

# **The Times view on the Church of England: Behind the Times**

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For a long time now the Church of England has endured an uneasy dual status. It is both the custodian of the state religion, enjoying a unique relationship with the monarch and a presence in the upper house of the legislature, and a minority pursuit commanding the devotion — if churchgoing be the index of devotion — of a declining portion of the population. Only 1 per cent of the populace attended Anglican services frequently in 2019, indicating that such events are becoming increasingly niche in an ever more secular society. Born of a temporal political imperative five centuries ago, the church has wrestled with its guiding principles in modern times, seeking to accommodate changes in society to a greater extent than older, less apologetic religions. This has resulted in internal conflict that has served only to distract from its central role of spreading the gospel and ministering to those in need of comfort.

The Church of England is enduring a prolonged crisis of confidence, and it is nowhere more clearly illustrated than in a survey of frontline Anglican clergy conducted by this newspaper. The findings make disquieting reading for the church's leadership, suggesting widespread pessimism and discontent among those who struggle to maintain congregations and keep parishes alive. The most glaring finding is that the foot soldiers of the established religion

believe that Christianity has been marginalised as a social force in this country. Only a quarter of Anglican priests describe Britain as truly Christian, with seven in ten of the opinion that this aspect of national identity is a thing of the past. This defeatism extends to individual working lives. Almost a quarter of clerics have considered quitting the priesthood because of overwork, with a majority now entrusted with running more than one church, and some as many as ten. Disillusionment with a remote church hierarchy is widespread, some respondents citing a profound lack of support from their bishops.

These administrative failings could be remedied by a more sympathetic, responsive and streamlined leadership, and a reallocation to parishes of resources generated by the Church's still vast portfolio of investments. But the discontent goes deeper, focusing on the Anglican leadership's failure to embrace social change and accept that its doctrines lag behind the liberal instincts of most of the British people.

For the first time the survey makes explicit the support of [a majority of Anglican priests for gay marriage](#), even as the church still struggles with granting blessings for gay couples joined in civil partnerships (parishes are allowed to opt out of providing blessings). Fifty-three per cent of respondents would be happy to conduct gay weddings, and almost two thirds back gay priests being allowed to marry. This desire for a more tolerant church naturally extends to gay sex, which the majority of clerics questioned say should no longer be regarded as sinful. The same is true for premarital sex. Meanwhile, almost two thirds of Anglican clergy believe that

the system [allowing parishes to reject female vicars](#) should be scrapped. The church's cause is not helped by its inconsistency — the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Most Rev Justin Welby, has welcomed gay blessings but refuses to perform them.

In supporting these views Anglican priests are doing no more than mirroring those of the general population; more than half of Britons believe the Church of England should marry same-sex couples. The world has moved on and left the General Synod behind. If it is to avoid irrelevance the church would be wise to embrace the liberal instincts of its clergy and the country. The rearguard action being fought by traditionalists has gone on too long and will end only one way. For better or worse Anglicanism has sold itself as a modernising force. It should get on and modernise.