000 congregations across Scotland, and from all denominations, will record their attendance. It is a 'snapshot' of the 'visible' church. Those who attend worship and can be counted on a particular day. This information will reveal both our strengths and our weaknesses. It will be compared to figures from five years ago, to help provide the church with an accurate picture of trends in 21st century Scotland, comparable with the Statistics for Mission profiles done for each congregation, so the church can informatively focus on both their national and local, ministry and mission. That is the purpose of the census.

The title of this year's General Assembly - yes they have titles - is *People of the way*. The pilgrim journey is always hard. History has shown that. From the struggles of the people of God in their 40 wilderness years, to the church in 21st century Scotland, as it struggles to witness in an ever changing society. We also need

to know where we are going, where is our Promised Land is, and we also need to know, who is travelling with us. Theologically, we are not always in agreement, but, the journey we are on together, in seeking the Kingdom of God on earth, is far more important, than any difference that might divide us.

Part of our witness is to stand and be counted. To be the church 'visible' and not the church 'invisible'. To be one amongst the many, that is the Body of Christ, in Scotland. To share the pilgrim road with our fellow travellers; some found in the formal structures of the church, others of faith, who are travelling the road alone, many who have left the church behind, and those in our communities, who will partner with us, in the work of fighting injustice, inequality and a lack of compassion in today's society.

In being counted, we are not numbers. That is hugely important. We are all unique people in the eyes of God. We are all known by Christ and we are all bound together by an eternal spirit, who is saying to us; we are travelling together, the destination is God's Kingdom here on earth. That is our promised land. We ask God, to give us the strength and the perseverance, to run the race of faith to the end, and to keep our eyes, firmly fixed, on Jesus. Amen.