

New Report: Church of Canada May Disappear by 2040

A “wake-up call.”

That’s what Archbishop Linda Nicholls, primate of the Anglican Church of Canada, called a new report showing there may be no members left in the mainline Canadian denomination in 20 years.

The report, which was commissioned by the church, was delivered to the Council of General Synod meeting Nov. 7-9 in Mississauga, Ontario.

“Projections from our data indicate that there will be no members, attenders or givers in the Anglican Church of Canada by approximately 2040,” said the Rev. Neil Elliot, an Anglican priest in Trail, British Columbia, who authored the report.

Elliot based his prediction on church statistics from 1961 to 2001, subscriber data to the “Anglican Journal,” the church’s official publication and data from his own survey of the number of people on parish rolls, average Sunday attendance and regular identifiable givers across Canada.

“For five different methodologies to give the same result is a very, very powerful statistical confirmation which we really, really have to take seriously and we can’t dismiss lightly,” he told church leaders during the synod.

Membership in the Anglican Church fell from a high of 1.3 million in 1961 in membership to 357,123 in 2017, said Elliot.

The new statistics will test the “perseverance, endurance (and) creativity of the church, Nicholls said during the synod.

At the same time, she added, “we do not face our challenges

alone.” Instead, church members can rely on a sense of community and “promise of God’s grace.”

In the future, Nicholls hopes Canadian Anglicans will focus more on the church’s calling to be a faithful witness in Canada instead of being drawn into a “vortex of negativity” about the decline.

“We’re called to do and be God’s people in a particular place, for the purpose of sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ, and the only question is, ‘How do we need to share it, so that it might be heard by those around us?’” she said.

Geoff Woodcroft, bishop of the Diocese of Rupert’s Land in Manitoba and northwestern Ontario, called the report “dire.”

“We need to take it very seriously,” he said. But, he added, it’s not a “death knell for the church.”

While the report captures the numerical decline, there are still signs of life in the church, he said, adding that Anglicans in Canada are “trying new experiments to live out more fully the call to engage the world as the body of Christ.”

“It’s a challenging time, but also a hopeful time,” he said.

Jamie Howison, rector at St. Benedict’s Table in Winnipeg, agrees.

Howison’s congregation meets on Sunday evenings. Its services feature a folk-roots musical style coupled with traditional Anglican worship. About 150 people, including many young adults, attend weekly. It’s one of a number of “vibrant and robust exceptions” to the other overall churches’ struggles.

For inspiration, Howison pointed to the words of former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, who once said that “the church is not ours to save.”

"We are only called to be good stewards of what we have been given. God will do what God will do," Howison said.

Laura Marie Piotrowicz, rector at St. John's Anglican Church in Lunenburg, Nova Scotia, remains hopeful for the future of the church. Piotrowicz serves at the second-oldest continuous congregation in Canada, which dates back to 1753.

Since its founding, she said, "We've seen our numbers increase and decrease. Throughout it all, we've kept our focus where it needs to be—on loving God and loving one another."

In a blog post about the report, Jenny Andison, a suffragan bishop of the Diocese of Toronto, suggests the Anglican Church can respond to the decline by promoting spiritual growth.

"If someone is maturing in their Christian faith, it will naturally lead to loving, culturally sensitive and effective evangelism," she wrote. There is also a need to support families, she added, noting that the church has "been in a catechetical crisis" for some time.

"There has never been a more critical time to be equipping Christian parents to form living faith at home with their children," she wrote.

Andison also called for Anglicans to become missionaries to their own culture and for a "revival in our prayer lives."

"[If] every ounce of energy that we spend fretting about institutional decline was spent instead on our knees, I wonder where we would find ourselves." {eo}

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