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Archbishop Stephen writes in today's Telegraph about the hope of faith. For Christians, the story that defines our identity has never been one of overwhelming numerical growth nor fear of extinction

Two thousand years ago, a family took part in a census.

Over the coming weeks in schools, churches, high streets, and venues across this country the Christmas story that began with Mary and Joseph's journey for a census will be enjoyed and celebrated by millions of people.

But of what story are we a part? What story do we want to tell about ourselves? The UK census gives us a particular and important snapshot of the identity of our nation decade by decade. Interpreting the story of trends, values, perceptions, and identities that underlies these snapshots is complicated, however.

Some commentators have responded to the census data about religious affiliation released last week by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) by predicting the terminal decline of Christianity in our nation or declaring this as a statistical watershed moment. I am interested in the overall story that this census snapshot informs. Christians should approach this data with humility, attentiveness, and self-reflection.

Though the most common response to the voluntary question of religious affiliation remains "Christian," there was a 13.1 percentage decrease from 2011 to 2021. The ONS clarifies that these figures are about "the religion with which [respondents] connect or identify, rather than their beliefs or active religious practice."

I do not find the trend in the responses to this particular question surprising; we have left behind the time when many people almost automatically identified as Christian.

Yet the story of the relationship between the identity expressed on our census forms and our engagement with faith is far from straightforward. There are fewer people in the pews on a typical Sunday morning than a few decades ago but, at the same time, some of our churches - of all traditions and styles - are growing significantly and we are also seeing people coming to faith in Jesus Christ to whom the idea of joining a weekly service would not necessarily occur.

These apparently contrasting statistical snapshots inform a more complicated though incomplete story, which is not one of terminal decline for religious faith nor Christianity, but more about how individuals in our ever-changing nation and culture choose to express their identity. This is a

story on which I and other Christians must reflect carefully and humbly.

For Christians, however, the story that defines our identity has never been one of overwhelming numerical growth nor fear of extinction. Amid the complexities of identity, values and nation, Christians strive to live by the story of the Good News of Jesus Christ – a story notable for the absence of success by the world’s usual standards.

A watershed moment in that story happened when, “Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world.” The events that then unfolded will be shared by millions of people in the UK this Christmas. They will hear the baby Jesus described as a light that shines in the darkness. His story is not a tale of linear success, but about how that light shines through the difficult realities of our lives and finally overcomes all darkness.

A baby is born helpless in a stable to a very young mother in an occupied country. The family is threatened with murder and flees as refugees. As he grows, Jesus will reject worldly power and wealth. He will feast and celebrate. He will weep and mourn. He will sit with the lonely. He will sit with his enemies. He will be loved and hated, cherished and betrayed. He will suffer injustice and die a criminal’s death. And – as Christians believe – he will rise on Easter Sunday, and secure light rather than darkness as the very final word.

That’s the fundamental story that shapes Christian identity.

And it is why I am full of hope.

The success of Christians in following and sharing that story is what matters. And because of this, right now, across our nation Christians are offering practical help and spiritual support to anyone in need. This winter, perhaps more than ever before, food and warmth and companionship are being made available by Christians.

We offer this to all – entirely irrespective of any census answers they may have given. And this dedication and service will continue, whatever the statistical trend.

Christians in our nation are part of a global faith: the largest movement on Earth, which is its greatest hope for a peaceful, sustainable future.

That hope started with a census.

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