

## REACHING THE NONES

BY SARAH PIX

As Christian leaders, we find ourselves in a new landscape. Like the evolution of all topography, it has not happened overnight.

The decline in church attendance and belief in God has been well documented over decades. The last few decades have seen dramatic cultural changes in our nation. We have seen a shift from a general feeling of warmth and positivity towards the church, through indifference, to hostility. Coinciding with this, within the Church, the 'E' word has been out of favour, dismissed as too difficult, the domain of specialists or even culturally inappropriate. So the new raft of resources that CPAS has recently launched, to aid churches in creating a culture of evangelism, are timely indeed.

### BOLDER, HUMBLER, SIMPLER

Last year, the Church of England adopted a new mission statement: bolder, humbler, simpler – and there have been some positive signs of a reawakening, with the reformation of the College of Evangelists and the Archbishop of Canterbury's Lent book for 2021 (Living His Story, Hannah Steele), a call for renewed efforts in personal evangelism, and an attempt to demystify it.

Despite the Covid years being deeply challenging for those in church leadership, and accelerating some of the trends that were ticking over pre-Covid, there have also been positive stories, with many non-churched people connecting with online services and Zoom Alpha. In October last year, the BBC reported that 51% of young adults pray regularly, and 49% attend a place of worship monthly, placing them leaps and bounds ahead of the over 55s on both counts!

### THE RISE OF THE 'NONES'

In this landscape, I have had the privilege of working on a project focusing in on a particular section of society that has quietly but rapidly been increasing. We are witnessing the rise of the 'Nones'.

These are the people who would tick the box in a census to say that they are of no religion. In the 2011 census, the percentage of people reporting as Christian dropped from the previous 72% to 59% - that's 4.1 million people in the space of a decade. And a total of 6.4 million more people saying that they are of no religion.

Since then we have had another census, but the findings have not yet been published. However, other studies such as the one produced by the [Benedict XVI Centre for](#)



[Religion and Society](#), and the tremendously helpful Bible Society poll of 20,000 people used as the basis for their [Lumino](#) platform, have shown that the trend is continuing.

**We are now waking up to the fact that 52% of our nation no longer believe in God, and this is predicted to rise to 60-65% by 2030.**

### OUR RESPONSE

As Christians in this nation, how do we step up to such a challenge? The answer is certainly 'prayerfully'. I think also 'imaginatively'. The Anglican Ordinal charges those who would be ordained to 'proclaim afresh in each generation the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ', challenging us to find new Holy Spirit-inspired ways of communicating the timeless, unchanging gospel in fresh ways. Many of the resources that we use to help people learn about Jesus and encounter him, assume a basic level of knowledge and understanding. But many no longer know the story of Jesus.

With the very fibre of British Society being steeped in Christianity, previous generations were likely to have grown up with church attendance, school assemblies, and compulsory hymn practice. Sometimes this led them away from Jesus rather than to him. We have become very conscious of the importance of vaccination through the Covid pandemic. Is it possible that some in this era walked away from Christian faith because they had just enough religion to effectively vaccinate them against true, life-giving faith in Jesus? That they had just enough church-going running through their veins that they are now immune to the real vibrant relationship with God?

For this generation, increasingly, this is not an issue, as, unless you grow up in church, you just don't know the basic narrative of the gospel. This means that the good news is being heard by fresh ears and unjaded hearts, and being received as just that – good news.

So this is both of great concern, but like all challenges, also confronts us with amazing opportunities if we can only take a hold of them.

### AN OPPORTUNITY

A project is underway looking at the rise of the 'Nones' in the UK, and how the church can be equipped to reach out to them. You can visit our [website](#) to find out more.

The aim is to put the 'Nones' firmly on the Church's agenda, and to establish a community of practitioners who can encourage one another with good news stories and best practice. If you feel in need of some encouragement with regard to the task ahead of us, take a look at some of the video testimonies on the website – stories of 'Nones' who encountered Jesus and have been transformed.

Historically we have been great at taking the opportunities amongst our fringe. We have been good at making warm connections with people and offering them the next step with Jesus, whether that is an invitation to a special service, to Alpha, or to a parenting course based on Christian teaching.

But that fringe is diminishing, and the 'Nones' are increasing and we cannot ignore them if we are serious about our mission to make disciples of all nations (read 'people groups' or cultures, of which the 'Nones' are a significant one). The 'Nones' need Jesus just as much as everyone else, even if they are closed to him for now.

We can't give you a formula or even a small group resource. In fact, our research has shown us that some of the old-fashioned methods of 1-to-1 relationship, prayer etc. are still the most effective. Jesus resisted laying down formulas in his teaching. Perhaps the closest that he came to was, 'I only do what I see my Father doing' (John 5: 19). It seems that he wants our ministry and mission to flow from relationship with the Father. So we must seek him. It must be on the agenda.

And remember, our God does resurrection and redemption. Hope abounds.



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