



# The Kendal Project

Patterns of the sacred in contemporary society

[www.kendalproject.org.uk](http://www.kendalproject.org.uk)

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Welcome to the first edition of the Kendal Project newsletter, an occasional publication designed to inform and, hopefully, to interest the many people who have helped this project since it began last October.

The aim of the project is to map patterns of religion and spirituality in Kendal, exploring questions such as how different forms of Christianity are faring, the relative importance of alternative forms of spirituality, and the meanings and significance of religion and spirituality in people's lives. The project is directed by Paul Heelas, Bronislaw Szerszynski and Linda Woodhead from Lancaster University, and the field research is mostly carried out by Ben Seel and Karin Tusting.

The principal activities of the project to date have been directed at surveying the field of religion and spirituality in Kendal. Karin has been gradually attending services at Kendal's 26 different churches, which has started to give us a sense of the patterns in organised religion. Ben has identified over 50 non-Christian groups with some sort of spiritual dimension to their activities – from Buddhists to Yoga to Sacred Dancing groups – and has attended most of these. And together Karin and Ben have spoken to a large number of complementary health practitioners both over the telephone and face-to-face about their practices and whether they have a spiritual dimension.

## **Kendal**

A number of people have asked why we chose Kendal for the project. There were both practical and academic reasons for this. On the practical side, Kendal is close enough to the university to make such a study

feasible, and is the right size, large enough to be interesting and have a wide range of activities going on, small enough to be covered by the project team. Kendal has a church attendance rate slightly above the national average, and is also something of a centre for alternative spirituality, offering us an ideal place to explore some of the key questions in current religious studies debates.

It is clearly crucial that the project reflects Kendal accurately, so as well as the activities focusing on patterns of the sacred, we have decided to explore further people's own experiences and understandings of Kendal as a place to live. We are hoping to run a feature in the Westmorland Gazette, asking people to write in telling us what Kendal means to you, so keep an eye out for that!

## **Church attendance count**

One of the project's aims is to find out the proportion of people in Kendal who are actively involved in religious or spiritual activities. On 26th November, we completed a church attendance count. The project team, together with 25 intrepid Religious Studies students, braved the wind and rain to stand outside all the church services in Kendal with our clipboards. This has given us invaluable information, both about total numbers of attenders and about the gender and age breakdowns in the different churches. The results suggest that around 8 per cent of the population of Kendal were attending church on the Sunday of the count. However, the detailed results should be interpreted with caution. We are aware that several of the churches had lower attendance figures than usual on that Sunday for a variety of reasons. So we have also sent

questionnaires to the clergy and ministers in the churches so that when these results are published, we will be able to place them within a wider context. The 26<sup>th</sup> November figures were as follows:

Allhallows	11
Bethel Evangelical	19
Fellside Methodists	15
First Church of Christ, Scientist	33
Heron Hill Free Church	15
Holy Trinity and St George R.C.	531
Jehovah's Witnesses, Highgate	98
Jehovah's Witnesses, Parkside	62
Kendal Christadelphians	16
Kendal Parish Church	195
Latter Day Saints, Town Hall	26
New Life Community Church	56
Our Lady and St Oswald K. and M.	5
Parr St Evangelical	154
Salvation Army	22
Sandylands Methodist	94
Society of Friends (Quakers)	29
South Lakes Christadelphians	10
Spiritualist Beacon of Light	32
St George's	110
St Mark's, Natland	122
St Thomas'	300
St Thomas', Hallgarth	58
Stricklandgate Methodist	176
Unitarian	45
United Reformed, Highgate	81
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>2315</b>

### ***Spirituality outside the churches***

Estimating the numbers involved in alternative spiritualities is a more challenging task. Some groups meet weekly, others less frequently, and one-off weekend or day workshops are also of some importance. One-to-one encounters with a spiritual healer, reflexologist or homeopath can have spiritual significance for some but not for others, even while the frequency with which people attend such practitioners also varies enormously. Despite the complexity of the field, we are collating information about these different forms of involvement and we

later hope to make some estimates. If you have any ideas about this task or about areas we may have overlooked we'd love to hear from you!

### ***Future project activities***

The project is now moving into its next phase, in which we will be working more closely with a smaller number of churches, groups and practitioners, giving out questionnaires and talking with people to gain a more in-depth understanding of the place of religion or spirituality in their lives. This summer we'll also begin a street study where we will be asking the general public about their beliefs and values, and what gives meaning to their lives.

We would like to close this newsletter by thanking everyone who has assisted us in the research so far. The research team has received a very warm welcome from the people of Kendal, and without this help the research would not have been possible. Further newsletters will report more preliminary results and any planned publications from the project.

If you have any questions or comments, do feel free to contact us, either by post or email, or visit the project website at [www.kendalproject.org.uk](http://www.kendalproject.org.uk). We look forward to continuing this fascinating research in Kendal.

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