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Jeremy Paxman on the Church of England’s fight to survive

As congregations dwindle, is the Church on the brink of extinction?

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Two ladybirds crawl across the white cloth on the altar table of an ancient Dorset church as a tiny handful of parishioners takes communion. Outside, it is a perfect English summer Sunday, the air drowsy with the scent of growing flowers, grass and trees. Inside St Mary’s, Tarrant Gunville, all is quiet and slightly musty. The few tablets on the walls speak of young men lost in the first world war and long-dead parishioners who loved and gave to the church — there has been one on the site since the 12th century. Apart from the visiting weekenders, of whom I am one, there are seven in the congregation, none of them exactly in the flush of youth. The vicar celebrating communion according to the Book of Common Prayer is 87; he apologises beforehand that “I have tried to draw stumps several times” and yet he keeps being asked to conduct services and cannot refuse. He preaches a drily witty sermon that happens to be about the “shipwreck” of the Church of England, which he admits he has recycled from earlier years. He forgets to lead the congregation in the Lord’s Prayer.

Everything about this scene tells a felt truth about the C of E — its abiding presence deep in the shires, the breathtaking beauty of its churches, the sonorous cadences of its almost forgotten liturgy, its valetudinarian faithful. We have had this impression for decades. Philip Larkin’s much loved poem “Church Going” (the pun is surely intended) was written more than 60 years ago. He talks of “A shape less recognisable each week/ A purpose more obscure”, and wonders how long it will be before the Church of England is reduced to a few cathedrals “chronically on show”, while wind and rain whip through the ruins of country churches.

Irreversible decline has been the Church’s lot for several generations in an age when Sundays are for football matches and car-boot sales. A National Census survey suggests that 8.5 million British people now identify as Anglican, down from 13 million a decade ago. The Church makes few demands of the people it ministers to, seeming grateful just to be acknowledged. Its premises are swept out and decorated for the weddings of unbelievers and the funerals of those whose families can find no other way to make sense of finality.

The (supposed) lifestyle of the old country parson remains catnip to the affluent English, as the enormous prices commanded by former village parsonages testify. Strapped for cash, the Church has been selling them off for decades, rehousing such clergy as remain in bungalows, whence on Sunday mornings they scuttle off in modestly priced cars to tear from one near-empty church to another.

Honeyed former rectories speak of the great social standing of the Anglican clergy, and are now tended and loved by members of the Rectory Society, a pleasantly eccentric club for fans of these beautiful residences. The society begins its annual meeting with a lusty rendition of "The Church's One Foundation", the Victorian priest Samuel John Stone's great anti-schismatic marching song. How many of those singing so heartily realise that the Staffordshire rectory in the hymnist's birthplace was sold off — foundations and all — by the local diocese nearly four decades ago?

Still, centuries of devotion have left a 21st-century institution with some very precious real estate. Nearly half the Grade I listed buildings in England are churches. But when the faithful could be funding food banks or anti-slavery initiatives, it seems a nonsense for them to be raising money to fix their own roof. About 20 C of E church buildings are closed down each year. Why not sell off most of the churches, along with the rectories?

It would be a cultural tragedy, of course, for the churches of England hot-wire us into our history and are very often the oldest and most significant building in a community. Why else would officialdom have encouraged the Heritage Lottery Fund to spend £25m annually on a scheme devoted to the preservation of places of worship? Earlier this year, however, the HLF announced that it was pulling the plug on the dedicated funding. There will need to be more church fete tombolas.

Building maintenance has acquired such importance because church buildings are the biggest and longest-standing demonstrations of religious belief. So parishes struggle on, trying to make ends meet; some churches house libraries, others post offices. In Bath, one church even has a pub inside it. The eagerness to keep the building intact testifies to something more than physical beauty. "It represents a gateway between this world and God," says Becky Clarke, the irrepressible 34-year-old Church of England official responsible for making sure the gateways don't fall down.

If anything, England's empirical, practical cast of mind has grown stronger since Matthew Arnold heard on Dover Beach the "melancholy, long withdrawing roar" of the sea of faith 150 years ago. It gets worse by the decade. Last year, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, talked of how "the culture [is] becoming anti-Christian". In a population of 65 million, fewer than one million go to church regularly, a decline of 11 per cent over the past decade. The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds has more than a million members.

Yet somehow the Church of England's special status survives, with its 26 bishops in the House of Lords ("the only members with a constituency to represent", claims one of them) and the Archbishop of Canterbury outranking the elected prime minister in the arcane rules of formal precedence. The Church was explicitly privileged by the 1944 Education Act, and a million children are educated — at the state's expense — in its schools. Vicars of Dibley across the

land (there are 16,000 churches) find themselves attending village fetes, blessing children's pets and organising picnics for teddy bears. It is like a jumper knitted by your grandmother: it has never really fitted but you've never had the heart to throw it out.

But the time for mild bemusement is past, for the Church of England is tottering from irrelevance to the edge of extinction. "Seventy per cent of giving to the Church comes from those over 50. Forty per cent comes from the over-seventies," says Mike Eastwood, a former charity director now working as secretary of the Liverpool diocese. Unless congregations are replenished soon, the game will be up. Yet he refuses to believe the struggle naught availeth. "I believe we can turn it around. We've got about 10 years."

Optimism is a precondition for any job in the Church of England. But the overwhelming impression is of dwindling, ageing congregations: homely, well-mannered and kindly folk increasingly out of joint with the noisy, secular spirit of the age.

Every schoolchild knows that the Church of England was born of frustration and baptised in blood. The stones of Fountains and Tintern abbeys stand as reminders of England's escape from the superstition, venality and worldly power of the papacy. But what is it for?

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I once asked a distinguished bishop what a person needed to believe to be an Anglican. "What an interesting question," he said, as if it had never really occurred to him before.

The question "how many members does the Church of England now have?" gets you nowhere. "We don't have 'members'. We're there for anyone and everyone," says Mark Arena, the Church's head of financial communications. The people it is "there for" include those who despise it, those who laugh at it and those who ignore it. In 2012, even the Queen, who follows Henry VIII as "Defender of the Faith", trotted out the line that "its role is not to defend Anglicanism to the exclusion of other religions. Instead, the Church has a duty to protect the free practice of all faiths." You don't have to push a bishop very hard to discover they all share the Queen's conviction that the C of E's core purpose is to protect the right to belief per se — whether Christian, Sikh, Muslim or Zoroastrian. As William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury in the 1940s, is supposed to have put it: "The Church is the only institution that exists for the benefit of those who are not its members."

This is not true, of course (think of the better aspects of monarchy), but no atheist can accept the constitutional privileging of credulousness over reason: we have seen quite enough of the use of faith to justify barbarism. But cold rationalism has its own cruelties too. The Right Reverend Christine Hardman, Bishop of Newcastle, has a neat summary, telling me: "The

Church of England embodies compassionate tolerance and kindness." It is a generous comment, for the debate over the ordination of women demonstrated how much harder such values are to sell than the simple-minded certainties of bigotry. Is it a bad thing to have a space in our national life reserved for an institution that tries to see the best in people?

The Church is doing its best to scrabble back. On a recent weekend in late June, beneath the magnificent lantern spire of Newcastle, England's most northerly cathedral, the bishop ordained 14 new deacons, or junior priests. It is believed to have been the biggest mass ordination in the cathedral's history. They were men and women, a Hungarian, a Frenchman, a Norwegian, a Spaniard and the chief executive of a local authority. Nationally, there has been a 14 per cent increase in the number of men and women due to begin training for the priesthood this autumn.

The "New Rev" initiative (the Church's nickname is indicative of its awkward mateyness) is a planned strategy, for a quarter of the clergy being paid to look after the Church of England's 12,000 parishes are 60 or older. As the baby boomers succumb to age, someone will have to take their place.

But to survive, the Church must serve Mammon too. In the former oil man Justin Welby, it has its first economically expert Archbishop of Canterbury since the dismal science became considered worthy of study. All told, there are some £12bn of assets under C of E management. Some investments, such as the arms trade and pornography, are clearly off-limits. The first investment guidelines in 1948 included an abhorrence of aircraft, newspapers, "amusements" and alcohol. Tobacco products were added to the list in 1962, and the Church's belief in humanity's contribution to climate change has brought a further constraint. Attention-grabbing disinvestments include its sale of shares in a couple of mining companies (on environmental and human-rights grounds) and Rupert Murdoch's News International. Even within these ethical constraints, the Church claims that with clever asset management its investments have outperformed some hedge funds.

The vanishing churchgoers are a different problem.

You can almost hear St Peter's, Brighton, before you see its towering neo-Gothic stonework. On a stage inside, a band — two guitars, drums, keyboard, vocalist and backing singer — is amplified to sub-Glastonbury volume. The lyrics to songs (never "hymns") are displayed on flatscreen monitors mounted on pillars. There is no sign of an altar and not a dog collar to be seen. The churchwarden wears a T-shirt, the congregation are mainly in trainers and jeans. There are plenty of tattoos on show.

St Peter's — a church community "planted" by evangelicals from Holy Trinity Brompton in London — is a success story. Nicknamed "Brighton's cathedral" because of its great size, it

was originally constructed to the designs of a young Charles Barry during a spate of early-19th-century church-building. The church that was built in Brighton was vast, but by 2007 the number of people rattling around it on Sundays had become so embarrassingly small that the Church Commissioners were ready to declare it redundant.

Enter “HTB”, as the evangelicals from Holy Trinity on the Brompton Road call themselves. As you’d expect from a church based in Knightsbridge, the HTB clergy have a very middle-class feel about them: to an outsider, it often seems as if all the men were at Eton or Winchester together. HTB is wealthy and undeniably successful, its Alpha course a form of Christian blitzkrieg, adopted worldwide by numerous denominations (24 million people have completed the course). In 2009, HTB took over St Peter’s. It has now built a congregation of almost 1,000.

The message is relentlessly upbeat. “There is no such thing as hopelessness,” says the preacher. “God loves you and is so proud of you.” There is much simple-minded textual exegesis: “Why did God tell Adam he could name the animals? Because it’s fun. And families have fun.”

It is black-and-white stuff and seems to take the creation myth at face value. But its message is welcoming and forgiving and there is much uplifting of palms and raising of arms in the air. The overwhelming impression is that people are enjoying themselves. A young woman at the doorway explains how the church has helped her put her life back together after years of drug addiction. A formerly homeless man smiles a greeting. The vicar, Archie Coates, introduces to the congregation a woman who has just been spared a prison sentence on drugs charges, almost — it sounds — as a consequence of divine intervention with the judge. Praise the Lord.

There is, its enemies suggest, something alarmingly cultish and un-English about the way HTB does business. That may, of course, be why it is the most successful part of the Church of England (Justin Welby is an HTB man). It is cordially disliked by much of the gay Christian movement for its insistence on gay celibacy. Yet you would have to have a heart of stone not to be moved by the stories of the souls — and lives — saved in St Peter’s.

While HTB may be the noisiest part of the Church of England, it is clearly not a national solution to the Church’s looming crisis. Anglicanism is, after all, the original broad church. “You cannot understand the Church as a corporation, it’s a coalition,” says one senior figure at Church House, the organisation’s 1930s headquarters in Great Smith Street, Westminster. An hour spent at All Saints Margaret Street in central London, where there is much swinging of censers, ringing of bells and reciting of the angelus to the Virgin Mary, is enough to demonstrate the impossibility of selling the singing of “songs” and speaking in tongues to its large and prosperous-looking congregation.

Perhaps it was ever thus: the Church was born in adversity. William Nye, the clever former mandarin who is the C of E's secretary-general — he drops words such as "formularies" into our conversation — may understand the Thirty-Nine Articles. But the supposed defining principles of the C of E are unknown and virtually incomprehensible to most worshippers. They have been argued over within the Church since their promulgation in 1571.

In many ways, the story of England is the story of her Church, and there is something endearing about its endless anxieties

It is, inevitably, matters of sex and gender that trigger the fiercest controversies. Should women be allowed to wear dog collars? Should they be entitled to become bishops? Should the Church recognise gay relationships? The battle lines in these squabbles — so fraught to the media, so passé to much of the citizenry — are not necessarily obvious: some of the most intransigent enemies of the ordination of women were gay. Hardman, the Bishop of Newcastle, has been given the task of steering the group trying to form a new bishops' policy on sexuality. A 65-year-old grandmother married to an atheist, who only became a Christian after the birth of her second child, she is too canny to do more than smile when I suggest it is a poisoned chalice. For though she herself finds joy in the idea that everyone is equal in the eyes of God, other members of the Anglican communion (which stretches from Mexico to Myanmar and beyond) simply cannot stomach the idea of gay marriage. "If only we could get shot of some of these colonial encumbrances" is the cry from those who beg for the Church to embrace the 21st century and ignore the threats and protests from the more conservative congregations of sub-Saharan Africa (where, according to the World Christian Database, the majority of Anglican churchgoers now reside). But that is not the C of E way. The Church of England has three sources of authority — scripture, tradition and "the exercise of reason". So there will be endless talk and buzzing of bees in bonnets and, eventually, some form of words will assert itself. If I had to cite one argument for admiring the way the C of E does its internal business, it would be its reasonableness.

Quietness, modesty and thoughtfulness are unfashionable. In cyber space, no one can hear you think, and these values do not tweet well (though the Church of England's Facebook response to the London Bridge murders in June — footage of a candle burning and the words "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" — was rather powerful). Yet the Church has appointed its own ambassador to the shouty world of social media. Thirty-three-year-old Adrian Harris, previously with Tesco and Bupa, talks of his role supervising digital communication as "the most purposeful job I've ever done".

The intellectual climate can make the Church vulnerable to the most awful banality, of course. (I once listened to a Cornwall vicar who chose as the text for his Easter Sunday sermon the catchphrase from Noel Edmonds' boneheaded game show Deal or No Deal.) But

freedom and thoughtfulness are surely better than the opposite. They certainly help the Church to face quotidian horrors. England has had an awful year, with four terrorist attacks and the appalling fire at Grenfell Tower. The local vicar there, Alan Everett, believes that his church was uniquely able to respond to the disaster “because we live alongside each other, and Muslims trust us”.

When a deranged Islamist blew himself up among children and their parents at the Manchester Arena, murdering 22, it proved a similarly daunting challenge. The Bishop of Manchester, David Walker, a skinny 60-year-old mathematician (he really does have a beard and sandals), had to decide how the established church should react. Walker decided its duty was to “curate the spaces in which people can consider how to respond”. It sounds like typical C of E waffle, perhaps, but it is unquestionably preferable to inciting people to embark on a take-no-prisoners crusade.

“Oh, the poor old Church of England,” said a vicar friend when I told her I wanted to find out what made it tick. Her resigned tone suggested despair at any outsider “getting” it. But on the whole, I admire the Church. In many ways, the story of England is the story of her Church, and there is something endearing about its endless anxieties.

A list of the achievements of individual clergymen and the Church as a whole — poverty relief, schooling, university education — begins to sound like the “What Have the Romans Ever Done for Us?” sketch in Monty Python’s Life of Brian. Only an ignoramus would deny the importance of the Church in the creation of the welfare state, for example. One in four primary schools in England is C of E, while all schools are legally required to hold a daily act of worship “wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character”. The verbal contortionism reflects the oddness of our country (French schools, for example, are statutorily secular).

But its past actions are not the point. “People are perfectly happy to listen when you talk about the good works done by the Church. But their eyes glaze over when you mention God,” says one lay enthusiast for the Church. In the end, the C of E’s problem is that not enough people believe in the one thing that makes it different from the secular world. And, to be available to all, it has first to continue to exist.

It has at last woken up to the existential crisis that has been obvious to others for years, and it is now in a race against time. Disagreements over new liturgies, polite squabbles over gay and gender rights, its wish to share its authority with Islam, Sikhism and Judaism — these have all been indications of attempts to adjust to the world the rest of us have been living in for years, but which seems to have somehow caught it by surprise. Society has moved on and the Church is struggling to catch up.

All is not yet lost. The 16th-century theologian Richard Hooker is still the authority cited by many of those trying to steer a path for an institution whose hold on the national imagination seems increasingly to be to do with things that happened a long time ago. “Hooker’s stool” suggests that Anglicanism rests on the three legs of scripture, tradition and the application of reason. The furniture analogy fits the Church’s down-to-earth nature. It is the third of these that distinguishes the Church of England, and good sense counts. Anything can be sorted out over a cup of tea.

For how long there will be money enough for a decent selection of biscuits is anyone’s guess.

Jeremy Paxman is an FT contributing editor.

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