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Faith journeys beyond the congregations:

an interim summary of insights from the
“Listening to – and learning from – Christians in
the Highlands and Islands” project

Steve Aisthorpe

Church of Scotland

Mission Development Worker (North)

July 2013

1. Introduction

During the latter part of 2012 and early 2013 a research project was initiated to develop a better understanding of the experiences and perspectives of Christians in the Highlands and Islands who are not engaged with a local church congregation¹. This is a provisional summary of that research. It is written especially for those who participated in the research and those who have indicated an interest in the project in response to various articles. It is hoped that this summary will fill a gap between these articles² (which, inevitably, have been, as one reader put it, “tantalisingly general”) and the full write-up, which is in process.

This summary deals with the insights gained from thirty interviews. The techniques involved in recruiting the participants, conducting the interviews and analysing the transcripts mean that we have in-depth information only on the particular people interviewed. Any more general conclusions are only informed assertions. Later this year, a survey will test these assertions with a much larger (approximately 400) and scientifically random sample. In one sense, then, the purposes of the research summarised here have been to learn the correct questions to ask of a much larger group.

After this survey, it will be possible to make well-founded statements about changes within the Christian community across the Highlands and Islands and make educated proposals regarding other predominantly rural areas in Scotland and beyond. However, at this point, following a brief explanation of the background, this summary will limit itself to explaining the methodology that has been adopted, the data that has been gathered and the outcomes of the analysis that has been undertaken.

When possible, verbatim quotations from interviews will be included. By including these it is hoped that this summary will move beyond pure description and give a “voice” to the interviewees themselves. Where quotations differ from the original interview transcript it is purely to protect the identity of the interviewee.

¹ The project title is “Listening to – and learning from – Christians in the Highlands and Islands”.

² Articles relating to this research have been published in *Life and Work* (January and August 2013), *Country Way* (June-September 2013) and *Baptist Times* (8 June 2013).

2. Acknowledgements

The research described here was only possible because of those people who agreed to share their experiences and perspectives in an in-depth interview. Much gratitude is owed to all who were willing to participate in interviews. It has been a huge privilege to be welcomed not only into the homes of many of the interviewees, but into their lives, as they have openly shared their life stories, journeys in faith and experiences of church life. The other big debt of gratitude is owed to Sheila Reeves, Senior Administrator of the Church Without Walls team in the Church of Scotland's Mission and Discipleship Council. Sheila diligently transcribed most of the interviews, thereby transforming digital recordings into data that could be analysed. The other significant influence on this project has been that of Professor Leslie Francis and colleagues involved in the Centre for Studies in Rural Ministry. Their guidance and comments have shaped the process from initial ideas to its current stage and have helped to steer the project away from potential pitfalls.

3. Background

Evidence suggests that there is a large and growing sector of the Christian community that is almost entirely neglected by the institutional church. This sector remains largely invisible in the media's comment on, and the public's perception of, the Christian community. The sector referred to comprises those people who are committed Christians but who do not regularly attend a local congregation of what has been sometimes been called "the institutional church". As one leading academic has put it, "Religion in Europe is like an iceberg: most of what is interesting is under the water and out of view."³

However, the evidence that suggests this is far from cohesive. It is pieced together from material gleaned from research on "church leavers"⁴, data on church attendance⁵ and studies of the spirituality of people who do not attend church⁶. To date, no study has focused

³ Davie (1994) *Religion in Britain Since 1945*, Wiley-Blackwell.

⁴ For example, Francis, L. J. and Richter, P. J. (2007) *Gone for Good?: Church Leaving and Returning in the 21st Century*, Epworth Press.

⁵ For example, Brierley, P. (1998-2008) *Religious Trends*, Christian Research; Ashworth, J. and Farthing, I. (2007) "Churchgoing in the UK: A research report from Tearfund on church attendance in the UK" at http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/03_04_07_tearfundchurch.pdf

⁶ Hay, D. (2002) "The Spirituality Of Adults In Britain – Recent Research" in *Scottish Journal of Healthcare Chaplaincy* Vol. .5 No 1.

exclusively on people who are committed Christians, but who do not regularly attend church. While “church leavers” account for some of this group there are others who have escaped the attention of previous researchers. There are, for example, people who have become committed Christians from an unchurched background but never engaged with a local church congregation.

This gap in current research is no small matter. In 2001, the author of the *World Christian Encyclopaedia*, David Barrett, estimated that there were 112 million “churchless Christians” worldwide⁷. He projected that this number would double by 2025 – and yet there is still little data on people’s experience of what has been called “churchless faith”⁸ and no clear view of the patterns and scale of this phenomenon.

Despite the lack of coherent and focused data relating to Christians who do not regularly attend church, an estimate of the minimum scale of this phenomenon can be obtained by combining data on the so-called “dechurched” (i.e. former churchgoers, no longer regularly engaged with a church congregation) with the insights from the most rigorous data available on “church leavers”. Ashworth & Farthing (2007) found that 39% of people in Scotland counted themselves as “dechurched”. That data also showed that the proportion of “dechurched” people was highest in rural areas, suggesting that we might expect the figure for the Highlands and Islands to be higher than the 39% Scottish average. If, as research findings from other parts of the western world suggest, most of the “dechurched” have not “deconverted”, but merely “deaffiliated”⁹ then those Christians not currently engaged in a local congregation will represent the fastest growing sector within the Christian community.

If this is the reality, it calls into question many interpretations of the current context. For example, what Peter Brierley of Christian Research, referring to the dramatic decline in church attendance in recent years, has described as “a haemorrhage akin to a burst artery”¹⁰ may, in fact, be more of a reconfiguration - a paradigm shift - within the Christian community. Rather than indicating that “We could well bleed to death ... we [British Churches] are one generation from extinction”, the evidence could reflect a seismic shift in how Christians express their worship, nurture their faith, participate in fellowship and engage in God’s mission. Is it purely coincidental that recent decades have seen both decline in

⁷ Barrett, D. (2001) *World Christian Encyclopaedia*, OUP.

⁸ Jamieson, A. (2002) *A Churchless Faith*, SPCK.

⁹ Richter and Francis, 1998, found that only about one in three church leavers pointed to loss of faith as their key reason for leaving

¹⁰ Brierley, P. (2000) *The Tide is Running Out*, Christian Research.

traditional church-going and the burgeoning of new, less institutional, forms of church in the UK? Is there, as some working in other contexts have suggested¹¹, a substantial transition going on within the Christian community – a movement from an affiliation to institutional forms of church towards new, less formalised expressions? How is the apparent paradox of declining church attendance and rising interest in spirituality reflected in the lives of people in the Highlands and Islands? Are those Christians who are exploring non-congregational forms of faith journeying best seen as the fall-out of congregational decline or the avant-garde of something new or something else? These are all questions that this study and the survey that will follow¹² seek to answer.

4. Methodology

“Listening to – and learning from – Christians in the Highlands and Islands” can be described as an “inductive” approach to research. This means that, rather than starting out with a theory and testing it, people’s stories were listened to in a very open fashion and then, by carefully analysing the interview transcripts, themes have been identified that will now form the basis of the propositions to be tested by surveying a large, random sample.

4.1 Recruiting the interviewees

Potential interviewees were identified in one of the following ways:

- Contacts referred through church leaders
- Articles in local newspapers
- “Snowballing” (i.e. participants suggesting other possible participants)
- Social media (Twitter and Facebook)

By identifying a group of potential interviewees that was about three times the size of the required thirty, it was possible to choose participants who, as a group, were representative in terms of the following four factors:

¹¹ Tickle, P. (2008) *The Great Emergence*, Baker; Brewin, K. (2007) *Signs of Emergence: A Vision for Church That Is Organic/Networked Decentralized/Bottom-Up/Communal/Flexible/Always Evolving*, Baker.

¹² As explained in the “What next?” section of this paper, an extensive survey is planned in order to explore the themes that have emerged from the interviews and better understand the scale and pattern of changes that are taking place within the Christian community in the region.

- Sex
- Age (generation)
- Location
- Experiences of church

In terms of sex, the cohort was half male and half female. Rather than filter by age on a purely mathematical basis, it was decided to apply some widespread categories from generational theory. Generational theory explains that the era in which a person was born affects the development of their view of the world. Our value systems are shaped in the first decade or so of our lives, by our families, our friends, our communities, significant events and the era in which we are born. For the purposes of this study, based on a review of literature related to generational theory, the following categorisation was adopted:

- “Silent Generation” (SG) born 1920s – 45
- “Baby Boomers” (BB) born 1946 – 64
- “Generation X” (X) born 1965-81
- “Generation Y” (Y) born 1982 – 99

Historical data relating to church attendance and changes in church attendance show significant regional differences across the Highlands and Islands¹³. For this reason - and also because of cultural differences that might be significant – interviewees were sought from each of the following geographical areas:

- Outer Hebrides
- West Coast & North West
- Eastern Highlands
- Orkney
- Shetland

In terms of church experiences, interviewees included people who “dechurched from within the region” (i.e. people who were engaged with a congregation in the Highlands and Islands and then disengaged), “dechurched from elsewhere” (i.e. people who were engaged with a congregation elsewhere and dechurched either before moving into the research area or

¹³ Brierley, P. (2003) *Turning the Tide: The Challenge Ahead – Report of the 2002 Scottish Church Census*, Christian Research.

concurrently with moving into the area), and “unchurched” people, who, while they are committed Christians, have never been regular churchgoers.

For the purpose of this research a “church congregation” was defined as one that is part of a wider denomination or network. In terms of defining what constitutes “engagement” with a church, this study adopted the practice-based definition used by others researching “church leaving”¹⁴ – whereby “engagement” requires a minimum of attending at least six congregational worship services (excluding weddings, funerals, Christmas and Easter events) in a year. In practice, all of the interviewees fell well within these definitions. Most were deeply committed Christians who had been involved in some kind of Christian leadership.

4.2 The interviews

Interviewees were asked to recount “their story” as it related to faith and any involvement with churches. As far as possible the interview then progressed without interruption apart from occasional prompts or questions for the purpose of clarification. Interviews were recorded as digital files. The longest interview was 145 minutes and the shortest was just over 10 minutes. Most were around an hour. Each interview was then transcribed.

4.3 Analysis

By carefully reading through the transcripts, highlighting and noting key points, a total of 27 themes were identified. Specialist software (NVivo 9¹⁵) was then used to manage the many references from the transcripts that supported these themes. Once the transcripts were coded in NVivo it was possible to draw together all references to particular themes and look at these in more detail.

4.4 Ethical considerations

Good research is grounded on sound methodology and this includes careful attention to ethical considerations. All aspects of the research were scrutinised by the Glyndwr

¹⁴ This was pioneered by Hoge, Johnson and Luidens (1993) and the logic for adopting this is outlined in Francis, L. J. and Richter, P. J. (2007) *Gone for Good?: Church Leaving and Returning in the 21st Century*, Epworth Press.

¹⁵ NVivo is a qualitative data analysis (QDA) computer software package produced by QSR International.

University Research Ethics Standing Committee. All interviewees read an information sheet and signed a consent form in order to ensure that they were fully aware of the measures taken to maintain their anonymity and the confidentiality of their personal information. It was clear that interviewees were free to opt out of the project at any time and the interview process was such that participants only shared what they wished to share.

5. The data

The core data comprise 28 hours of recorded interviews and 167,400 words of interview transcripts. However, the process has also generated a lot of correspondence which, in itself, has added to the research. Articles that were published in local newspapers in order to recruit interviewees resulted in correspondence from people who shared their experiences and views on why people might be choosing to practice their faith in non-congregational ways. More recently, the articles that have been published in magazines to raise awareness of the project have also resulted in further correspondence.

Of particular note was a significant volume of correspondence from people who are currently engaged with a church congregation, but struggling to remain so. The following quotation is typical:

“... not only are there people out there who have ‘Churchless Faith’, but there are others who are seriously considering it - me for one! My faith is as strong as it's ever been (along with all the usual doubts etc.) but I am seriously wondering whether the Kirk, or indeed any other organised religion, is an appropriate or healthy place to express it ...”.

6. What have we heard?

This kind of qualitative research is, by its very nature, subjective. Nothing has been measured or counted; we have simply listened and then carefully analysed all that we have heard. What follows, therefore, is a discussion of some of the themes that have most frequently recurred. In order to be honest to the data, each theme will be backed up by illustrative quotations.

Where it is stated that “a few” of the interviewees stated something or referred to something it means that quotations from between two and five of the interviewees have been noted as related to this theme. Similarly, the term “several” means five to ten transcripts contained references to a theme and “over a third” or “under half” refers to between ten and fifteen interviewees. The term “most” is reserved for instances where more than half of the interviewees said things that related to a particular theme.

Readers should be absolutely clear that the purpose of this careful use of language does not in any way imply that generalisations can be made on the basis of the research that has been undertaken to this point. These interviews have provided in-depth insights into the experiences and perspectives of the particular people we have listened to. Whilst we have sought to interview a sample that is representative in the ways described above, it has not been a random sample and we must restrain ourselves from making generalisations until data is available from the forthcoming survey. The use of the precise language outlined above is purely to give the reader a sense of how significant the various themes are *within* the data.

6.1 The resilience of faith

Several interviewees reported that their faith life has diminished since ceasing regular congregational engagement. Typically, they described finding it difficult to maintain spiritual disciplines. One person, for example, reported:

“I’ve found it harder to read my Bible as much ... I suppose I’ve found it harder to pray ... But it hasn’t made me feel further from God or more remote.”

However, most who had once been regular churchgoers reported that, in retrospect, their faith journey has been positively impacted by disengagement from the congregation they were previously a part of. So while comments such as “I do miss the fellowship” were not uncommon, most described a sense of relief after what, for most, had been a prolonged period of struggling (see below). The following quotation summarises the kind of experience that most described:

“It was a wonderful relief when I realised I was free to walk away from the churches in which I had tried so hard to conform, but wasn’t flourishing ...”

One married couple described how their disengagement from church had led to a deepening of their relationship and their shared discipleship:

“It’s been good in building up a relationship with God individually, but it’s been good for our relationship with one another”.

Some expressed concern for the wellbeing of friends who remain in regular involvement with a church congregation, but are struggling - as in the following comment:

“One of the things we keep encountering is a sense of a watershed that’s developing within the Highlands. It feels as if God is presenting the church with a choice of either you change and you accept all the risks that go with that change, or you cling onto what’s familiar even while it’s dying ... And a number of people that we know have chosen to cling on and have lost even the confidence they had because it feels like the sense of desperation is increasing.”

6.2 A hunger for fellowship

A few of the interviewees are isolated as Christians. However, most have linked into friendships or informal groups that have Christian fellowship as part of their purpose. The following was a fairly typical comment: “We’ve ... been meeting occasionally with some other couples that have come out of the church.” Some have been proactive in gathering others together and in establishing new kinds of churches. One interview reported that, two years after disengaging with a local congregation:

“... a fellowship has come into being – disciples are being made and we meet together and we follow what I believe to be the simplicity of the church in the New Testament. And so we don’t have a religious building; we don’t have any plan to have a religious building. If we grew – and we have been growing – we would multiply into various homes or other places where we could meet, and we’re praying for that. We’ve got the beginnings of a second group that started over the last month or two.”

A few are engaged in “long-distance fellowship” as their main source of spiritual nurture. So one person reported:

“What helps me most is an “anam cara” [a “soul friend” in the Celtic tradition] who although in [a place several hundred miles away] is a great help ... I am a long-distance parishioner of [a Christian community based in a location several hundred miles away]”.

Several people mentioned that the internet had been helpful in linking them to other Christians. A few had found the internet a source of fellowship and inspiration. One person who finds gathering in groups very difficult reported how helpful online churches such as www.stpixels.com had been; others mentioned webcasts and opportunities to join worship remotely such as those provided by St Andrew’s Parish Church Bo’ness.

6.3 Leaving church is painful

It has sometimes been suggested that people often leave churches for trivial reasons¹⁶. However, this did not appear to be true for any of those interviewed as part of this study. In fact, most who had left churches (as opposed to those who had never been in the habit of regular churchgoing) described leaving after a lengthy period of frustration, disappointment and difficulties. Most described a process of prolonged deliberation and soul searching. Whilst, in hindsight, most see their disengagement from church positively, they also recounted times of anguish in the (often long) period leading up to their disengagement from congregational church. The following are typical statements:

“I found it very difficult to worship and after a while I just had to leave ... got terribly depressed about the situation – it made me quite ill, nightmares, couldn’t sleep ...”;

“I was finding I wasn’t sleeping well, I was finding that I was having very uneasy feelings and uneasy relationships within the church”.

Most also described feelings of guilt after deciding to disengage from a congregation. “I’ve grown up always going somewhere on a Sunday morning, it feels really weird and kind of wrong!” was a typical comment.

¹⁶ The Times, quoting “research”, carried a headline, “Petty squabbles cause empty pews” and stated that, “Typical arguments take place over types of buildings, styles of worship, youth work. If not that, then they argue over the flower rota.” However, this and similar reports were based on a research sample of which 98% “attended church regularly”. This was not, therefore, a survey of people who had left churches; it was a study of church-goers’ perceptions.

However, while some still wrestle with those feelings some time later (“I kind of feel guilty that I don’t go to church any more”), most find a place of peace and, as one interviewee put it “equilibrium”: “I think the overwhelming experience is of a much better ... I was going to say ‘balance’ but it’s not all about balance ... much better ‘equilibrium’”.

6.4 Life really is a journey

The well-worn metaphor “life is a journey” is one that helpfully describes the accounts that were listened to during this research. While few interviewees used the term “journey”, it is noticeable that, in describing the ups and downs of their experience of the Christian faith and their experiences of church congregations, these were often related to significant life events. Bereavements, health challenges and home relocations were given as some of the catalysts for re-evaluating faith and church attendance. Generally speaking, faith seems to have been deepened by these crisis events, but not always. One person described how a particularly difficult year (“... even now without any question, that was the worst year of our family life, it really was.”) led to a period of deep questioning and a moving away from faith as it had previously been configured:

“I also found that at this time my spiritual life was somehow deadened, I’d lost something here as well and, over a period of years, I tried to be aware of what was happening and analyse it and it took me three years really to work out what was happening. But generally speaking I would say that I found that I could not accept a lot of the Christian premises of belief.”

The same person described how now, several years later, there is a hesitant and gradual return to a re-evaluated faith:

“I have now started praying more than I was, and it has invigorated my Christian faith. I am still puzzled and have to work out exactly where my Christian faith lies ...”

Some people described their faith being encouraged by major life changes, but using those changes as an opportunity to disengage with congregational church with as little stress as possible. For example, a few people explained how a house move gave the opportunity to

stop churchgoing. One person described how the need to visit a family member who was ill gave the opportunity to move away from the congregation without creating a stir:

“... I think the general understanding within the church was that because of my involvement and time that I was spending with [the family member who was ill], that that somehow meant that I didn't have time to give my energies to the church. That's what I think happened ...”

When this person finally resigned from the congregation (where they had held a particular leadership role) it went largely unnoticed: “Funnily enough when I did resign, hardly anyone asked me, hardly anyone.”

While most point to life crises as deepening faith, a few interviewees expressed disappointment at their experience of church at these times. These people had an expectation of pastoral care that was not met when it was most needed. The following are typical:

“What I don't like about church in the general sense is that there's no pastoral care ... we really need that feeling that somebody ... has a real proper sense of deep care for us and I think that's probably why I've kind of fallen away from being part of a traditional church setting.”

“I thought, ‘He hasn't a clue how to handle me. He doesn't see that I'm actually struggling and I'm really looking at him for help, and to come up with language that would be identifiable to me as well.’ ... So I kind of floundered for a long time.”

6.5 Missional concern¹⁷

Whilst most people described some negative experiences that acted as “push factors”, most interviewees implied that, on balance, it was a concern for the missional challenges in their area (and the fact that these had not been adequately met or even taken seriously by the local congregation) that were decisive motivators for their disengagement from the congregation. For most of these interviewees, part of their struggles with life as a member of the congregation was that more and more time seemed to be demanded for internal matters,

¹⁷ The term “missional concern” is used here to convey the passion that most interviewees communicated that the Christian message should have an impact in their community and in society. Most felt that the congregations they had experienced were focused on internal affairs whereas they felt called to the bigger cause of God's mission.

leaving less time to nurture relationships with friends outside the Christian community. One person explained it this way:

“... there was a draw ... there was a request for more and more time to be spent in a variety of meetings ... there was the request for Session meetings and for a management committee. There was a hall to be built, there was a lot of time being consumed by all this ...”.

Time spent on church management was leading, in this person’s experience, to neglect of a basic aspect of Christian living as a consequence:

“... as we got to the end of the 90s, what was really striking us were two things – time is short, years are passing quickly, this commission that we have to be active in the world as ambassadors for Christ was something that was much more theoretical than practical it seemed.”

Having failed to convince others in leadership to address this issue, this person and their spouse decided to leave the congregation. Despite sadness at having failed to communicate their vision to the minister, elders and wider congregation, they were immediately encouraged by how the time that had been used in church-related matters was used in engaging with others beyond the Christian community:

“... it was like getting an eighth day to the week. It was unbelievable what sort of opened up. ... our opportunities to be impactful are just on another scale completely ... we talk with a lot more people than we ever did outside the faith community about our life in faith. We get asked a lot more than we ever did before about serious stuff of life from people who are themselves in positions of responsibility and dealing with all kinds of complexities and uncertainties and ambiguities that they face perhaps in their careers but as much in the family or in their relationships ...”

Others experienced concern that the activities of the congregation had little to communicate to their friends and neighbours. One person, for example, described how they came to see the church congregation and the day-to-day lives of most people in the community as having so little overlap, that any missional engagement was virtually non-existent:

“... we felt that something was holding back the church at the wider level. I think part of it was the sense of the church exists within its own bubble a lot of the time

... We mix with people ... we meet people in a shop, we meet people in the course of our work day by day, but it felt often as if these were two separate bubbles that never really involved much integration and it was hard to imagine what would ever have much impact in the sense of not just 'here we are, this is who we are' but making Jesus relevant to people where they were."

Others described this in terms of relevance, feeling that the congregations they had experienced had become "irrelevant" to the wider community.

6.6 Resistance to change

A recurring theme throughout most interviews was a perception that congregations are very resistant to change. Whether people's primary concerns were matters that frustrated them personally or issues that they were concerned about for the sake of others, they found that they were powerless to bring about change. Indeed, people spoke in the strongest terms of the way congregational culture and denominational structures make it extremely difficult for congregations to adapt. The following quotations summarise the feeling shared by most:

"... and of course Presbyterianism is an amazingly well-designed machine in that it can keep going, keep going, keep going, and I think it is part of the problem in the Highlands."

"... one thing I don't like about the church is it has not, I don't think, progressed with time and with society, really. I'm quite dismayed that generally speaking church services, particularly up in the West of Scotland, have not changed much in 100 years, and that to me is not healthy."

"... if there is to be an institutionalised church where people can attend on a regular basis they're going to have to evolve, that's why I don't attend church now. But at the same time I do want my family to know the Christian faith ... That's why I don't go to church now anyway, the lack of evolution in the church makes it impossible for me to look at the church as a serious institution."

Most people were not talking about the message or theology of the church when they expressed dismay at resistance to change. Rather, they felt that the way congregations

function is out of step with modern lifestyles and contemporary expectations of good practice.

6.7 Superficiality

Several interviewees spoke of their disappointment with the superficiality of the discipleship and worship they experienced in congregations. They expressed a hunger for a more profound encounter with God and with other Christians. One person, explaining their decision to leave a particular congregation, put it this way:

“... there wasn’t anything wrong. There wasn’t any big fallout or anything - it was just probably what wasn’t happening ... The [Sunday morning] service was good as it went, but was a bit lightweight ... Everything was just a little bit lightweight and wishy-washy.”

“... in a Sunday morning environment ... People are so set on the agenda of ‘The music has to get sorted’ ... ‘Who’s doing the prayers?’, ‘Who’s doing the children’s talk?’, ‘Who’s doing the sermon?’, ‘Who’s doing this, who’s doing that? ... I’m just not convinced that that’s what the early church would’ve looked like, because I think the early church (to look at Acts) was about loving people and sharpening people and engaging with people, and I just think we’ve lost that to some extent somewhere, and so often people are so set on the agenda of what they’ve got to do that morning that they maybe miss out on what it is God actually wants to do with them.”

6.8 Issues of belonging and authenticity

More than a third of interviewees spoke of feeling that they could not “be themselves” in the context of congregations they had experienced. Some used the term “authenticity”. Others spoke of similar issues in terms of “lacking a sense of belonging”. Factors included things as diverse as dress code, leadership structures, the role of women, expectations regarding spiritual experiences and more. One person said:

“... this is a problem that I tend to have with churches is that they tell you how you should be and they don’t allow you to be authentic.”

Another stated, "I couldn't conform to that sort of system."

"For me to go to a church where you have to wear shirt and tie ... if I don't wear a shirt and tie to the church they say to you 'you're not tidy enough ... you're wearing a hooded top'. I'm not sure that's good and I find that difficult, so I think God's much bigger than that."

"I found it difficult to have the experiences that I thought other people had, and therefore I felt very much on the outside and unable to get on the inside."

Some simply found the congregation a difficult place to make friends apart from at a superficial level:

"But that's what I wanted in the church – I wanted friends in the church, I didn't want a Sunday stranger."

"I felt like I would walk in there on a Sunday morning and no-one was talking to me and I'd get on with doing my thing and the service would finish and we'd go out and could have absolutely no-one speak to me, and ... that's nothing against them, because I think sometimes that happens in all sorts of places, but to think about church to me is to be in a loving family."

Speaking of his wife, one man explained that "... because of the role of women she didn't feel welcomed ... she felt like an addendum to me, kind of thing."

Some people explained how, in their experience of congregational life, they sensed that some people were valued more than others:

"... the way some members of the church were valued more than others ... that's what it always felt like - that older people weren't valued as much as the couples with families; single people weren't valued as much. That's what it felt like. That was the perception I got - whether that's actually real, it may not be the case but that's what it felt like."

6.9 Leadership

Most interviewees who had been part of a congregation at some time had comments about church leadership. One of the main themes in relation to this was a perceived poor handling of conflict, usually with regard to someone other than the interviewee. This statement from a correspondent summarises well the comments from several interviewees:

“An issue arose that we felt was dealt with very poorly, and unfortunately, we then found it impossible to come under the authority of the Eldership. The issue itself was not our reason for leaving - it came down to purely how it was handled.”

Several people spoke about styles of leadership that were “controlling” or “stifling”. The following were typical of these:

“The traditional governance of the church was very kind of formal and almost mechanistic at the application of principles rather than the breath of the Spirit.”

“We liked them as people, but it was just that feeling of a clamp they had put on church – stifling the Holy Spirit really.”

Most of the people who cited difficulties with leadership mentioned issues of poor communication or a lack of communication. One couple described an incident that had been shocking for them when a Minister made a unilateral and unexpected decision to end an activity within the congregation that had been precious to them for a considerable time:

“He decided to close the Bible study down without coming and speaking to us or asking us or saying ‘look, I’m going to do something different’. He just announced from the pulpit that next week will be the last one and then it’ll be closed.”

Another person described the frustration of trying to share concerns with the leadership of a congregation over several years and receiving no serious response:

“Whenever I did try and sort of communicate and try and speak about problem situations that I felt were hard, were needing resolved, I just always felt as if it was ... there was nothing came back, it was just like speaking ... I always had a picture of speaking into a well and waiting for the echo but nothing came back at all.”

Other matters that were to do with the overall culture of congregations, but where interviewees looked to those in leadership to address were gossip and the “talking down” of

other denominations or even those in authority in their own denomination. The following comments were typical of these:

“One of the big issues was the whole leadership, the eldership, and the way they spoke about and treated the church authorities. I can understand people not liking things that folk do and disagreeing with them, but it was the way they spoke about them and so, Presbytery and General Assemblies, Ministers ... it was the way in which they spoke about them and, for me ... it was really undermining the authority that was given to those people by God and it just seemed to undermine God’s authority in this place.”

“There’s a huge amount of judgement goes on; what I absolutely, categorically really dislike in the church is gossip. Gossip leads to a lot of heartache – I have been the personal recipient of that and I found it very, very difficult to deal with.”

6.10 Worship styles

About half of interviewees made comments about styles of worship. Some expressed difficulty with the word-based style of most Highland congregations. One person admitted:

“... singing hymns did nothing for me and, you know, sermons did nothing for me ... I suppose I am more energised by symbol and image.”

Another found time in the outdoors more helpful than attendance at congregational worship:

“So, from my point of view I don’t go to church because I see more of God when I’m climbing the hills and kayaking the rivers, and I’m happy to meet people and we have some really good discussions.”

Interestingly, a fellowship initiated by one of the interviewees since disengaging from a congregation is built around meals and walks:

“Our focus is on relationship, and we do that through meals and we walk with people. In my heart, I do this because the Lord Jesus ate and drank with tax collectors and sinners – he walked with his disciples. There may be better ways but I don’t yet know of better ways of spending time with people than eating and drinking with them, and

walking with them. I see this as the strategy the Lord Jesus used for explaining the gospel of the Kingdom.”

A few people had experienced contemplative styles of worship elsewhere and found it difficult to find this close to home in the Highlands and Islands. So one person reported:

“What I loved about [a particular Christian community] was the silence and the contemplative side of it and I just missed that dreadfully in going to [name of local congregation] ... and not meaning to judge other people but there’s no silence - it’s all jabber-jabber - and instead of the Word of God you get your tuppence-worth ... you know, a minister giving their tuppence-worth in a very cheerful, jolly manner. Not that there’s anything wrong with being cheerful and jolly, but it feels like the people who do the services are adding their tuppence-worth, watering down the Word of God to make it acceptable to people, and it doesn’t work for me, it really doesn’t work.”

A few people expressed a feeling that the traditional sermon seemed incongruous in present day society. One person put it this way:

“I guess if you look back in history, part of the function of the church was to have a speaker that would educate the population, the congregation, and is that really relevant these days? We’ve got more information at our fingertips these days so perhaps it isn’t as necessary to come from one man, because you could be blinded by one man’s opinion.”

A discomfort with the traditional sermon format overlapped to some extent the wider issue of the ability to ask questions and interact as part of worship and discipleship. The following quotations summarise the main points in relation to this:

“Within most churches there is little opportunity to talk openly about not only some of the above issues but also to openly share feelings about one’s own faith.”

“If you do question, you’re a renegade. Nobody’s said that to me, but it was the feeling I got – that could be a wee touch of paranoia, but I don’t think I’m wrong.”

“Questioning isn’t encouraged in many church contexts.”

6.11 Unchurched Christians

Among the interviewees were people who had discovered the Christian faith for themselves through an evangelistic course (e.g. Christianity Explored or Alpha) - but had not engaged with a church congregation since. These people spoke of the contrast they found between the lively, interactive, and hospitable setting of a home group and their local congregations. In each case they have initiated or are part of a small informal group, where they continue to enjoy fellowship and explore faith together:

“So, I stopped going to church but still needed some Christian fellowship, and that’s why I asked us all to get together for the house group, because I was still needing something but I was aware of other people still needing somewhere where they could meet and talk, other friends that had stopped going to church or were feeling uncomfortable in the church family, building, whatever.”

7. What next?

The above is a brief summary of what we have heard. Since analysing the transcripts considerable work has gone into discussing the insights with various and diverse small groups and individuals. Also, as part of the detailed write-up we are reflecting on what we have heard in relation to other relevant research. For example, research in other regions has noted how congregations tend to be characterised by overrepresentation of some personality types and underrepresentation of others¹⁸. This may well have a bearing upon some of the experiences we have heard about. Others have sought to understand the experiences of church leavers through the lens of James Fowler’s theories of faith development¹⁹ and this kind of approach also has the potential to help us understand what we are finding in Scotland.

It is also valuable to see how some of the wider trends in society may be influencing changes in the Christian community in Scotland. For example, a trend towards greater individuality has been noted²⁰. Decreasing trust in institutions of all kinds has been widely documented²¹.

¹⁸ Francis, L., Robbins, M., Williams, A. & Williams R. “All types are called, but some are more likely to respond: the psychological profile of rural Anglican churchgoers in Wales” in *Rural Theology* 5(1), 23-30, 2007.

¹⁹ A brief and accessible summary of this is published as Jamieson, A. (2002) *Chrysalis*, Paternoster. Highly recommended to those who are living a churchless faith and wanting to better understand their experiences.

²⁰ Putnam, R. (2000) *Bowling Alone*, Simon & Schuster.

What has been called “the massive subjective turn of modern culture”²² as people see their identity less in terms of roles, duties and obligations and place greater emphasis on their own subjective experiences (both individually and in relationally) has been interpreted by some as “religion giving way to spirituality”²³. The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development recently reported dramatic changes in organisational size and collectivism²⁴. While the church is more than just a human organisation, it is never less; it has been shaped by social changes in the past and is not immune to these kinds of trends now.

A survey has been created that will be used with a random sample of about four hundred people who fit the criteria of being Christian, living in the Highlands and Islands and not engaged with a church congregation²⁵. The survey will explore the insights we have gained through the recent interviews, probe some of the ideas that have emerged through this and other research and assess the scale and pattern of the “churchless faith” phenomenon. A widely used ten-question tool for assessing religious commitment has been adapted to apply specifically to Christianity and will be embedded in the survey. This and other questions will allow us to look for correlations between particular personal characteristics (age, sex, religious commitment and several others) and people’s experiences of Christian community – both congregational and post-congregational.

If you have received this directly by email, you will also receive updates on further developments unless you request otherwise. If you have come across it by other means and would like to be kept informed, please make contact the author (see below) and you will be included in future communications.

Author: Steve Aisthorpe, Church of Scotland Mission Development Worker (North),

2 Suidhe Crescent, Kincaig, Kingussie, PH21 1NB

Tel. 07966 286617 Email: saisthorpe@cofscotland.org.uk

²¹ For example, research conducted by The Futures Company in 2012 found that “Faced with combined uncertainties about trust and the economy, consumers have abandoned community and retrenched to their homes and families.”

²² Taylor, C. (1991) *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Harvard University Press.

²³ Heelas, P. & Woodhead, L. (2005) *The Spiritual Revolution*, Blackwell.

²⁴ From 1998 to 2010, the proportion of private-sector employment accounted for by firms with more than 250 employees fell from 49 per cent to 40 per cent, while the proportion employed in the smallest firms (with one to four employees) doubled from 11 per cent to 22 per cent.

²⁵ A pilot in May 2013 found that out of 227 interviewed at random 39% claimed to fit these criteria.