



# Research Update

## The Church of Ireland in Northern Ireland: A decade of change?

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### Introduction

This is an important time in Northern Ireland due to the changing political and social environment, as well as in terms of increasing secularisation. How have these changes affected members of the Church of Ireland, and what do members think about key questions facing their community?

This Research Update draws upon data from the **Northern Ireland Life and Times survey** and the **Northern Ireland Social Attitudes (NISA)** survey to explore the social attitudes of members of the Church of Ireland community across Northern Ireland. By using data from 1989 to 2002, this Update will provide an analysis of trends within the denomination over a decade.

### Who are we?

Each year, between 14 per cent and 18 per cent of survey respondents identified themselves as members of the Church of Ireland, with the figure of 16 per cent in 2002. This reflects the figures from the Census of Population: in 1991, 18 per cent of the population said that they were members of the Church of Ireland, but this had dropped to 15 per cent in 2001. An analysis of the age breakdown over time shows some evidence of an ageing population.

### Church attendance

Having identified the level of membership of the Church of Ireland, how regular are they in their church attendance? Brewer (2002) notes that within mainstream Protestantism, levels of observance are becoming less strict. Figures from Life and Times and NISA show some fluctuation in the level of church attendance. Figure 1 shows that while over one third of respondents (35

per cent) attended church every week in 1989, this had dropped to 30 per cent in 2002. The proportions of Church of Ireland respondents who never attend church were similar in 1989 and 2002. However, these figures fluctuated within the intervening years, for example, with reported church attendance being particularly low in 2000.

### The importance of prayer

However, being religious means more than attending a church, and so the

surveys in 1991 and 1998 included a series of in-depth questions on religious observance. Similar proportions of Church of Ireland respondents in 1991 and 1998 (11 per cent and 10 per cent respectively) said that they pray several times a day (see Figure 2). Meanwhile, there has been a decrease of 11 percentage points in the proportion of people who pray once a day (from 31 per cent in 1991 to 20 per cent in 1998). This trend is matched by an increase in

Figure 1: Attendance of church services

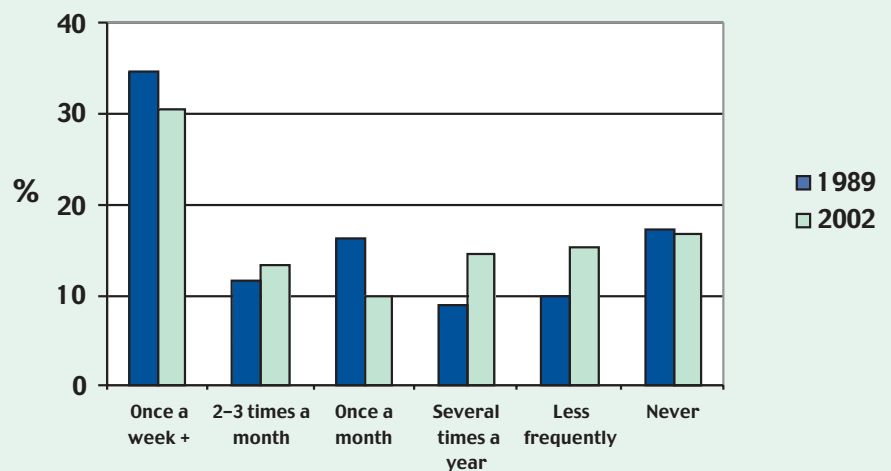
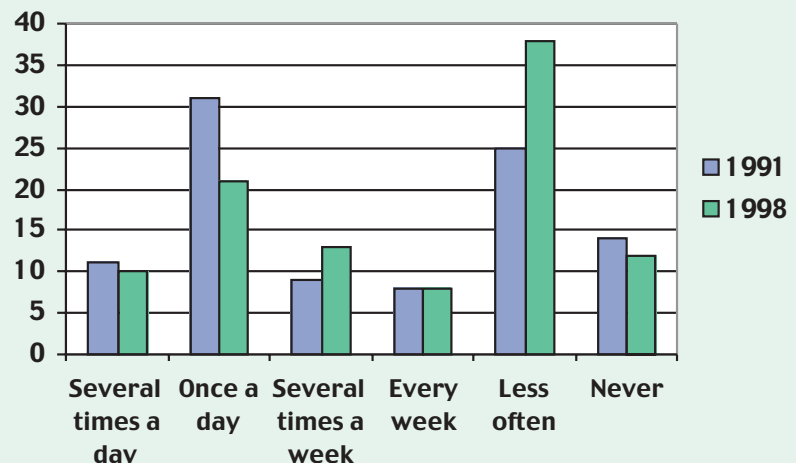


Figure 2: Frequency of praying



the proportion of respondents who pray less than once a week, but not by an increase in the proportion of respondents who never pray. Thus, it can be said that Church of Ireland respondents are praying less frequently but are still praying.

### Involvement in other church activities

Respondents were also asked about their involvement in activities or organisations connected with the church, other than attending services. The proportion of respondents who participated in such activities fairly often (nearly every week or more frequently) has dropped from 17 per cent to 7 per cent (see Table 1). This has been offset by a rise both in the proportion of respondents who participate less than every week, and those who never take part in such activities.

Table 1: Participation in church activities other than attending services

	%	
	1991	1998
Several times a week	5	2
Every week	6	3
Nearly every week	6	2
Less often	43	50
Never	40	43

### How religious are they?

Church attendance and participation in church organisations show the more practical side of religion. But how do members of the Church of Ireland describe their own religiosity? Table 2 shows that just over one in ten respondents in both 1991 and 1998 said that they were extremely or very religious. However, there appears to be a decrease in the level of religiosity over the years. The biggest change is in the proportion of respondents saying that they are somewhat religious, which has dropped from 49 per cent in 1991 to 40 per cent in 1998. This corresponds with an increase in the proportion of respondents



describing themselves as being neither religious nor non religious (23 per cent in 1991 to 29 per cent in 1998).

Table 2: Level of religiosity

	%	
	1991	1998
Extremely religious	1	3
Very religious	11	8
Somewhat religious	49	40
Neither religious nor non religious	23	29
Somewhat non religious	10	10
Very non religious	3	5
Extremely non religious	1	3
Don't know	1	2

### Identity

Identity can be expressed in various ways. The first of these explores whether respondents think of themselves as being unionist, nationalist or neither. Table 3 shows that there has been little change in the proportion of Church of Ireland respondents who consider themselves to be unionist,

while there has been a small decrease in the proportion who consider themselves to be neither unionist nor nationalist.

Table 3: Identity

	%	
	1989	2002
Unionist	69	71
Nationalist	<1	2
Neither	30	25
Other	0	1
Don't know	0	2

Where some change has occurred, it is in the responses people give relating to national identity. While nearly two thirds of respondents (65 per cent) considered themselves to be British in 1989, by 2002 this figure had risen to 76 per cent. From Table 4, it can be seen that this is in contrast to the decrease in the proportion considering themselves to be Ulster or Northern Irish.

Table 4: National identity

	%	
	1989	2002
British	65	76
Irish	4	4
Ulster	11	5
Northern Irish	18	13
Other	-	2
Don't know	-	<1
British/Irish sometimes	3	0

It is useful to look at the figures for the intervening years. For example, after the 1994 cease-fires, there was a marked drop in the proportion of respondents identifying themselves as British - in 1996, this figure was 58 per cent. However, this proportion had risen to 76 per cent by 1999. In contrast, data from a 2001 survey of 232 Protestants in Donegal showed that 49 per cent of respondents perceived themselves to be Irish Protestant, and a further 37 per cent saw themselves as being Irish. Nine percent perceived themselves to have dual nationality (British/Irish) (Derry and Raphoe Action, 2001).

### Community relations - mixed marriage

The Church of Ireland is widely held to be a reconciling church and has worked over the years to promote better inter-church relations and increased ecumenical activity. In the light of this it is of interest to explore attitudes to mixed marriage. First of all, respondents were asked if they thought that **most people** in Northern Ireland would mind if one of their close relatives married someone from a different religion. In 2002, approximately one third of Church of Ireland respondents (34 per cent) thought that most people would not mind. However, one quarter (25 per cent) of respondents thought that most people would mind a lot. These figures are similar to the attitudes of both Presbyterians and of Protestants as a whole (see Table 5). This is in stark contrast to the figures for 1989, when nearly half (48 per cent) of Church of Ireland respondents thought that most people would mind a lot the mixed marriage of a close relative, which was more pessimistic than Presbyterians or Protestants overall (Table 5).

The next question asked respondents if **they themselves** would mind if a close relative married someone of a different

religion. Table 6 shows that two thirds of Church of Ireland respondents would not mind at all if a close relative married someone of a different religion. Only 13 per cent said that they would mind a lot. The level of acceptance of a cross-community marriage among Church of Ireland respondents has increased since 1989, and at this personal level they are now more generally tolerant to the idea of mixed marriage than Presbyterians or Protestants overall.

### Morality

One area where religion is thought to make a difference to people's attitudes is in relation to moral issues. Table 7 indicates that attitudes to pre-marital sex have become much more liberal during the 1990s. In 1998 just over one quarter of Church of Ireland respondents (27 per cent) thought that pre-marital sex is always or mostly always wrong compared to 46 per cent in 1989. While there has been some decrease in the proportion saying that extra-marital sex is always or almost always wrong, the vast majority of respondents cannot condone it.

Table 5: Most people would mind a close relative marrying someone of a different religion

	%					
	1989			2002		
	C of Ireland	Presb	Prot	C of Ireland	Presb	Prot
Would mind a lot	48	37	41	25	26	26
Would mind a little	28	40	34	33	33	34
Would not mind	16	18	18	34	35	34
Don't know	9	5	6	7	6	7

Table 6: Respondent would mind a close relative marrying someone of a different religion

	%					
	1989			2002		
	C of Ireland	Presb	Prot	C of Ireland	Presb	Prot
Would mind a lot	21	25	25	13	15	15
Would mind a little	29	18	21	16	21	18
Would not mind	47	55	53	66	61	62
Don't know	1	2	2	4	3	5

Table 7: Sexual attitudes

	% saying always or almost always wrong	
	1989	1998
Pre-marital sex	46	27
Extra-marital sex	90	84

Homosexuality is a topic of much debate at present within the Anglican Church, especially in relation to the appointment of openly gay clergy, such as the appointment of Reverend Gene Robinson as the Bishop of New Hampshire. The recent statement by the Primates of the Anglican Communion meeting in Lambeth Palace (dated 16/10/03) has stated that 'we must make clear that recent actions in New Westminster and in the Episcopal Church (USA) do not express the mind of our Communion as a whole, and these

*decisions jeopardise our sacramental fellowship with each other.* It is clear that debates on this issue will continue. In Northern Ireland looking at homosexuality in general, in 1989, four out of five Church of Ireland respondents (82 per cent) thought that sex between people of the same sex was always or almost always wrong. In fact, over three quarters of respondents (79 per cent) thought it was always wrong. By 1998, the proportion thinking it always or mostly always wrong had dropped to 67 per cent. It must be noted that a more liberal attitude towards homosexuality in general does not necessarily imply an increased acceptance of the appointment of openly gay clergy.

## Conclusions

There has been no drop in the proportion of respondents who are affiliated to the Church of Ireland. Moreover, while there has been no rise in the proportion of respondents who never pray or take part in church activities, the frequency of such activity has decreased. Members consider themselves British. Attitudes towards mixed marriages have become more tolerant. In addition, attitudes to pre-marital, extra-marital and homosexual sex have become more liberal. In sum, these suggest that members of the Church of Ireland have undergone a process of liberalisation or secularisation during the 1990s, which is still continuing.

## References

Brewer, John D, 2002, 'Are there any Christians in Northern Ireland?' in Gray, A M, Lloyd, K, Devine, P, Robinson, G and Heenan, D (eds) *Social Attitudes in Northern Ireland: the 8<sup>th</sup> report*, London: Pluto Press

Derry and Raphoe Action, 2001, *Protestants in Community life: Findings from a Co Donegal Survey*, Raphoe: Derry and Raphoe Action

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## Key Points

- 16% of Life and Times respondents belong to the Church of Ireland.
- 30% of these attend church every week, while 17% never attend church.
- One in ten pray every day, and 11% say that they are very religious.
- Most Church of Ireland respondents see themselves as unionist (71%); most also see themselves as British (76%).
- Most respondents are tolerant of cross-community marriage.
- Attitudes to pre-marital, extra-marital and homosexual sex are becoming more liberal. However, in 1998, four out of five respondents still thought that extra-marital sex is wrong.

The Northern Ireland Life and Times survey is carried out annually and documents public opinion on a wide range of social issues. In 2002, 1800 adults were interviewed in their own home. Interviews were carried out by Research and Evaluation Services.

The Life and Times survey is a joint project of the two Northern Ireland universities and aims to provide an independent source of information on what the public thinks about the social issues of the day. Check the web site for more information on the survey findings ([www.ark.ac.uk/nilt](http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt)) or call the survey directors on 028 9097 3034 with any queries.

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