

Priests say England's Christianity is history

Church is split on cultural change

BY MARK A. KELLNER THE WASHINGTON TIMES, Aug. 31, 2023

Nearly two-thirds of priests in the Church of England said Britain “can no longer be described as a Christian country,” a landmark survey by The Times of London revealed Tuesday.

About 64.2% of clerics said Britain could be called a Christian nation only “historically, not currently,” and 24.2% said the Christian adjective still applies.

The clerics’ assessment dovetails with 2021 census results reported by the British Office for National Statistics, which noted that less than half the population of England and Wales identified as Christian, down from 33.3 million in 2011 to 27.5 million in 2021. Those identifying as having “no religion” rose from 14.1 million in 2011 to 22.2 million in 2021.

Survey respondents expressed little optimism about the church’s future. Only 43.9% of priests indicated it is “very likely” that they would still be holding a service every Sunday in 10 years, and 66.7% anticipate church attendance to continue to decline in the next decade.

The survey of 5,000 priests with British addresses, selected randomly from a clerical directory, drew 1,436 responses. Of the respondents, 1,185 priests were still serving. The Times of London said it was the first attempt at a nationwide survey of clerics since 2014.

The newspaper said the majority of the priests want the church to stop opposing premarital and gay sex and to start conducting same-sex weddings, which currently is blocked in favor of “blessing” ceremonies for same-sex couples.

In a significant shift, 80.2% of clerics

said they would support appointing a woman as the archbishop of Canterbury, the church’s top job whose holder traditionally leads the global Anglican Communion. Although women have been ordained as priests for decades, they were deemed eligible to serve as bishops only since 2014.

More than two years will likely pass before the Church of England confronts that possibility. The Times of London reported that the Most Rev. Justin Welby, the current archbishop, will reach the retirement age of 70 in January 2026.

The newspaper said the 1,185 serving priests surveyed reported high stress levels. One said the “pressure of justifying” church doctrines to a growing number of skeptical and secular listeners is daunting.

The priests said they feared that efforts to stop a decline in church attendance would not work with the state-sponsored church facing “extinction.”

Such a fate would mark a significant displacement for the 26 million-member denomination, for centuries the majority religion in the land of Charles Dickens, J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, who evoked Christian themes in their internationally revered writings.

Britain rejected papal authority in 1534 when Parliament passed the Act of Supremacy, making King Henry VIII the “Supreme Head of the Church of England.” The break gave Parliament and the prime minister a say in the appointment of bishops.

Today, 26 archbishops and bishops sit in the House of Lords as voting members.

King Charles III is the church’s current “supreme governor,” as the mantle is now known. He has held that title since the death of his mother, Queen Elizabeth II, on Sept. 8. In May, Charles was confirmed as “defender of the faith” during his coronation, a ceremony held in Westminster Abbey and led by the Church of England’s most senior cleric, the archbishop of Canterbury.

The Right Rev. Nick Baines, the bishop of Leeds, said the church “has a distinct

King Charles III, coronated in Westminster Abbey, is the supreme governor of the Church of England. Only 43.9% of the church’s priests have indicated in a survey that it is “very likely” that they would still be holding a service every Sunday in 10 years. ASSOCIATED PRESS

vocation that does not include seeking popularity.”

That mandate means it has to simultaneously be challenged by popular culture and challenge that culture, said Bishop Baines, speaking for the Church of England in a statement released as The Times of London published its results.

The church “has to live with the tension of being prophetic (challenging the way the world is) whilst listening to the challenge the world brings to it,” he said.

Issues of sex and sexuality have roiled the Church of England and the larger Anglican Communion, of which Archbishop Welby is “first among equals.”

Although many British clerics support same-sex marriage, resistance from Anglican churches in Africa and elsewhere has prevented the Church of England from permitting same-sex weddings. Recent business sessions of the world's Anglican leaders have been torn over the issue.

In February, leaders of 10 Anglican provinces in the Global South said they no longer recognize Archbishop Welby's primacy because the Church of England agreed to bless same-sex couples. The archbishop of Canterbury said he wouldn't personally bless such couples as part of his task of maintaining unity among Anglicans.

Bishop Baines said the denomination would persist in its mission despite the survey results.

"Evidently, the Church hasn't always got it right but cannot escape the demands of its calling to be faithful to God in loving his world," he said.

Just how faithful the Church of England is to traditional Christian teachings remains unclear. The majority of priests surveyed, 62%, said the church should drop its opposition to premarital sex. In addition, 64.5% said the church should drop its teaching that "homosexual practice is incompatible with Scripture," and 63.3% support allowing gay priests to enter into civil partnerships.

After the Times of London survey was published, British advocacy group Christian Concern said the results indicate a disconnect between the surveyed clergy and those sitting in the pews. In February, the group found that of the 33 Church of England congregations with the largest attendance of worshippers younger than 16, 20 churches "could be clearly identified as supporting the church's historic view that sex is reserved for one man, one woman marriage."

The group's chief executive, Andrea Williams, said the apparent popularity of traditional doctrine among young British Christians should offer a lesson on combating decline.

"Simply aping the current values of the culture around us is the road to extinction for the Church of England," she said.

"If the church wants to grow, attract youth and remain relevant in society, it needs to advocate for biblical teaching on marriage and sexual ethics," Ms. Williams said. "The church should not be adjusting its teaching to follow the culture or society, but proclaiming the benefits for society and individuals of life-long heterosexual marriage and reserving sexual expression for marriage."