Investigating the invisible church:

* a survey of Christians who do not attend church

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1. Introduction
The total volume and shape of an iceberg is notoriously difficult to predict. The visible portion, that spire of ice that projects above the waterline, is only a fraction of the whole, hence the expression "tip of the iceberg" for what is only a partial manifestation of something considerably larger.

There is now considerable evidence to suggest that those Christians who belong to a church congregation and regularly attend a service of worship on Sunday mornings are “the tip of the iceberg”. The empirical data suggest that the majority of people in the UK who identify themselves as Christians are no longer engaged with a congregation in the traditional sense.

Last autumn, the Mission and Discipleship Council of the Church of Scotland took the plunge and went below the waterline to take a careful look at the Christian population of the Highlands and Islands that has little or no engagement with church congregations. A random sample of over 5,500 people was contacted by telephone. Of these, 2,698 took part in a short interview. 934 of those interviewed identified themselves as Christians who do not attend church and agreed to take part in a survey.

The purpose of the survey was to build on the foundations of research undertaken in 2012/13. That earlier study carried out in-depth interviews with thirty Christians who were not attending a local church. It provided unique insights into the experiences and perceptions of Christian believers who had either disengaged from congregational life or who, in some cases, had never been involved in a congregation. However, being based on a small, representative sample, it was impossible to generalise the findings or to estimate the scale of what has been called “churchless faith”. Last autumn’s survey, being based on a random and substantial sample, has put some empirical flesh on the bones of previous insights and probed the themes that emerged from those previous in-depth interviews.

This report summarises some of the findings and gives some initial glimpses of what is emerging from the wealth of data collected. The emphasis is on presenting the facts. While section seven offers some tentative interpretations, this summary is deliberately structured in such a way that the facts are presented first. It then concludes by inviting readers to share their thoughts about what the church should be learning from this research.

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1 A summary of that study, “Faith journeys beyond the congregations”, is available online: www.resourcingmission.org.uk/resources/mission-research
2. Acknowledgements
The whole process of recruiting participants, data entry and statistical analysis was managed by the research company, Critical Research. They proved to be excellent partners in this venture and special thanks go to Associate Director, Ro Marriott, and her team. The research was funded by the Church of Scotland’s Mission and Discipleship Council, The Highlands and Islands Special Reserve, The Novum Trust, and the Society in Scotland for Propagating Christian Knowledge (SSPCK). Thanks also go to 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. Of course, special thanks go to the 430 people who gave time to complete and return the surveys. Without them we would remain largely ignorant of the Christian community of this region that exists beyond the church congregations.

3. The survey
The survey comprised four kinds of questions. Firstly, the bulk of the almost eighty questions were designed to explore themes that emerged from the previous qualitative research mentioned above. The intention of these questions was to determine whether the experiences and perceptions shared by the thirty people who were previously interviewed are also found more widely among non-congregational Christians. These questions mainly took the form of statements to which respondents were asked if they agreed strongly, agreed, were unsure, disagreed or disagreed strongly. A mix of positive and negative statements was spread through the survey to enable cross-checking of responses on the same themes.

Secondly, there were questions relating to the personal characteristics of the respondents. Their age, gender, postcode, length of time living in the Highlands and Islands and length of time regularly attending a church congregation were all collected using a series of tick boxes.

A further set of questions asked respondents to indicate their habits in relation to prayer, meeting with other Christians, talking about their faith, and Bible reading.
The fourth element of the survey was a set of ten questions, which, together, formed an index known as the Hoge Intrinsic Religiosity Scale (HIRS)\(^3\). These questions were spread through the survey and when the responses were analysed together they produced a score between 10 and 50. This same set of questions has been carefully validated and has been used extensively in other research. The author of a review of tools for measuring religiosity, said of the HIRS “this is by far the most accurate measure of what I think is at the heart of religious devotion – relationship with and commitment to God (the object of ultimate concern).”\(^4\) High scores on this scale indicate that a person’s faith underpins all that they do; their faith is core to their motivation and, in this sense, they *live* their faith. Lower scores suggest that they perceive their faith as having less impact on their life. It would be inappropriate and incorrect to apply labels such as “nominal”, “committed” or “devout” to groups within the sample according to their scores on this scale. However, it is noticeable that what might be called “high scorers” (i.e. those with scores more than thirty) show significant differences in their responses to many of the questions compared with and “low scorers” (i.e. those with scores of thirty or less).

A total of 430 surveys were returned\(^5\). This constituted a return rate of 46.1%, very high for this kind of survey. Seven surveys were excluded due to a number of questions being left unanswered, leaving a total of 423 for analysis.

4. The sample
The 423 surveys came from people throughout the Highlands and Islands. The map on the right shows the location of respondents. The green patches represent

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\(^5\) Of the 933 who fitted the criteria and were willing to participate, 289 (31%) said that they would prefer to respond online and 644 said that they would prefer to complete a postal survey. The overall return rate of 46.1% comprised 145 online and 285 postal surveys.
areas where a few respondents were located; yellow patches show areas where many respondents were located; the red area around Inverness shows the greatest concentration of respondents. Overall, the concentration of respondents correlates well with population density and shows a good geographical spread.

In terms of gender, 60% of surveys were returned by females and 39% by males, with just a few people preferring not to indicate their gender. This approximately 60/40 split is similar to the gender balance of church attendance in Scotland at the time of the 2002 church census.

Just over half the surveys came from people of the so-called baby boomer generation. That is, they were born in the period 1946 – 64 and spent their formative years in an era associated with redefinition of traditional values and of relative affluence. 18% of surveys came from people born in or before 1945. Many of this generation, especially indigenous Highlanders, had fathers who were involved in the First World War; most were too young to serve in the Second World War, but experienced the impact of the economic depression of the 1930s and/or the austerity of wartime. 23% of respondents, being born in the period 1965-81, were from “Generation X”, generally seen as more heterogeneous than previous generations and a generation that experienced significant moves towards the embracing of greater social diversity in terms of race, class, religion, ethnicity, culture, language, gender identity, and sexual orientation. Only 5%, born 1982 – 99, came from “Generation Y”, a generation who, among other things, grew up with information technology and the internet.
Nearly half (49%) of those surveyed had lived in the Highlands and Islands for their whole life; 32% had been in the region for more than twenty years; less than 20% of respondents had been in the area less than twenty years (8% less than ten years and 11% between ten and twenty years).

In terms of experiences of regular church attendance, 15% of those who returned surveys had never attended church regularly; 31% had attended regularly for less than ten years; half of respondents had attended church for more than ten years (23% more than 20 years; 27% 10 - 20 years).

5. The Big Picture

5.1 The scale of “churchless faith”
The size of the sample and rigour of the method means that it is now possible, with a high degree of confidence, to estimate the number of people in the Highlands and Islands who identify themselves as Christians, but who are not engaged with a local congregation\(^6\). The estimate is that 43.8% of people in the Highlands and Islands identify themselves as Christians who are not engaged with a church congregation. Based on the population

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\(^6\) Having sampled 5,523 for our research, we actually interviewed 2,698. The remaining 2,825 were unwilling to be interviewed at the time of contacting them. Of those interviewed, 1,182 identified themselves as Christians who do not attend church on a regular basis. This is 43.8% of those interviewed. However there were 2,825 people sampled who were unwilling to be interviewed at the time of contact and it would be reasonable to assume that those people could be quite different in terms of their faith and church life. So, to attempt to provide a better overall estimate of the proportion of all who would fit our criteria, we undertook follow-up phone calls with people from those 2,825 “refusers”. This follow-up study was simply used to discover the proportion that would fit our main criteria. The results of the call-back exercise showed that the proportion of “refusers” who fit the criteria was not significantly different from the interviewed sample.
estimate of the study area from the 2011 census, this constitutes about 133,300 people. Statistically, we can be 95% confident that the true proportion of all who fit our criteria is in the range 41.93% to 45.67% (i.e. c.127,600 – 139,000).

To compare these figures with those people who are engaged with a church congregation is difficult because it is more than a decade since the last comprehensive Scottish church census. What we can say is that in 2002, 12.7% of the population of the Highland region attended church regularly. The corresponding figures for Orkney and Shetland were 12.9% and 13.3% respectively. In the Western Isles, Skye and Lochalsh 39.2% of the population attended church regularly in 2002. Since 2002 church attendance throughout the region has declined, especially among the main denominations. We can conclude, therefore, with a good degree of confidence, that there are considerably more people who identify themselves as Christian who do not regularly attend church than people who are regular attenders. The iceberg analogy proves to be apt.

5.2 Christian commitment and spiritual practices
Whilst all 423 respondents identified themselves as “Christians” when interviewed by telephone, their responses to the survey questions indicate different understandings of what that means, including varying levels of commitment to living out Christian values and differing habits in terms of spiritual practices. By “spiritual practices” we mean those intentional activities which help Christians form habits in response to God’s grace. In most Christian traditions these include prayer and scripture reading. The survey also asked questions related to their vision and practices in relation to mission.

As mentioned above, at the core of the survey was a set of ten questions that together form the Hoge Intrinsic Religiosity Scale (HIRS). This tool examines the extent to which a person’s faith is integrated with the rest of life and the extent to which the person is determined that their faith governs and guides their choices and behaviour. People who score highly on this scale “find their master motivation in religion. Other needs, strong as they may be, are regarded as of less ultimate significance, and they are, so far as possible, brought into harmony with the religious beliefs and prescriptions. Having embraced a creed the individual

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endeavours to internalize it and follow it fully. It is in this sense that he lives his religion.”

The sample was split almost equally between those who scored thirty or less and those who scored more than thirty (see below), with 211 of the 423 people surveyed (49.9%) scoring over thirty.

Those with very low scores may view themselves as “Christian” more as a cultural identity than as pertaining to a personal faith in Jesus Christ that underpins their values and behaviour. What we can say with confidence is that the survey shows that there are many for whom their Christian faith is core to their life. This challenges any suggestions that the “churchless faith” phenomenon is primarily characterised by nominalism or apostasy. The previous in-depth interviews discovered that this was certainly not so for those thirty people; this study shows that it is not the norm.

When it comes to practices of scripture reading and prayer, high scorers on the HIRS show notably greater frequency in these activities. For example, a third of those with scores over thirty pray daily whereas only 3% of those with scores lower than thirty pray daily (see below).

Those with higher HIRS scores also demonstrate a strong missional vision. 82% of those with HIRS scores over thirty agreed with the statement “The world needs to hear the teaching of Jesus Christ” compared with 34% of those with scores below thirty. Scores for a negatively worded partner statement, “The teaching of Jesus Christ has nothing to say to the

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modern world” underlined this difference, as 87% of the high scorers disagree compared with 55% of low scorers.

Those with scores over thirty are also more likely to discuss their faith with others (see below). Overall, in response to the statement, “I occasionally talk to friends and neighbours about faith” more respondents disagree than agree (51% as opposed to 41%). However, high scorers are considerably more likely to agree than those with lower scores (57% as opposed to 26%). Gender also appears to be significant here, as, overall, nearly half of females agree with this statement (48%), a significant difference when compared with males (30%).

5.3 Disappointed with church, but not with God
All those surveyed have either chosen not to engage with a local church or, in most cases, have left a congregation after many years of regular attendance. However, while they may be disillusioned, disappointed or frustrated with church, most are not disappointed with God. In response to the statement, “I feel disappointed with God”, an overwhelming majority disagreed (72% disagreed – of whom 33% disagreed strongly). High scorers are more likely to disagree than all respondents (87% compared with 72% overall). Males and females differ here, with females more likely to disagree than males (77% against 66%). Also, the longer spent attending church the more sure people are of their view in this regard: 8% of those who attended church for more than 20 years stated that they were unsure compared with 20% overall. This group is also significantly more likely to disagree with the statement (91%).
5.4 Christian identity and church attendance

The single strongest response in the survey was to the statement, “I do not believe that I need to attend church to be a Christian”. 86% agreed with this statement. Whilst those with an HIRS score of over thirty and those who attended church for more than twenty years were less likely to agree, there was overwhelming agreement with this statement even amongst those groups (see below).

5.5 Sense of affiliation with the wider church

While none of the respondents were engaged with a local congregation, half indicated that they feel part of the worldwide Christian community. Only a fifth disagreed with the statement “I feel part of the worldwide Christian community”. However, this is a statement which some groups responded to in markedly different ways than the overall picture might suggest. Unsurprisingly, those with HIRS scores over thirty had a significantly higher proportion agreeing with this statement (66%) compared with those who scored thirty or less - where 34% agreed. Also, older respondents reported a greater sense of connection with the
wider Christian community. Those born before 1945 are significantly more likely to feel part of the worldwide Christian community (68%) than those born between 1965 and 1981 (30%).

In response to the statement, “I feel part of the worldwide Christian community”

Also, nearly two thirds of respondents who had attended church for over 20 years (64%) agreed with this statement compared with less than half of all those respondents who had attended for less time (45%).

5.6 A sense of belonging
Three questions probed whether part of the reason for disengaging from church was the lack of a “sense of belonging”. The responses to these questions were remarkably similar across the board. Regardless of age, previous experience of church, HIRS score and gender, about a quarter agreed with the statement, “I used to go to church but felt that I didn’t fit in”.

In response to the statement, “I used to go to church but felt that I didn’t fit in”

5.7 The church and change
About a third of respondents agreed with the statement, “The church in this region is in need of radical change”. In fact, almost regardless of age, gender, and HIRS score, the sample was
split evenly between those who agreed, those who disagreed and those who were unsure. The only difference of note is that those born 1946-1964 are more likely to agree (40%) than all respondents (35%).

In response to the statement, “The church in this region is in need of radical change”

In response to a statement, “I would like to help bring positive change within my local church, but feel powerless to do so”, whilst half of all respondents disagreed, there were some significant differences within the sample. Those with scores of over thirty on the HIRS had a significantly lower proportion disagreeing with this statement (42%) compared with those scoring thirty or less which had over a half of respondents disagreeing (58%). In fact nearly a quarter of those in the high scorer group agreed with this statement. In another significant variance from the overall picture, just over a quarter of respondents who were born before 1945 said that they would like to help bring positive change within their local church, but feel powerless to do so.

Overall 7% (slightly higher for HIRS high scorers – 9%) of respondents said that they had actually tried to share thoughts and ideas with their local church but felt ignored.

6. The how and why of church leaving

6.1 Leaving church: suddenly or gradually?
Of those who had once been regular church attenders (and remember that 15% of the total sample indicated that they had never regularly attended church), most disengaged from church gradually. Over half (57%) of all respondents agreed with the statement, “I used to go to church but decreased attendance gradually over time”. In contrast, about a fifth (22%) agreed with the statement, “I used to go to church but left suddenly”. It appears that women
are more likely to leave suddenly than men. Those who have spent their whole lives in the Highlands and Islands are significantly less likely to leave suddenly. Those who have spent over 20 years regularly attending church are significantly more likely to leave suddenly.

In response to the statement, “I used to go to church but decreased attendance gradually over time

![Bar chart showing responses to the statement](chart1)

In response to the statement, “I used to go to church but left suddenly”

![Bar chart showing responses to the statement](chart2)

6.2 The role of life crises and house moves
Just over a fifth of respondents (21%) and just over a quarter (26%) of those with scores of more than thirty on the HIRS indicated that some sort of crisis in their life led to them disengaging from church. Another interesting finding is that a crisis led to disengaging from church for a third (33%) of those who previously attended church for more than 20 years.
In response to the statement, “I used to go to church but when I moved house I did not find a church I liked in my new area”

In response to a separate statement, a fifth of respondents stated that they had felt “let down by the church at a time of personal need”.

About one in six (17%) agreed with the statement, “I used to go to church but when I moved house I did not find a church I liked in my new area” and there was no significant difference on the basis of HIRS scores. Those who regularly attended church for more than 20 years are most likely to agree with this statement and also more likely to be “unsure” (18% compared with 12% overall).

In response to the statement, “I used to go to church but when I moved house I did not find a church I liked in my new area”

6.3 Changes within individuals

Whilst the overall findings suggest that issues connected to church or changes in circumstances were the main reasons for those who have left churches, it should be noted that just over one in three respondents indicated that it was changes within them that led to them disengaging from church. Overall, 35% of those surveyed agreed with the statement “Changes that happened within me led to me stopping attending church”. The group that are
least likely to agree with this statement are those born in the period 1965-1981. Only a quarter of them (26%) recognised this as a key factor in disengaging from church.

**6.4 Too much infighting within churches and between churches**

One of the clearest responses, with a strong consensus across all groups, related to the perception that there is too much infighting within churches and between churches. Nearly two thirds (63%) of all respondents agreed with this statement compared with one in ten (11%) who disagreed. The only significant difference between groups was between male and female. A significantly higher proportion of males (68%) agreed with this statement than females (59%). Those with most experience of church are least likely to disagree with the statement, “There is too much infighting within churches and between churches” (only 5%); two thirds (66%) of them agreed.

**6.5 Issues of relevance**

We know that the majority of those surveyed (and a very large majority of those scoring over thirty on the HIRS – 82%) are convinced of the relevance and importance of the Christian
message because they agreed wholeheartedly with the statement, “The world needs to hear the teaching of Jesus Christ”. However, their views about the relevance of the church as they have experienced it were very different.

In response to the statement, “In my experience, sermons in church have little or no relevance to my everyday life” opinion was divided, with four out of ten (39%) disagreeing with this statement compared with 37% who agreed. A further quarter (24%) was unsure how to answer. High scorers on the HIRS are significantly more likely to disagree (56% compared with 39% overall). Conversely, low scorers on the HIRS are more likely to agree (54% compared with 37% overall).

Another interesting finding was that the proportion who disagreed with this statement increased with the time spent attending church (see chart below). A fifth (19%) of those who had never attended church regularly disagreed compared with over half 53% who had been attending for over 20 years.

As well as asking about respondents’ perceived relevance to themselves, the survey also explored their thoughts about the relevance of church to other people. In response to the statement, “Church feels like ‘another planet’ to most people” nearly half (48%) agreed, 23% disagreed and 28% were unsure how to answer. High scorers on the HIRS had similar views
to all respondents and there were no significant differences on the basis of gender, generation, time living in the region or time attending church.

**6.6 Worship style, theology and accessibility of churches**

Overall, the picture that emerges is that worship style is an important issue for only a few people: only 15% overall and 17% of HIRS high scorers would attend church regularly if a different style of worship were available. However, although these are not decisive issues for most, what can be said is that there are very few who feel that their local churches are too informal (11%) compared with those who feel that they are too formal (40%). Also, while only 5% felt that the teaching in church is too broad, 29% feel it is too narrow and 40% feel that “The church’s teaching is too black and white in such a complex world”. Whilst the “style” and theology of church are not decisive issues for most, the data do suggest that there are about 20,000 people in the Highlands and Islands who identify themselves as Christians, who do not currently attend church, but would do so if there was a different style of church on offer. Specifically, 8% overall and 15% of HIRS High Scorers indicated that they would welcome the opportunity “to join a small group of Christians who meet in homes and discuss faith and life together”.

More significant than worship style seems to be the way churches operate in relation to people’s lifestyles. In response to the statement, “I would like to attend a church but find that other commitments prevent it”, while more people disagreed than agreed (48% versus 34%), the data suggests that about 45,000 people would like to attend church, but feel prevented from doing so by other commitments. Those scoring more than thirty on the HIRS are significantly more likely to agree with that statement than low scorers (42% compared with 27%) and those who have never regularly attended church are significantly more likely to disagree than those who have attended church at some point in their lives (68% compared
with around 45%). Over half (57%) of those who have lived in the Highlands and Islands for more than 20 years disagreed, a significant difference compared with all respondents (48%).

In response to the statement, “I would like to attend a church but find that other commitments prevent it”

6.7 Contentedly non-congregational
As indicated above, there are certainly significant numbers of people who would welcome opportunities to engage with a church if it fitted in with other commitments and constraints. However, the majority of those surveyed are not looking to engage with church. In fact, many appear to find life as a Christian beyond the congregational context both helpful to their spiritual journey and vocationally fulfilling.

In response to the statement, “I want to follow my own spiritual quest without religious institutions” four out of ten (41%) agreed, a quarter (27%) disagreed and a further 32% were unsure. High scorers on the HIRS have a higher proportion disagreeing with this statement (35%) compared with low scorers (18%).

Amongst respondents who had spent their whole life in the region, a lower proportion (36%) agreed with the statement, “I want to follow my own spiritual quest without religious institutions” compared with those living in the area for shorter times. Amongst respondents who had attended church for over 20 years a significantly higher proportion (40%) disagreed compared with those who attended church for a shorter period.

Of those who had never regularly attended church, 57% agreed with this statement compared with just 25% of those who attended for more than 20 years.
In response to the related statement, “Not being involved in a traditional church congregation frees me to pursue what I believe is my Christian calling”, while just over a third (36%) disagreed, just under a third (31%) agreed. Compared with all respondents, those who had regularly attended church for more than 20 years are more likely to disagree (47%); those who had never regularly attended are more likely to agree (40%).

In response to the statement, “Not being involved in a traditional church congregation frees me to pursue what I believe is my Christian calling”

7. What should we learn?
The findings summarised above represent part of the data from the survey. It is planned to publish reflections based on the full survey and on the previous in-depth interviews at a later date. That will focus on interpretation and application, with practical suggestions regarding how the church should respond. What follows are some suggestions of what we might learn from the findings outlined above. They are not presented as definitive and your own reflections and thoughts are requested and encouraged.
7.1 We need to revise our understanding of the nature of the Christian community in the Highlands and Islands (and, most probably, elsewhere)
It has been commonplace to view the population which attends church regularly and the Christian population as synonymous. This is incorrect. In fact, the larger part of the Christian community does not engage with a church congregation on a regular basis. It has been conventional in recent years, when thinking about Christian mission, to talk about “the 90%”, those with no regular contact with a congregation, as those who need to be reached with the gospel message. However, it is now clear that a sizeable proportion of that 90% represents people who are already on a journey of discipleship with Jesus Christ.

7.2 Some of us may need to revise our assumptions about people who have left our churches
If views have prevailed that those who have left our churches are usually “backsliders” for whom a crisis of faith is the main reason for their departure, these must be revised. We must also recognise that Christians who do not attend a church congregation fall along a broad spectrum in terms of what their faith means to them – as do regular churchgoers.

7.3 The growth in “churchless faith” is not about the impact of “incomers”
Recent arrivals into the Highlands and Islands comprise only a small minority of those Christians who do not attend church congregations. It is probable that about half have been in the region their whole lives and that over 80% have lived here for over 20 years.

7.4 “Churchless faith” is not just a “lack of commitment”
The thousands of Christians who have attended churches, but no longer do so, in the main, attended regularly for many years before disengaging. About a quarter attended in the past for more than twenty years; about half attended for more than a decade.
7.5 There really is a significant Christian population who have never been regular church attenders
Whilst studies in other parts of the world have researched “church leavers”\(^9\), this survey has identified a relatively small (15% of our sample) but significant group of Christians who have never been regularly involved with a congregation. About a third of this group are high scorers on the HIRS.

7.6 The so-called “dechurched”, often have a strong sense of affiliation with the wider church
Most of those surveyed expressed a sense of belonging to the worldwide Christian community even though they are not affiliated to a local congregation.

7.7 We must ask searching questions about whether our congregations are hospitable, welcoming and inclusive communities
Various research projects have shown that a few personality types tend to be over-represented in churches and that there is a corresponding under-representation of other types\(^{10}\). It seems likely that this phenomenon has a self-perpetuating affect. It is not surprising then that some people struggle to find a sense of belonging in their local congregation. Those of us who are privileged to visit congregations throughout the region can testify to the fact that congregations have their own cultures, their own unique “feel”. To genuinely celebrate diversity and allow those who are different from the current core membership to be authentically themselves, congregations need to give constant attention to fostering habits of welcome and inclusion and to cultivate a culture of hospitality.


\(^{10}\) Brown, M. (2007) “Culture, change and individual differences in the Scottish Episcopal church” at [https://openair.rgu.ac.uk/handle/10059/454](https://openair.rgu.ac.uk/handle/10059/454) and Francis, Robbins, Williams & Williams (2007) “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).
7.8 We need to rediscover discipleship
Whether Christians are part of a congregation or not, it is important that faith is nurtured and worked out in the realities of daily life. It is clear that many of those who are not engaged with a congregation are serious about developing habits that sustain and grow their Christian lives, such as prayer, scripture reading and meeting with other Christians. Congregations need to re-evaluate the opportunities they provide for Christians to explore faith, work through questions and doubts, and grow in Christian character. It is clear that, for many, the congregation alone has not provided a helpful context for discipleship. Small informal groups can provide a safe space and the relational context in which people can grow.

7.9 We need to explore ways of linking together the wider Christian community
Whilst we should accept that most Christians who have left congregations have no intention of returning, they are still a part of the Christian community, the body of Christ. Whilst many Christians who are not part of a congregation seem to meet with other Christians and share fellowship, there are others who are effectively isolated. We need to explore creative ways to connect believers with one another. Whilst some churches have been good at bringing churches together, perhaps there is a need for occasional public invitations for Christians to gather, regardless of affiliation or non-affiliation. Perhaps the internet also has a key role to play in linking Christians together and providing a forum for encouragement, discussion, worship and prayer.

7.10 We need to look at how we respond to people’s crises and big changes
One thing that comes out of this survey is the importance of church congregations being “caring communities” and the need for diligence and excellence in “pastoral care”. Congregations would do well to review how they respond to their members and those in the wider community at times of particular need and crisis. House moves, too, are times when Christians may re-engage with congregational life, move away from congregational life or just be on the lookout for others with whom to share the Christian journey. These are therefore key opportunities for congregations to extend welcome and support. Not only in the crisis times, but through strong relationships and open conversation, congregations need to be attuned to the ups and downs of people’s lives. As has been noted, most people who have disengaged from congregational life have done so gradually over an extended period.
7.11 Can conflicts between congregational life and the rest of life be overcome for some at least?
It seems that many of those Christians who are not currently engaged with a congregation but who would like to be are prevented more by practical considerations than matters of theology or style. Greater variety of opportunities to engage with congregations would be welcomed by some. This may mean looking at issues of timing, provision for all ages and exploring opportunities to gather for worship, prayer and study that take place beyond traditional Sunday services.

7.12 We need to listen to people who have left congregations and those on the fringes of congregations
Many who took part in the survey see the need for radical change in the churches of the Highlands and Islands. Some have tried sharing their ideas and thoughts, but feel ignored. We need to hear their perspectives and thoughts. Congregations must not fear criticism. Where criticism is levelled there is usually at least a kernel of truth and so it should be welcomed. From the first phase of this research, in which we listened in detail to thirty Christians who are not part of a congregation, we discovered how much value there is in allowing people to tell their story of faith and church. If we are genuinely willing to listen, we need not fear offence in asking them to share their experiences.

7.13 Christian teaching that connects with real life and current issues
It seems from our survey that the teaching within congregations needs to connect with people’s lives and contemporary issues if people are to sense that it is relevant to them and to their friends and neighbours.

7.14 Diverse expressions of church for a diverse population
The insights we have gained from the Christian community beyond congregations suggest a need for greater diversity in terms of expressions of church. In many parts of the Highlands and Islands, even when there are multiple congregations, they are remarkably similar in comparison to the full spectrum of churches in Scotland and the rest of the UK. Historically,
the limited diversity that exists has often come through division. How might we encourage diversity and learn to see new forms of church not as schisms, but as green shoots to be cherished in a spirit of unity and humility?

8. And finally … over to you
Thank you for taking time to read this summary. As you reflect upon it, please share your thoughts. As has been mentioned above, your interpretations and reflections are invited. They will help as we seek to understand what is going on at a time of unprecedented change within the church, what it means and how it challenges us in our own roles and vocations within the Christian community. Please send any contributions to the author (see below).

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 contact the author (see below) and you will be included in future communications.

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