

## **Christian Census – Bishop Jill Duff, 29 November 2022 for The Express**

Six million fewer people have ticked the box “Christian” on the census than in 2011. But post-pandemic people are reaching out for more meaningful spiritual experience. I notice a growing appetite for faith and prayer.

A recent survey showed nearly half the population (46%) had been in contact with their local church. The top reasons for doing so were attending weddings, baptisms, and funerals (50%) worship and services (42%) and carol services (39%).

During the pandemic 40% of under 30s engaged in Christian worship online. One of our Vicars in Lancashire, Rev Anne Beverley, made it on to BBC’s One Show with her surprise two million followers on her TikTok channel @ChristChurchWesham. She said to me: “I dared to switch the comments on. I couldn’t believe it – people were asking such big questions – what happens after I die? Can you pray for healing for me?”

Only two months ago, during HM The Queen’s funeral watched by 2 billion across the world, people were reaching for words around the presence of God in the coincidence of the rainbows at her death, the beauty of the service at Westminster Abbey, her overt faith in Jesus Christ, which King Charles has so movingly spoken of himself. He captured hearts as he finished his tribute with the words – “May flights of angels sing thee to thy rest”. So much in our films, our music, our culture expresses this heartfelt longing for life beyond what we see, for that one day when “we’ll meet again”, one day we’ll come home.

Only yesterday Stormzy released a trending post on Instagram (Stormzy performs ‘Holy Spirit’ live) which simply described the presence of Jesus in his life. Our Three Lions of the England World Cup Squad – Rashford, Sterling and Saka – speak openly about their Christian faith in a way that whets the taste buds.

My experience as a bishop in Lancashire, is that there’s a growing appetite for tasters of the Christian faith. One of our vicars was called by parents from the local school asking why there was nothing at a time they could make: now she’s running a thriving Families@4 service on a Sunday afternoon. In another seaside town, where retired people make their home, the vicar has innovated with a “Freshers’ Week” for the over 60s for those finding themselves time rich, but relationship poor, asking the big questions in life. We are finding a growing demand for churches to be hubs of their communities – offering Warm Welcome, Wellness Hubs, CAP debt advice, food pantries, emergency food parcels. In one of our towns, the local councillor said: “It’s like the church is the fourth emergency service”.

My challenge following the Census is that there’s a heavenly banquet out there – in a church near you. Why not taste and see for yourself?