

How evangelicals took over the Church of England

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In 1966 two of the most well-loved and respected church leaders of their day faced off against one another. Speaking at an Evangelical Alliance event in Westminster, famed preacher Martin Lloyd-Jones publicly criticised evangelicals for remaining inside the Church of England, thereby aligning themselves with leaders in the denomination who promoted liberalism. He said evangelicals “scattered about in various major denominations” were “weak and ineffective”. The Welsh minister of Westminster Chapel suggested evangelicals should instead form their own association of churches.

As chair of the event, John Stott was expected to offer his polite thanks to Lloyd-Jones. Instead the rector of All Souls Church issued an impassioned spontaneous rebuttal, arguing that evangelicals should remain inside the Church of England and fight for truth from within. Thankfully the two men were later reconciled after their very public falling out.

The church of England reported a ten-year high of people entering training

Fifty years later there's good reason for evangelicals to believe Stott's argument ultimately won the day. For instance, unlike his more liberal predecessor, the Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby is a charismatic evangelical (and a member of Holy Trinity Brompton before he was ordained), and his counterpart in York, John Sentamu, comes from an evangelical background too. As Rev Dr Ian Paul, who sits on the Archbishops' Council notes, while previous generations of evangelicals ignored senior establishment posts, today's evangelicals are taking them on, so when it comes to its senior leadership, “the Church of England is more evangelical than it's ever been”. According to Dr Paul, the growth of the Holy Trinity Brompton (HTB) and New Wine networks is further evidence that evangelicals are having a strong impact on the Church. And the trend looks set to continue. Evangelicals now account for 70 per cent of ordinands entering training. A generation ago, the figure was just 30 per cent.

The rise of the CofE evangelical

Most agree there are three distinct groups or ‘churchmanships’ inside the CofE: Evangelicals, Anglo-Catholics and Liberals. In the 1950s and 60s, the Anglo-Catholic and the Liberal traditions were the prominent models in the Church. A typical service in a parish church was very formal, with an emphasis on the Eucharist over evangelism and tradition over church planting.

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So what happened? Canon David Winter, former head of religion for the BBC, observes that Billy Graham's crusades (which millions attended) made “an enormous impact” on the Church of England. According to Canon Winter, before Graham arrived in 1954 there was only one evangelical bishop in the Church of England. But afterwards, “theological colleges were full of young evangelical men who had been converted through Billy Graham and came with that approach and message”.

Rev Paul also praises the evangelicals who sided with Stott and made “deliberate decisions to engage with the structures” of the established Church, rather than leave. But, whatever the reasons for the rise of evangelicalism, Linda Woodhead, professor of sociology at Lancaster University and co-author of *That Was The Church That*

Was (Bloomsbury Continuum) believes evangelicals now have a disproportionately large amount of power.

Church statistician Peter Brierley's research shows the number of evangelicals in the CofE have risen from 26 per cent in 1989 to 34 per cent in 2005. Some are estimating that figure could now be as high as 50 per cent. But Woodhead is more sceptical, arguing that only 10-20 per cent of Anglicans in the pews are evangelicals compared to one-third of clergy who are evangelical. She comments: "In numerical terms [evangelicals are] still a minority. But in terms of bishops and power in the Church and dominant ideology, it's become extremely influential – the dominant influential party in the past 25 years."

The Church of England's three major groups

Anglo-Catholics

The name given to those who emphasise liturgical worship and see the celebration of the Eucharist as central. They tend to espouse a Roman Catholic view of doctrine and view church tradition as an important source of authority.

Liberals

The group within the Church of England who believe human reason and modern insights can alter previously held Christian beliefs. They do not believe the Bible is inerrant and prefer to emphasise progressive thinking over past traditions.

Evangelicals

Used to describe those who hold exclusively to the inspiration and authority of scripture in matters of doctrine. Evangelicals also believe firmly in personal conversion and evangelism.

A takeover?

Woodhead argues the Church used to be seen as a place where the whole community could gather and mark life events such as births, deaths and marriages. You didn't have to believe to belong. The evangelical approach, on the other hand, emphasises personal salvation, evangelism and growing church attendance. According to Woodhead, this latter view has gained prominence and is now held by Welby: "He's investing in trying to convert more people and make them churchgoers. All the energy is going into getting more people in church on a Sunday morning." She argues this has resulted in the Church being viewed by wider society as exclusively for "very enthusiastic Christians".

Woodhead would prefer to see greater investment in areas of education (one in four primary schools in England is CofE), chaplaincy and social work. Her language is provocative – claiming there's been a "takeover" of the Church of England by evangelicals who have acted in a "strategic and determined" way since the 1950s, and put "enormous energy" into appointing men to positions of power.

The claim is strongly denied by Rev Paul who argues: "Anyone who uses the language of an 'organised takeover' is speaking out of paranoia. The Church of England is a Protestant denomination and evangelicals are concerned to encourage their fellow Anglicans to take seriously Anglican identity as it's been expressed historically. That's not the same as trying to take it over."



At HTB's Focus Nicky Gumbel introduces a new generation of CofE leaders trained at St Mellitus

The HTB effect

One of the most oft-cited examples of evangelical influence on the Church of England is the HTB network. The Alpha course, Worship Central and the Marriage Course were all birthed out of Nicky Gumbel's church, not to mention the many thriving church plants both inside and outside of London. The revival of St Peter's Church in Brighton is often heralded as a great success story. The Grade II* listed church building in the centre of the city had been empty for years. But after a team of 30 people arrived in 2009 from HTB, the church grew dramatically. Now more than 1,000 people attend five Sunday services, spread across two venues. And while the CofE struggles on a national level to engage the younger generations, many evangelical congregations, including St Peter's, attract a large number of students.

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St Mellitus – the training college which grew out of HTB's St Paul's Theological Centre – has also had a meteoric rise since it was founded in 2007. In September the Church of England reported a ten-year high in the number of people entering ordination training. Many of them are at St Mellitus which is already training more than 200 ordinands. While it has a commitment to what it calls 'generous orthodoxy' ("we work with all kinds of Christians and denominations") its firm focus on missional leadership and church planting means the institution has an evangelical flavour to it. But given the rate of overall decline in the Church of England, even if the estimates are accurate and HTB are reaching thousands of people across the nation, Woodhead says this is merely "a drop in the ocean". She's similarly critical of reports regarding church growth in the capital, arguing the belief that the Diocese of London is doing well is a "myth" and that decline is still inevitable. "It's going to be a tiny minority in society who are regularly in church."

The recently British Social Attitudes Survey confirms Woodhead's position. It showed that for the first time, more than half of the UK population has no religion. But given the substantial number of thriving evangelical churches across the country, there's been speculation that only nominal Christianity is dying. Perhaps the general population no longer feels obliged to tick 'Anglican' on a survey if they only go to church once a year and don't really believe in God? There's also a general perception that nominalism is more prevalent in Liberal and Anglo-Catholic circles than inside evangelicalism.

Others argue that while cathedral worship is on the rise and some evangelical congregations are managing to

attract younger people, a sober analysis of all the available data demonstrates these are rare exceptions to an otherwise bleak picture.

In his article for the *Financial Times* on the CofE's "fight to survive", broadcaster Jeremy Paxman observed there are more members of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds than there are regular churchgoers in the UK. While he was warm towards the HTB church plant in Brighton – "you would have to have a heart of stone not to be moved by the stories of the souls – and lives – saved in St Peter's" – he was clear evangelicalism alone cannot save the Church. "While HTB may be the noisiest part of the Church of England, it is clearly not a national solution to the Church's looming crisis. Anglicanism is, after all, the original broad church."



St Peter's Brighton, where an HTB plant has revived the city's historic church

The s words

Anglicans may pride themselves on being a broad Church, but the intensity of recent debates over sexuality have led some to utter the dreaded s-words of 'split' and 'schism'. Evangelicals are no strangers to robust theological debates and past decades have seen them get involved in arguments surrounding Christ's resurrection, the authority of scripture and the atonement.

Whenever 'key gospel issues' are deemed to be at stake or the established Church is perceived to be moving in a more liberal direction, calls for evangelicals to walk out have inevitably increased. Earlier this year Rev Dr Gavin Ashenden resigned from being a chaplain to the Queen, stating the Church of England was "on its last legs". Dr Ashenden was angry that St Mary's Cathedral in Glasgow had allowed the Koran to be read during a church service. He accused the Church of seeking "cultural accommodation to a secular, and even anti-Christian culture" and encouraged his fellow evangelicals to join him in quitting the Church.

Ashenden has since been appointed as a 'missionary bishop' to the UK and Europe by an independent Anglican group, the Christian Episcopal Church of Canada and the USA. Likewise, other breakaway groups such as the Anglican Mission in Europe are developing parallel church structures in the UK. Meanwhile conservative group GAFCON are seeking to work from within the CofE to "retain and restore the Bible to the heart of the Anglican

Communion”.

This disruption is mainly due to the CofE’s recent debates on sexuality. Many evangelicals would agree with Andrea Williams from Christian Concern’s assertion that this is where the “battle for orthodoxy” lies. Williams is especially disgruntled that many evangelical leaders appear reluctant to make bold public statements.

“The biblical view is clear, from Genesis to Revelation that marriage is one man and one woman for life. We need to see the leadership of the Church speaking to the culture.”

Williams has strong words for HTB leaders who rarely speak publicly on the issue of sexuality: “We’ve seen the Alpha movement grow up and it’s wonderful to see across the world many people have become Christians. Now what would be amazing to see from that part of the Church is a real, clear and public statement on marriage.”

However, according to Woodhead the evangelical consensus is shifting as most Anglicans now favour same-sex marriage. It’s an opinion which is also expressed by the Bishop of Buckingham, Alan Wilson. He told *Premier Christianity* that the vast majority of Anglicans under 40 do not object to gay relationships and that the aims of evangelicals are not serviced by having “barmy views on gays”.

“I think that most of my [evangelical] colleagues would say, ‘we don’t like the word “marriage” being used, it could be a category error. But if June and Rosemary next door think they’re married, then we don’t regard it as the last hill to die on to tell them they’re not. We just get on with trying to be good news to them, in the way we do with everyone else and we’d want to work it out pastorally and missionally rather than ideologically’.”

Avoiding an exodus

Ever wary of a split, the Church of England has taken steps in the past to keep traditionalists on-side. After Rt Rev Rod Thomas led the campaign which tried (but failed) to prevent the Church from appointing female bishops, the Church responded by appointing him as Bishop of Maidstone and entrusting him with the task of providing alternative episcopal oversight for his fellow conservative evangelicals. In practice this means churches which disagree with women bishops can choose to be overseen by Thomas, rather than the appointed female bishop.

Despite assurances to the contrary when gay marriage was legalised, the Church is increasingly under pressure to change its position on gay marriage. In July, Justine Greening, the government’s equalities minister, said the Church should “keep up with modern attitudes”. Talk like this will worry evangelicals such as Thomas who has already observed the Church move away from what he views as biblical principles on gender roles. He and others have been unhappy about their treatment during debates over transgenderism and sexuality at recent Church of England synods. If the Church caved in to cultural pressure on women in leadership, could it do the same with sexuality?

Because sexuality is a “first order” issue which relates to “sin and salvation”, Thomas believes it poses a “greater potential for a split” than the appointment of women bishops. While the Church of England has hosted passionate debates on gay marriage, it has yet to change its position. But if the Church were to change, an evangelical exodus would be highly likely.

5 reasons why evangelical churches grow

1. Their focus on evangelism

If Christians commit to sharing their faith, more people will hear the gospel, some will accept Christ and many will then join local churches. Evangelistic courses such as Alpha and Christianity Explored are commonly used to this end.

2. Contemporary style

Comfortable seating instead of pews. A worship band in place of an organ. An espresso machine instead of lukewarm tea. The vicar wears jeans. Changes like these might appear small, but they can help a church building feel more open, informal and welcoming to the community, thereby attracting those who are not yet Christians.

3. Outreach

Evangelical churches have taken on social action initiatives in recent years. Many churches will run foodbanks and midweek groups for the elderly or young parents and their children. Well-known Church and community projects, such as Street Pastors, were also born out of evangelicalism.

4. Culturally relevant preaching

Evangelical churches will often devote time to addressing contemporary issues affecting congregants such as family, work and various social issues.

5. Church planting strategy

In recent years the Diocese of London has repeatedly refused to close struggling churches. Instead the Church has committed to revitalising congregations and planting new churches in a variety of forms (café churches, missional communities, network churches, etc). In 2015, Ric Thorpe was appointed as the first ever CofE bishop for 'church plants'.

Are we all evangelicals?

'Evangelical' has become such a broad term that a plethora of prefixes, including 'conservative', 'progressive' and 'charismatic' are commonly added in order to narrow the definition. Thomas is part of Reform – a group which aims to “uphold, defend and spread the gospel of Jesus Christ according to the original doctrines of the Church of England”. He’s often described as a 'conservative evangelical', although he prefers 'classical evangelical'. Nevertheless he agrees 'evangelical' by itself has become “such a general label, it’s almost without meaning”.

Wilson, meanwhile, suggests some definitions of the word 'evangelical' could in fact apply to all clergy. “If by being an evangelical you mean a Christian who takes God and the Bible seriously and thinks faith is deeply personal and is about a relationship with God, we’re all there in a sense. If, on the other hand, you want to say, 'all right-thinking evangelicals know that the following hot button issues have the following answers – gay marriage “bad”, charismatic “OK if you like that sort of thing, but watch it” – then you are journeying with a very small tribe, which takes itself immensely seriously.”

Wilson singles out “some members of Reform” for criticism, saying they’re “not willing to engage anyone else” and are “extreme and fundamentalist” in their views.

Thomas, who chairs the Reform Council, believes he’s merely defending the Church’s historic doctrine. He’s confident there’s still “huge potential” for evangelicalism inside the Church of England. “I believe profoundly the Church of England is at its heart an evangelical Church – if you look at its formularies, Book of Common Prayer, Thirty-Nine Articles, Ordinal. These are very Protestant and very much in line with an evangelical understanding of the gospel.”

While more liberal voices inside the Church bemoan the increased influence of evangelicalism, Thomas believes the surface is only being scratched: “From my point of view, the surprising thing is evangelicals haven’t had *more* influence in the Church of England, given the numbers that have come to faith through evangelicalism.”

The only balance to this undeniable trend that evangelical influence on the CofE is growing, is to recognise there has also been regression in other parts of the Church, as Wilson observes: “the Catholic decline since the 80s has been quite remarkable”.

Hostile takeover or friendly merger?

Adherents of evangelicalism might wonder why such a fuss is being raised over evangelicals “taking over”. At the end of the day, evangelicals are often the people bucking the trend and building thriving congregations. What’s not to love?

Whether it’s viewed as a hostile takeover or an innocent collaboration with fellow Christians, there can be no doubt that evangelical influence on the Church of England has grown considerably in recent decades.

When Welby was recently asked to state his view on whether gay sex is a sin, he was criticised for saying it was a question “I can’t give a straight answer to”. Likewise, the evangelical wing inside the Church of England is increasingly struggling to answer questions surrounding sexuality, finding themselves torn between wanting to defend biblical orthodoxy and seeking to communicate sensitively to a culture that has moved far from traditional values. Those battling with this might be consoled by broadcaster and theologian Dr Robert Beckford’s observation: “Despite churches having a conservative or biblically based morality, they’re doing incredibly well despite the changes out there – they are winning.” Contrary to popular belief, holding a traditional perspective on sexuality doesn’t appear to hinder growth.

It’s perhaps understandable why evangelicals have felt forced to leave the Church in years gone by. Whether disgruntled at perceived liberalism or prompted by the charismatic renewal to start something new, evangelicals have often followed Martin Lloyd Jones in feeling more at home outside of the established Church. Yet, whatever differences remain over sexuality, evangelicals are in the ascendancy in the CofE. It could be argued that there’s never been a better time to be an Anglican evangelical. If that’s true, then Stott’s side of the debate can claim victory. Not only is evangelical influence substantial, but it is significant enough to attract criticism both from secularists and some Christians inside the CofE. This much is known: The independent evangelical leaders who declared arrogantly in years gone by that “the Church of England is dead” were wrong. God hasn’t finished with it yet!

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