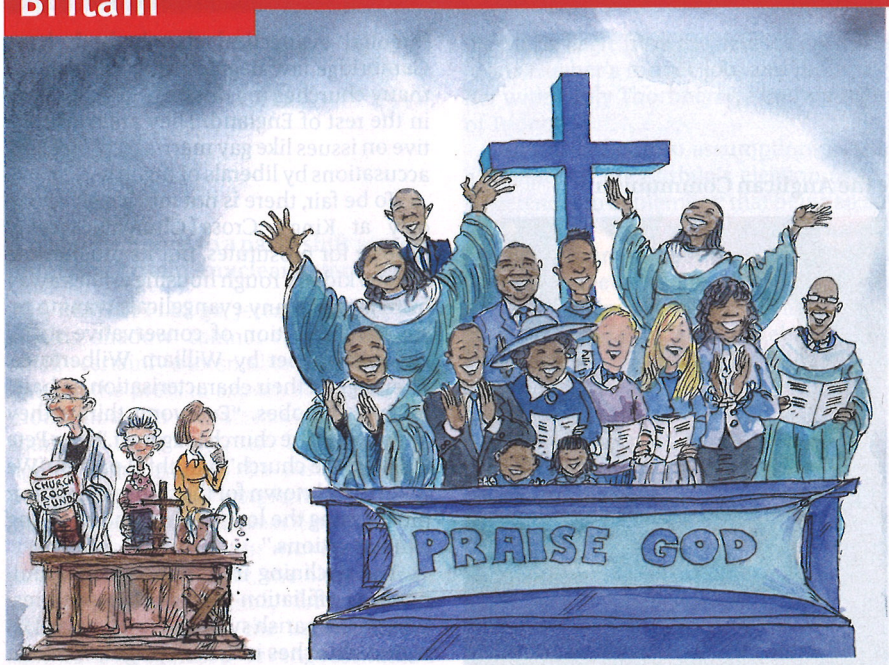

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The Church of England

Resurrection?

Parts of the established church are learning from their immigrant brethren

TO SEE the future of Christianity in Britain, go on a Sunday morning to an old Welsh Congregational chapel off the Pentonville Road in Islington. The building has been bought by a Pentecostal Ethiopian church; the congregation raises its hands in a show of unEnglish ecstasy to praise God in Amharic. A few hours later, something unexpected happens. A congregation of mainly white members of the Church of England start their service. This group, known as King's Cross Church, or KXC, has grown from a handful in 2010 to 500 now.

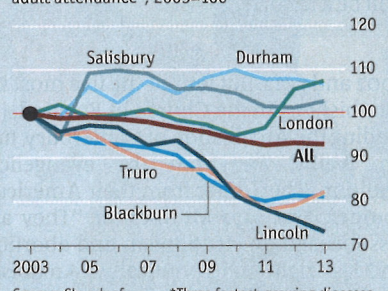
The first service reflects a well-documented phenomenon: an immigrant-led surge in London churchgoing. Weekly participation in Christian services in the capital has grown by 16% since 2005. Most devout Londoners (88%) worship outside the ranks of the established church whose spires pierce the skyline; about a third are Pentecostal. But the second service shows that even some Anglican churches are bucking the downward trend in membership. London is one of several dioceses within the Church of England that are growing, if only a little (see chart).

Overall the drift down in church attendance continues, as new figures later this month will show. The proportion of people calling themselves Christian fell from 72% in 2001 to 59% in 2011. Those saying they have no religion rose from 15% to 25% in that period (including 177,000 claiming to be Jedi). The number of churchgoing Anglicans fell by 12%, and in 2013 stood at 1m. Some 19m baptised Anglicans do not attend church.

Hints of revival in parts of the Church of England point to broader changes. Traditionally, the established church has had an obligation to serve everyone who lives in a parish. Its churches have been the centrepiece for local and national events. But many Anglican churches that are growing, as in King's Cross, are "network" churches. They meet in pubs and offices outside the parish system. Most are evangelical, emphasising a personal faith based on conversion rather than a cultural affiliation to a denomination. They believe in tithing—giving a tenth of their income to the church—which increases their influence as other congregations shrink and expectations of financial giving fall.

Bottoming out?

Church of England, average weekly adult attendance*, 2003=100



Source: Church of England

*Three fastest-growing dioceses, three fastest-shrinking dioceses

Nick Spencer of Theos, a religious think tank, says the Church of England is switching from a broad-based organisation, characterised by affiliation more than commitment, to a smaller grouping of more committed worshippers. Some observers suggest the parochial system, which has helped shape English life for centuries, needs to change. They also question the Church of England's position as the state church, established by law. Should it cling to its old role of thinly spread universal provision or abandon it to foster smaller pockets of exuberance?

Papists and puritans

For centuries, the Church of England has been a broad one. With a low bar for membership—being born usually suffices—it has been there to hatch, match and dispatch anyone who wanted its services, a sort of religious public utility whose moderation has formed the English character and provided a glue for English society.

As in the worldwide Anglican Communion (see box on next page), tensions remain. For liberals, the reasons for decline are obvious. "English society and the Church of England have gradually drifted apart in terms of values," says Linda Woodhead, professor of the sociology of religion at Lancaster University. "This was true over issues like remarriage and the ordination of women, and it's true of same-sex marriage." Evangelicals say the church is right not to be swayed by changing social mores. They emphasise being counter-cultural and point out that many churches which are growing run against the liberal flow. "What is dying in England is not ▸▸

Global Anglicanism

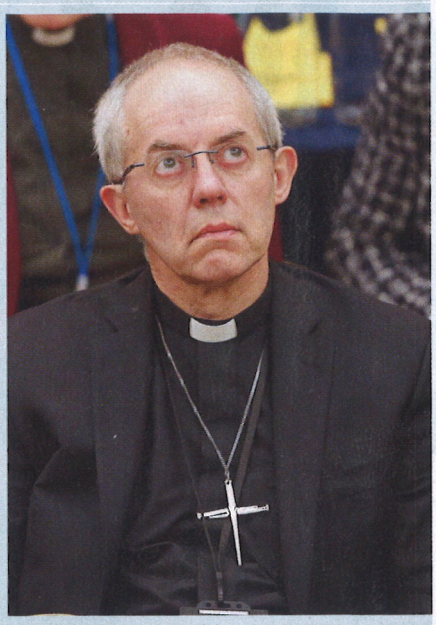
Rowing, not rowing

The Archbishop of Canterbury tries to save the Anglican Communion

WHEN he was an undergraduate at Cambridge, Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury, was cox of a Trinity College rowing eight. Perhaps coincidentally, rowing metaphors flowed in September when he announced that he had invited all 37 global Anglican primates to Canterbury for a conference starting on January 11th, in what some see as a last-ditch attempt to save the Anglican Communion. One aide suggested that bishops should not spend so much time "trying to placate people and keep them in the boat, without ever getting the oars out and starting to row". Frustrated that bickering is keeping Anglicans from their primary mission, the archbishop will need all his powers as a cox to head off a collision, or even the sinking of the global Anglican boat.

The problem is a row between liberals, mainly North American, who want the church to allow same-sex marriage, and conservatives, who think it must not. Some leaders from each side are not on speaking terms. Archbishop Welby is said to want a looser affiliation, so that both groups can keep relations with Canterbury and continue to call themselves Anglican but not have to deal with each other. He has no "papal" powers to kick out any provinces; previous attempts to discipline those who defy traditional Anglican teaching have been stopped from below. The archbishop is "not so much trying to get closer unity", says one informed cleric; "he is trying to prevent greater disunity."

The biggest danger is that some African conservatives, who take a traditional view of sexual ethics, will walk out and lead a breakaway movement. But liberal North Americans are also angry that Archbishop Welby has invited Foley Beach. He heads a group that has split off from the Episcopal church (the official American wing of Anglicanism) in opposition to its consecration of sexually active gay bishops, which the church first did in 2003. Mr Beach and others have formed alliances with conservative African leaders.



Heading for the rapids

The archbishop's pragmatic risk-taking represents a change from his two predecessors, who tried to encourage the two sides to work together. One way he has managed to get all the primates to attend (at the last big meeting in 2011 a third were absent) is to invite them to set the agenda. Used to spats in the Church of England at home, he has emphasised the need for "good disagreement".

He has also made clear to conservative Africans that, although he supports the church's traditional stance on marriage, it must not translate into homophobia. In June he expressed deep concern about "the stress for the Anglican Communion" after the American Episcopal church started the procedure to enable its clergy to solemnise same-sex marriages. But he has also admonished bishops who support the criminalisation of gays. If he can steady the boat, says the cleric, it will be a miracle.

Christianity but nominal Anglicanism," says David Goodhew of Durham University, author of "Church Growth in Britain". The share of evangelicals in the Church of England rose from 26% to 34% between 1989 and 2005, says Peter Brierley, a church demographer, and could now be nearly 50%.

Not all growth is evangelical. Attendance at cathedrals rose by 35% between 2002 and 2012. But four of the five most senior bishops in the Church of England, including the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, are from the evangelical tradition. They differ from their American counterparts, says Mr Spencer. "They are less focused on creationism and abortion and less right-wing politically." Archbishop Welby and Nicky Gumbel, vicar of Holy Trinity, Brompton (HTB), London's most influential evangelical church, both have Cambridge law degrees. HTB has planted many churches in London and is doing so in the rest of England. They are conservative on issues like gay marriage, prompting accusations by liberals of bigotry.

To be fair, there is not much sign of bigotry at King's Cross Church's weekly drop-in for prostitutes, nor its programme to keep kids on rough housing estates away from gangs. Many evangelicals want to restore the tradition of conservative social engagement set by William Wilberforce. They sigh at their characterisation as hateful homophobes. "Everyone thinks they know what the church is against," says Pete Hughes, the church's youthful pastor. "We want to be known for the things we are for: proclaiming the love of God and showing it in our actions."

The declining importance of denominational affiliation continues to put pressure on the parish system. With 9,000 of its 16,000 churches in rural villages, "it is not fit for purpose", declares David Voas of Essex University. Network churches are "like a virtual community", he says, better suited to the modern era.

The church is trying other models. One is Fresh Expressions, a mixture of new congregations such as Messy Church for children and Café Church for grown-ups, trying to reach the unchurched. Many have lay leaders. Another bottom-up initiative is the "minster model". A prototype in rural Buckinghamshire, Latimer Minster, has grown from eight people in 2010 to 350. It is financially independent, thanks to tithing. Frog Orr-Ewing, the vicar, calls minsters the "ecclesiastical equivalent of academies" (state-run schools outside local-authority control).

Much of this is difficult for liberals to take. "What about the people who would rather stick their head in a food mixer than become an evangelical?" asks Alan Wilson, the bishop of Buckingham, who openly supports gay marriage. He worries that the increasing number of people who affiliate only loosely or not at all with the Church of England will be alienated. Many do not hold liberal Christian beliefs, let alone evangelical ones. Mr Voas calls them "the fuzzies", epitomised by a 2011 survey that found only 47% of 18- to 34-year-olds declared a religious affiliation, but 67% said they occasionally or regularly pray.

As to the possibility of disestablishment, most think it is unlikely to happen. Politicians are barely involved any longer in choosing bishops. A majority of people say they want a Christian coronation for the next monarch, and no government would tie up parliamentary time unpicking the links between canon and civil law. So the Church of England will probably struggle on. Yet if it is to survive, this most traditional of English institutions must do more to adapt to a post-Christian world. ■