

News Church of England



The House of Lords reserves 26 seats for the Lords Spiritual – Church of England bishops and archbishops – a tradition secular groups say is anti-democratic

Support for bishops to quit Lords

Chris Smyth Whitehall Editor
Geraldine Scott Political Reporter

Church of England bishops should give up some of their reserved seats in the House of Lords to leaders of other faiths, priests have said.

Twenty-six seats in the Lords are reserved for Church of England archbishops and bishops. Many proposals for Lords reform have included plans to reduce or abolish the Lords Spiritual seats, with secular groups arguing that no religious figures should enjoy automatic representation in parliament.

A survey by The Times of 1,200 priests has found that 60.1 per cent back some kind of reform, though only 6.7 per cent want the seats abolished.

In the poll, 44.8 per cent wanted to keep the 26 Lords Spiritual seats but for them to be “opened to other denominations and faiths”, while 8.6 per cent said they should be reserved for the church’s bishops but reduced in number. A further 36.5 per cent said that the system should continue unchanged.

The Bishop of Oxford, the Right Rev Steven Croft, who has sat in the Lords for ten years, said: “I think that is an interesting finding. Both the positive reception of the Lord’s Spiritual ... and also the openness to other denominations and faiths.” He said that “people of all faiths do make a significant contribution [already in the Lords]”.

Andrew Copson, chief executive of Humanists UK, said: “The situation is unfair, undemocratic, and unjustified, as even a majority of clergy now agree.”

The Bishop of St Albans, the Right Rev Alan Smith, said on behalf of the church: “We provide an independent, non-partisan voice in parliamentary debates, bringing an ethical and spiritual perspective that is informed by our roles in civil society.”

Ban on ‘gay cure’ backed by nearly 70% of clergy

Kaya Burgess
Religious Affairs Correspondent
Ryan Watts

More than two-thirds of Church of England priests back the government’s plan to introduce a ban on conversion or so-called gay-cure therapy, with less than a fifth against, a Times survey has found.

A poll was sent to 5,000 priests selected at random from a church directory and received responses from almost 1,200 active clergy in what was the widest-ranging survey conducted of clerics.

It included the question: “The government is proposing a ban on conversion therapy. Do you support or oppose such a ban?”

A total of 67.8 per cent said they supported a ban, with 17.7 per cent against.

The survey also found that a majority of priests backed same-sex marriage for the first time and that 32.7 per cent of working age priests had considered quitting the church because of the pressure of their jobs. Eighty per cent of priests would back a female Archbishop of Canterbury.

The Bishop of Dorchester, the Right Rev Gavin Collins, told Times Radio that The Times’s survey had uncovered “a wealth of really helpful, inspiring and

On conversion therapy

Q The government is proposing a ban on conversion therapy. Do you support or oppose such a ban?

Support **67.8%**

Oppose **17.7%**

Don't know **14.5%**

Data based on a survey of 1,185 Church of England priests conducted in August 2023

challenging data for us” in the church. The Bishop of Buckingham, the Right Rev Alan Wilson, added: “It answers a lot of questions which really are very important.”

The government’s plan to ban conversion therapy has been mooted for several years, but no bill has yet been published. The proposal has faced opposition from some traditionalist Christian groups who fear it could criminalise priests trying to provide pastoral care to those struggling with their sexuality.

The term conversion therapy refers to any kind of pressure applied to those who are gay or transgender to coerce them to repress their sexuality or gender identity. At its most extreme, there have been reports of electro-therapy

and so-called “corrective rape” being used. Christian campaigners have warned that “conversion therapy is harmful, dangerous and just doesn’t work”.

A Cabinet Office spokeswoman said: “This government is committed to protecting people at risk from conversion practices. As part of this we will publish a draft bill setting out our approach ... in this parliamentary session.” She said scrutiny would “ensure we address any risk of unintended impacts”.

The Evangelical Alliance group said that it “opposes coercive and abusive practices carried out in the name of conversion therapy” and supported the government’s “commitment to ensuring people are able to receive the support that they choose to help them navigate their sexuality”. The group added, however: “Church leaders should not fear being criminalised when they pastor and pray for people.”

The Times poll also found that support for assisted dying among Church of England priests appeared to have grown from 22 per cent to 35.5 in the past nine years, but a majority still did not want to see it legalised.

Scrolling has replaced prayer, Juliet Samuel, page 19
Clergy are way off message, letters, page 22

Priests lose faith in goal of achieving net zero by 2030

Kaya Burgess, Ryan Watts

Priests appear to have little faith that the Church of England will hit its formal target of reaching net zero by 2030, with 65 per cent believing that their own church will miss it, the Times survey showed.

A proposal was put to the General Synod, the church’s assembly, in 2020 to set a date of 2045 for reaching net zero, but this was brought forward by synod members to 2030. The move was approved despite fears that it may be too ambitious, given the challenge of reducing the carbon footprint of more than 16,000 churches, many of which are ancient listed buildings.

A Times investigation last year found that many parishes were unable to afford eco-friendly boilers and heating systems, with most granted permission to stick to fossil fuels until green technology became cheaper.

The poll asked: “The General Synod set a date of 2030 for the Church of England to reach net zero on its carbon emissions. How confident, if at all, are you that your own church can achieve net zero by 2030?”

Sixty-five per cent of priests said they were not confident, 36.9 per cent were “not very” confident and 28.1 per cent were “not at all” confident. Only 2.2 per cent said they were “very confident” while 20.8 per cent said they were “fairly confident” and 0.5 per cent said their church had already reached net zero.

Last year a poll of Christian churches, commissioned by Ecclesiastical Insurance and carried out by the Bible Society, found that more than half said they did not have the funds to make eco-friendly upgrades. The church has pledged £190 million over nine years to “support the church in the transition towards net zero”, conceding last year that the 2030 target was “hugely ambitious” but adding that it “reflects the seriousness of our commitment to protect God’s creation”.

When Philip Petchey, a church judge, granted permission for a church to install a new fossil-fuelled boiler last year, he noted: “There is not a green option at a reasonable cost”, and warned: “It does seem that, absent new technology coming to the rescue ... a whole series of decisions like the present case is likely to lead to the 2030 target being missed.”

Operation Noah, a campaign group calling on the church to tackle climate change, said: “What Church of England clergy on the ground need is money and support to phase out polluting heating systems and install clean technologies, and for this to be as easy as possible in terms of permissions and approvals. The survey results are unsurprising. Church of England clergy often work in difficult circumstances with limited resources.”

The Right Rev Graham Usher, the Bishop of Norwich, said: “Our detailed net zero route map ... sets out a practical and pragmatic route to 2030.”

AI is smart but we're
better than machines

James Marriott

Page 20



Comment

Decline of Christianity should be mourned

As faith wanes, other structures arise to fill the vacuum with conspiracy theories, political tribalism or health fads

Juliet
Samuel



@CITYSAMUEL

The bells still ring out on Sunday morning, just as they have for hundreds of years, at the church nearest my house. It's one of the few in London whose congregants still respond in their hundreds, filling the pews and the donation boxes, helping to host royal wedding or coronation fairs, handing out meals to the homeless.

I'm not Christian, and yet the church helps to structure the community I live in, building networks that I also inhabit, between parents in the playground and nearby nurseries and schools. It is faint, but it's still there.

Across Britain, however, these sorts of networks are fading, like old root structures turning to mulch. A survey of Anglican clergy commissioned by The Times has found that almost two thirds of them believe this is no longer a Christian country. The last census, in 2021, showed a 13-percentage-point drop in those calling themselves Christians, to 46.2 per cent, and a 12-percentage-point rise, to 37.2 per cent, in those who declared they had "no religion".

A certain strand of liberal opinion is liable to respond to this information with a self-satisfied "Good!", like an adolescent unveiling a controversial opinion at the dinner table. Religion, they'll contend, is nothing more than a force for conflict, ignorance and prejudice, and if the discussion continues,

you are liable to get drawn into a not-particularly-illuminating narrative about how Europe's devastating wars of religion were all about the length of a priest's cassock and all sorts of other half-remembered, half-baked notions from GCSE history. Such is the long shadow cast by the John Lennon generation.

To say that religion has been involved in its share of abominations is a bit like saying human society has been responsible for heinous crimes. For as long as there have been societies, there have been religions; indeed, in most complex societies, religion has been a primary organising principle. And it is not as if post-religious societies, such as Maoist China or Soviet Russia, have particularly covered themselves in glory. The common factor for evil and exploitation is not religion, but humanity.

So allow me to feel saddened by

Scrolling and constant sharing have replaced prayer and meditation

the inexorable secularisation of this country. It seems to me that Britain could do with a bit more Christianity, rather than less, and that where the church withers away, it leaves a gap. The gap is mostly in the everyday habits and structures of life. There are almost no places left, like a church, where a community gathers regularly on the basis of its geographical proximity. This leads inevitably to a diminishing stock of neighbourly contacts and relationships.

There is no appointed time when a neighbourhood gathers to rest and reflect. There is no shared stock of

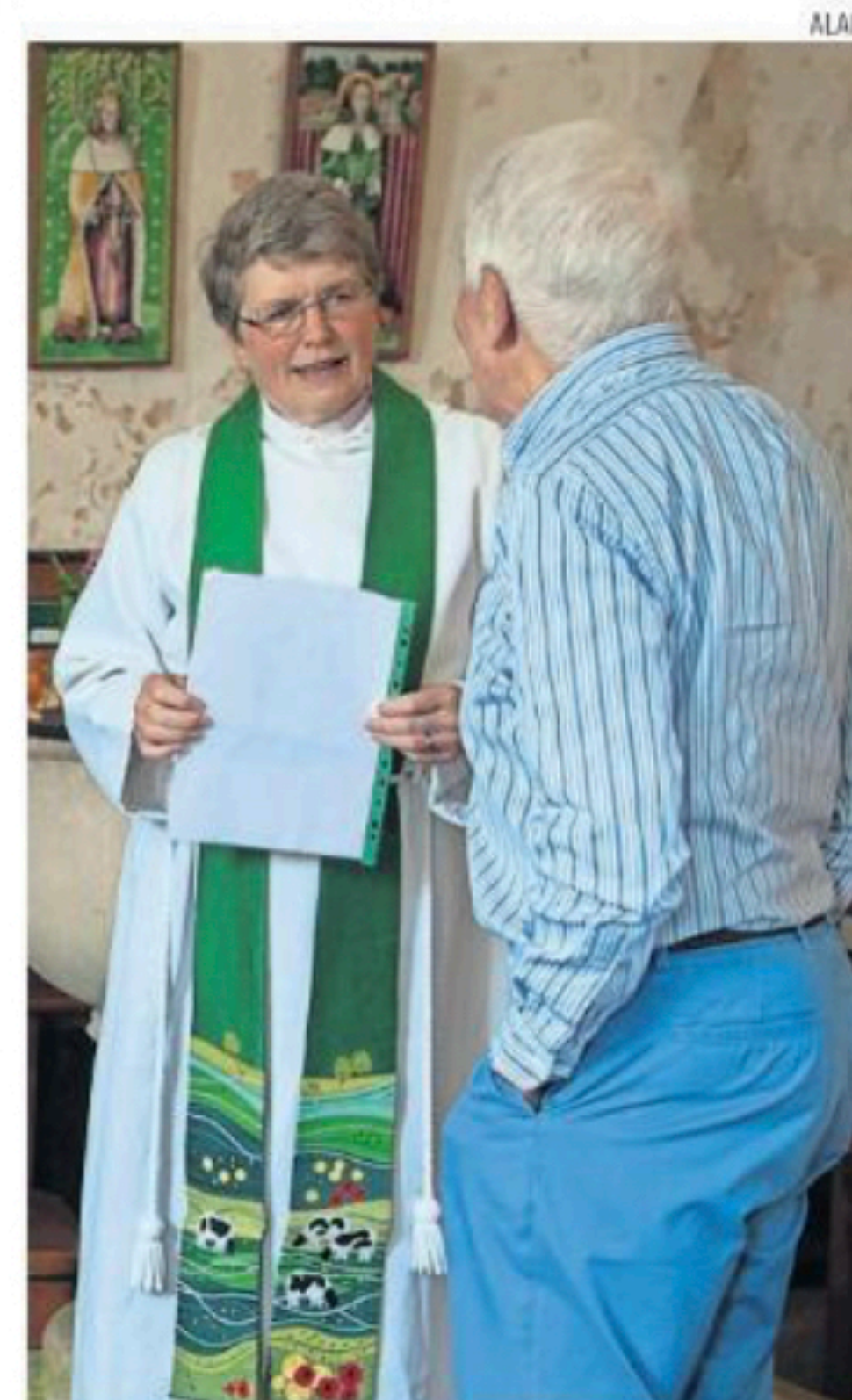
wisdom to turn to during physical or moral trials, only the Google search box waiting for your plaintive question, with its drop-down menu of suggested phrases.

I once signed up to an app called Nextdoor, which purports to build local communities by connecting people who live near one another and have similar needs or interests. The whole thing was awash with carping and complaints about "people who leave their dogs alone barking all day", "noisy children leaving rubbish everywhere" or fights about the Tories, Labour and Brexit. These forums seem universally to give vent to the vilest and pettiest of village instincts, without providing any of the human contact and local culture that foster pride and community.

We are forgetting the utility of things we used to know. Where the norm used to be prayers at bedtime, we have endless scrolling; where there was once private meditation, we are engaged in constant sharing; where there was a degree of sexual restraint there is the principle of constant experience-maximisation and opportunism.

And why not? A hyper-rationalist framework has to have a reason not to do these things. Usually it reaches for a health reason or a kind of evolution-for-dummies: phones are bad for sleep or girls are programmed to want fewer partners because they have finite reproductive capacity. Human behaviour is not formed by rationale, however, but by habit. Most religions have embedded within them habits that people are struggling to relearn from their therapists or health apps.

A large part of the issue is technological. As the late French anthropologist Marc Augé put it:



The church helps to structure local communities and build networks

"Today, the television and the computer have replaced the hearth." The hearth, which was a private, communal space for a family, has been replaced by another type of threshold, where influences from the outside world move seamlessly in and out of the home.

When we do go out, we spend growing amounts of our time in what Augé called "non-places", transient spaces such as hotel lobbies, shopping centres and motorways, where humans are alone and anonymous. These are places with little social, spiritual or cultural life in them, often with a radio playing, a loop of adverts and news passing on "the inexhaustible stock of an unending history in the present".

No doubt this anonymity has given us freedom, but it has taken something from us too, eroding a

shared sense of particular history and culture that make a neighbourhood feel like home.

Secularisation, in short, has cost us something important, something we should be able to acknowledge without being accused of pining after medieval theocracy. This is a loss that is not easily regained. I am certainly not sure that bringing the church into line with "public opinion" on gay marriage or

We're spending growing amounts of time in 'non-places'

premarital sex, for example, will do much to revive Christianity in this country. But humans are a species prone to religious modes of thinking and where old religions fade, other, religious-like structures arise to fill the gap. Sometimes they take the form of neo-paganism, like strands of the environmentalist movement. Others are political tribes, often the nastiest and most destructive of forces. Others dive into conspiracy theories or super-fandom or health fads.

What most of these trends have in common is that they split us into ever-smaller units, rather than creating a broader, shared basis for culture. And despite modernity's many advantages, I am not convinced that the way it splinters society ultimately makes us happier or healthier.

RED BOX

For the best analysis and commentary on the political landscape
[thetimes.co.uk/redbox](https://www.thetimes.co.uk/redbox)

Changing attitudes in the Church of England

Sir, The Church of England clergy are way off message ("Britain isn't a Christian nation now, say clergy", news, Aug 30). Christians are leaving the C of E because they do not like the progressive liberal church and want authentic Christianity instead.

In Shrewsbury we have dwindling congregations in the three large town centre C of E churches. Meanwhile the tiny Greek Orthodox Church has a regular British congregation of more than 200 and is expanding because it preaches straight from the Bible and is therefore believed in.

I think it would be better to survey congregations across all Christian churches not just the progressive C of E pushing for modernisation, which is the cause of its own decline.

Tristram Llewellyn Jones
Church Stretton, Shropshire

Sir, Anglican clergy have concluded that Britain is no longer a Christian nation. Perhaps more to the point, is the Anglican church still a Christian church? One of the distinctive features of a truly Christian church is acceptance of the authority of the Bible, yet most of the clergy disregard its clear teaching and seek to conform to the world's ways rather than to God's

word. More than at any other time, the church needs strong leadership that has confidence in its foundations.

Dr Brian Scott
Lincoln

Sir, I wonder if the results of your survey would have been different if you had asked only vicars of growing churches. As a retired yet active clergyman I help lead a well-attended village church in the Cotswolds. We teach the Bible as the word of God, believe in the resurrection of Jesus, the power of prayer and the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. Why attend a church where the vicar does not believe these things and bangs on about climate change and food banks? Important though such things are they are not the gospel.

Canon Andrew Wingfield Digby
Witney, Oxon

Sir, As a person of faith who is outside the Church of England, I am saddened that one of the consequences of its decline is the loss of social cohesion that churches helped to provide. Meeting every Sunday meant local people interacted, families linked up and individuals felt valued. That may not have been its core purpose, but it

was very powerful, and is missed in a world that can feel fractured and isolating. My synagogue, also subject to the same secularism, has stemmed the tide so far by morphing into a community centre rather than just a house of prayer. Maybe the church can do the same.

Rabbi Dr Jonathan Romain
Maidenhead Synagogue

Sir, Your leading article (Aug 30) exhorts the Church of England to "get on and modernise". It is already doing so and it is a disaster.

Canon David Hall
Christ Church, Chorleywood, Herts

Sir, It was depressing to read that clergy want significant changes in teaching to bring the church more in line with public opinion. If Jesus, the apostles and the early church had done that the Christian faith would not have survived beyond the 1st century. Thankfully the countercultural gospel they proclaimed challenged public opinion and churches that remain faithful to the biblical message rather than public opinion have often grown rather than declined.

Andrew Brown
East Grinstead, W Sussex