

Anglican faith sinks in sea of diversity

The religious face of the nation is changing fast as migrants bring their own ways of worship, reports Kaya Burgess

For every Church of England church that has closed over the past six years, more than three Pentecostal churches and almost two mosques have opened, as migration changes the face of faith in Britain.

Analysis by *The Times* of more than 29,000 registered places of worship shows that more conservative denominations and faiths imported from abroad are growing as historically dominant institutions such as the Church of England and Methodist church decline.

Experts have described a trend of “religious fragmentation”, as non-Christian faiths grow and independent, migrant-led churches prove more successful in attracting young worshippers.

Comparing the 2010 and 2016 lists of all buildings registered in England and Wales under the Places of Worship Registration Act, *The Times* has found that almost 600 Pentecostal churches and more than 260 Islamic institutions have opened in the past six years.

During the same period an estimated 168 Church of England churches have closed, while the data shows that almost 500 Methodist churches and 100 Catholic churches have closed.

Gordon Lynch, a professor of theology at the University of Kent, said: “With alternative Christian places of worship such as Pentecostal churches, and also to an extent with Islam, the growth is linked to inward migration. We know religious organisations are an important bridging point for people when making the transition between different cultures.

“In postwar Britain, our culture was still that of a default Anglican or Church of England society. We’re now in an era of religious fragmentation where there is no default and increasingly people will identify with no religion. That could be seen as a threat to Christianity, but could also free it from the negative connotations of being part of the establishment.”

Pentecostalism is one of the fastest growing denominations in the world with an estimated 500 million followers based largely in west Africa, the Caribbean, North and South America and parts of Asia.

Pentecostal churches in Britain, such as the Assemblies of God, are often characterised by predominantly black and ethnic minority congregations, a more literal interpretation of the Bible, and by embracing spectacle in sermons. They have increased in number by more than 40 per cent since 2010, now numbering at least 2,012 churches on the register.

The Church of England is exempt from inclusion on the register, but has far more churches than any other denomination at about 15,700. Figures from the Church Commissioners show they are closing at a rate of 28 per year.

In 2010 there were 999 Muslim places of worship. That has now increased by more than a quarter to 1,263.

Hindu temples increased by almost a third; Buddhist temples by almost a quarter; Sikh places of worship by 7 per cent; and Jewish places of worship by 2.5 per cent.

The data shows that Methodist churches fell by 491, or 6 per cent, to 7,267. The United Reformed Church fell by 141, or 8 per cent, to 1,530. The register includes 93 fewer Catholic



GIDEON MENDEL/CORBIS; RICHARD POHLE FOR THE TIMES

Experts have described a trend towards “religious fragmentation” as Christianity in Britain becomes ethnically diverse

Bringing God to a secular Britain

Analysis

British missionaries helped to spread Christianity around the globe. Christians from converted countries are now engaging in “reverse mission” to reintroduce God to an increasingly secular Britain.

The growth of Pentecostal churches in Britain has been driven by migration from around the world, including from Nigeria, Ghana, the Caribbean and Protestant communities in South America. “A century ago the face of European Christianity could have been labelled as white, but now it is increasingly becoming multicoloured,” said Israel Olofinjana, a Nigerian-born minister and mission expert in London.

Ageing Church of England congregations have declined to an all-time low and the number of people describing themselves as being of “no religion” increased from 15 to 25 per cent between the 2001 and 2011 censuses.

Welcoming the growth of migrant-led churches,



Robert Beckford, from Canterbury Christ Church University, said: “Christianity is alive and well in Britain, it just looks different.”

Linda Woodhead, a sociologist at Lancaster University, disagreed. “Migrant groups do pop up every now and again, but if you look at the big picture, Christianity in Britain has seen a relentless decline for over 100 years,” she said.

The number of Christian churches in Britain, at about 50,000, still dwarfs the number of mosques by about 30 to one. The rising number of Islamic places of worship reflects a desire

by the children and grandchildren of first-generation migrants to contribute to British society, according to the Muslim Council of Britain.

“The first generation of mosques of the 1950s and 1960s were of a makeshift nature, located in converted terraced houses, cinema halls, fire stations and closed-down churches,” a spokesman said. “By the 1990s, there were purpose-built mosques. The third-generation mosques of today are exciting ventures, architecturally and in their vision to be of service to their neighbourhood.”

Places of worship

● The register of places of worship includes a number of alternative and unusual minority faiths.

● There are now 11 Scientologist places of worship in England and Wales. Scientologists believe that thetans are immortal beings with numerous past lives, possibly including in extraterrestrial cultures, who have taken residence in a human body.

● There are four places of worship registered for the Aetherius Society. Followers believe that gods based on other planets, known as Cosmic Masters, help humans on Earth and visit us in UFOs.

● The town of Nelson, in Lancashire, is home to the country’s only registered Druid place of worship, with a ground floor property registered as the Southfield Temple of Druidic Worship.

● There are eight registered Baha’i places of worship, one Rastafarian place of worship, and one for the Goddess People of Avalon, who believe that the Lady of Avalon lives in Glastonbury and communicates through visions.

churches, a fall of 2.5 per cent to 3,558. Buildings used for worship do not have to be registered and the data does not reveal how many people attend.

Robert Beckford, a professor of theology at Canterbury Christ Church University who presented *The Battle for Christianity* on BBC One, suggested that registered Pentecostal churches may account for only 60 per cent of the total and said that they now formed a “powerful and conservative lobby”.

“There has been a seismic shift,” he said. “Christianity in Britain has become much more ethnically diverse as a result of migration from west Africa, central and eastern Europe and, to a degree, Latin America. They all have very strong traditions of worship and have brought that with them.

“Pentecostalism has a belief in the authority of the word of God, so within that you have got a conservative morality on issues such as family and sexuality, but they are liberal on social welfare.”

The Church of England has started a “renewal and reform” programme. A report to be published soon shows that

Registered UK places of worship (Church of England exempt)

	Number of buildings in 2016	Percentage change from 2010
Scientologist	11	100
Pentecostal ¹	2,012	38.7
Hindu	213	29.1
Muslim	1,263	26.4
Buddhist	87	24.3
Evangelical ²	607	17.0
Sikh	256	7.1
Jewish	366	2.5
Other Christian	7,629	1.5
Baha’is	8	0
Jehovah’s Witnesses	923	▼1.6
Baptist	3,224	▼1.8
Roman Catholic	3,558	▼2.5
Friends/Quakers	362	▼2.7
Salvation Army	830	▼3.2
Other	226	▼4.6
Methodist	7,267	▼6.3
United Reform Church	1,530	▼8.4

¹inc Assemblies of God, Elim, the Apostolic Church, Vineyard, Church of God in Christ ²all non-CofE denominations

inner-city and newly “planted” churches have introduced cigarette breaks, services in pubs and outreach events for Muslim neighbours. They are designed to arrest a 1 per cent annual decline in congregations driven by the death of worshippers, who have an average age of 61. Pentecostal churchgoers have an average age of 33.

Pentecostal worship was more likely to attract younger churchgoers, Dr Beckford said, adding: “It’s about a high-tech audio-

visual presentation and there’s more music and big screens and the preaching is very practical and simple.”

Druids also have a registered place of worship

