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## Prayer and praise during the Munich Crisis: a story of church attendance

**Conference paper**

**Original citation:**

Originally presented at [The Munich Crisis and the people: international, transnational & comparative perspectives](#), 29-30 June 2018, Humanities Research Institute (HRI), the University of Sheffield

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/89382/>

Available in LSE Research Online: July 2018

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## Prayer and Praise during the Munich Crisis: a story of church attendance

‘There was one Sunday in September when there was a flocking back to the house of prayer. Homes, country and lives were in danger, and people felt that God could help. The crisis passed and again we sank into the same slothful and neglectful ways’.<sup>1</sup>

The words of the vicar of Christ Church in Fulham written in his January 1939 parish letter. His reflections on the Munich crisis as echoed by Philip Williamson in his article on the Christian conservative response to totalitarianism. He states that ‘the imminence of war during the Czech crisis had brought unusually large numbers of people into churches and chapels to prayers to penitence and intercession’.<sup>2</sup> Using three local case studies, focussing on Bedfordshire, Bolton in Lancashire, and the London boroughs of Fulham and Hammersmith, this paper will investigate these claims using primarily local newspaper reports and church records, as well as the impact of events on Armistice events in November 1938.

Most works examining the crisis make passing references to churches. However, two articles tackle it specifically. Alan Wilkinson’s 1989 article notes activities undertaken by people, including the laying of flowers at the Cenotaph and increased church attendance in major cities on the Sunday following the agreement, though without any statistical evidence.<sup>3</sup> Andrew Chandler’s article examines the reactions of leading members of the Church of England, who mostly supported Chamberlain’s actions, and the morality of the Munich agreement.<sup>4</sup> Although not specifically related to the crisis, events of the period affected attendance at Armistice Day and Remembrance Sunday events. Adrian Gregory in *The Silence of Memory* traces the changing nature of these days. Using Mass Observation (MO) data, he highlights that in November 1937 attitudes varied with feelings of hypocrisy about praying for peace whilst preparing for war and that it was necessary, as the memory

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<sup>1</sup> Hammersmith and Fulham Archives (HFA): Christ Church Parish Magazine, January 1939

<sup>2</sup> P. Williamson, ‘Christian Conservatives and the Totalitarian Challenge, 1933-40’, *English Historical Review*, 115, 462 (2000): 608

<sup>3</sup> A. Wilkinson, ‘Thanking God for Neville Chamberlain: Appeasement and the English Churches’, *Modern History Review*, 1, 2 (1989): 26-7

<sup>4</sup> A. Chandler, ‘Munich and Morality: The Bishops of the Church of England and Appeasement’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 5, 1 (1994): 77-99

of war provided a lesson for peace. Whatever people's attitudes towards Armistice Day, it did not prevent towns and cities from coming to a standstill.<sup>5</sup>

Before discussing the case studies, some national context is required based on letters to the editor and MO crisis diaries. Sunday 18 September was a universal day of prayer, called by the Archbishop of Canterbury and supported in a letter to *The Times* by leaders of the Free Churches.<sup>6</sup> By comparison, the *Manchester Guardian* did not publish any letters about the call of prayer. However, it did publish two in the week leading up to the agreement, calling upon British churches to work with their German counterparts to prevent war.<sup>7</sup> Additional letters appeared after the agreement. Writing on 4 October, Gertrude Bose reflected upon the aftermath in difference countries, asking if those praying for peace in England had reflected that the Czechs were also praying to God and hoped that as such, jubilation would be less strident.<sup>8</sup>

Apart from newspapers, MO records provide a rich source of evidence for a people's history of the crisis. However, the MO records contain very few references about attendance at church. Two entries refer to 18 September with one observer from the Home Counties noting that despite the service being well attended, there was a lack of young people.<sup>9</sup> Church services also took place during the week. One respondent from the North East mentioned that services had been ongoing all week prior to the resolution of the crisis, which led her to attend with her daughter on the Sunday after the agreement, for the first time since Whit Sunday. As this Sunday was also harvest festival, it resulted in the church being three parts full, as in other areas.<sup>10</sup>

The national sources examined provide little evidence for historians. However, there may be greater coverage in national newspaper reports, which were not examined for this paper. The evidence demonstrates that people attended church during the crisis and that there was some drift back, especially on the Sunday following the conclusion of the crisis. Does the local evidence support the national level?

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<sup>5</sup> A. Gregory, *The Silence of Memory: Armistice Day 1919-1946* (Oxford, 1994)

<sup>6</sup> *The Times*, 16 September 1938

<sup>7</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, 26 September 1938

<sup>8</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, 4 October 1938

<sup>9</sup> Mass-Observation Archive (M-O A): Day Survey (DS) 35, The Crisis, September-October 1938; M-O A: DS118, Crisis, September 1938

<sup>10</sup> M-O A: DS66, Crisis, 26 September - 2 October 1938

The Bedfordshire case study primarily focusses upon the urban centres of Luton and Bedford, with some references to rural areas. During the weeks prior to the crisis, several special services were held. One of these was a peace service at Waller Street Methodist Church, which was addressed by the local pacifist minister, Reverend Leslie Brewer. He announced this intention to establish a local branch of the Peace Pledge Union.<sup>11</sup> The message of peace was reinforced at a service on 29 September, attended by over 200 women, who heard the preacher argue that ‘at times like this, faith can help’.<sup>12</sup> These were just a few of the services that took place. People came into church at other times to pray for peace. The return to the church during the crisis was noted in the October minutes of Henlow Parish Council. They had decided to leave the church open during the crisis, as people resorted to prayer due to feeling threatened.<sup>13</sup>

The above indicates that people were attending church during the crisis. Unfortunately, church service registers normally record the number of communicants rather than attendance. As such, the former is used as a way of providing an indication of the numbers attending services on the Sundays before and after the crisis, for a selection of churches in Bedfordshire.

Table 1: Sunday church attendance in Bedfordshire 18/9/38 – 9/10/38<sup>14</sup>

Church	Location	18/9/38	25/9/38	2/10/38	9/10/38
St Andrew’s	Luton	82	69	173	65
St Anne’s	Luton	10	24		6
St Christopher’s	Luton	74	77	127	49
Christchurch	Luton	112	74	245	78
Stopsley	Luton	78	29	68	35
St Peter’s	Bedford	39	92	140	19
St Paul’s	Bedford	140	144	224	85
St John’s	Bedford	11	30	8	16
St Leonard’s	Bedford	23	30	76	18
St Martin’s	Bedford	74	56	133	51

<sup>11</sup> *Beds and Herts Evening Telegraph*, 12 September 1938

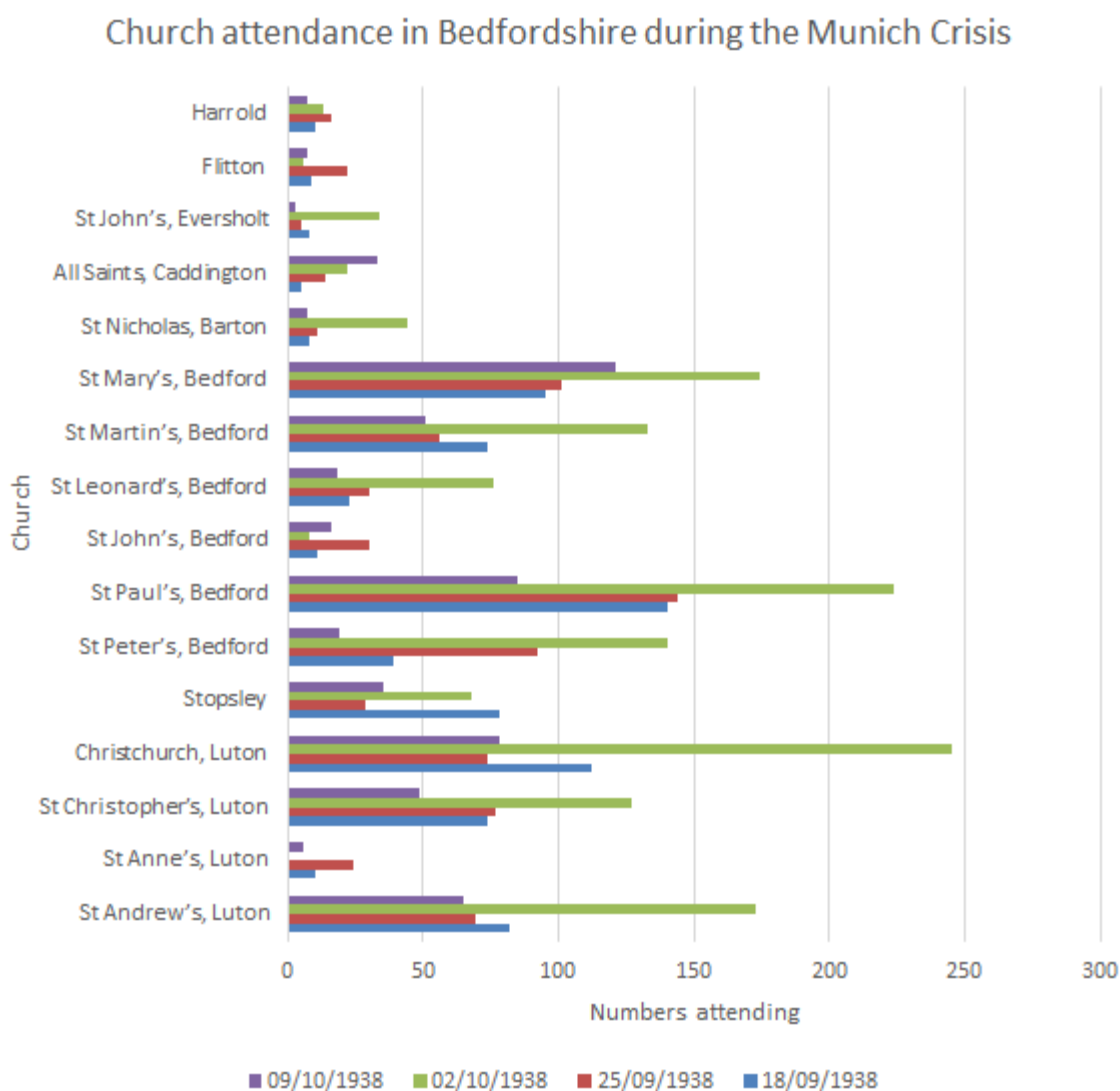
<sup>12</sup> *Luton News*, 29 September 1938

<sup>13</sup> Bedfordshire Archives (BA): X381/3, Henlow Parish Magazine, November 1938

<sup>14</sup> BA: P150/0/7, Register of Services 1932-1939; BA: P151/0/1, Register of Services; BA: P161/0/2, Service Register 1 Jan 1933- 8 Apr 1942; BA: P135/1/41, Register of Services; BA: P158/0/3, Register of Services; BA: P100/0/23, Register of Services; BA: P1/0/2, Register of Services; BA: P88/0/2, Register of Services; BA: P134/0/7, Register of Services; BA: P147/0/12, Register of Services; BA: P81/0/9, Register of Services; BA: P21/0/6, Register of Services 1937-1943; BA: P35/0/12, Register of Services 1931-1940; BA: P42/0/1, Register of Services 1932-1943; BA: P12/0/3, Register of Services 1936-1947; BA: P33/0/6, Register of Services 1938-1945

St Mary's	Bedford	95	101	174	121
St Nicholas	Barton	8	11	44	7
All Saints	Caddington	5	14	22	33
St John's	Eversholt	8	5	34	3
	Flitton	9	22	6	7
	Harrold	10	16	13	7

Figure 1: Church attendance in Bedfordshire during the Munich Crisis



Church attendance on the two Sundays prior to the final week of the crisis fluctuated, whilst in the immediate aftermath, a surge in the number of communicants occurred at most churches. The increased numbers were reported in the local newspapers as people gave thanks for the culmination of the crisis, which provided 'a great sense of relief in all our hearts and minds'.<sup>15</sup> The sharpest

<sup>15</sup> *Beds and Herts Evening Telegraph*, 1 October 1938

increases occurred in Luton and Bedford. Luton's main church reportedly closed its doors fifteen minutes before the start of the service due to the numbers attending, leading to another service later in the day. These services, reportedly attracted triple the usual number of communicants, a claim that cannot be verified as the service register for this period is unavailable. Similar increases were reported at other churches.<sup>16</sup> Increases were also reported in Bedford and Dunstable. Reflecting upon the crisis, Reverend W J Price, preaching at Victoria Street Methodist Church, argued that individual and collective prayer had prevented an even greater crisis.<sup>17</sup> The sharp increases in the urban areas of the county occurred to a less extent in the rural parishes. Taken together, the crisis impacted on the number of communicants, thereby implying an overall increase. Separately, it can be argued that those in urban areas were more thankful, which may be related to the increased threat of aerial bombardment. However, it should be noted that for many churches, Sunday 2 October was also harvest festival, a service that traditionally attracted a higher attendance.

The immediate impact of the crisis witnessed more people attending church. It also had a knock-on effect relating to Remembrance Sunday and Armistice Day services. Leading up to these services, ministers such as Reverend Aubrey,<sup>18</sup> and *Luton News* letter writers like H. S. Knowles,<sup>19</sup> urged people to remember how they had felt during the recent crisis. Newspaper reports demonstrate that people did remember the crisis with large crowds reported, though there were some exceptions. Canon Griffiths, preaching at the Priory Church in Dunstable, noted that one of the effects of the crisis had been that age and youth now stood shoulder to shoulder to honour the dead, thus displaying an increased sense of gratitude compared to previous years.<sup>20</sup> The actual impact of the crisis on attitudes to remembrance is well summarised by a *Bedfordshire Standard* report on 18 November. This stated that 'the nation had watched with gratitude as the crisis passed and on Friday remembered its gratitude for the dead of the Great War'.<sup>21</sup> Messages like this were stressed in several church sermons,<sup>22</sup> thereby indicating that Armistice events in 1938 need to be factored into any assessment of the impact of the crisis on ordinary people.

Bolton's experience differed from Bedfordshire as there is more information available regarding the lead-up to the crisis. One of the first indications came on 6 September, when the *Bolton Evening*

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<sup>16</sup> *Luton News*, 6 October 1938

<sup>17</sup> *Beds and Herts Evening Telegraph*, 3 October 1938

<sup>18</sup> *Beds and Herts Evening Telegraph*, 7 November 1938

<sup>19</sup> *Luton News*, 10 November 1938

<sup>20</sup> *Luton News*, 17 November 1938

<sup>21</sup> *Bedfordshire Standard*, 18 November 1938

<sup>22</sup> *Beds and Herts Evening Telegraph*, 11 November 1938

News reported that that midday service at St Paul’s Cathedral would be devoted to prayers for peace in Central Europe.<sup>23</sup> Prayers for peace took place in Bolton and were reported on 16 September, with the paper noting that services of intercession for peace took place in several churches, including the main parish church where seventy people attended.<sup>24</sup> This was reinforced by a report in the *Bolton Journal and Guardian*, where the vicar of Bolton’s main parish church, W. J. Havelock Davidson, said that he hoped prayers for peace would occur in as many churches as possible.<sup>25</sup> He showed his appreciation for this and other articles published about peace services in local newspapers, as part of a letter to the *Bolton Evening News* appealing for people to attend church during this time of anxiety.<sup>26</sup> In order to assist people who wanted to pray, churches such as the Trinity and Congregational Methodist Church in Farnworth decided to remain open. This included a daily prayer meeting led by one of the denominations, thereby indicating that churches were working together to meet the spiritual needs of the people. Further services were reported in the local newspapers on 29 and 30 September, as being well attended.<sup>27</sup>

With local newspapers reporting on attendance at prayer meetings, what do the service registers say about church attendance on the Sundays surrounding the crisis.

Table 2: Sunday church attendance in Bolton 18/9/38 – 9/10/38<sup>28</sup>

Church	Location	18/9/38	25/9/38	2/10/38	9/10/38
St Stephen’s	Bolton	27	40	96	20
St Thomas	Bolton	47	99	252	81
Emmanuel	Bolton	46	14	15	39
St Mary’s	Bolton	96	56	99	30
Bolton Parish Church	Bolton	41	28	197	19
St Barts	Bolton	130	96	150	18
All Souls	Bolton	28	45	37	56
Saint James	Bolton	42	17	22	17

<sup>23</sup> *Bolton Evening News*, 6 September 1938

<sup>24</sup> *Bolton Evening News*, 16 September 1938

<sup>25</sup> *Bolton Journal and Guardian*, 16 September 1938

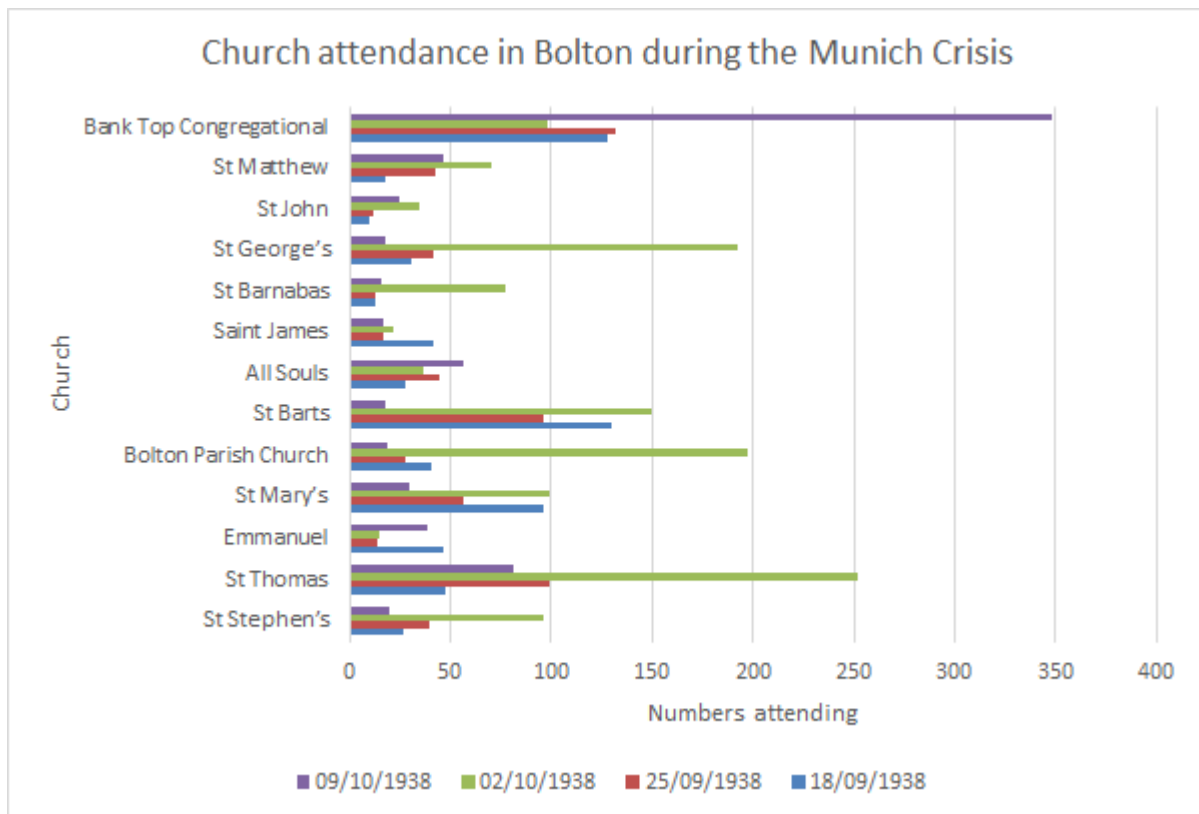
<sup>26</sup> *Bolton Evening News*, 16 September 1938

<sup>27</sup> *Bolton Evening News*, 29 September 1938; *Farnworth Weekly Journal*, 30 September 1938

<sup>28</sup> Greater Manchester County Record Office (GMCRO): L168/1/6/1, St Stephen’s Church Preachers’ Book, 1931-1938; GMCRO: L144/1/6/7, St Thomas Preachers’ Book, 1933-1939; GMCRO: L108/1/6/2, Emmanuel Church Preachers’ Book, January 1933 - April 1941; GMCRO: L85/1/9/3, Register of Services; GMCRO: L243/1/10/7, Bolton Parish Church Preachers’ Book, 1937-1950; GMCRO: L122/1/8/5, St Bart’s Register of Services, 1920-1942; GMCRO: L117/1/6/4, All Souls Church Preachers’ Book, 1933-1940; GMCRO: L128/1/6/4, St James’ Register of Services, 1928-1938; GMCRO: L124/1/5/6, St Barnabas Register of Services, 1932-1942; GMCRO: L244/1/8/1, St George’s Preachers’ Book, 1932-1948; GMCRO: L246/1/5/5, St John Register of Services, 1935-1945; GMCRO: L123/1/6/8, St Mathew Register of Services, 1936-1944; Bolton History Centre (BHC): NC/3/3/1, Bank Top Congregational Church Register of Services, Nov 1909 - Mar 1946

St Barnabas	Bolton	13	13	77	16
St George's	Bolton	31	42	192	18
St John	Bolton	10	12	35	25
St Matthew	Bolton	18	43	70	46
Bank Top Congregational	Bolton	128	132	98	348

Figure 2: Church attendance in Bolton during the Munich Crisis



Bolton communicant figures display a similar pattern to Bedfordshire with most churches reporting large increase in the number of communicants for 2 October, which for many churches was also harvest festival. The other three Sundays, there were minor fluctuations, making it difficult to judge if people responded to the national call for prayer on 18 September.

Newspapers reporting on church services continued in the immediate aftermath of the crisis. On 1 October, 'Thankful' had written to the *Bolton Evening News* to encourage all young men of the district to attend chapel on the coming Sunday.<sup>29</sup> Based on the communicant figures, there was a partial response. At a service of thanksgiving at Westhoughton Church, people were turned away as the church was full.<sup>30</sup> The *Bolton Evening News* editorial on 3 October argued that it was

<sup>29</sup> *Bolton Evening News*, 1 October 1938

<sup>30</sup> *Bolton Evening News*, 3 October 1938; *Horwich and Westhoughton Journal and Guardian*, 7 October 1938



appropriate that prayers of thanksgiving had been said in churches<sup>31</sup> and mention was made in several sermons about the answering of prayers regarding the international situation.<sup>32</sup> Based on reports and the service registers, people were grateful for the preservation of peace, even if the price was a feeling of humiliation about the way in which the crisis had been settled.

The thanks shown by the population of Bolton and the surrounding areas demonstrated an appreciation for deliverance in the immediate aftermath of the crisis. As with Bedfordshire, there was a knock-on effect on remembrance events in November 1938, despite continuing calls for services to be scrapped due to the memories it triggered in those who had returned from the conflict.<sup>33</sup> Remembrance events took on a greater significance due to the crisis. Bolton's Armistice Day commemorations saw the town stand still to reflect on recent events and unlike in previous years, most people were wearing poppies.<sup>34</sup> The crowds that attended in Bolton also occurred in the nearby town of Farnworth.<sup>35</sup>

The final case study examines the London boroughs of Fulham and Hammersmith. Like the other two areas, there were encouragements to take part in the call to prayer on Sunday 18 September. This call had been answered in Central London churches earlier in the week<sup>36</sup> and based on the communicant figures, there was a response in some churches in Fulham and the surrounding area.

Table 3: Sunday church attendance in Fulham and surrounding areas 18/9/38 – 9/10/38<sup>37</sup>

Church	Location	18/9/38	25/9/38	02/10/38	09/10/38
All Saints	Fulham	235	106	328	95
Christchurch	Fulham	35	69	163	31
St Dionis	Fulham	113	150	114	110
St Mary's	Fulham	131	55	187	56

<sup>31</sup> *Bolton Evening News*, 3 October 1938

<sup>32</sup> *Bolton Evening News*, 3 October 1938

<sup>33</sup> *Bolton Evening News*, 8 November 1938

<sup>34</sup> *Bolton Evening News*, 11 November 1938

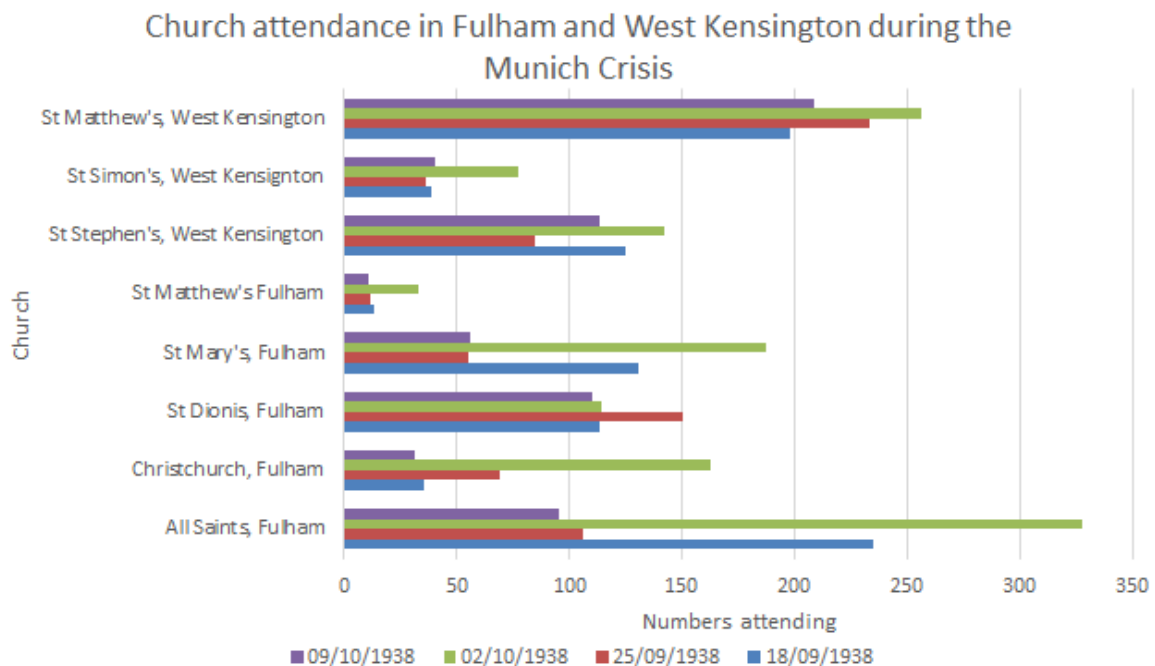
<sup>35</sup> *Farnworth Weekly Journal*, 18 November 1938

<sup>36</sup> *Bolton Evening News*, 16 September 1938

<sup>37</sup> London Metropolitan Archives (LMA): P77/ALL/48, Church Services Register, 18 October 1935 to 20 April 1940; LMA: P77/CTC/016, Church Services Register, 31 May 1936 to 13 October 1946; LMA: P77/DIO/B/01/008, Church Services Register, February 1936 to 16 February 1940; LMA: P77/MRY/18, Register of Services 1 January 1936 - 3 April 1953; LMA: P77/MTW/043, Register of Services 1938-1946; LMA: P80/STE/052, Register of Services 22 October 1936 to 2 March 1940; LMA: P80/SIM/025, Register of Services 25 March 1934 to 28 August 1941; LMA: P80/MTW/29, Register of Services 5 December 1937 to 8 February 1939

St Matthew's	Fulham	13	12	33	11
St Stephen's	West Kensington	125	85	142	113
St Simon's	West Kensington	39	36	77	40
St Matthew's	West Kensington	198	233	256	209

Figure 3: Church attendance in Fulham and West Kensington during the Munich Crisis



On 7 October, the *West London and Hammersmith Gazette* reported that prayers for peace had been offered in the week leading up to the agreement and churches such as Walham Green Methodist Church had remained open for prayer. The services of intercession had been well attended. The services on 2 October were also well attended and took place throughout the day. Attendance at St Dionis was up, as 114 took communion and increases at All Saints were reported. However, the service register for St Dionis reveals that this was around the normal number for this period.

The sermons delivered during these services highlighted the return to church. Speaking at one service, Reverend R H Boday said 'people were very apt to rush to God for help in time of danger and forget all about him when the danger was past'.<sup>38</sup> This message was reiterated in church magazines, which noted that the large congregations were of people recognising where deliverance had come

<sup>38</sup> *West London and Hammersmith Gazette*, 7 October 1938

front.<sup>39</sup> Deliverance had not only been provided to the people of Britain but other nations as well. Those praying were asked to remember that sacrifice that had been made by the Czechs to preserve peace, part of which was a house to house collection to provide money for a relief fund.

The message of thankfulness affected attendance at remembrance events in November, with an increase in the numbers attending the war memorial. Those attending included large numbers of young people from the Guides and Scouts, where they heard Reverend Scott refer to the sacrifice of the dead. The Mayor and other council members in attendance wore a mixture of red and white poppies.<sup>40</sup> Despite the attendance increase in Fulham, the number attending Walham Green was smaller than in previous years.<sup>41</sup>

Overall, what do the three case studies tell us about the impact of the Munich crisis on church attendance and remembrance events. The communicant figures and newspaper reports from all three case studies confirm that there was a return to church and that there was a 'flocking back', particularly on Sunday 2 October rather than 'one Sunday in September' as the opening quote claimed. All three case studies cover urban areas, though some of the rural parishes in Bedfordshire did see an increase but not the same extent as urban areas. For the two Sundays in September, there were increases in attendance at some churches on the Sundays prior to the resolution of the crisis but not to the extent of the services on 2 October. In addition to regular Sunday services, people went to church to pray during the week, either individually or as part of services of intercession for peace. To meet the spiritual needs to the people during the crisis, churches decided to remain open in all three areas.

In terms of remembrance, the impact of the crisis on the people was seen in terms of increased attendance at events in all three case study areas, which also witness the coming together of old and young in a way that had not been seen a year earlier. The crisis must take some credit for this as people were urged to remember how they had felt during the crisis period.

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<sup>39</sup> HFA: DD/976/137-170, Monthly Bulletin of the Munster Park Methodist Church, October 1938; HFA: St Mary's Church Magazine, November 1938

<sup>40</sup> *Fulham Chronicle*, 11 and 18 November 1938

<sup>41</sup> *Fulham Chronicle*, 18 November 1938

Was there a flocking back? The opening quote referred to a Sunday in September. Across the three case studies, it has been demonstrated that there was a return to the church in the build-up to the crisis as people came to church to pray. However, in terms of sheer numbers, the real return to the church occurred on 2 October and just as quickly died away, thereby reflecting the words of some of the ministers quoted.

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