



The Great Retreat: The Decline of the Church of England since 1851

An Analysis of Statistics, Causes, and Key
Historical Events

August 25, 2025



The Victorian Paradox (1851-1914)



Church Expansion vs Attendance Decline

The Church of England invested heavily in building new churches to meet growing populations, yet attendance relative to population growth continued to fall during this period.



Rise of Nonconformity

Denominations such as Methodists and Baptists gained popularity, especially among working-class communities, challenging the Church's dominance.



Intellectual Challenges

Emerging scientific theories like Darwinism and critical biblical scholarship led to a 'crisis of faith' among educated classes, weakening traditional beliefs.

World War One: A Crucible of Faith

01 Initial Surge in Attendance

Church attendance temporarily increased as people sought comfort, meaning, and patriotism during the war's early years.

02 The Problem of Evil

The massive loss of life and suffering led many to question how a benevolent God could allow such horrors.

03 "Lost Generation" Impact

The deaths of millions of young men created a lasting demographic gap, reducing future church congregations.

04 Long-Term Secularization

The war accelerated pre-existing trends toward secularism, permanently weakening the Church's cultural and spiritual influence.

Post-War Era: The Great Retreat

01

Accelerated Decline

Following World War II, church attendance dropped significantly as the nation shifted focus towards rebuilding and modernization, intensifying an already downward trend.

02

Social & Cultural Shifts

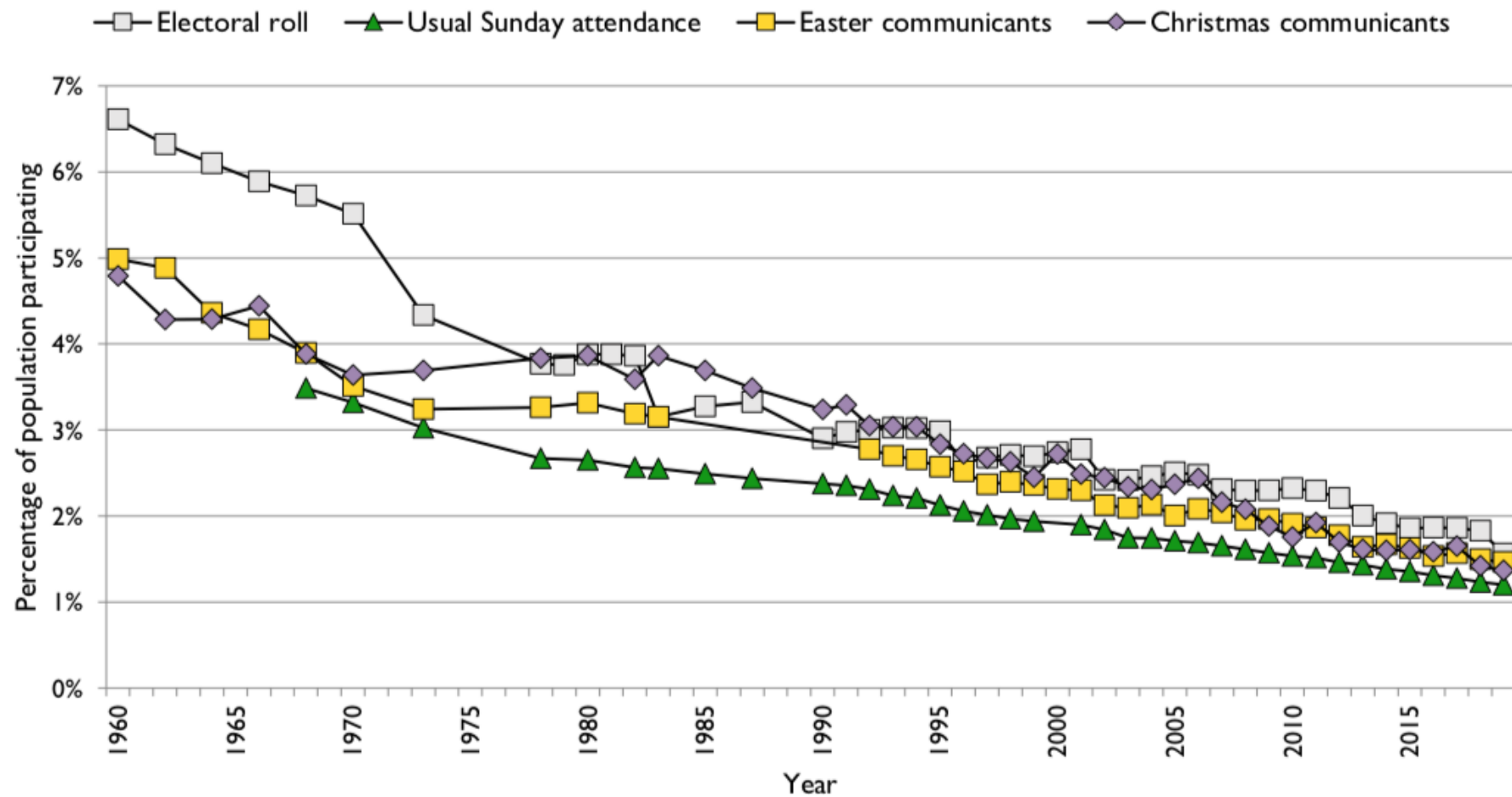
The rise of consumer culture, expanding leisure options, and the introduction of a seven-day work week created new priorities that competed with traditional churchgoing.

03

Less Social Pressure

The strong societal expectation to attend church faded, leading to more personal choice and a decline in regular worship as churchgoing was no longer seen as a social obligation.

Figure 11: Church of England participation summary, 1960-2019

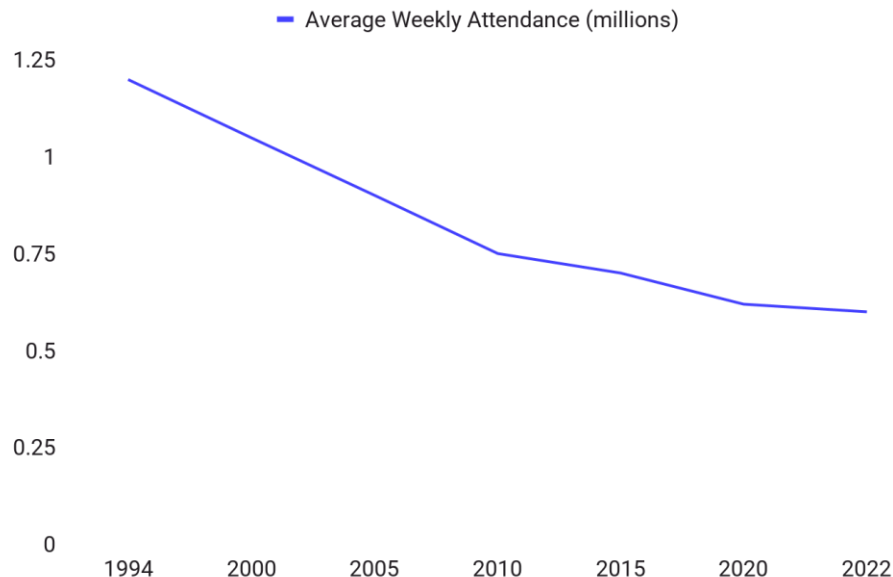


Average Weekly Attendance Decline

Attendance Trends and Insights

- Average weekly attendance dropped by approximately 50% from 1.2 million in 1994 to around 600,000 in 2022.
- This decline includes attendance at all services throughout the week, not limited to the main Sunday service.
- The number of people attending at least one service per month has followed a similar downward trend.
- This long-term reduction signals changing patterns of religious engagement within the Church of England.

Average Weekly Attendance from 1994 to 2022

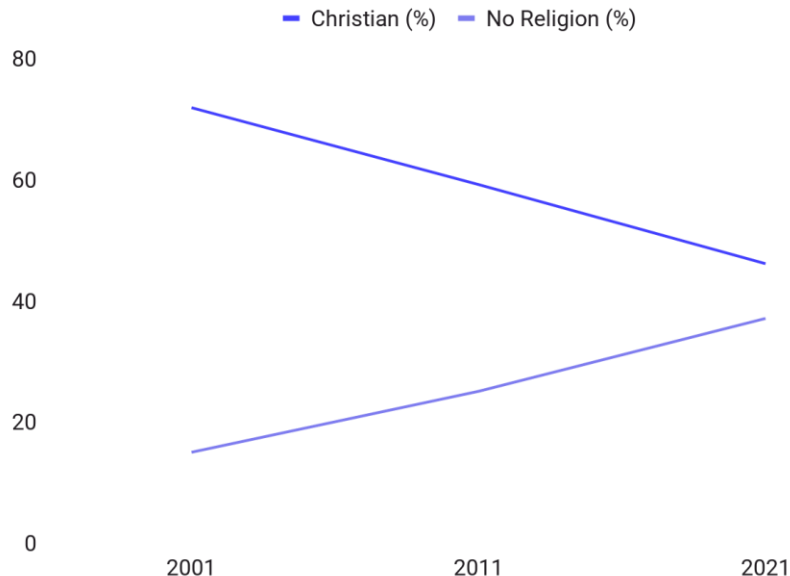


Declining Religious Affiliation

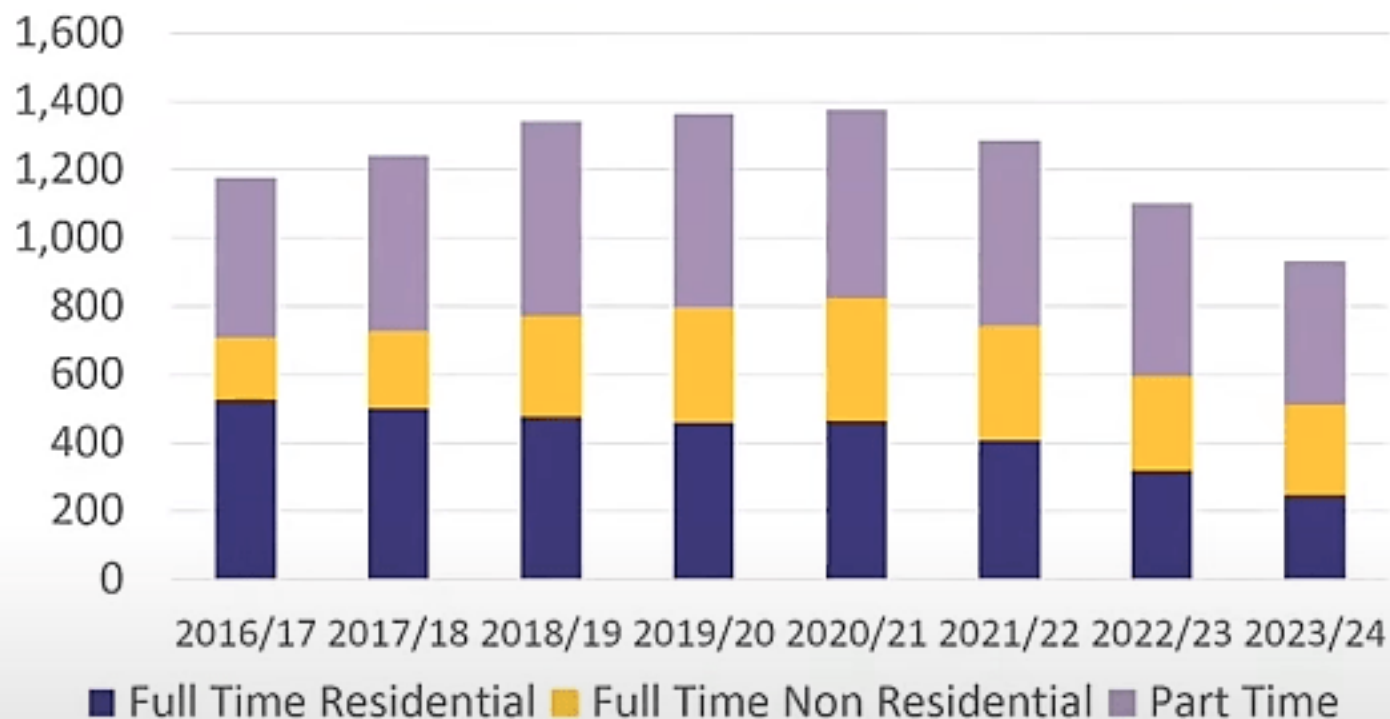
Census Trends and Religious Identity

- In 2001, 72% of the population identified as Christian, showing strong religious affiliation.
- By 2011, Christian identification had fallen to 59.3%, marking a significant decline in just a decade.
- In 2021, Christian affiliation dropped further to 46.2%, the first time below 50% in census history.
- The rise of those reporting 'no religion' reached 37.2% in 2021, becoming the second-largest group after Christians.

Christian Identification vs. No Religion (2001-2021)

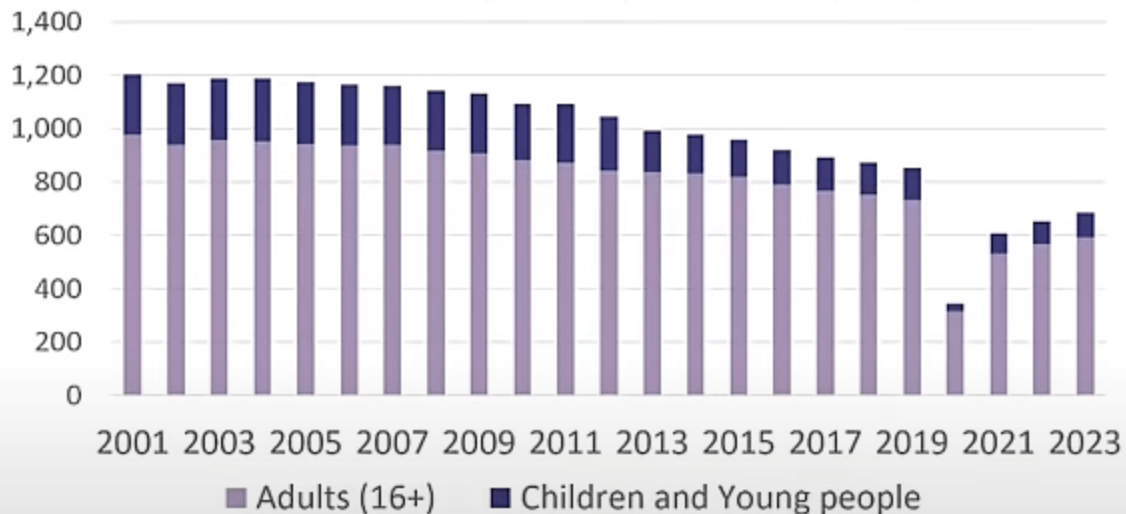


Decline in ordinand numbers



Church of England attendance decline

Average Weekly Attendance (000s)



Membership and Affiliation Trends

Church Membership Decline

Church of England membership, measured by the parish electoral roll, dropped from over 1.2 million in 1994 to below 600,000 by 2024, reflecting a steady decrease in active members.

National Census Affiliation

The percentage of people identifying as Christian in national censuses fell from 72% in 2001 to 59.3% in 2011, and further to 46.2% in 2021, marking a historic decline below half the population.

Rise of No Religion

Those identifying as having 'no religion' rose sharply to become the second-largest group at 37.2% in 2021, up from just 14.8% in 2001, indicating a major cultural shift away from traditional religious affiliation.



Plus tip:

Include recent local or regional data if available to make the trends more relevant to your audience.



Key Life Events Decline



Baptisms Decline

Baptisms have dropped dramatically from around 160,000 in 1994 to approximately 50,000 today, a decline of over 65%, highlighting reduced infant and adult church initiation.



Confirmations Drop

Confirmations, an important rite for full membership, decreased from 25,000 in 1994 to less than 8,000 in 2022, reflecting lower engagement with formal church commitment.



Weddings Decline

Church weddings fell from around 70,000 in 1994 to under 30,000 in 2022, influenced by the rising preference for civil ceremonies over religious ones.



Funerals

See separate slides



Trend Explanation

The drops in baptisms, confirmations, and weddings reveal a broader decline in religious participation, while funerals maintain steadiness due to cultural and traditional factors.

Baptisms and Confirmations Decline



Baptisms Decline

- Baptisms decreased over 65% from 160,000 in 1994 to around 50,000 recently.
- Decline includes both infant and adult baptisms, signaling reduced initiation into church life.
- Reflects broader trend of lower church involvement among families and individuals.



Confirmations Decline

- Confirmations fell from about 25,000 in 1994 to less than 8,000 in 2022.
- Significant drop highlights fewer young people committing to full church membership.
- Indicates weakening passage rites and reduced engagement with church traditions.

Weddings Trends



Decline in Weddings

- Church weddings fell from around 70,000 in 1994 to under 30,000 in 2022.
- Civil ceremonies are growing more popular, contributing to the decline in church weddings.
- This shift reflects broader societal changes in marriage preferences.

Clergy and Church Buildings



Decline in Paid Clergy

The number of stipendiary clergy has decreased steadily, reflecting shrinking resources and fewer ordained positions available across parishes.



Increased Workload

Remaining clergy face growing responsibilities as fewer paid clergy serve larger congregations and multiple church locations.



Church Closures

Some churches have closed due to declining attendance and financial challenges, but closures remain relatively limited compared to the rate of attendance drop.



Rate of Closure vs Attendance

Church closures occur at a slower pace than attendance decline, indicating efforts to maintain church buildings despite shrinking congregations.

Religious vs Non-Religious Funeral Services

Decline of Religious Services

- Popularity of religious funerals decreased by 37% since 2017.
- Only 17% of respondents chose religious services in 2023.
- Spiritual services were the least preferred, selected by 12%.
- This decline aligns with fewer people identifying with religion in the UK.

Rise of Non-Religious Services

- Non-religious funerals have grown 25% in popularity since 2017.
- They have been the preferred choice for five consecutive years.
- Over 22 million people in the UK now identify as non-religious, per ONS data.
- This shift highlights a move toward personalized, secular ceremonies.

The Rise of Celebrants



Popularity Surge

The preference for celebrants to lead funeral services has increased by 92% since 2017, becoming the choice of over half of respondents in 2023.



Decline of Vicars

Vicars have seen a 19% decrease in popularity as funeral leaders since 2017, although they still remain a choice for 28% of people.



Personalized Ceremonies

People increasingly want funerals crafted to tell unique life stories, moving away from templated religious services toward bespoke, meaningful ceremonies.



Reflecting Individual Values

The rise of celebrants highlights a cultural shift toward honoring individual values and life journeys rather than traditional religious rites.

Summary of Key Findings

Modest and Respectful Funerals

The most popular funeral style is modest and respectable, reflecting a cultural preference for simplicity over extravagance.

Non-Religious Ceremonies

There is a clear shift away from religious rites, with non-religious services growing significantly in popularity over the past five years.

Cremation and Venue Preference

Cremation remains the preferred method of final disposition, with crematoriums being the favored venue for funeral services.

Celebrants and Open Attendance

Celebrants have become the leading choice to officiate funerals, supporting personalized ceremonies often open to all who knew the deceased.



Summary of Trends

Attendance Halved

Average weekly attendance has dropped from 1.2 million in 1994 to around 600,000 in 2022, reflecting a 50% decrease across all services.

Membership & Affiliation Decline

Church membership fell from over 1.2 million in 1994 to below 900,000 in 2014, while national Christian affiliation dropped from 72% in 2001 to 46.2% in 2021.

Drops in Life Events

Baptisms, confirmations, and weddings have all seen major declines, with baptisms down over 65%, confirmations reduced by two-thirds, and weddings less than half since 1994.

Reduced Clergy Numbers

The number of paid clergy has decreased, increasing the workload for remaining vicars as they serve a shrinking congregation.

Key Reasons for the Decline



Secularization

Religion's influence in public and private life has steadily diminished, reducing societal pressure to participate in church activities.



Institutional Controversies

Deep divisions over issues like women's ordination and same-sex marriage have caused internal conflicts and alienated some followers.



Scandals and Trust Issues

Handling of abuse cases has severely damaged public trust, leading many to question the Church's moral authority.



Demographic Challenges

An ageing congregation and failure to engage younger generations have resulted in shrinking attendance and participation.



Cultural Disconnect

The Church is often perceived as out of touch with modern lifestyles and concerns, limiting its relevance to contemporary society.



Church of England Safeguarding Scandals

Acknowledging Failures and Pursuing Reform

August 25, 2025



Acknowledging a History of Institutional Failure



Culture of Secrecy

For decades, the Church prioritized protecting its reputation, handling abuse allegations internally and quietly, often concealing the truth from the public and authorities.



Deference to Authority

Victims' voices were frequently dismissed due to an ingrained respect for clergy authority, which led to disbelief and silencing rather than support and justice.



Protectionism Over Welfare

Perpetrators were often relocated to new parishes without investigation or punishment, prioritizing institutional image over the safety and wellbeing of victims.

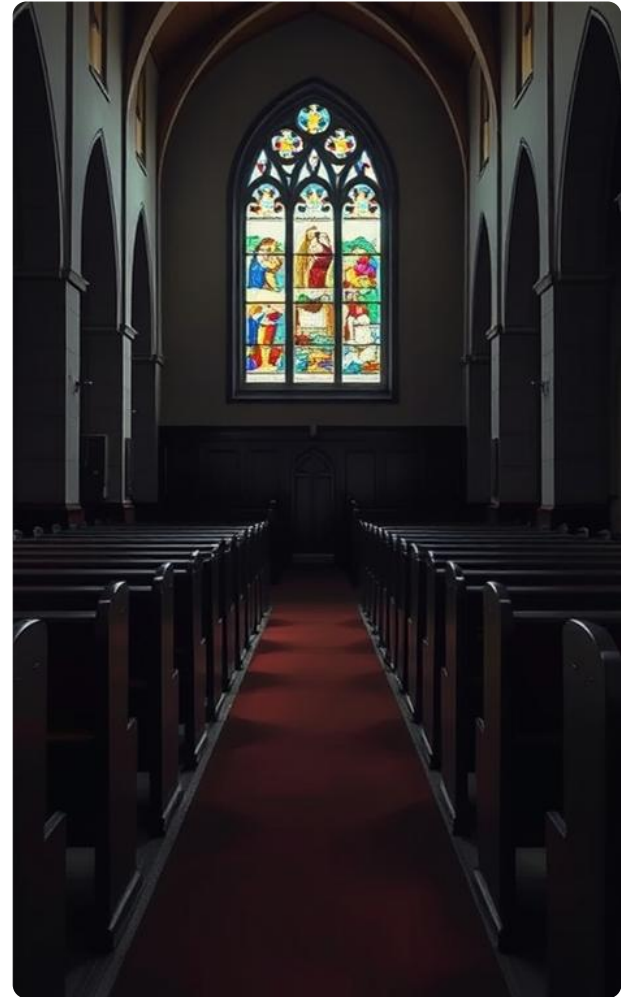


Lack of Safeguarding Discipline

In the 1980s and 1990s, safeguarding was not a defined practice within the Church, resulting in inadequate responses to abuse allegations and failure to develop protective protocols.

Case Study: Peter Ball

- Peter Ball, former Bishop of Gloucester, was cautioned by police in 1992 for indecent assault but faced minimal consequences at the time.
- Senior church figures, including a letter of support from the then Prince of Wales, advocated for Ball to continue his ministry despite allegations.
- Ball resigned but was allowed to live as a bishop in retirement, with victims largely ignored and silenced.
- In 2015, after a thorough investigation, Ball was convicted and jailed for sexually abusing 18 young men over 15 years.
- The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) described the case as 'nauseating,' with senior bishops acting as 'perfect accomplices' who protected the abuser rather than the victims.



Case Study: John Smyth and the Iwerne Trust

- John Smyth, an evangelical barrister, led holiday camps for public schoolboys through the Iwerne Trust in the 1970s and 1980s where he committed brutal physical and sexual abuse.
- Senior Church figures were aware of Smyth's abusive behavior, with a 1982 report describing "horrific" beatings, yet the trust only conducted an internal investigation and did not report him to the police.
- Instead of facing justice, Smyth was allowed to continue his work abroad in Zimbabwe, where further abuse occurred.
- Archbishop Justin Welby, who was a dormitory officer at one of these camps, later admitted knowing Smyth but was unaware of the extent of his abuse at the time.
- This case exemplifies the Church's "shaming failure" to protect children, highlighting systemic cover-ups and a culture that prioritized reputation over victims.



The Rise of Scrutiny and Rising Numbers



Independent Inquiries

The 2020 report by the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) exposed systemic failures in the Church, highlighting a culture that protected abusers and neglected victims.



National Safeguarding Team

Established in 2015, the Church's National Safeguarding Team centralized safeguarding efforts, replacing informal parish-level handling with a coordinated, formal approach.



Past Cases Review 2

Launched in 2019, PCR2 re-examined all known abuse cases dating back to the 1950s, uncovering hundreds of new cases and thousands of perpetrators previously unreported.

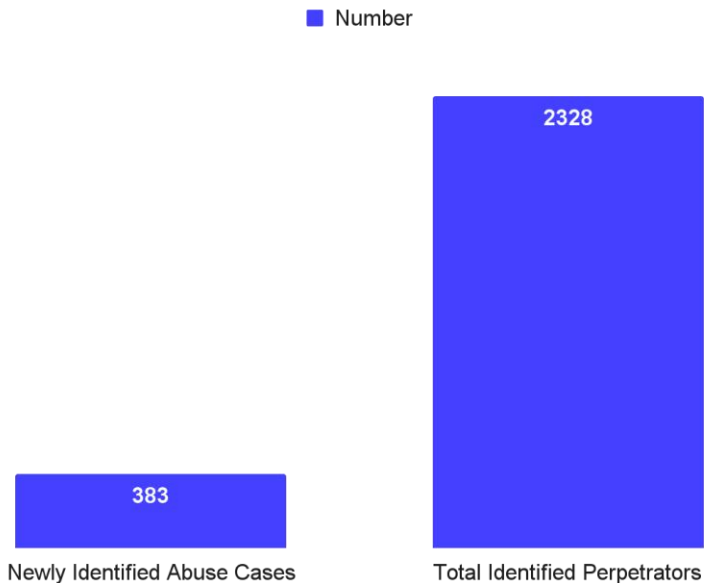


Societal Shift

Growing public awareness and media exposure of abuse scandals have encouraged more survivors to come forward, increasing reporting and demanding accountability.

Past Cases Review 2 (PCR2) Findings

Key Findings from Past Cases Review 2 (PCR2)



PCR2 uncovered hundreds of new abuse cases highlighting the scale of historic abuse and the need for ongoing vigilance and reform.

Factors Driving Increased Reporting



Independent Inquiries

Bodies like the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) brought historical abuse cases to light, creating a public platform that encouraged survivors to come forward and increased transparency.



Proactive Church Investigations

The Church's Past Cases Review initiatives systematically reviewed thousands of files, uncovering previously hidden abuse and demonstrating a commitment to confronting past failings.



Societal Awareness Shifts

Growing public sensitivity to child protection and widespread media coverage of institutional abuse scandals empowered more survivors to speak out and demand accountability.

The Voices of Survivors



Betrayal and Power Imbalance

- Victims often trusted clergy as spiritual leaders, making abuse deeply shocking.
- Survivors describe feeling silenced and disbelieved when they spoke out.
- Abusers leveraged their authority to manipulate and intimidate victims.
- One survivor said, 'I believed a man who is a padre was a man of God... so I didn't think anyone would believe me.'



Spiritual Damage and Calls for Leadership

- Abuse shattered many survivors' faith and their relationship with God.
- Victims report lifelong emotional and spiritual trauma beyond physical harm.
- A survivor warned the Church would 'die' without moral leadership and decisive action.
- Calls emphasize the need for repentance, justice, and systemic change.

Emotional and Spiritual Impact on Survivors

- Many survivors describe their faith as deeply shattered, feeling betrayed by the very institution meant to nurture their spiritual well-being.
- The abuse caused not only physical and psychological trauma but also disrupted survivors' relationship with God, leading to feelings of abandonment, doubt, and spiritual crisis.
- Survivors often experience isolation from their religious communities, compounding the emotional damage and complicating their paths to healing.
- The betrayal by trusted religious leaders creates a profound conflict between personal faith and institutional failure, making reconciliation and recovery more difficult.
- Long-term effects include struggles with trust, identity, and belonging within faith communities, highlighting the need for compassionate pastoral care and support.



The New Atheist Phenomenon

Understanding the Rise and Impact of New Atheism Since the 2000s

August 25, 2025



Introduction to New Atheism

Emergence and Impact

- New Atheism gained prominence around 2007 with influential books like Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion*, Sam Harris's *The End of Faith*, and Christopher Hitchens's *God Is Not Great*.
- Distinct from traditional atheism, it adopted a bold and confrontational tone, openly challenging religious beliefs and institutions.
- The movement coincided with the rise of the internet and social media, which helped spread its ideas rapidly and created a global community of non-believers.
- New Atheism brought atheism into mainstream cultural conversations, making skepticism toward religion more visible and socially acceptable.



Core Arguments of New Atheism



Religion as a Delusion

New Atheists assert that belief in God is a falsifiable hypothesis and label it a delusion—an irrational belief held despite evidence to the contrary.



Religion as Socially Harmful

They argue religion fosters violence, intolerance, and impedes scientific and moral progress, with even moderate faith providing cover for extremism.



Science and Reason

Science is promoted as the ultimate path to knowledge and ethics, standing in opposition to what New Atheists view as superstition and dogma.



Rise of the Internet

The internet and social media amplified New Atheist voices, creating global communities and increasing atheism's visibility and acceptance.



Plus tip:

Use icons that clearly represent ideas like delusion, social harm, science, and internet to visually reinforce each core argument.



New Atheism and the Internet

- The rise of the internet and social media in the early 2000s provided New Atheism with unprecedented global reach beyond traditional media.
- Online platforms enabled rapid sharing of New Atheist writings, debates, and videos, boosting visibility and impact.
- Virtual communities formed around atheist and secularist ideas, offering support and identity to non-believers who might feel isolated offline.
- Social media helped normalize atheism, making it more socially acceptable and encouraging open discussion of religious skepticism.
- This digital environment accelerated the movement's growth and influence, fostering a sense of belonging and collective purpose among adherents.



Global Secular Trends

- Western Europe has seen decades of gradual decline in religious affiliation and church attendance, predating New Atheism.
- New Atheism resonated strongly in Western Europe but acted more as a catalyst than the origin of secular trends.
- Countries like the UK, Germany, and France show marked increases in people identifying as religiously unaffiliated over the last 20 years.
- These changes reflect broader societal shifts including modernization, increased education, and changing cultural values.
- The rise of secularism in Europe is part of a longer historical pattern of questioning religious authority and embracing pluralism.



Generational and Societal Shifts

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Generational Replacement Dynamics

- Older, highly religious generations are gradually passing away.
- Younger generations show significantly lower rates of religious affiliation.
- Millennials and Gen Z are less likely to attend religious services or identify with organized religion – though recent news stories have suggested a growing interest in faith?
- This demographic shift drives ongoing decline in overall religiosity.



Societal Attitudes and Cultural Shifts

- Younger generations prioritize individual spirituality over institutional religion.
- Increased acceptance of secularism and diverse belief systems.
- Social values of inclusivity and scientific reasoning influence faith perspectives.
- Religious institutions often perceived as out of step with contemporary social issues.

Political Polarization and Distrust

- Religious institutions in many Western countries, especially the U.S., have increasingly aligned themselves with conservative political agendas, creating a strong association between faith and right-leaning ideologies.
- Younger generations and progressive individuals often find themselves at odds with these institutional stances, particularly on issues like LGBTQ+ rights, abortion, and social justice, leading to feelings of alienation.
- This political alignment has caused many to perceive religion as intolerant or exclusionary, discouraging them from joining or continuing religious affiliation.
- The perception of religion as politically biased has fueled distrust, prompting some to leave their faith or reject organized religion altogether.
- This trend highlights how political polarization extends beyond governance, deeply influencing social and cultural identities, including religious belief.



Institutional Trust

Scandals and Institutional Failures

- Widespread revelations of sexual abuse by clergy shocked global communities and exposed systemic cover-ups.
- These scandals severely damaged the moral authority and credibility of religious institutions in the eyes of believers and non-believers alike.
- Victims' testimonies and media coverage fueled public outrage and led to increased skepticism about the transparency and accountability of religious leadership.
- The institutional responses often appeared inadequate or defensive, compounding feelings of betrayal and disillusionment.
- As a result, many individuals distanced themselves from organized religion, accelerating the rise of religiously unaffiliated populations.

The Role of Technology



Democratization of Information

- Internet provides instant access to diverse religious and secular viewpoints worldwide.
- Individuals can explore critiques of religion and alternative philosophies anonymously and privately.
- Online resources debunk myths and challenge traditional religious teachings with scientific evidence.
- Access to global knowledge reduces reliance on local religious authorities and dogma.



Community Support for Non-Believers

- Online forums and social media create supportive communities for atheists, agnostics, and ex-believers.
- Virtual spaces reduce social isolation often felt by those leaving religious faith.
- Shared experiences and intellectual discussions empower individuals in their transition away from religion.
- Technology fosters visibility and normalization of non-religious identities.

Two different views on how to combat decline in church attendance

- Churches face a critical question: how to grow and attract more people in a changing cultural landscape.
- Two main viewpoints have emerged: the evangelical approach emphasizing biblical authority and personal conversion.
- The progressive approach focuses on inclusivity, social justice, and adapting faith to modern culture.
- This debate reflects broader tensions within Christianity about tradition versus adaptation for growth.





Evangelical

Evangelical Approach: Biblical Authority

- The Bible is regarded as the inerrant, inspired word of God, serving as the final authority in all matters of faith and life.
- Evangelicals emphasize strict adherence to biblical teachings as the foundation for church doctrine and practice.
- The Great Commission (Matthew 28:19) highlights the Bible's call to make disciples, framing evangelism as a biblical mandate.
- Biblical authority underpins the evangelical belief that moral and spiritual truths are timeless and unchanging.
- This view asserts that faithfulness to Scripture ensures spiritual integrity and guides church growth efforts.



Evangelical

Evangelical Approach: Personal Conversion

- Personal conversion is viewed as a profound, life-changing moment of turning away from sin and committing to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.
- This 'born-again' experience is central to evangelical faith, symbolizing spiritual rebirth and a new beginning.
- It is believed that genuine church growth depends on individuals having this personal encounter with God, not just cultural or social affiliation.
- The conversion experience motivates believers to live according to biblical teachings and to share their faith actively with others.



Evangelical

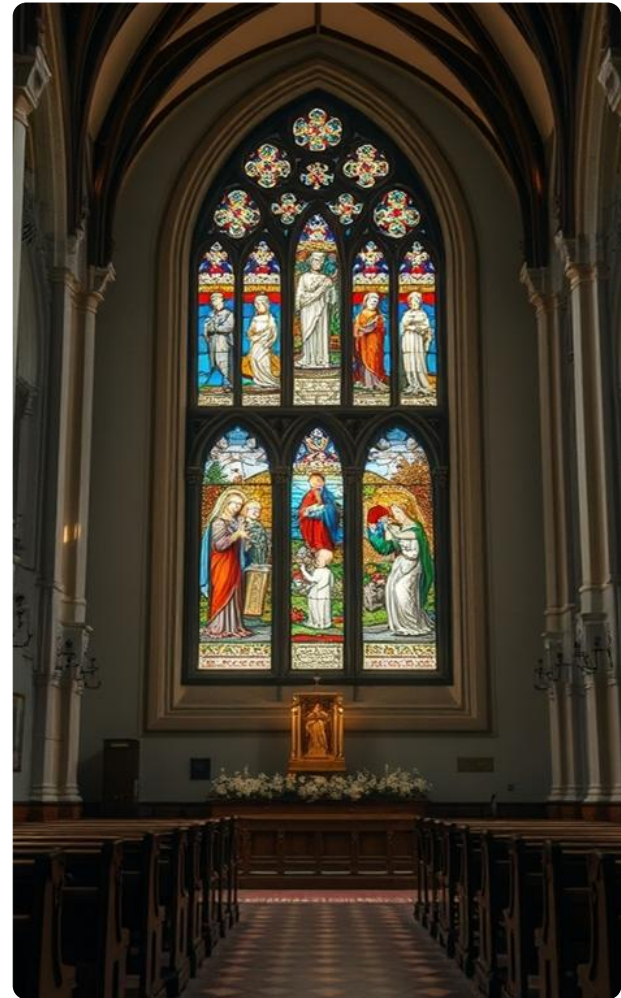
Evangelical Approach: Evangelism and Mission



- All Christians have a biblical mandate to actively share the gospel and make disciples, based on the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19).
- Evangelism is seen not just as outreach, but as a spiritual responsibility essential for the growth and health of the church.
- Personal relationships and community engagement are key methods used to spread the message of Jesus Christ.
- Mission efforts often extend beyond local communities to include global outreach, reflecting a commitment to all nations.
- This proactive approach emphasizes conversion as a transformative experience that invites new members into the faith community.

Evangelical Approach: Traditional Morality

- Evangelicals uphold biblical teachings on marriage as a lifelong union between one man and one woman, based on scripture.
- Sexuality is understood within the framework of marriage, with traditional morality rejecting practices seen as inconsistent with biblical standards.
- Adherents believe that maintaining these teachings preserves the spiritual health and moral clarity of the church community.
- Compromising on these moral principles is viewed as weakening the church's message and its role as a moral guide.
- This stance is often positioned as faithfulness to unchanging biblical truths amidst changing cultural norms.



Progressive Approach: Inclusivity and Acceptance

- Progressive Christians prioritize creating a welcoming environment for individuals regardless of background, identity, or sexual orientation.
- They often reinterpret traditional biblical passages on sexuality to support a more inclusive stance, emphasizing Jesus's message of love over rigid dogma.
- Inclusivity is seen as essential for reaching marginalized groups who may feel alienated by traditional church teachings.
- This approach fosters tolerance and acceptance, aiming to build a community that reflects diversity and compassion.
- The emphasis on acceptance aligns with a broader commitment to social justice and equality within the church.

Progressive Approach: Social Justice

- Progressive Christians see social justice as a core part of living out the gospel, emphasizing care for the poor and marginalized.
- Addressing systemic injustices such as poverty, racism, and inequality is viewed as a vital Christian responsibility linked to faith.
- This approach connects faith with action, demonstrating the gospel through tangible efforts to improve society.
- Social justice initiatives are seen as a powerful witness that attracts those who seek a church engaged with real-world issues.

Progressive Approach: Dialogue with Culture

- Progressive Christians see faith as a living, evolving journey rather than a fixed set of doctrines.
- They embrace modern scientific discoveries and cultural developments, integrating these insights into their understanding of faith.
- This openness fosters dialogue between the church and contemporary society, breaking down barriers and encouraging mutual respect.
- Faith is viewed as adaptable, allowing believers to question, learn, and grow without abandoning core spiritual values.
- This approach aims to make the church relevant and welcoming to people navigating complex modern realities.

Summary: Two Paths to Church Growth

Evangelical Approach

- Emphasizes biblical authority as the foundation for faith and practice.
- Focuses on personal conversion through a born-again experience.
- Prioritizes active evangelism and missionary work to grow the church.
- Upholds traditional moral teachings on marriage and sexuality as essential.

Progressive Approach

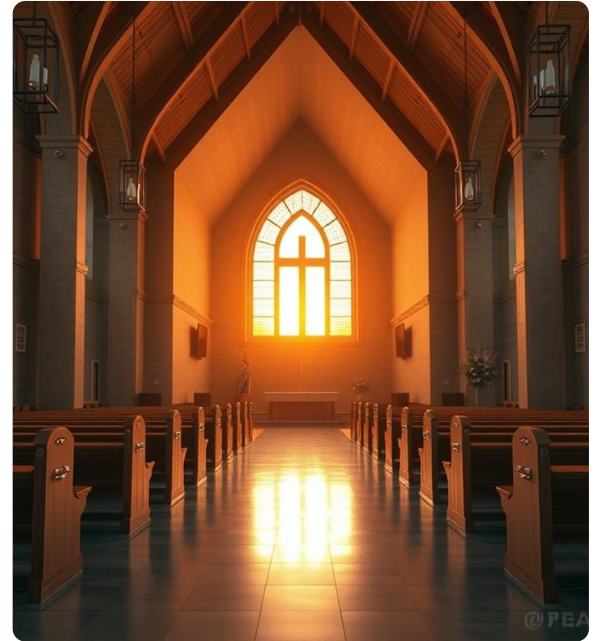
- Centers on inclusivity and acceptance of diverse identities.
- Advocates for social justice and addressing systemic inequalities.
- Engages in dialogue with modern science and cultural shifts.
- Prioritizes compassion over strict doctrinal adherence.



Conclusion

Both evangelical and progressive approaches offer compelling visions for attracting new members, reflecting deeply held values and priorities. Understanding and respecting these perspectives is essential as churches navigate a rapidly changing cultural landscape to remain vibrant and relevant.

**The ongoing debate
between tradition and
inclusivity shapes the future
of church growth.**



Thank you