

Facing Episcopal Church decline

By David Goodhew

Editor's note: This article examines data from the Episcopal Church's dioceses in the United States. It does not include overseas dioceses, such as those in Province IX, where the situation is quite different.

New analysis by Dr. Jeremy Bonner, a Durham-based researcher, offers clarity on the numerical fortunes of the Episcopal Church (TEC) in the USA in recent decades. Discussions of TEC's numerical fortunes usually take place within the context of its divisions, with the result that clarity is often the first casualty. Using a range of measures, looking across a long period of time, and supplemented by the latest data from TEC, Bonner's work offers an academically robust picture of what has been happening to the main Anglican church in the United States. This is highly significant for American Anglicans, but also for the wider Communion.

Numbers are not the be-all and end-all, but they do matter. If we believe Christian faith is good news, we should be seeking its proliferation, and be worried when it shrinks. Ignoring uncomfortable numbers does no good. Indeed, it only means the problems will have increased by the time we face the true state of affairs.

This article examines TEC using a range of measures, then explores how TEC compares with other denominations. Finally, it offers comments on the causes of these shifts and their wider significance.

Which numbers?

TEC deserves commendation for the accuracy of its data (some of the most accurate data of any member of the Anglican Communion), and its frankness in publishing such data. This article relies on the material from Bonner's important chapter in a new work, [Growth and Decline in the Anglican Communion, 1980 to the Present](#) (Routledge, 2016), which I had the privilege of editing. This chapter is supplemented here by [the latest TEC data](#). There are four key metrics: members, average Sunday attendance, baptisms, and marriages.

Membership

The chart below shows how TEC lost almost a quarter of its members, 1986 to 2010, within the context of a rapidly rising population. Between 2010 and 2015, TEC's baptized membership dropped further by 172,000 to 1,779,335, meaning the overall drop in membership from 1980 to 2015 was on the order of 30%.

Episcopal Church Baptized Membership 1980-2010¹

Region	1980*	1985*	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010
East	999,947	939,423	874,564	832,842	768,702	712,609	627,067
South	580,543	612,336	638,405	661,934	675,744	667,536	618,672
Midwest	482,677	447,299	423,180	398,528	370,821	336,526	291,113
West	493,759	516,900	509,901	511,183	513,778	488,705	415,055
TOTAL	2,556,926	2,515,958	2,446,050	2,404,487	2,329,045	2,205,376	1,951,907

* A conversion factor of 0.918427 has been applied to the raw data to render it compatible with that for 1990 and subsequently.

Membership decline was slower in the 1980s and 1990s and became marked since 2000. There were significant regional differences, with decline worst in the East and Midwest and some growth in the

¹ J. Bonner, "USA," in D. Goodhew (ed.), [Growth and Decline in the Anglican Communion, 1980 to the Present](#) (Routledge, 2016), table 12.3, p. 234.

West and the South (up to 2000), though all regions have been shrinking since around 2000. Decline between 2010 and 2015 is slightly slower than in 2005 to 2010, but continues to be pronounced.

Average Sunday attendance

Membership is an imprecise measure, since it includes many who may have limited involvement in congregational life. Figures for average Sunday attendance offer a harder metric and a more striking message.

Episcopal Church Average Sunday Attendance 2000-10²

Region	2000	2005	2010	Percentage Change, 2000-05	Percentage Change, 2005-10
East	262,696	232,767	191,963	-11.4	-17.5
South	263,265	252,338	220,122	-4.1	-12.8
Midwest	138,310	122,884	101,651	-11.1	-17.3
West	192,308	179,282	144,095	-6.8	-19.6
TOTAL	856,579	787,271	657,831	-8.1	-16.4

The reporting of average Sunday attendance began in 1991. During the 1990s average Sunday attendance was relatively stable but from around 2000 serious decline set in. This has continued and TEC's average Sunday attendance dropped by nearly one third between 2000 and 2015, from 857,000 in 2000 to 579,780 by 2015. While there is some regional variation, substantial decline has been happening across the country.

Baptisms

Baptism offers a different kind of measure, giving some sense of the number of people joining TEC and, for a church with a strong stress on infant baptism, a sense of the demographic trajectory of the church.

Episcopal Church Child Baptisms, 1980-2010³

Region	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010
East	20,789	21,566	22,123	19,056	15,971	13,195	9,828
South	12,128	13,214	13,562	12,719	12,421	10,989	8,465
Midwest	10,444	9,934	9,102	7,580	7,174	5,760	4,218
West	12,806	13,697	12,075	11,429	11,037	8,736	6,479
TOTAL	56,167	58,411	56,862	50,784	46,603	38,680	28,990

Episcopal Church Adult Baptisms, 1980-2010⁴

Region	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010
East	2,244	1,825	2,159	2,190	1,945	1,508	1,060
South	1,701	1,507	2,129	1,991	2,067	1,644	1,118
Midwest	1,392	1,109	1,214	1,005	1,192	940	615
West	2,121	2,177	2,342	2,064	2,027	1,528	979
TOTAL	7,458	6,618	7,844	7,250	7,231	5,620	3,772

² Bonner, "USA," Table 12.5, p. 235.

³ Bonner, "USA," Table 12.7, p. 236.

⁴ Bonner, "USA," Table 12.8, p. 236.

As Bonner notes, “For both groups ... the rate of baptism has been cut almost in half over a thirty-year period.”⁵ But the rate of decline has steepened. Child baptisms increased slightly in the early 1980s, then declined dramatically from around 1990. That decline has continued since 2010. In 2000 TEC baptized 46,603 children, but new numbers show that in 2015 TEC baptized 24,069 children, nearly half the number baptized in 2000. Adult baptism’s decline started later but has been even more striking. In 2015, 3,305 adults were baptized by TEC, less than half the number of adults TEC baptised in 2000: 7,231.

Marriages

However startling the drop in baptisms, the most dramatic data is for marriages. Here the decline has been steady, from 38,913 in 1980 to 11,613 in 2010. This has dropped further to 9149 in 2015. In other words, in 2015 TEC married less than a quarter of the number it married in 1980.

Episcopal Church Marriages, 1980-2010⁶

Region	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010
East	14,356	13,809	12,555	9,894	8,253	5,744	4,430
South	7,506	7,362	7,181	6,652	5,912	4,399	3,279
Midwest	7,742	6,119	5,293	4,240	3,559	2,778	1,833
West	9,309	7,837	6,786	6,088	4,717	3,269	2,071
TOTAL	38,913	35,127	31,815	26,874	22,441	16,190	11,613

The decline in baptisms and marriages predates the decline in Sunday attendance. There could well be a causal link between these phenomena, but the nature and extent of that link has yet to be clarified.

Comparison with other churches

What of other denominations? Are things worse for TEC than elsewhere, or sometimes better? Bonner’s chart below summarizes the key changes. Between 1980 and 2010 some American denominations grew (notably Roman Catholicism, the Southern Baptist Convention, Mormons and Pentecostals — although some of these have seen their rate of growth shrink in recent years) and others have declined to varying degrees. TEC is not *the* worst performing of U.S. denominations, but it is *one* of the worst. The mainline churches have, in the main, done worse than the non-mainline.

Percentage Change in Denominational Membership, 1980-2010⁷

Denomination	1980-1990	1990-2000	2000-10	1980-2010
Roman Catholic Church	+12.4	+16.2	-4.9	+24.1
Southern Baptist Convention	+16.3	+5.0	+0.0	+22.2
United Methodist Church	-4.0	-6.7	-4.7	-14.6
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America	-2.8	-2.2	-18.2	-22.3
Presbyterian Church (USA)	-11.4	-11.6	-21.9	-38.9
The Episcopal Church	-13.4*	-5.3	-15.7	-30.9*
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints	+31.9	+19.3	+45.5	+128.9
Lutheran Church-	-0.7	-3.2	-9.9	-13.4

⁵ Bonner, “USA”, pp. 236-37.

⁶ Bonner, USA,” p. 227.

⁷ Bonner, “USA,” Table 12.11, p. 239.

Missouri Synod				
United Church of Christ	-4.9	-14.8	-24.4	-38.7
Assemblies of God	+34.0	+18.5	+14.9	+82.6

**These figures do not reflect the change in calculating active membership in the 1980s.*

Explaining the shifts

Why is this happening? Explaining decline and growth of churches is a complex task, A wide range of caveats is needed. But some comments are possible.

Division?

One explanation is division. TEC lost a number of congregations in recent years to what is now the Anglican Church in America (ACNA). *But* TEC has declined by a far larger amount than can be accounted for by such divisions. Moreover, in several key metrics TEC's decline long predates these divisions. Even if you add TEC and ACNA together, Anglicanism in the United States has dramatically declined in recent years. A later article will focus on ACNA's numbers and how these compare to TEC's numbers

Demography?

A crucial factor is demography. TEC membership since the 1950s has correlated strongly with those segments of the population with the lowest birth rates — those who are most highly educated and/or in households with high earnings.⁸ This, combined with other factors, means TEC's membership is increasingly elderly. The most recent data shows that from 2008 to 2014 TEC congregations have continued to age, with 27 percent over 65 in 2008 but 31 percent over 65 in 2014.⁹ A further key aspect of demography is ethnicity. The U.S. population has dramatically diversified ethnically in recent decades, and this process continues. But as of 2014 TEC remained 87 percent white, with little sign that this is changing.¹⁰ Regardless of recent splits, demography is pushing TEC towards decline.

Secularization?

A separate question is secularization. U.S. churches for many years appeared less vulnerable to secularization than those in Western Europe, but this is changing. Mainstream Protestant denominations such as TEC have been particularly vulnerable to secularity. The evidence of Western Europe seems to be that as societies move out of Christendom, those churches that are most willing to recognize and adapt to their minority status have most ability to survive within the harsher climate of a secular age.

Church policies and practices?

Notwithstanding these points, church policy *also* plays a significant role in promoting decline or growth. From the early 1990s TEC has started around 12 congregations a year across the United States, markedly fewer than in the 1970s and '80s and vastly fewer than in the 1950s and '60s (when between 40 and 100 were being founded each year).¹¹ Yet the U.S. population grew dramatically during that period. Recently TEC has made efforts to plant more churches, but it is unclear how

⁸ Bonner, "USA," p. 227

⁹ See: <http://www.episcopalchurch.org/library/document/episcopal-congregations-overview-charts>; http://www.episcopalchurch.org/files/episcopal_congregations_overview_2014.pdf, accessed 9 June 2016.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ http://www.episcopalchurch.org/files/number_of_episcopal_congregations_by_year_founded.pdf, accessed 9 June 2016.

effective this has been. Wider evidence suggests that disinterest in starting new congregations correlates with a greater propensity to decline.

Lessons for the wider Church

U.S. Anglicanism operates in a very different context to other parts of Anglicanism. That said, there is much for wider Anglicanism to learn from the U.S. experience. Bonner's analysis shows how TEC has dramatically declined in recent years. There is a sense that the wider Anglican Communion has not awakened to how far and fast that decline has happened. In significant parts of the United States, TEC has ceased or will soon cease to have a meaningful presence. That said, those who write TEC off are overstating their case. Despite severe decline, it remains a substantial presence in parts of the nation, especially in some major cities.

Estimating the size of TEC's decline and understanding its causes is complex. Suggesting remedies is beyond the scope of this short article. But a few things can be said.

First, churches need to face demographic realities. If, for example, a city's or town's ethnic make-up shifts, wise dioceses and congregations will adapt, not pretend everything is the same.

Second, denominations have to learn to value the local church theologically. If the local church is seen only as an adjunct to some higher good, often called *the kingdom*, it is not surprising that little effort is made to multiply such congregations or seek their growth. Seeing *kingdom* as different from, and better than, *church* is against the grain of the New Testament, in which local churches are integral to the kingdom. The things that we value are the things that tend to flourish. If we want to see growing local churches, we need a theology that values the local church more. Conversely, theology that ignores or even downplays the growth of congregations needs to be questioned, not least for its internalization of the fatalism of the secular *zeitgeist*.

Third, the secular West is a tough climate in which to sustain congregational life, but it can be done and is desperately needed. For example, there is an avalanche of data that shows how well-being correlates with being part of a congregation.¹² And the practices that promote congregational growth are, to a degree, known; they are not a complete mystery. Focused attention on such practices and the theology that undergirds them is central to the existence of Anglicanism in the United States and elsewhere.

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¹² T. Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back*, (Vintage Books, 2012), p. 331.