

This overview of UK church life, published here in *Church Statistics* [CS], gives a detailed denomination by denomination overview of church membership, churches and congregations and the number of ministers. It covers each year from 2005 to 2010 with a forecast, often provided by individual denomination, of numbers in 2015. This Introduction draws out the major trends and items of importance from this mass of data.

Source of data

The data was collected by sending a form to every single denomination in the UK in the middle of 2010 where a contact address was available and asking for the detail just described, followed by a reminder letter to those who hadn't replied by the requested date. Some respondents were unable to provide all the data requested, so where necessary missing information has been estimated (all such numbers being indicated in CS), based on the trends for that denomination. The numbers were then collated into the same 10 broad denominational groups which have been used for reporting church data over the last 25 years. Some data is repeated from *Religious Trends* No 7, published in 2008, which gave firm data up to 2005 for most denominations and to 2006 for some, but only when no reply was received or no web or other information was available.

Historical Church Membership

“Membership” is a word commonly used in church circles but its meaning varies from denomination to denomination. Attendance is a much preferred measure since its meaning is clear whether it applies to Sunday attendance, midweek, once a week or once a month. But to give a sense of the religious awareness of British people, the use of membership is sometimes helpful. Membership is often higher in absolute terms than attendance, and will include more of the elderly in the population who may not be able to get to church so easily.

However, some churches can't or don't collect membership statistics. The Roman Catholic Church does not have membership – its people are either part of the Catholic population or Mass attenders. The first gives an unrealistic view of change in the church, so Catholic figures here relate to attendance. The same is true for most New Churches and virtually all the Pentecostal churches, both groups largely only counting attendance. For Anglicans the Electoral Roll figure is used, which is greater than attendance and perhaps gives a better sense of commitment even if only nominal. Presbyterians use membership, however, very rigorously and invariably can supply relevant numbers. The Orthodox Church sometimes equates citizenship with membership and a relevant percentage needs to be used in some circumstances. Orthodox attendance in any case is very low (less than 10% of membership), so using membership here gives a much better representation of this growing body of adherents.

Baptist and Methodist membership is readily available from denominational headquarters and the various Independent churches also can supply such data. The smaller denominations vary – the larger of which such as the Salvation Army, the various Lutheran churches and the Quakers can give membership information, but the many overseas national churches often give attendance as they have no membership figures.

Thus, membership is a composite term, an inexact science in its cumulation, but gives nevertheless a firmer indication of religious commitment than just ticking a box saying “Christian” on a Census or other form. It also gives an important link with the past since membership data, unlike attendance information, goes back several centuries. Figure 1 shows this by highlighting membership of UK churches since 1900.

While the peak year in terms of numbers was 1930 when there were 10.6 million members, in terms of the proportion of the population there has been a steady decline since 1900 when it was 33%. Figure 2 shows the percentage of the population who are church members since 1900.

Figure 1: UK Church Membership 1900-2020

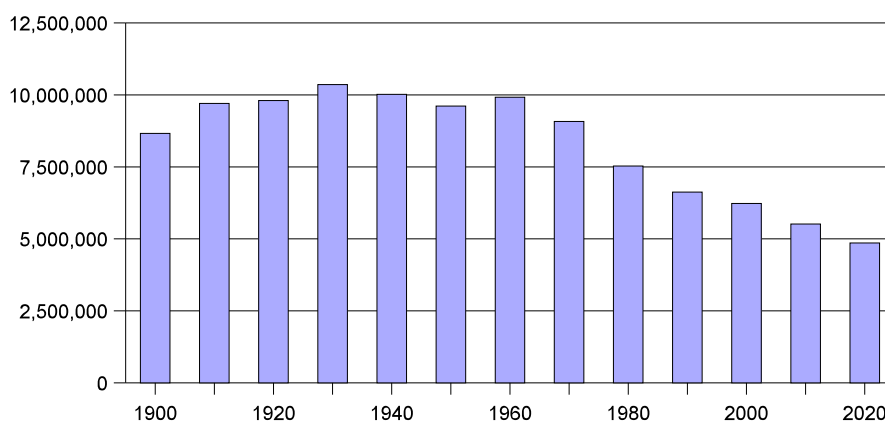


Figure 2: Percentage of the Population who are Church Members 1900-2020

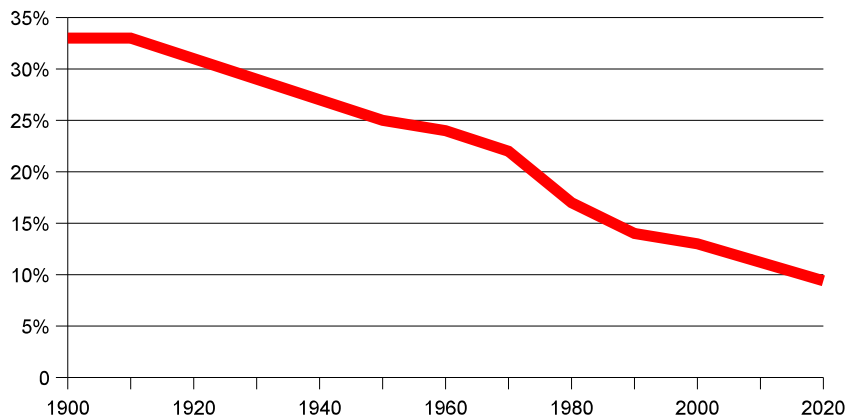


Figure 2 shows that the proportion of the population who are church members has dropped fairly consistently since 1900 with a slowing down in the 1950s (probably due to a huge number of Roman Catholic Irish immigrants desperate for employment, or possibly an outcome of the 1950s Billy Graham Crusades), an increase in fall between 1970 and 1990, and a continuing but slower rate of decline since 1990. That slower rate of decline is important, as it harbours growth as well as decrease.

Recent Denominational Membership

In 2010 there were 5.5 million church members in the UK, 11.2% of the population, 0.3 million fewer than 5 years previously in 2005 when the percentage was 12.3%. It is likely to continue to decline at about the same rate for the next 10 years, reaching 10.3% of the population by 2015 (and 9.4% by 2020 if trends continue) . Table 1 breaks these figures down by denomination, showing the percentage change over each period of 5 years.

Table 1: UK Church Membership by Denomination, 2005 to 2015

Denominational group	2005 Membership	% change 2005-2010	2010 Membership	% change 2010-2015	2015 Est Membership
Anglican	1,536,879	-5%	1,457,598	-8%	1,336,130
Baptist	207,777	-5%	197,871	-3%	192,479
Catholic	1,667,463	-12%	1,472,811	-10%	1,326,040
Independent	215,493	0%	215,199	0%	214,461
Methodist	294,819	-19%	237,744	-24%	180,921
New Churches	187,872	+12%	211,025	+7%	226,650
Orthodox	315,810	+ 5%	330,712	+7%	354,839
Pentecostal	342,485	+27%	434,905	+22%	529,594
Presbyterian	918,073	-19%	741,140	-22%	577,769
Smaller Denoms.	158,021	+36%	215,489	+14%	246,481
All Churches	5,844,692	-6%	5,514,704	-6%	5,185,514

The denominational groups fall into different categories:

- Those which declined between 2005 and 2010 and are likely to decline *more* between 2010 and 2015 – the Anglicans, Methodists and Presbyterians.
- Those which declined between 2005 and 2010 and are likely to decline *less* between 2010 and 2015 – the Baptists and the Catholics.
- Those which grew between 2005 and 2010 and are likely to continue growing between 2010 and 2015 – the New Churches, Orthodox, Pentecostals and Smaller Denominations. All except the Orthodox are expected to grow less quickly between 2010 and 2015 than in the previous 5 years.

- The Independent Churches are in a group by themselves as they are static and likely to continue that way.

Part of the growth of Smaller Denominations is fuelled by Fresh Expression guestimates. If these were taken out, the Smaller Denominations would still grow between 2005 and 2010 (by 12%) and between 2010 and 2015 (by 11%), so their overall trend is not affected by Fresh Expression figures.

The four growing denominations obviously provide an ameliorating effect to the others. Without them the total membership of the remaining 6 groups would decline -11% between 2005 and 2010 and -11% between 2010 and 2015.

Accuracy

How reliable are these figures? Obviously the 2005 and 2010 figures are drawn wherever possible from the denominational statistics themselves, but these are sometimes revised. The 2015 figures are always estimates. Table 2 compares previous estimates and current figures for the total numbers.

Table 2: Past and present estimates compared for total UK church membership

Year	As given in RT No 7	As given here	% difference
2005	5,791,400	5,844,700	+0.1%
2010	5,519,900	5,514,700	-0.1%
2015	5,028,500	5,186,300	+3.1%
2020	4,654,700	4,857,400	+4.4%

It may be seen that the 2005 and 2010 estimates are very close to the actual. The present estimates for 2015 and 2020 are higher than given five years ago, partly because in the interim the Catholic figures have been revised upwards, that is, their Mass attendance, especially in England in the early 2000s, did not decline as fast as expected. However, the overall trend of a reducing membership is not changed by the revisions shown. The downward slope in Figure 2 still pertains.

Which denominations are changing most?

If the overall change is -6% in 5 years, it is worth asking which denominations have especially declined or grown. Taking those with more than 10,000 members in 2005, which have decreased between 2005 and 2010 by, say, at least -15% or increased by at least +15% gives the following results:

Declined

The Scottish Episcopal Church (36,000 members in 2010; declined -16% between 2005 and 2010)
 The Baptist Union of Wales (14,000; -16%)
 The Roman Catholic Church in Wales (29,000; -17%)
 The Roman Catholic Church in N Ireland (406,000; -23%)
 The Union of Welsh Independents (28,000; -16%)
 The Methodist Church of Great Britain (219,000; -21%)
 The Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (17,000; -32%, but complicated by a merger in 2007)
 The Presbyterian Church of Wales (27,000; -20%)
 The Church of Scotland (415,000; -25%)
 The Free Church of Scotland (9,000 now; -18%)

Increased

The Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches (39,000; +15%)
 Newfrontiers International (30,000; +20%)
 Smaller New Churches (38,000; +17%)
 The Patriarchate of Romania (20,000; +33%)
 The Armenian Orthodox Church (20,000; +43%)
 The New Testament Church of God (28,000; +15%)
 The Redeemed Christian Church of God (80,000; +73%)
 Smaller African and Caribbean Churches (22,000; +21%)
 Other smaller Pentecostal Churches (29,000; +27%)
 Kingsway International Christian Centre (12,000; +20%)
 The Seventh-Day Adventists (30,000; +17%)
 Fresh Expressions (61,000; +210%)

These two lists are interesting. Of the denominations which have declined most, the Methodists and Irish Catholics apart, all are located in Wales or Scotland (ignoring the Russian Orthodox Church because of its merger). They are all relatively small, except for the Church of Scotland.

The two large denominations here are important, and show that if they are left out of the numbers for their country, church membership in both is declining far less slowly. Total Scottish church membership dropped -16% between 2005 and 2010, but membership outside the Church of Scotland decreased by only -3% in this period. Total church membership in N Ireland dropped -13% between 2005 and 2010. Take out the Roman Catholic Church, and it decreased by just -1%.

Of the denominations which have increased in the list above, most are relatively small, apart from the Orthodox Churches and probably some of the Fresh Expressions churches, and all are evangelical. Half of those listed are black churches (this includes the Seventh-Day Adventists, the majority of whom are black now in the UK), and these form half the membership (49%) of the 12 denominations listed.

Church Membership by Country

Table 3 shows the membership changes by each of the 4 constituent countries in the UK, and also the figures if the Church of Scotland and Roman Catholic Church in N Ireland are excluded.

Table 3: Church Membership in the UK, by Country, 2005-2015

Country	2005 Membership	% change 2005-2010	2010 Membership	% est change 2010-2015	2015 Est Membership
England	3,704,854	-1%	3,685,251	-1%	3,631,568
Wales	250,019	-12%	220,164	-12%	193,164
Scotland	934,527	-16%	781,351	-19%	632,764
N Ireland	955,292	-13%	827,938	-12%	728,018
All Churches	5,844,692	-6%	5,514,704	-6%	5,185,514
Scotland less CoS	381,551	-3%	368,411	-5%	348,852
N Ireland less RCI	428,292	-1%	421,938	-4%	403,018
Total less CoS & RCI	4,764,716	-1%	4,697,402	-3%	4,578,602

Overall church membership in England is holding its own, increases offsetting decreases. Membership decline in the other three countries of the UK is much greater. If the two major declining denominations in Scotland and N Ireland are taken out, the declines in these two countries are considerably less.

Table 4: Church Membership in England by selected Denominations, 2005-2015

Denomination	2005 Membership	% change 2005-2010	2010 Membership	% est change 2010-2015	2015 Est Membership
New Churches	168,007	+12%	188,140	+7%	201,370
Orthodox	284,780	+5%	297,740	+7%	319,815
Pentecostals	308,567	+28%	395,513	+22%	483,497
All others	2,943,500	-5%	2,805,496	-6%	2,628,886
All England	3,704,854	0%	3,686,889	-1%	3,633,568

Table 4 shows how church membership changes in England if the three major growing denominations are singled out.¹ It is clear that the New Church, Orthodox and Pentecostal growth compensates for the combined decline of the other 7 denominational groups. It should not be overlooked, however, that the two key denominations in England – the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church – accounted for three-fifths (59%) of total English church membership in 2005 and for 55% in 2010 (and an expected 52% in 2015). How these two perform really influences English church membership figures.

¹ The Smaller Denominations which include Fresh Expressions are not listed, although also growing, because the Fresh Expressions figures are very tentative.

What does all this say?

These figures show that church membership in the UK declined -6% between 2005 and 2010 and that a similar rate of decline is expected between 2010 and 2015, and thus continues the general trend over the last 50 years. However, within that overall position:

- English church membership is static, with increases offsetting decreases.
- The key denominations responsible for the increases in England are the New Churches (evangelical and charismatic), Orthodox, and the Pentecostal churches (mostly black, evangelical and charismatic).
- The Methodist Church of Great Britain is the fastest declining denomination in England.
- Welsh, Scottish and N Ireland church membership with an overall decrease of -15% between 2005 and 2010. This major decline is due to two large denominations, the Church of Scotland and the Roman Catholic Church in N Ireland. Scottish and N Ireland membership decline reduces to -2% if these two are discounted.
- The estimates previously made for 2005 and 2010 have proved very accurate, so it is naturally hoped that the new 2015 estimate will prove the same.

Number of Churches

Church Statistics also gives the number of churches or congregations (where churches meet outside normal church buildings) by country, shown in Table 5. The average church in 2010 had 108 members.

Table 5: Number of Churches in the UK, by Country, 2005-2015

Country	2005	% change 2005-2010	2010	% est change 2010-2015	2015 Est
England	38,636	+4%	40,080	+1%	40,649
Wales	4,374	-5%	4,174	-4%	4,007
Scotland	4,284	-2%	4,197	-5%	4,002
N Ireland	2,192	+3%	2,258	+1%	2,276
All Churches	49,486	+2%	50,709	+½%	50,934

While the overall numbers are only changing slowly, the actual number of churches increased between 2005 and 2010 and is expected to do so marginally between 2010 and 2015. Why is this? The answer comes in two broad ways. There are 600 more Pentecostal churches in the UK than 5 years ago, the large majority being new black churches. The Redeemed Christian Church of God alone has started 190 new churches in the last 5 years, the largest number for any single denomination; they now have a church in two-thirds (64%) of the cities in the UK. The next largest is Elim with 53 new congregations and the Church of Pentecost with 45. Other non-white ethnic churches have also started new congregations in the last few years, especially Chinese, Korean, Tamil and other Asian groups.

There are also many more “Fresh Expression” congregations. How many of these are simply extra services of a thriving church (which are not counted as a new congregation), or are new congregations started or planted by an existing church (which are counted) is not really known. “Messy” churches are usually the former, of which George Lings estimates there were 307 in 2010 in England.² If one assumes that roughly half of the Fresh Expressions started in the last few years are new congregations then that adds a further 1,300 churches.

It should not be assumed that only the black and other non-white ethnic churches and Fresh Expressions are starting new congregations. The Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches, other independent churches, several New Church streams (like Ichthus, Network Ground Level, Newfrontiers International (43 new churches planted), Vineyard Churches UK), the Russian Orthodox and the Seventh-Day Adventists have all seen several new congregations added since 2005.

But while growth is happening with many, decline is also occurring. Overall in the 5 year period, 2005 to 2010, 1,230 churches opened, excluding Fresh Expressions, and 1,350 closed, more or less evenly balanced if Fresh Expressions are omitted. This is a net drop of 120 churches. By way of comparison in the seven year period 1998 to 2005, 1,100 churches opened and 1,300 closed, a net drop of 200 churches. All this means is that, Fresh Expressions apart, the rate of church planting collectively is almost but not quite matching the number of church closures.

The largest number of closures was the Methodist Church of Great Britain which closed 310 churches between 2005 and 2010 – a rate of more than one every week – followed by the Church of England (200), the Roman Catholic

² *Encounters on the Edge*, No 46.

Church in England (140) and the United Reformed Church (90). Essentially, all these changes mirror the church membership variations.

Number of denominations

It is estimated that there are 340 denominations in the UK, up from 275 when last counted in 2006, the increase being almost entirely the number of new Pentecostal groups starting new churches.³ The number of denominations is extremely difficult to estimate. About half the total are recognised denominations whose names are more or less well known and are either Anglican, Baptist, Catholic, Independent, Methodist, a New Church stream, Orthodox, Presbyterian or one of the smaller denominations like the Salvation Army or the Quakers. The other half include some well known names like the Assemblies of God [AOG] or Elim or the New Testament Church of God, but they include many much newer Pentecostal churches such as Glory House, Cherubim and Seraphim Church, Bethel United Church of Jesus Christ and dozens and dozens more, or the many (often non-charismatic) churches of a particular nationality, like the French, Greek, Iranian, Italian, Japanese, or Tamil-speaking congregations.

When does an individual church become a distinctive denomination? In his 1977 book *The Becoming Church*, John Adair defined a denomination as “a Christian organisation uniting a number of local congregations,” which is loose enough to cover the complexity of the types of ways in which the Christian church in the UK actually exists.

Number of ministers

Likewise, the number of ministers in the UK are given in *Church Statistics*. Numbers for the four countries are shown in Table 6. The average minister was responsible for 1.4 churches in 2010.

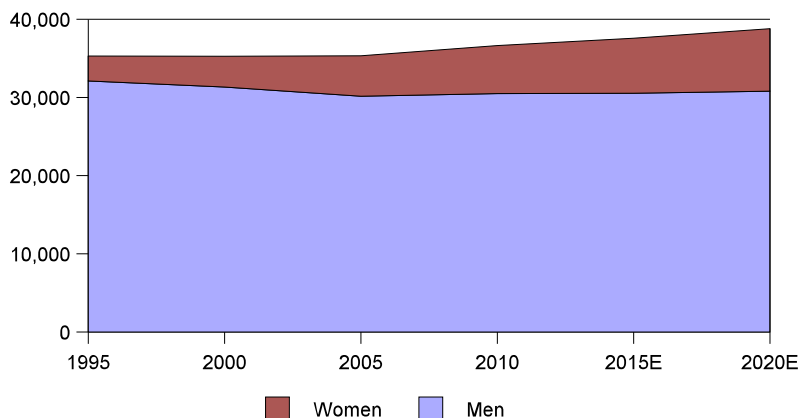
Table 6: Number of ministers in the UK by country, 2005 to 2015

Country	2005	% change 2005-2010	2010	% est change 2010-2015	2015 Est
England	28,281	+5%	29,693	+4%	30,746
Wales	1,731	-3%	1,672	-1%	1,658
Scotland	3,608	-1%	3,578	-3%	3,487
N Ireland	1,710	-1%	1,693	-1%	1,680
All Churches	35,330	+4%	36,636	+3%	37,571

The variations in the number of ministers by country and the number of ministers by denomination effectively repeat the variations already seen in the numbers of church members and churches. Growing denominations plant more churches and need more ministers; declining denominations normally see a reduction in both, although the very small changes in Church of England church buildings reflect the fact that so many are listed (76% of the total⁴).

Church ministers were analysed by gender, and Figure 3 shows the overall trend in which the proportion of ministers who are female rises from 9% in 1995 (it was first measured in 1992) to 21% by 2020 if present trends continue.

Figure 3: Number of UK ministers, by gender, 1995 to 2020



³ The 2010 *Operation World* figure of 503 seems rather high, but it includes many more independent (black) churches.

⁴ *Religious Trends* No 5, 2005/2006, Christian Research, Eltham London, Figure 12.12.1 for the year 2003.

Figure 3 shows an increasing number of ministers, but with the increase since 2005 almost entirely female. More women are becoming ministers than male ministers are retiring or resigning.

So what of the future?

The mostly firm figures for 2005 to 2010 and the projections to 2010 show a declining number of church members across the UK, and especially in Wales, Scotland and N Ireland, where the rapid decline stems either from the Church of Scotland or the Roman Catholic Church in N Ireland. The English membership figures show especial growth for three denominations not strongly present in Wales, Scotland or N Ireland – the New Churches, the Orthodox and the Pentecostal churches, especially the black church component of the last. Growth in these three groups is high, resulting in and from their planting of new churches. Likewise Fresh Expressions is making a smaller, but also significant impact in the number of new churches or congregations started.

The analysis shows the importance of evangelicalism in the New and Pentecostal Churches and the consequential drive for mission and starting new groups of worshippers. Orthodoxy is not part of the evangelical scene but equally shares a passion for mission, undertaken by ordaining new priests and encouraging them to start new congregations. A heart for mission and a willingness to try the new are the key elements here, along with a denominational structure which allows such experimentation and in effect gives its new initiatives permission to fail as well as to succeed.

In the main, the declining denominations simply do not share these features – little desire for outreach or with a structure insufficiently flexible or with people unable to make it work. It would be unfair to say that some are not trying hard – the Methodist Church, for example, had nearly 900 Fresh Expression worship units in 2009, but these have not yet turned their basic numbers around. Nor has the considerable investment in Fresh Expressions by the Church of England, but maybe it will over the next few years. It is obvious that the UK churches are not fossilising and in many instances are still vigorously active!