

Research finds attending a cathedral Christmas carol service makes people happy

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New research shows that attending a Cathedral Christmas Carol Service has a positive impact on mental health and well-being.

The research, by Professor Leslie Francis of the University of Warwick, The Very Revd Dr. Susan Jones, Dean of Liverpool Cathedral, and Dr. Ursula McKenna of Bishop Grosseteste University, Lincoln, is titled "The contribution of cathedrals to psychological health and well-being: Assessing the impact of Cathedral Carol Services." The study was designed to discover what effect special events, such as the Christmas services at Liverpool Cathedral, had on those attending, whether regular churchgoers or occasional visitors. It used the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire, part of a family of well-being measures that have been used in a number of correlational studies exploring the association between religion and positive psychology.

The research team tested 383 people before and after the Holly Bough Service, held on the Fourth Sunday in Advent, at Liverpool Cathedral in 2019, and then applied the same well-being measure to 802 people attending Christmas Carol Services in that same year.

In the test, participants were asked to respond to the same 29 statements before and after the [service](#) such as: I do not feel particularly pleased with the way I am, I find beauty in some things, I do not have a particular sense of meaning and purpose in my life.

The results showed real evidence that the Christmas carol services had a [positive impact](#) on those attending, with a robust difference between the

scores between the first and second test—much more than you would expect they would have increased by chance.

There have been a number of recent reports highlighting the growth in [cathedral](#) visitor numbers or showing the social and economic impact cathedrals have on their local communities and beyond, but there has been less work done to assess the psychological benefit on visitors and participants at special events.

This study is part of broader research into the positive impact of Anglican cathedrals on their [local communities](#) and the relationship between religion and happiness.

Commenting on the findings, Leslie Francis, Professor of Religions and Psychology at the University of Warwick, and Canon Theologian at Liverpool Cathedral, explained: "Collaborating with my research group, Liverpool Cathedral is committed to using the best scientific tools to evaluate its mission and ministry and to use that evidence to shape its priorities for the future.

"It is important to test research in peer-review journals before inviting the Church to take it seriously and I am pleased to say these findings can be taken seriously.

"But, as a scientist, further research is always needed to test and build on findings and we look forward to examining Christmas in other cathedrals, as well as other highlight events and services at different times throughout the year in Liverpool Cathedral," he added.

The Dean of Liverpool, the Very Revd Sue Jones, said: "I am really encouraged by these findings. We say that the cathedral is a place of encounter—a place to encounter the God who knows and loves us and a place in which people can feel affirmed and loved. And now we know

that works; not just for churchgoers, but for all the people of Liverpool.

"The Cathedral is adding something to Liverpool's sense of wellbeing. And I praise God for that," she added.

Previous studies in this field include: the study of 814 visitors to four cathedrals in England (Coventry, Ely, Lichfield and Wells), Winter and Gasson (1996); a study of 514 visitors to St Davids Cathedral in Wales, Williams et al. (2007) and a study of visitors to Canterbury Cathedral, Bond, Packer and Ballantyne (2015). All reported that visitors identified the benefits of peace and quiet and of connecting spiritually and emotionally.

Ysseldyk, Haslam and Morton (2016) looked at visitors to three environments (cathedral, castle and shopping center), and reported that for some, visiting the cathedral impacted their sense of self-esteem.

More information: Leslie J. Francis et al, The contribution of cathedrals to psychological health and well-being: Assessing the impact of Cathedral Carol Services, *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* (2021). [DOI: 10.4102/hts.v77i4.6820](https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i4.6820)

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