

Gone by 2040?

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"If people are not coming to the church and finding a place of hope and good news, then we have to ask, 'How are we presenting that hope and good news to this current generation and time? And what might need to be tried?' " says Archbishop Linda Nicholls, primate of the Anglican Church of Canada. Photo: Matthew Townsend

Statistics report a 'wake-up call' to church, says primate

Recently released data suggesting the church's rate of decline has not slowed over the past decade and a half—while not surprising—should serve as a useful reality check for Canadian Anglicans, says Archbishop Linda Nicholls, primate of the Anglican Church of Canada.

"I don't think they're a surprise to anybody," Nicholls said of the statistics in an interview with the *Anglican Journal*. "Anybody who's been in the church in the pews, or as a priest, or as a deacon or a bishop has known that this decline has been happening. We see it every Sunday, we see it in lots of ways. "I think it is a wake-up call.... If people are not coming to the church and finding a place of hope and good news, then we have to ask, 'How are we presenting that hope and good news to this current generation and time? And what might need to be tried?'"

The data were gathered in 2018 from the dioceses by the Rev. Neil Elliot, a priest in the diocese of Kootenay with a PhD in sociology seconded as part-time statistician by the national church. Elliot presented them in reports to the House of Bishops and Council of General Synod (CoGS) this fall.

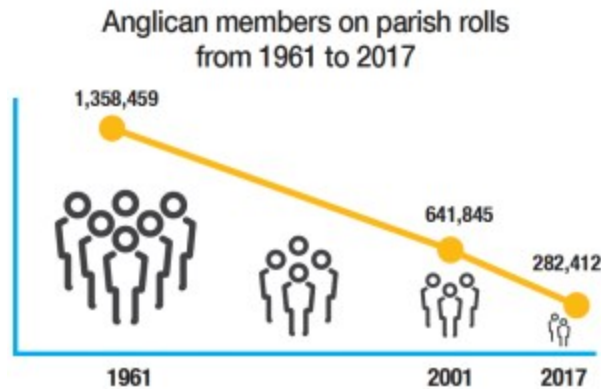
The data consist of statistics in a range of areas, including number of clergy and other employees; church membership and attendance, as measured in several ways; and performance of the pastoral offices of baptism, confirmation, marriage and funerals. The data are, according to Elliot's report, the first "complete and mostly reliable" set of statistics collected by the church since around 2001.

The data show the church running out of members in little more than two decades if it continues to decline at its current rate, Elliot said in a Nov. 8 presentation to CoGS.

“We’ve got simple projections from our data that suggest that there will be no members, attenders or givers in the Anglican Church of Canada by approximately 2040,” he said.

The projection should be taken especially seriously by Canadian Anglicans, Elliot said, because it is suggested by five different sets of church data, all collected in different ways: older data from 1961 to 2001; *Anglican Journal* subscriber data from 1991 to 2015; and three sets of data from his own survey of the dioceses as of 2017: the number of people on parish rolls, average Sunday attendance and regular identifiable givers.

“For five different methodologies to give the same result is a very, very powerful statistical confirmation which we really, really have to take seriously and we can’t dismiss lightly,” said Elliot.



Statistics show a relatively linear decline in church attendance since 1961, the Rev. Neil Elliot says. Chart: Saskia Rowley

Two other findings, he added, suggest different outcomes. Data collection on the pastoral offices of baptism, confirmation, marriage and funerals show an even faster rate of decline. However, a demographic study of a small number of parishes in the diocese of Kootenay, he said, suggested that—because of the age ranges that Anglicans fall into—the church could lose only 50% of its members by 2040.

But Nicholls said she believes Anglicans should be careful about jumping to conclusions about what will happen to the church in the future based purely on statistics of past decline. Clearly, she said, there are Anglicans today who still intend to be going to church in 2040, and the church will not close by that date.

“We all know that it’s not actually going to happen, because not everybody’s going to disappear,” she said. Elliot made a similar statement in his report to the House of Bishops.

Nicholls said she believed the true value of statistics-gathering lies not in prediction, but in holding a mirror up to the church.

“It is valuable in telling us what is,” she said. “And sometimes we’re slow to recognize what is, because it’s not what we want it to be. We look through rose-coloured glasses sometimes.”

One thing that needs to be recognized, she said, is the role of grief caused by the church’s decline in membership over the decades and the necessity of church closures that has come with it.

“I’ve had this said [to me] in small parishes that are clearly dying—people say, ‘No, no, no, I just want it to hang on until I’m buried from it.’ And that’s a tremendous sadness, because you understand the deep pain there is for people who’ve lived in that community their whole life.... They intuitively know that this isn’t going to continue forever but just hang on ‘til ‘I get to the end.’ So there’s a lot of pain in this, a lot of pain, and grief and loss.”

A reluctance to face this loss, Nicholls said, sometimes results in parishes avoiding taking action.

“One of the responses to grief can be denial. Because denial means then that ‘I don’t have to change anything, I can just pretend that this didn’t happen, it’s not happening and I don’t have to take personal responsibility for what might need to be done differently.’

“It comes out in parishes clinging to patterns of the way they do things that are not necessarily helpful any longer.”

In fact, however, the current situation is calling for initiative from everyone—not just church leaders, she said. “It’s asking of us a lot more creativity, at every level of the church, and a lot less waiting for somebody else to fix it—the creativity needs to come right from the grassroots, from people in the pews.”

Nicholls said she also hoped concerned Anglicans would focus on trying to discern the will of God for the church rather than the causes of the church’s decline in membership.

“We could get stuck in the weeds looking for the causes, because everybody likes to think if we knew the causes, we could fix it. The reality is that there are multiple and complex causes—some of which may belong to us, but a lot is also part of the general zeitgeist [spirit of the time] around us, in terms of philosophy, in terms of social conditions, in terms of people’s mistrust of institutions generally,” she said. “These are all factors—there’s no one factor that you can look at and say, ‘Gee, if we could fix that, we could fix everything.’ And there isn’t a quick fix.”

What the church needs to be asking now, in every community in which it finds itself, she said, is “Where do we see Jesus at work here, and how can we be part of that? And how can we be, frankly, open and generous in our expression of the Good News?”

There will be no one-size-fits-all answer to this, she added, because it will always depend on the context.

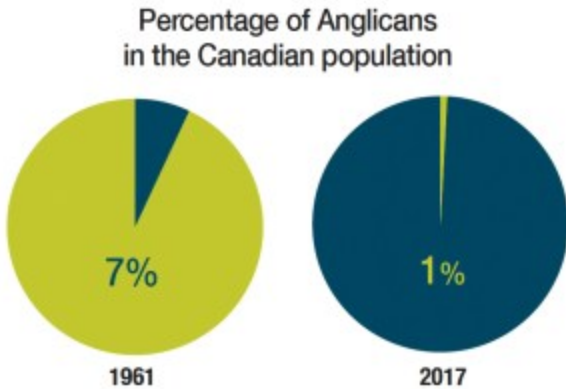
“It’s rooted in the communities in which our parishes...live, and their needs and concerns,” Nicholls said.

The church also needs to know better where it is growing—and that’s one area where detailed, continued statistics-taking can help, she said. “It is important that we collect them, and I hope we can encourage dioceses and parishes to do that to help us all.”

Elliot’s data suggest that the church’s rate of decline has been roughly consistent since 1961—a situation likely to feel worse, for those involved in it, than it may sound. A consistent rate of decline means that, although roughly the same number of people leave every year, a greater proportion leaves every year, and as time goes by it takes less time for the same proportion of people to leave. Think of it this way: if a church that starts at 100 people loses 10 each year, that first year won’t feel so bad. Ninety people in the pews feels a lot like 100, and the church will operate much as before. But each year brings greater concentrations of responsibility and loss—especially as the congregation reduces to 30, 20, and finally 10.

This phenomenon bears out in the statistics. By the number of Anglicans on parish rolls, membership declined by 50%—from 1,358,459 to 641,845—in the 40 years between 1961 and 2001. But it declined by almost the same proportion—44%—in the mere 16 years between 2001 and 2017.

All of this decline, Elliot’s report notes, occurred during a time when the overall population of Canada was growing. As a result, Anglican church members have come to make up an ever-smaller sliver of the Canadian population: 7% in 1961, 2% in 2001, and just 1% in 2017. Think about our example church—shrunk to 10 members—and now imagine it in downtown Toronto, surrounded by new high-rise condominiums.



The church's membership has shrunk—as Canada's overall population has grown. This means Anglicans make up a smaller proportion of the population. Chart: Saskia Rowley

In a response to a question at CoGS on how other Canadian churches were faring, Elliot said data collected by the United Church of Canada also showed 2040 as a “zero-member date.” The Presbyterian Church in Canada, while declining, seems to be losing members somewhat more slowly, he said. For the U.S.-based Episcopal Church, he added, the projected zero-member date was around 2050.

Archdeacon Michael Thompson, general secretary of General Synod, told CoGS that senior staff of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada had given him a similar impression about membership decline in that church.

“Though I can't quote the numbers, the lines look quite similar,” he said.

At the time this article was written, official publication of the statistics on anglican.ca was slated for late December. However, a version of Elliot's report had been leaked before his presentation to CoGS. In October, a link to it appeared in the *Anglican Samizdat* independent blog, after which it began to spread through social media. On Nov 4., *Broadview*, the former *United Church Observer*, published a story on the report.

In her opening remarks to CoGS, and again after Elliot's presentation, Nicholls assured members it had not been the intention of church leaders that they should hear about the statistics before they were presented to CoGS. She also noted the report had generated little interest outside the church after it was leaked.

Nicholls said she hoped that instead of trying to figure out why the church was in numerical decline, or get drawn into a “vortex of negativity” about it, Canadian Anglicans would instead focus on the church's calling.

“I think we're being tested about perseverance, endurance, creativity in the coming years,” she said. “At the end of the day, when we stand before the great judgement seat and have to answer for how we lived our lives as Christians, I think the question that will be asked is, ‘Were you faithful with what you were given?’”

Nicholls also said she was hopeful to see “green shoots” of growth in various areas around the country—some in the church's traditional ways of being and some in its new ways of expressing itself.

The primate is not alone in cautioning Canadian Anglicans not to conclude from the past rate of decline that there will be no Anglicans left in the country by 2040. Geoff Peddle, bishop of the diocese of Eastern Newfoundland and Labrador, examined membership trends in the Anglican church in Newfoundland, and the possible reasons for them, in a 2011 PhD dissertation. He says he has no doubt there will still be an Anglican church in Canada in two decades.

“I remain hopeful, and I absolutely, absolutely reject the thought that we’re gone in 2040,” Peddle says. “I know the lay people and the clergy that I work with are still deeply passionate and deeply committed to their faith and their church, and that gives me reason to be hopeful.”

The great complexity of the factors involved makes it extremely difficult to predict the church’s future membership, he says.

“I don’t think we can necessarily predict what’s going to happen over the next 20 or 40 years any better than we could predict in the ’60s what was going to happen,” he says.

Peddle says the statistics that the church has made it a practice to gather thus far, such as average Sunday attendance and the number of people on parish rolls, leave out “amazing things that happen between Sundays,” and many people—those helped by its ministry, or those who volunteer for it and partner with it—who are part of the church’s life.

“I think we are having profound, life-giving conversations today across the church, with all kinds of partners.”

Some people have returned to the church in his diocese, he says, after its synod agreed to allow same-sex marriages in September.

Peddle says he believes the church’s membership in Newfoundland—hit particularly hard in the ’90s by outmigration from the province—is now leveling off. In his diocese, the number of confirmations jumped from 180 in 2017 to 328 in 2018.

In a sermon at CoGs on Nov. 9, National Indigenous Anglican Archbishop Mark MacDonald said, with reference to the church’s falling membership, that its task should be not to manage decline, but to rediscover hope. In an interview with the Journal, MacDonald said he also believed that part of the church’s numerical decline was due to its focus in the past on a now-shrinking segment of Canadian society—middle- and upper-middle class people of British background.

“We have been very focused on a particular ethnic and socio-economic constituency,” he said. “That constituency is in decline, and we, because we have been so much involved with that constituency alone, are in decline as well.”

It’s time for the church to look outside this demographic, he said.

“There are other Canadians as well who I assume would be happy to be a part of our group, and so for me, the decline means that we need to look beyond our boundaries,” MacDonald said. “I don’t think decline in and of itself is bad. I think there are many ways to be faithful to God that don’t necessarily involve growing. But I do think that we need to have a larger horizon.”

Asked how the church is doing among Indigenous Canadians, MacDonald said that while church attendance is not doing well, confirmations and baptisms are “booming.”

The statistics show membership falling across the country from 2001 to 2017, at least as measured by one key indicator: average Sunday attendance. At least one diocese seems to have bucked the trend, however. Elliot’s data show that average Sunday attendance in the diocese of the Arctic increased by 264% from 2001 to 2017.

David Parsons, bishop of the diocese of the Arctic, said he’s seen some growth in membership in the church. In some communities in the diocese, he says, the problem is not that not enough people are going to church, but that existing churches can’t hold everyone who shows up.

There are likely a number of causes for the increase in membership, he says. One of these is the relatively fast rate of population growth in the north. Another, he says, is the uniquely spiritual culture of the north’s Indigenous people.

“Most Indigenous people are very much aware of the spiritual world—many others have been taught to just rely upon their intellect and their emotions,” he says. “That’s not enough—we’re spiritual beings.”

With this, he says, comes a different attitude toward the church in the north—and in many Arctic communities, the Anglican church is the only church.

“In the Arctic, everybody looks to the church, even if they’re not attending. If you have a town of say 400 people, all of them may not be going to church, but all of them will be looking to the church, and they see the value of the church being there,” he says. “That may not be the case in the south.”

The Arctic church could also be attracting more people because its intense trust in Scripture as a source of meaning that gives people the hope they need, he says.

“We’re Bible-believing Christians,” he says. “The basic questions of human beings around the world—Who am I? Where did I come from? What’s my purpose? Why am I here?—the Bible answers those questions.... The church has a message of hope.”

Parsons says he also believes the church is called to grow in numbers, citing the parable of the talents, in which a master praises two of his servants for investing the money entrusted to them at a profit.

Introducing Elliot’s presentation to CoGS, Thompson said he believed Canadian Anglicans should look at the numerical decline of their church’s membership in the context of other changes for the better.

The London, Ont., church in which he started worshipping in 1968, Thompson said, “while not filled to the point of discomfort, was full.” On the other hand, he added, “in all of the years that I attended that church...in all of the years I had attended church before then, and in all of the years that I attended church until I was in my 20s, I never once heard a sermon that made reference to God’s justice.”

He continued, “I never once heard anybody tell me about the residential schools. I never heard anything about the responsibility of the people of God to respect the dignity of every human being. It’s not that people didn’t care about those things, but those things were not tip-of-the-tongue discourse in the life of the church in which I was formed. Things are quite different now.”

Elliot also told the group about ongoing efforts to expand and diversify data collection using a new computer application, ParishOS. He said he hoped the church would be better able to monitor how specific aspects of its life, some of which may hold particular potential—home churches, Fresh Expressions, Messy Church and Book of Common Prayer services, for example—are doing.

Meanwhile, a working group of bishops, to be headed by Mary Irwin-Gibson, bishop of the diocese of Montreal, has been formed, Thompson said, “to say what are the things we should be counting... that will help us understand that, while the church we offer to God is smaller than it has been in the past, that’s not the only thing that’s true of it.”

In table group discussions after Elliot’s presentation, members of CoGS were asked to ponder four questions: whether the data was true to their own experience; what surprised or stood out for them in the report; what they believed God was telling the church through the data; and where the Good News was in it.

Some table spokespeople said the data matched the experience of those at their table; some reported that at least one member of their group came from a growing or stable parish. Some groups expressed doubt that the church would run out of members by 2040.

“We actually don’t think there’s ever going to be a zero person,” one table spokesperson said. “I think what we will be offering to God in 2040 will be a different church, and a much smaller church, but it will still be a church.”

Another reported of his group, “Between the range of us there were some who found it hard to understand how everybody that they knew would either be dying or becoming apostate at 55, for the church to run out of members.” But he himself, the spokesperson added, was amazed to learn the church hadn’t lost more than Elliot’s report stated.

Some groups spoke to hope that the report would spur the church to change.

“Our group talked about the great hope, and good news, in the idea of taking more risks,” one said. “We see good news in the fact that several of us were noticing that lots of newcomers to the congregation were new Canadians as well.... Now we’re in this time of change, we can start addressing these kind of trends.” And the emptying of rural congregations might mean more opportunities for ecumenical shared ministries, the spokesperson said.

Some groups were curious about whether data could be collected in other areas—such as how church buildings are being used. At least one group spoke to hope that the collection of the data, and possibly more data in the future, would not only help the church identify areas of growth; it would also help parishes and dioceses in numerical decline know that they’re not alone.

Asked by the *Anglican Journal* how she thought Canadian Anglicans should pray for the church, Nicholls replied, “Pray for the Spirit to blow through the hearts and minds of everyone, and open our eyes to see where Jesus is calling us to be at work. It’s not that God isn’t there in the community already. And it isn’t that God isn’t calling us—sometimes we’re just expecting God to be in a different place, and so we don’t see God where God actually is.

“Pray for us to be flexible and open in how we express the gospel. And pray for that deepening of discipleship in us that will lead us there.”

She added, “At the end of the day, if we have prayed with open hearts and minds to see where God is calling us to be and work, if we have sought to follow that to the best of our ability, that is all we can do.... I think we need to have courage and simply be faithful.

“God will have a church.”

Source: *The Anglican Journal*, January 2020,
<https://anglicanjournal.com/gone-by-2040/>