

# Catholic and Episcopal churches shrinking

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Statistics from the latest edition of the Catholic Directory of England and Wales reveal a picture of a shrinking church.

For four weekends each year, priests count the number of people actually in their churches. Between the 2009 and 2010 counts there was a drop of 1.5%. The 885,169 people attending mass represented 1.6% of the national population and 21.9% of the estimated Catholic population.

The number of attenders fell in 14 of the 22 dioceses (and by as much as 10.0% in Northampton, 9.3% in Middlesbrough, and 7.5% in Leeds). Five dioceses (Birmingham, Clifton, Liverpool, Plymouth, and Southwark) returned identical figures for both years, and three (East Anglia, Salford, and Wrexham) reported modest growth (ranging from 0.4% to 1.9%).

Among the other statistics included in the Catholic Directory are estimates of the Catholic population, practising or lapsed, as known to and returned by parish priests. In 2010 the number was 4,034,069, 1.2% down on 2009 and equivalent to 7.3% of the population of England and Wales.

There was a decline in the same period of the number of diocesan priests – down by 7%, the number of churches open to the public went down by 3.8% and baptisms up to seven years old fell by 0.1%.

And across the Atlantic it's an even worse outlook for the Episcopal Church (the Anglican Church in the USA), where official statistics show it declining at a catastrophic rate.

In the six years from 2004 to 2010, the Episcopal Church's average Sunday attendance fell by 17 per cent and its total membership declined by 13 per cent. Of those still in the Episcopal Church as of 2010, 30 per cent were over the age of 65, whereas those over 65 comprise only 13 per cent of the total US population.

The statisticians Dr C Kirk Hadaway and Dr Matthew Price presented their findings to the churches' Executive Committee, noting that to "get a broad-based sense of congregational vitality, we have used a number of measurements including church school enrolment, marriages, funerals, child baptisms, adult baptisms, and confirmations. These speak to a parish's integration in the community and the possibility for future growth".

Over the same period, Church school enrolment has declined by 33 per cent. The number of marriage performed declined by 41 per cent. The number of burials fell by 21 per cent. The number of child baptisms declined by 36 per cent. The number of adult baptisms declined by 40 per cent. The number of confirmations declined by 32 per cent.

"While these numbers may not capture the totality of what is happening in the Church, we do not have a measure that is moving in a positive direction," the Church's statisticians reported.

In addition to the Church's sharp decline in its pastoral health, the number of churches reporting financial difficulties rose sharply: by 2010, 72 per cent of congregations reported they were in "financial stress".

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