

Church faces 'difficult decision' to engage liberal christian students

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Religious leaders face a fresh challenge in engaging young Christians, after new research revealed many university students are affirming their faith in private but staying away from church on Sundays.

The study into religion among undergraduates at 13 English universities - by the universities of Derby, Durham, Chester and Kingston University London - also found liberal Christians outnumbered evangelical Christians tenfold on campus. The University of Durham led the study.

A total of 4,500 undergraduate students were surveyed and 100 interviews carried out for the study, which found:

- Christianity attracts far more students than any other religious tradition, but most of these have begun to detach themselves from [church](#) by the time they reach this formative stage in life;
- among Christian students, over half never attend church during term-time;
- 60% of students involved in the evangelical Christian Unions believe homosexual relations to be 'always wrong' but among other Christian students only 20% held this view;
- while the Church of England struggles with the question of women bishops only ten per cent of Christian students believe women should not be admitted to the same leadership positions as men;
- less than ten per cent of Christian students believe The Bible disproves evolution.

The researchers said most Christian students were "far closer to the social mainstream than the evangelical groups that often speak the loudest among Christians in public debates". The Church needed to consider how it could better engage with "the interests and enthusiasms of this generation," they added.

A book based on the study - entitled *Christianity and the University Experience: Understanding Student Faith* has now been published.

Dr Kristin Aune - Director of the Centre for Society, Religion & Belief at the University of Derby - said: "Christian students make up a significant part of universities' student bodies, and they are a diverse group. Our research challenges universities, chaplaincies, churches and all who work with Christian students to look at their diversity in order to work with them more effectively."

Lead author Dr Mathew Guest, of Durham University's Department of Theology and Religion, added: "When many think of religion on university campuses two things come to mind; an intense faith affirmed by evangelical Christians and some Muslims, and an equally intense atheism expressed by young sceptics as a protest against religion.

"Moderate or liberal Christianity rarely enters the conversation, assumed to be a long spent force favoured by older generations.

"And yet our research found that this description reflects the values of the majority of students who identify Christianity as their religion of choice. In fact, liberal Christians outnumber evangelicals tenfold.

"With the vast majority of Christian students affirming a moderate expression of values in keeping with wider British culture, the Church faces a difficult decision about whether to adapt to changing times or risk permanently alienating an entire generation."

Provided by University of Derby

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