

Evensong sees a surge even as British church attendance declines

In small and large spaces, the 45-minute service is attracting people who might otherwise never enter a sanctuary.

by [Catherine Pepinster](#) in the [October 10, 2017](#) issue

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LONDON (RNS) — The line of locals and tourists stretches about 400 people long, and one might think they are waiting to get into the premiere of a play or an upscale restaurant's grand opening. But these people want to go to a church service.

In Britain, where churchgoing is mostly in decline, crowds are drawn to evensong, the hymn-heavy evening service of the Anglican tradition taken from the Book of Common Prayer. This line was headed for the service at Westminster Abbey in London, sometimes called England's parish church.

Abbey officials estimate that there can be up to 700 people at evensong when the main choir is singing. Similar crowds can be found in cathedrals across Britain.

But even in much smaller churches, evensong attendance is growing, attracting people who might otherwise never enter a church. Some clergy hope the service is a way to draw people into a deeper relationship with the church.

What's behind the evensong upsurge? Much credit goes to a website, [Choralevensong.org](#), that helps people find a service near them. Since its creation last year, more than 500 churches, cathedrals, and colleges have been included. Hundreds more have requested to be added.

After being listed on the site, one church found the numbers turning up for evensong rose from 20 to 200.

Guy Hayward, editor of the Choral Evensong website, said: "A lot of people don't want to directly engage with the church, they don't want to go in through the front

door, as it were. They are looking for a side entrance and choral evensong provides that. They are attracted by artistic expression and then by osmosis they find it spiritually appealing.”

Then there’s the more practical reason to come to evensong. Cathedrals in England often charge high admission fees—about \$25 in some cases—so some tourists opt instead for evensong, which is free.

Evensong is a creation of the English Reformation, derived from monastic prayer traditions. Its liturgy is drawn from the Church of England’s Book of Common Prayer, created by Archbishop Thomas Cranmer in 1549. It usually lasts about 45 minutes and includes scripture readings such as psalms and the Nunc Dimittis (Song of Simeon) and Magnificat, both taken from the Gospel of Luke.

Some of the greatest choral music sung at evensong was written at the time of Queen Elizabeth I, soon after its liturgy was first designed, by composers such as Thomas Tallis and William Byrd.

At Westminster Abbey, the crowds sat near the choir and in temporary seating placed next to the high altar to accommodate the overflow. Among those attending was Julia Mellow, from Adelaide, Australia.

“I am not really religious,” she said. “I came for the music and the history.”

For Alejandro Calas de Laxedon Zangnonit and his family, from the Rioja region of Spain, the church service did matter: “We are Christians. It was important to my parents to be at a church service, and this is very beautiful.”

Another couple, Lee and Marie Johnson, from Colorado, described themselves as more spiritual than religious, and the spirituality of the service appealed to them.

“There is a reverence about it,” said Lee Johnson. “It is a moment when you can pause in your daily life, when you can stop.”

Marie Johnson said, “It brought tears to my eyes. . . . I used to go to church more when I was young, but the rules, the judging of people put me off. But the church here, with a service like this, brings people together.”

The dean of Westminster, John Hall, described evensong as a starting point for some people to engage with Christianity.

“Even though the majority of the worshipers will be unfamiliar with evensong, there is generally a very respectful and even prayerful atmosphere,” he said. “We do from time to time have evidence of the impact of the experience. I profoundly believe that attending a beautiful act of worship, whether evensong or the Eucharist, has converting power.

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