
Anglican Church Decline in the West

John Hayward



www.churchmodel.org.uk

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Abstract

The numerical decline has been a dominant feature of the Anglican churches in the western world, especially those of the UK and the USA, since the 1950s. This report examines attendance and membership data from four of these churches: the Church of England, the Church in Wales, the Scottish Episcopal Church, and the Episcopal Church of the USA. It is shown that the Church of England is declining slower than the other three denominations. Further, the Church of England is not likely to reach extinction this century, whereas the other three have predicted extinction dates within 25-35 years. Reasons are put forward as to why the Church of England is more resistant to numerical decline compared with its sister western Anglican denominations. This report originally appeared as two blogs in July and August 2015 and attracted much comment.

Introduction

The Anglican Church, once a key institution in the English-speaking world, has suffered decline for over half a century. Although in both the UK and North America there are many examples of growing and lively Anglican churches, as national denominations the trend is downwards. This decline is in marked contrast to continued Anglican growth in Africa and other parts of the world. There the church is healthy. In the West it is sick. The question is – is the Anglican sickness unto death?

In this article, I explore the different patterns of Anglican decline through four denominations: the Church of England (C of E), the Church in Wales (C in W), the Scottish Episcopal Church (SEC), and the Episcopal Church of the USA (ECUSA). From that analysis, I will suggest possible reasons for their differences in decline.

1. The Pattern of Decline

Which of the four denominations is the healthiest, and which has the worst decline?

First, look at the attendance data since the beginning of the century. Such a short period is used as churches tend to change their method of measuring attendance over time, which will skew any predictions. A shorter time frame will help reduce this effect. The attendance data is graphed in figure 1 [1,2].

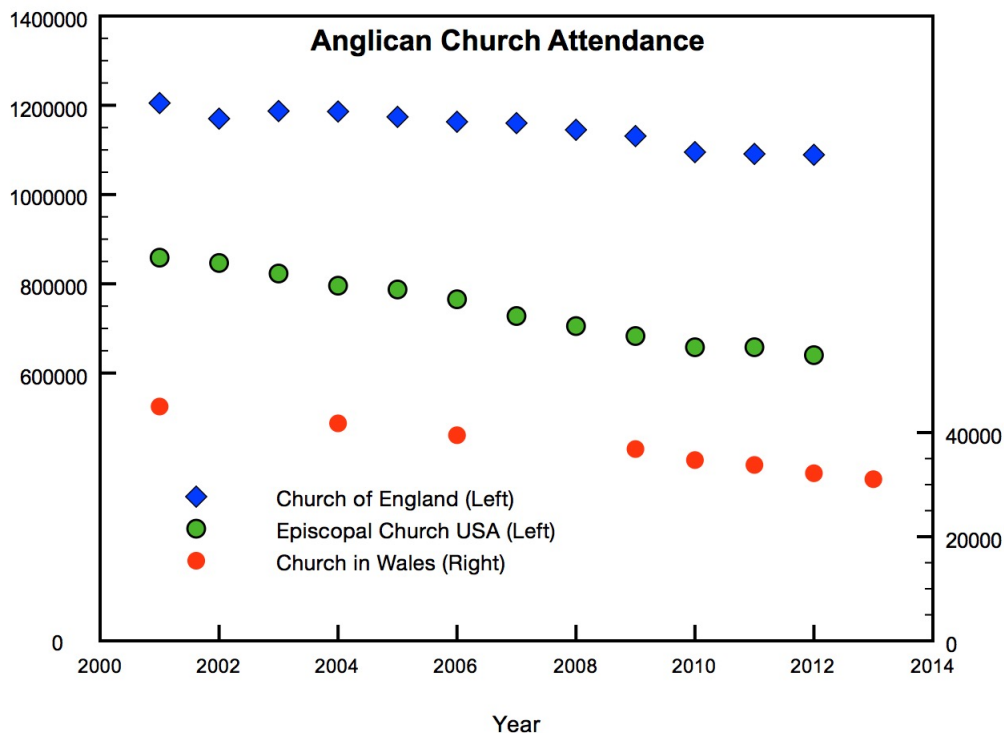


Figure 1: Attendance of C of E, ECUSA – left scale; C in W – right scale.

It is clear the Church of England is the largest of the three denominations; indeed it is larger than ECUSA (left scale) even though the USA is over six times the size of England. Numerically ECUSA has never had the dominant position in the USA that the Church of England has had in England. Nevertheless, it could still command influence on US society,

perhaps because it inherited the C of E's prestige. By contrast, the C in W is much smaller (right scale), reflecting its place in a much smaller country.

Larger differences emerge when the rate of decline is examined. One measure of decline is the slope of the line through the data points. Here the C of E has the slowest decline, ECUSA has the fastest, and the C in W somewhere in the middle. The Church of England is healthier than the other two.

Using the percentage rate of decline, ECUSA had a 2.7% per annum decline in 2010, whereas the C in W had 2.9%. So why is ECUSA declining faster? Simply because it is a much larger church; 2.7% of a big number is a big number! Percentages are misleading as the above declines are not exponential but largely linear, as aging is part of the process. As such the percentage decline of all will increase in time. In 2010 the C of E had an annual decline of 1.1%, which means it is losing less in absolute terms than ECUSA. Thus ECUSA is the worst declining of the three.

2. Extinction

How likely is it that these denominations will become extinct if current trends continue?

Attendance and membership data for all four denominations are fitted to the limited enthusiasm model of church growth, a model that can use data and decide whether a declining church is heading for extinction or not [2] [3].

The Church in Wales, Scottish Episcopal Church and the Episcopal Church of the USA are all firmly under the extinction threshold. By this, I mean that for the range of model parameters that calibrate to the data then all resulting simulations indicate future extinction. By contrast, the Church of England is on the margins of extinction; some calibrations say yes, just; some say no, just [4]. Again there is a clear distinction between the C of E and the others.

The limited enthusiasm model was not set up to predict when extinction may take place [5], only that it will take place at some future point. To estimate an extinction date linear extrapolation is applied to the recent attendance and membership data, as they are approximately straight, noted previously. The straightness of the data indicates aging is the dominant process in the decline of the denominations, as the aging process counters the natural negative exponential decline [6]. Both membership data and attendance data are used in order to demonstrate that both data sets confirm the extinction status of each denomination [7]. The results are displayed in table 1, with the graph of the attendance results in figure 2 (membership used for the SEC [2].)

Expected Date	Extinction	Church of England	ECUSA	Church in Wales	Scottish Episcopal Church
Attendance		2100	2041	2039	-
Membership		2082	2055	2043	2043

Table 1: Predicted Extinction Dates Using Linear Regression and Extrapolation.

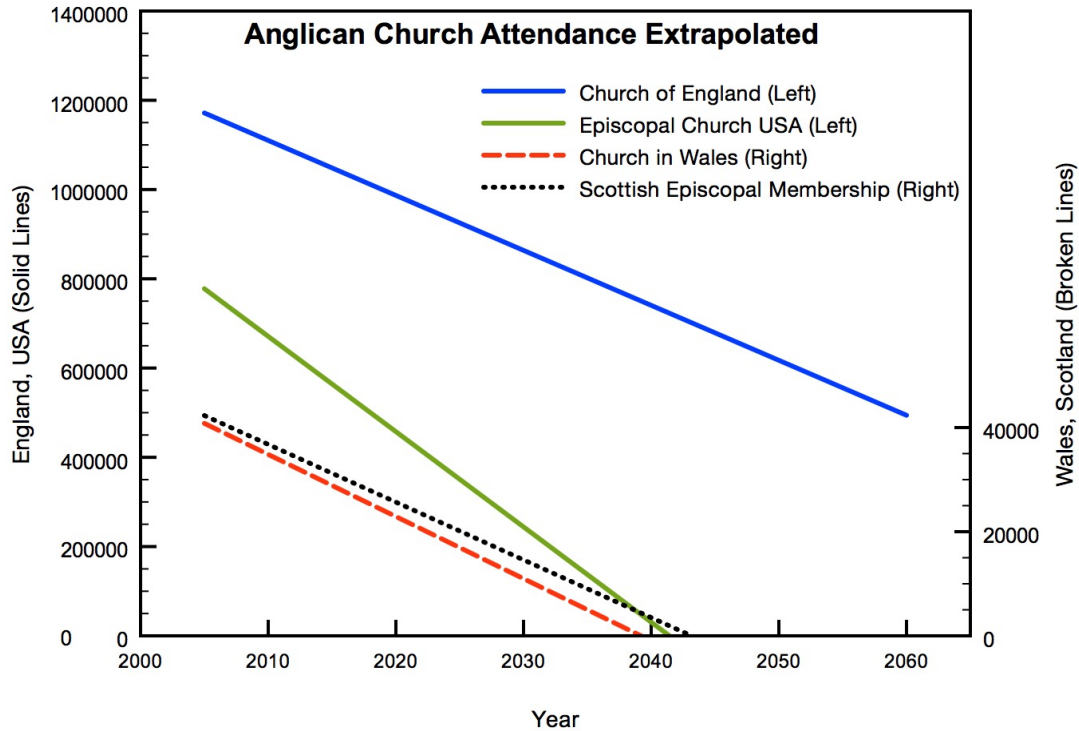


Figure 2: Projected Attendance for C of E, ECUSA – left scale; C in W, SEC – right scale.

ECUSA, C in W and SEC attendance figures all predict extinction dates around 2040 figure 2. This date is confirmed for the latter two by the projected membership data, with the ECUSA membership predicting an extra 15 years, table 1. Membership data for Anglican churches tend to be unreliable as it relies on electoral roles that are only maintained periodically, and have fairly minimal criteria for inclusion. Thus I would go with the figures predicted by attendance.

By contrast, the Church of England’s extinction is at the end of the century, so far away that it effectively says it is not clear if its decline results in extinction or not. Again there is a clear difference between the C of E and the other three denominations.

There is a certain amount of “wobble” room in all these results, but not enough to delay the extinction of the denominations by much. If current trends continue, the Episcopal churches of the USA, Scotland and Wales are near the end of their lifespans and will be seeing massive church closures from around 2025 onwards.

3. Long-Term Patterns

Where does this church decline sit in the broad scheme of the churches’ histories?

There are no reliable attendance figures going back into the 20th century. Instead, membership figures are used, taken as a percentage of the population of each country. This decision will allow for population growth. The results are compared, on the same scale, in figure 3, from 1900.

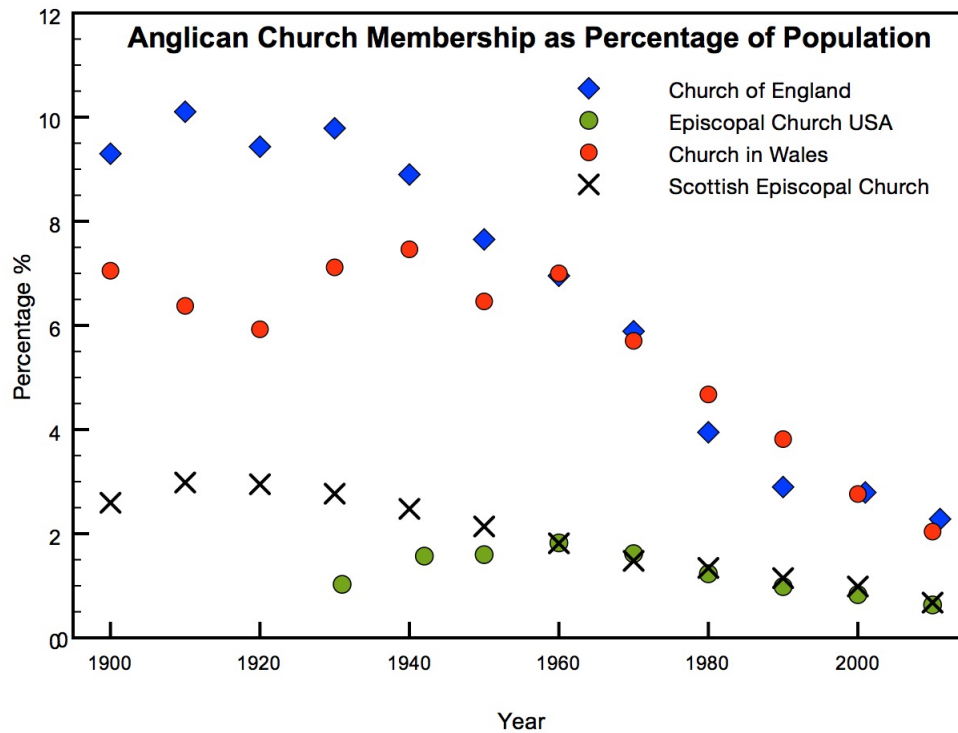


Figure 3: Membership as percentage of population for C of E, ECUSA, C in W, and SEC.

In the past, both the Church of England and the Church in Wales have had a greater share of their national populations than that of either SEC or ECUSA. This could reflect the fact that they were the “conformist” traditions in their lands, unlike Scottish Episcopalians, who were non-conformists among Presbyterians, and ECUSA who were merely one of many denominations. It may also reflect significant over-reporting of electoral roles by the established churches earlier in the century. The steeper decline in the C of E from 1970 probably represents a better definition of membership coming into use! It has stabilised in this century.

By 2000 the C of E and C in W have similar membership percentages, despite differing attendance percentages, 2.4% compared with 1.6% respectively. It is likely the C in W, with almost double the number of “members” compared with attenders, has much over-reporting on its electoral roles.

4. Summary of Data

Thus, generally speaking, the Church of England commands more loyalty among society than ECUSA, the Scottish Episcopal Church or the Church in Wales. Consequently, the decline of the C of E is the slowest, and it is unlikely to face extinction this century, unlike the other three, which have only 25-35 years remaining. Given the likely acceleration of church closures that will start in the next decade, these three Anglican denominations probably have less than ten years to address the issue of their impending extinction.

I should also note that none of the four denominations has ever commanded widespread public loyalty in terms of membership or attendance. Churches in the West have never been as popular as they have perceived themselves to be. The church might find the future easier to face by keeping in mind its mission, and its Lord, rather than some idealistic picture of a past golden age that never really existed.

5. Potential Causes of Decline

It is clear that all four denominations were declining, but that in Wales, Scotland and the USA the Anglican churches were declining much faster than the Church of England. Both the C in W and the SEC have potential extinction dates about 2040, with ECUSA possibly lasting 10-15 years longer. Indeed, although the Church of England is declining, it is only on the margins of extinction if the current pattern remains.

Rather than just repeat the standard reasons given for church decline, in the light of the contrasts in decline patterns, I would rather look at a different question:

What does the Church of England have, that the other three denominations do not, that may have helped reduce the effects of numerical decline?

Here are some suggestions, not exhaustive, and some may be a bit controversial:

(a) Establishment by Law

The Church of England is established by law and is thus seen as the nation's church. It has more connections with the "Establishment", has inroads into parliament, appears at state functions and has the monarch as its head. It is so established it was once nicknamed the Conservative Party at prayer! Although in Wales the C in W does have a more limited form of establishment when it comes to marriages and schools, both it, SEC and ECUSA, have no real *benefits* of the state. They are merely one of many denominations, with some others being larger [8].

(b) Uniformity

ECUSA, SEC and C in W, are all Episcopal by conviction. It is the characteristics of episcopacy, such as bishops and prayer books, that sets them apart from other denominations in their respective countries. By contrast, the C of E is the national church, which just happens to be Episcopal. It is defined more by being national, and less by being Episcopal, as it is the national and established element that really sets it apart from other English denominations. Thus, the C of E has more variety between congregations than the other three. To give an example from Wales, one Church in Wales clergyman described his denomination to me as like a Henry Ford car, "any colour you like as long as it's black"! Generally speaking, I have found in Wales, Scotland and the USA a fairly rigid uniformity when visiting different parishes, more so than I have seen in England. Thus the C in W, SEC and ECUSA are narrower, and therefore almost sectarian in their relationship with non-Anglicans, compared with the C of E.

(c) Establishment by State Attachment

All four churches are established in the sense that they reflect national life and trends. By that, I mean that they do not want to be sectarian in their relationship with the government, the media or national institutions. Instead, they wish to be seen to be such institutions themselves, perhaps no longer the Conservative Party at prayer, but still the "Establishment at prayer". However, due to their relative narrowness, the C in W, SEC and ECUSA are also able to change more rapidly in response to changes in society and the Establishment. All three have changed fast since the 1950s, and very fast in the last

10 years, being more open about their modernism. As such the C in W, SEC and ECUSA have been able to respond more to societal liberalisation, keeping themselves in line with the heartbeat of the land: perhaps being the “liberal progressives at prayer”. Not surprisingly they are much further ahead with adopting same-sex marriage, and gay-affirming beliefs, compared with the Church of England, where there is more resistance to change [9].

(d) Theology

All four denominations have a variety of churchmanships, however, The C of E, in contrast to the others, has a stronger evangelical wing, making it generally more conservative. Evangelical theology, with its emphasis on conversion, tends to produce a church with a stronger missionary zeal than other churchmanships [10]. Due to theological liberalism, many conservatives have left ECUSA, leaving it a predominately liberal denomination. In the Church in Wales evangelicalism was always thin on the ground, especially in the industrial south-east, which tends to be “liberal high”. In the Scottish Episcopal church, there are a small number of evangelical churches, mainly confined to the big cities. Though some have high attendance, the bulk of parishes in the SEC are not evangelical [11].

(e) Revival

Of the four denominations, the C of E has been influenced more by Charismatic Renewal than the others, despite the “Renewal” starting with a US clergyman [12]. Additionally, The C of E’s expression of charismatic renewal has also been more evangelical, including a revival in expository preaching. Perhaps the C of E has been more open to revival than the others.

(f) Rural

Both Wales and Scotland are more rural than England, and many of their congregations are in areas of low population. The Church in Wales especially has a difficult job maintaining a parish system over the whole land. Also, rural congregations often have an older age profile. However, the USA has many big cities, which should have given ECUSA an advantage over its British cousins. So this reason is less convincing.

6. Conclusion

Putting the above together, I would suggest that the reason for Church of England's decline is slower than that of the Anglican churches in Wales, Scotland and the USA [13], is primarily due to internal factors, not external ones in society. I would go further and say that it is beliefs, not actions, that are the source of the problem. When congregations ask for my advice on why they decline I first ask them what they believe, not what they do. Actions follow from beliefs. Perhaps the Church of England has, on average, stronger beliefs than the other three; beliefs that encourage growth.

All these churches want to grow to survive, to have healthy congregations and have a positive impact on society. However, the C of E perhaps has a proportionally larger group of people, who believe in evangelism because they want to rescue people, save them from their sins for their own sake. This belief in reaching people, regardless of organisational needs, would lead to greater recruitment activity and a stronger sense of purpose that helps retain and motivate

members. Church growth comes from a strong identity rooted in a mission that is bigger than the church itself.

It could be that the Anglican churches are all examples of the institutional lifecycle I have talked about previously [14] and that most of the pre-1900 denominations are coming to an end because they have put too many resources into maintaining themselves at the expense of their mission. The way forward is not to work out how to save the organisation but let it fade and try saving the lost. Something new will then emerge. Perhaps the Church of England, with its greater diversity, is much further down the road of that reinvention.

Such reinvention, one that restores the fundamental beliefs and spiritual vitality of the church, does not come by organisational management or cultural accommodation. These are spiritual issues, and the solution comes through spiritual means, not by putting motions through synods, but by seeking the face of God. If the above analysis is correct, the Anglican Churches of Wales, Scotland and the USA do not have much time left to seek to “humble themselves, and pray, and” 2 Chronicles 7:14.

References and Notes

1. Data Sources:

Church of England

Statistics for Mission 2012, (2014), Archbishops' Council, Research and Statistics, Central Secretariat:

<https://www.churchofengland.org/media/1868964/ministry%20statistics%20final.pdf> and previous editions,

Church in Wales

Church in Wales Membership and Finances, 2013:

http://www.lphparish.org.uk/mf_2013.pdf, and previous editions.

The Arthur Rank Centre:

<http://www.arthurrankcentre.org.uk/lfirc/item/download/1861>

Wales Online:

<http://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/news-opinion/wales-no-longer-nation-churchgoers-7025782>

<http://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/wales-news/church-wales-reacts-shortage-vicars-1836731>

Scottish Episcopal Church

The Church Times:

<http://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2013/14-june/news/uk/scots-need-greater-numbers-%E2%80%98to-pay-the-rent%E2%80%99>

The Sunday Times:

http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/news/uk_news/scotland/article1268194.ece

The Arthur Rank Centre:

<http://www.arthurrankcentre.org.uk/lfirc/item/8200->

Episcopal Church of the USA

The Association of Religious Data Archives:

http://www.thearda.com/Denoms/D_849.asp

Episcopal Church of the USA website:

<http://www.episcopalchurch.org/library/document/average-sunday-attendance-province-and-diocese-2003-2013>

Other UK membership data: Various issues of *UK Church Statistics* and *Religious Trends*, Peter Brierley, Brierley Consultancy and Christian Research.

<http://www.churchmodel.org.uk/growthrefs.html>

2. There was too little attendance data available for the Scottish Episcopal Church at the time of writing.
3. The limited enthusiasm model was developed to describe the dynamics of revival, see *A General Model of Church Growth and Decline*, *Journal of Mathematical Sociology*, 29(3), 177-207, 2005. <http://www.churchmodel.org.uk/publ.html>

When modelling decline it is possible to cut the model down and aggregate leaving rates with birth and death rates making model calibration simpler, yet still giving the same results on extinction thresholds.

4. See two previous blogs on the Church of England
<http://churchgrowthmodelling.blogspot.co.uk/2014/09/decline-of-church-of-england-update.html>
<http://churchgrowthmodelling.blogspot.co.uk/2013/10/the-decline-of-church-of-england.html>
5. The limited enthusiasm model does not deal with age categories and assumes constant death rates. In the last few years of a church's life aging dominates, death rates rise, and decline is faster. However the model's prediction of the threshold of extinction, and church numbers through most of history, is accurate.
6. It is noted that the extinction date computed from membership data is different to that computed from attendance data. There is a danger of reading too much into this. This is especially true for the Church of England. The following reasons were supplied to someone who raised this comment about this point.:

Firstly I computed the extinction data for the C of E with the two sets of data just to show that the extinction date predicted by either was so far in the future that it confirmed the Limited Enthusiasm model's prediction of "margin of extinction". That is, it is too close to call. 10-15 years of data cannot predict dates 50+ years in the future by any method, so their difference is of no significance. All that can be said is if the actions that affect the C of E's decline continue the same way, then extinction this century is unlikely.

Secondly the C of E has been revising its method of measuring attendance by electoral role, making it more realistic, as such it may be artificially declining faster as revision takes effect. Eventually this effect will fade and membership and attendance will be closer.

Thirdly, Membership tends to lag attendance as people take time before they join a church, and there can be a delay before departed members are taken off the role. Thus membership tends to be higher than attendance in declining churches, other way around in growing ones. There can also be age difference, with the membership in a declining church having an older profile than attendance. Young people are more likely to attend before settling on membership; older people stop attending due to infirmity but remain members. This would give the membership an artificially higher loss rate.

Fourthly when the numbers in the church get low then the type of "deterministic" model used here no longer works to well. Deterministic models give exact numbers at any given time and are reasonably accurate due to averaging. But with small numbers averages get unreliable and modellers prefer "stochastic" models and deal with probabilities. For example the 2039 extinction date for the Church in Wales is an average figure. When numbers get small all you can give are probabilities that it will be 2039, 2042, 2036 etc. There will be a probability it becomes extinct in 2050 - but it will be a very small

probability.

7. Some people commented on the use of a straight line fit for the declining data. They argued it should be “logarithmic”, which means a declining negative exponential curve. For example a church halves in size every 20 years. In this case the per capita decline rate is constant, but the actual number lost per year gets smaller, as the church is smaller. The following reply was given to these comments:

Strictly speaking decline through people leaving, and deaths, should be negative exponential, and thus slow the decline down. This is called a first order balancing loop in system dynamics. This is exactly what the Limited Enthusiasm Model of church growth predicts, the model I used to decide which side of the extinction threshold each church fell. However the data are NOT negative exponential but linear, as can be seen in the graph, and tested statistically. The reason, as many of the people who handle church statistics know, is that the church is also aging as it declines. The leaving rate and death rates exert forces that slows the decline, but aging exerts a force that counterbalances it , the net result is almost linear. Sadly it shows aging, death have far more effect than retaining children or conversion. It is not that there is no conversion or joining rate, but it is possible that this rate is similar to the leaving rate, leaving deaths and aging as the dominant forces on decline.

In an ideal world I would build aging into the Limited Enthusiasm model and let that model predict the extinction date rather than the straight line fit. Unfortunately mixing aging, a discrete time process as far as measured ages are concerned, and the social forces of the model, a continuous time process, is a notoriously hard maths problem and is still an area of research.

See also: Aging and Church Decline <http://www.churchmodel.org.uk/declineaging.html>

8. The Church in Wales now is the largest church in Wales as non-conformity has declined much faster than Anglicanism. There is still a general perception that Wales is non-conformist and chapel, even if it is no longer true
9. ECUSA voted to introduce same sex marriage at its recent convention July 1st 2015-07-02 <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2015/07/01/why-the-episcopal-church-is-still-debating-gay-marriage/>

The Scottish Episcopal Church voted in its synod, June 12 2015, to modify its laws to be “silent on marriage”, thus enabling their ministers to conduct same-sex weddings, probably not until 2017.

<http://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2015/12-june/news/uk/scottish-synod-opens-church-door-to-same-sex-weddings>

At the time this article was written the Church in Wales governing body was due to vote on the introduction of same-sex marriage in the middle of September 2015. With two of the six diocese in favour of the change, one narrowly, and two against, again one narrowly, it was not clear at the time what the outcome would be. So far of the 6

dioceses, St David's has voted firmly against. In the end only the Llandaff diocese was strongly for the change, with St. Asaph against. The other four dioceses were in varying degrees against. The Bishops decided in the light of these results that the governing would take a vote, but no decision would be made. The vote was just over 50% delegates in favour, well short of the two-thirds majority required for a constitutional change. The matter is laid to one side for now due to the divisions it would cause. Because of the different law in Wales (and England) compares with Scotland, the Church in Wales has a harder task change the definition of marriage. But perhaps this has showed the denomination is less liberal than its Scottish and American counterparts.

<http://www.churchinwales.org.uk/structure/governing-body/meetings/16-17-september-2015/>

[http://cinw.s3.amazonaws.com/wp-](http://cinw.s3.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/13_02_SameSexPartnershipNote.pdf)

[content/uploads/2015/09/13_02_SameSexPartnershipNote.pdf](http://cinw.s3.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/13_02_SameSexPartnershipNote.pdf)

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-mid-wales-34278101>

10. See for example:

Kelley D. (1986). *Why Conservative Churches are Growing: A Study in the Sociology of Religion*. Mercer University Press;

Stark R. and Iannaccone L.R. (1994). A Supply Side Reinterpretation of the "Secularisation" of Europe. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 33 (3), 230-252.

Perrin, R.D. and Mauss A.L. (1991). Saints and seekers: Sources of recruitment to the Vineyard Christian Fellowship. *Review of Religious Research*, 33: 97-111.

11. There are two large Scottish Episcopal Churches in Edinburgh that have 10% of the attendance of the whole denomination of 277 parishes. The two have nearly 30% of the attendance of the 50 parishes in the Edinburgh diocese. It gives some idea how under represented Episcopal Evangelicals are in terms of the number of parishes. It also shows the skewed nature of congregational attendance.

12. The charismatic movement is often deemed to have started with Episcopal clergyman Dennis Bennett in Van Nuys California in 1960. The reality was a little more complex than that. Hocken, P. *Streams of Renewal: Origins and Early Development of the Charismatic Movement in Great Britain*, Paternoster Press, 1997.

13. There are other Anglican churches in the USA, outside of ECUSA, such as the Anglican Church in North America, and the Anglican Church in America. These were excluded from the study. There are at present few Anglican churches outside the "official" ones in the UK, and I think they are all in England, but that may well change in the future.

14. Institutionalism and Church Decline

<http://churchgrowthmodelling.blogspot.co.uk/2015/04/institutionalism-and-church-decline.html>