

The number of churches in England in 2015 is estimated at 40,300, up from 38,800 in 2010, an increase of 300 per year, or almost one per day. Both numbers can be broken down into 49 geographical units – 47 counties plus the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man.

**Definition of “County”**

“County” here refers to the definition of a county used in the 1974 Local Authority Act of Parliament, each county being composed of a number of Local Authority Districts. Some of these, due to various subsequent Acts of Parliament, have now either re-constituted themselves and are called Unitary Authorities or have amalgamated with other Local Authorities to form a larger combined area, usually becoming a Unitary Authority in the process. In these changes the actual physical boundaries of the Local Authority Districts have not generally changed, or only changed marginally, with one major exception – those situated in North Lincolnshire and along the River Hull in the former East Riding of Yorkshire.

Thus, for example, the county of Leicestershire in this paper includes the city of Leicester, whereas details of the population of the “County of Leicester” by the Office for National Statistics will exclude the city of Leicester since it has become a Unitary Authority (UA) and is listed by the ONS as a separate unit. Some of the counties formed under the 1974 Act have now become entirely made up of Unitary Authorities and the name “county” strictly is no longer meaningful. These county names are put in brackets here when listed in a Table. In some counties *all* of the Local Authorities have merged into a single Unitary Authority. These are shown here with the letters UA after their name.

For simplicity, the counties have been grouped into 10 Regions, each consisting of a whole number of counties. This paper focuses on regional variations most of the time.

**Closures and Openings**

The number of churches is available from denominational headquarters and a database augmented by additional data given by local ministers. Counts of the total are available for the Church Census years (1989, 1998 and 2005). The *Religious Trends* series, now continued in *UK Church Statistics*, gives total counts for subsequent years, the time series being robust enough to allow reasonable projections for the years immediately ahead. While these give counts by individual denomination, the 290 denominations in the UK are conveniently grouped into 10 broad units in *UK Church Statistics*, and these broader groupings have been used throughout this exercise.

Churches are being started, or “planted”, or built, or opened, all the time, and others are closing because they are no longer viable or for other reasons. “Church” here includes the many congregations worshipping in non-ecclesiastical buildings, such as schools, village or community halls, people’s homes, etc, or, especially in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in pubs, cafés, open areas, or other places. For Church Census purposes we counted a church as a group of people meeting primarily for worship at least once a month, but there are a number of other churches where worship takes place on a more irregular basis such as boarding school assemblies, Armed Forces chapels, some hospitals or only at special times of the year (usually Easter or Christmas).

A large exercise on behalf of Christian Aid was undertaken in 2013 giving the number of churches by county by denomination for the Church Census years and projected through to 2020. With their permission, those numbers were published in *UK Church Statistics No 2, 2010-2020* in Section 13, and have been used as the basis for the analysis in this paper. So, for example, it shows that in Northumberland there were 8 Independent Churches in 1989, 7 in 1998 and 12 in 2005. Excluded from these figures are any churches which may have started between 1989 and 1998 but which also closed during that period. These particular figures do show, however, that at least one church closed between 1989 and 1998 and at least 5 started between 1998 and 2005. The numbers thus obtained by subtraction from one year to the next are therefore *net* figures not *gross* figures, the gross figures being completely unknown and unavailable, but a study of just the net figures provides many interesting observations. By way of example, Table 16.1.1 below shows the number of churches in the North Region by county across all denominations.

		Region	County	1989	1998	2005	2010	2015	2020	Openings	Closures
<i>Table 16.1.1: Number of Churches in the North region of England, 1989 to 2020E</i>	North		(Cleveland)	291	288	286	277	293	288	+71	-74
			Cumbria	763	740	719	649	643	611	+86	-238
			(Durham)	513	501	492	471	491	475	+97	-136
			Northumberland UA	357	340	334	318	319	309	+57	-105
			Tyne and Wear	626	609	590	559	568	550	+101	-176
			TOTAL	2,550	2,478	2,421	2,274	2,314	2,233	+412	-729

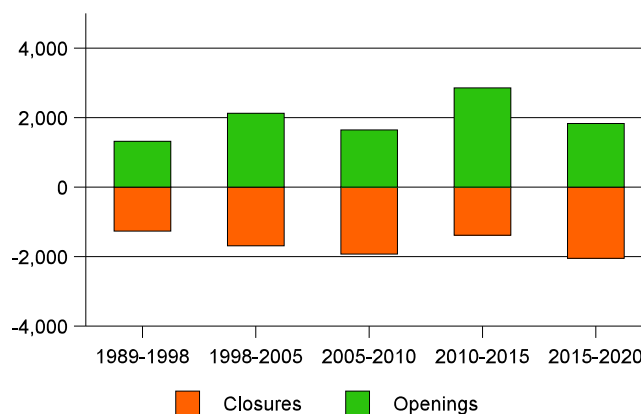
The number of openings shown in the final two columns is the sum of increases between one year and the next totalled for each denominational group, and the number of closures is calculated the same way. The Table shows that Cleveland saw 71 new churches started, and 74 close, a drop of 3, but across the whole of the North Region, these numbers are part of a total of 412 churches started and 729 closed, a net drop of 317. It is important to assess these numbers in perspective. The numbers are being counted across 31 years, so that 412 openings in the North Region are an average of 13 per year and 729 closures an average of 24 per year, a net drop of 11 churches per year across 10 denominational groups. In 2020 the total number of churches in the North Region will likely add up to about 2,233 churches, so closures have been averaging about -1.1% per annum and openings +0.6% per annum.

Figure 16.1.1 shows how such numbers varied by denomination across the whole of the UK (not just the North Region) and Figure 16.1.2 over time (the actual numbers may be found in Tables 16.1.2 and 16.1.3; those for the North Region are in the relevant column).

Figure 16.1.1: Churches opening and closing in England by denomination, 1989-2020



Figure 16.1.2: Churches opening and closing in England by Time-period, 1989-2020



The overall picture shows that it is the Methodists, Roman Catholics and Anglicans who have been closing the most churches, while the Smaller Denominations, Pentecostals and New Churches have been opening the most. Fresh Expression churches are included within “Smaller Denominations” whatever their actual denomination, so some of the Smaller Denominations openings will be Anglican and Methodist, so militating against their large numbers of closures. Many of the Pentecostal openings will be Black Majority Churches (BMCs) and other immigrant churches. Even the denominations which have seen many closures have also opened some churches (including the Methodists even though there are so few they cannot be seen in the diagram), and denominations seeing many new churches started have also had to face closures.

Table 16.1.2 shows that the regions where openings outnumbered closures were broadly in the south-east of England (South East (North), South East (South) and Greater London), but also the West Midlands, largely because of Birmingham (especially, from Table 16.1.3, since 2010), as more immigrants moved into that city and also began BMCs. Were it not for Norfolk, East Anglia would also be joining the South East, as Cambridgeshire and Suffolk share the same positive outlook on church openings.

Table 16.1.2: Openings and Closures by Denomination and Region, 1989 to 2020

Denomination <sup>3</sup>	North	York-shires	North West	East Midlands	West Midlands	East Anglia	S East (North)	Greater London <sup>2</sup>	S East (South)	South West	TOTAL
<b>Anglican 1989</b>	<b>990</b>	<b>1,486</b>	<b>1,369</b>	<b>1,982</b>	<b>1,782</b>	<b>1,507</b>	<b>1,676</b>	<b>987</b>	<b>1,825</b>	<b>2,769</b>	<b>16,373</b>
Opening	0	+3	0	+16	+1	+5	+39	+54	+17	+20	+155
Closing	-91	-103	-116	-155	-129	-108	-99	-4	-106	-190	-1,101
<b>Anglican 2020</b>	<b>899</b>	<b>1,386</b>	<b>1,253</b>	<b>1,843</b>	<b>1,654</b>	<b>1,404</b>	<b>1,616</b>	<b>1,037</b>	<b>1,736</b>	<b>2,599</b>	<b>15,427</b>
<b>Baptist 1989</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>186</b>	<b>244</b>	<b>195</b>	<b>210</b>	<b>352</b>	<b>287</b>	<b>331</b>	<b>342</b>	<b>2,339</b>
Opening	+10	+18	+1	+38	+43	+12	+19	+93	+58	+50	+342
Closing	-15	-1	-19	-9	-7	-68	-38	-10	-3	-29	-199
<b>Baptist 2020</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>137</b>	<b>168</b>	<b>273</b>	<b>231</b>	<b>154</b>	<b>333</b>	<b>370</b>	<b>386</b>	<b>363</b>	<b>2,482</b>
<b>R Catholic 1989</b>	<b>320</b>	<b>363</b>	<b>707</b>	<b>276</b>	<b>344</b>	<b>161</b>	<b>392</b>	<b>422</b>	<b>455</b>	<b>385</b>	<b>3,825</b>
Opening	0	+5	0	0	0	0	0	+44	0	+2	+51
Closing	-146	-166	-337	-144	-156	-73	-183	-102	-225	-183	-1,715
<b>R Catholic 2020</b>	<b>174</b>	<b>202</b>	<b>370</b>	<b>132</b>	<b>188</b>	<b>88</b>	<b>209</b>	<b>364</b>	<b>230</b>	<b>204</b>	<b>2,161</b>
<b>Independ't 1989</b>	<b>193</b>	<b>103</b>	<b>290</b>	<b>164</b>	<b>232</b>	<b>140</b>	<b>366</b>	<b>292</b>	<b>441</b>	<b>554</b>	<b>2,775</b>
Opening	+25	+136	+89	+70	+94	+71	+44	+109	+39	+35	+712
Closing	-61	-22	-34	-16	-14	-3	-97	-50	-159	-226	-682
<b>Independ't 2020</b>	<b>157</b>	<b>217</b>	<b>345</b>	<b>218</b>	<b>312</b>	<b>208</b>	<b>313</b>	<b>351</b>	<b>321</b>	<b>363</b>	<b>2,805</b>
<b>Methodist 1989</b>	<b>592</b>	<b>1,021</b>	<b>846</b>	<b>938</b>	<b>665</b>	<b>419</b>	<b>460</b>	<b>252</b>	<b>378</b>	<b>1,169</b>	<b>6,740</b>
Opening	+1	0	0	0	0	0	+5	+2	0	+3	+11
Closing	-349	-466	-345	-471	-297	-256	-211	-28	-165	-659	-3,247
<b>Methodist 2020</b>	<b>244</b>	<b>555</b>	<b>501</b>	<b>467</b>	<b>368</b>	<b>163</b>	<b>254</b>	<b>226</b>	<b>213</b>	<b>513</b>	<b>3,504</b>
<b>New Chur's 1989</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>99</b>	<b>88</b>	<b>77</b>	<b>110</b>	<b>142</b>	<b>221</b>	<b>142</b>	<b>1,026</b>
Opening	+80	+115	+174	+98	+146	+66	+219	+266	+267	+268	+1,699
Closing	0	0	-2	0	-23	-23	0	-150	0	-6	-204
<b>New Chur's 2020</b>	<b>125</b>	<b>163</b>	<b>226</b>	<b>197</b>	<b>211</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>329</b>	<b>258</b>	<b>488</b>	<b>404</b>	<b>2,521</b>
<b>Orthodox 1989</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>114</b>
Opening	+10	+20	+26	+19	+20	+13	+19	+36	+17	+18	+198
Closing	-1	0	-4	-2	0	0	0	-3	-3	-4	-17
<b>Orthodox 2020</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>84</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>295</b>
<b>Pentecostal 1989</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>156</b>	<b>158</b>	<b>144</b>	<b>250</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>156</b>	<b>709</b>	<b>117</b>	<b>151</b>	<b>1,951</b>
Opening	+96	+120	+200	+250	+402	+64	+221	+1,329	+181	+182	+3,045
Closing	-13	-24	-11	0	-8	-1	-4	-381	-3	-16	-461
<b>Pentecostal 2020</b>	<b>154</b>	<b>252</b>	<b>347</b>	<b>394</b>	<b>644</b>	<b>102</b>	<b>373</b>	<b>1,657</b>	<b>295</b>	<b>317</b>	<b>4,535</b>
<b>URC 1989</b>	<b>130</b>	<b>142</b>	<b>269</b>	<b>128</b>	<b>132</b>	<b>93</b>	<b>197</b>	<b>174</b>	<b>201</b>	<b>215</b>	<b>1,681</b>
Opening	0	+4	0	+4	+1	0	+2	+3	0	+4	+18
Closing	-44	-50	-68	-20	-31	-24	-55	-41	-56	-45	-434
<b>URC 2020</b>	<b>86</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>201</b>	<b>112</b>	<b>102</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>144</b>	<b>136</b>	<b>145</b>	<b>174</b>	<b>1,265</b>
<b>Smaller Ds 1989<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>136</b>	<b>171</b>	<b>156</b>	<b>141</b>	<b>174</b>	<b>117</b>	<b>214</b>	<b>243</b>	<b>213</b>	<b>219</b>	<b>1,784</b>
Opening	+190	+368	+291	+273	+385	+230	+493	+501	+417	+393	+3,541
Closing	-9	0	-7	-5	-8	-3	-5	-197	-2	-4	-240
<b>Smaller Ds 2020<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>317</b>	<b>539</b>	<b>440</b>	<b>409</b>	<b>551</b>	<b>344</b>	<b>702</b>	<b>547</b>	<b>628</b>	<b>608</b>	<b>5,085</b>
<b>Total 1989</b>	<b>2,550</b>	<b>3,618</b>	<b>4,039</b>	<b>4,123</b>	<b>3,868</b>	<b>2,769</b>	<b>3,933</b>	<b>3,559</b>	<b>4,191</b>	<b>5,957</b>	<b>38,607</b>
<b>Opening</b>	<b>+412</b>	<b>+789</b>	<b>+781</b>	<b>+768</b>	<b>+1,092</b>	<b>+461</b>	<b>+1,061</b>	<b>+2,437</b>	<b>+996</b>	<b>+975</b>	<b>+9,772</b>
<b>Closing</b>	<b>-729</b>	<b>-832</b>	<b>-942</b>	<b>-822</b>	<b>-673</b>	<b>-559</b>	<b>-692</b>	<b>-966</b>	<b>-722</b>	<b>-1,362</b>	<b>-8,299</b>
<b>Total 2020</b>	<b>2,233</b>	<b>3,575</b>	<b>3,878</b>	<b>4,069</b>	<b>4,287</b>	<b>2,671</b>	<b>4,302</b>	<b>5,030</b>	<b>4,465</b>	<b>5,570</b>	<b>40,080</b>

For definitions of Regions, see bottom of Table 16.1.3. <sup>1</sup> Including Fresh Expressions of all denominations <sup>2</sup> All the 1989 and 2020 totals are as from *Capital Growth*, Table 1.4. <sup>3</sup> The time period measured for openings and closures is made up of five separate parts added together: 1989-1998, 1998-2005, 2005-2020, 2010-2015 and 2015 and 2020. If any church opened and closed within any of these time periods it will NOT be included in the above figures. In that sense they are therefore *net* figures of changes not *gross* numbers of openings and closures.

Chur's = Churches Smaller Ds = Smaller Denominations

Table 16.1.3: Openings and Closures by Region and Time-period, 1989-2020

Period	North	York-shires	North West	East Midlands	West Midlands	East Anglia	S East (North)	Greater London	S East (South)	South West	TOTAL
<b>Total 1989</b>	<b>2,550</b>	<b>3,618</b>	<b>4,039</b>	<b>4,123</b>	<b>3,868</b>	<b>2,769</b>	<b>3,933</b>	<b>3,559</b>	<b>4,191</b>	<b>5,957</b>	<b>38,607</b>
Opening	+27	+79	+86	+99	+89	+57	+109	+506 <sup>1</sup>	+143	+122	<b>1,317</b>
Closing	-99	-122	-90	-123	-78	-109	-89	-203 <sup>1</sup>	-100	-252	<b>-1,265</b>
<b>Total 1998</b>	<b>2,478</b>	<b>3,575</b>	<b>4,035</b>	<b>4,099</b>	<b>3,879</b>	<b>2,717</b>	<b>3,953</b>	<b>3,862</b>	<b>4,234</b>	<b>5,827</b>	<b>38,659</b>
Opening	+88	+154	+174	+165	+279	+85	+253	+480 <sup>1</sup>	+208	+238	<b>2,124</b>
Closing	-145	-155	-205	-159	-128	-97	-136	-255 <sup>1</sup>	-149	-260	<b>-1,689</b>
<b>Total 2005</b>	<b>2,421</b>	<b>3,574</b>	<b>4,004</b>	<b>4,105</b>	<b>4,030</b>	<b>2,705</b>	<b>4,070</b>	<b>4,087</b>	<b>4,293</b>	<b>5,805</b>	<b>39,094</b>
Opening	+51	+115	+103	+101	+123	+69	+156	+645 <sup>2</sup>	+153	+130	<b>1,646</b>
Closing	-198	-201	-253	-164	-161	-116	-194	-140 <sup>2</sup>	-188	-312	<b>-1,927</b>
<b>Total 2010</b>	<b>2,274</b>	<b>3,488</b>	<b>3,854</b>	<b>4,042</b>	<b>3,992</b>	<b>2,658</b>	<b>4,032</b>	<b>4,592</b>	<b>4,258</b>	<b>5,623</b>	<b>38,813</b>
Opening	+165	+197	+269	+247	+375	+170	+366	+413	+334	+319	<b>2,855</b>
Closing	-125	-61	-161	-179	-136	-103	-108	-140	-118	-236	<b>-1,367</b>
<b>Total 2015</b>	<b>2,314</b>	<b>3,624</b>	<b>3,962</b>	<b>4,110</b>	<b>4,231</b>	<b>2,725</b>	<b>4,290</b>	<b>4,865</b>	<b>4,474</b>	<b>5,706</b>	<b>40,301</b>
Opening	+81	+244	+149	+156	+226	+80	+177	+393	+158	+166	<b>1,830</b>
Closing	-162	-293	-233	-197	-170	-134	-165	-228	-167	-302	<b>-2,051</b>
<b>Total 2020</b>	<b>2,233</b>	<b>3,575</b>	<b>3,878</b>	<b>4,069</b>	<b>4,287</b>	<b>2,671</b>	<b>4,302</b>	<b>5,030</b>	<b>4,465</b>	<b>5,570</b>	<b>40,080</b>
<b>Total 1989</b>	<b>2,550</b>	<b>3,618</b>	<b>4,039</b>	<b>4,123</b>	<b>3,868</b>	<b>2,769</b>	<b>3,933</b>	<b>3,559</b>	<b>4,191</b>	<b>5,957</b>	<b>38,607</b>
<b>Opening</b>	<b>+412</b>	<b>+789</b>	<b>+781</b>	<b>+768</b>	<b>+1,092</b>	<b>+461</b>	<b>+1,061</b>	<b>+2,437</b>	<b>+996</b>	<b>+975</b>	<b>+9,772</b>
<b>Closing</b>	<b>-729</b>	<b>-832</b>	<b>-942</b>	<b>-822</b>	<b>-673</b>	<b>-559</b>	<b>-692</b>	<b>-966</b>	<b>-722</b>	<b>-1,362</b>	<b>-8,299</b>
<b>Total 2020</b>	<b>2,233</b>	<b>3,575</b>	<b>3,879</b>	<b>4,069</b>	<b>4,287</b>	<b>2,671</b>	<b>4,302</b>	<b>5,030</b>	<b>4,465</b>	<b>5,570</b>	<b>40,080</b>

<sup>1</sup> As given in UK Church Statistics Table 12.17 totals in columns 3, 2, 6 and 5 respectively <sup>2</sup> Pro rata to Table 12.17 totals in columns 9 and 8 respectively

Regions are made up of the following counties or (old counties): **North:** (Cleveland), Cumbria, (Durham), Northumberland UA and Tyne and Wear; **Yorkshires:** (East Yorkshire), North Yorkshire, South Yorkshire and West Yorkshire; **North West:** Cheshire, Greater Manchester, Lancashire, Merseyside and the Isle of Man; **East Midlands:** Derbyshire, Leicestershire, Lincolnshire, Northamptonshire and Nottinghamshire; **West Midlands:** Herefordshire UA, (Shropshire), Staffordshire, Warwickshire, West Midlands and Worcestershire; **East Anglia:** Cambridgeshire, Norfolk and Suffolk; **South East (North):** Bedfordshire, (Berkshire), Buckinghamshire, Essex, Hertfordshire and Oxfordshire; **Greater London:** All 33 Boroughs; **South East (South):** East Sussex, Hampshire, Isle of Wight UA, Kent, Surrey and West Sussex; **South West:** (Avon), Cornwall, Devon, Dorset, Gloucestershire, Somerset, (Wiltshire) and the Channel Islands

Church changes 1989-2020

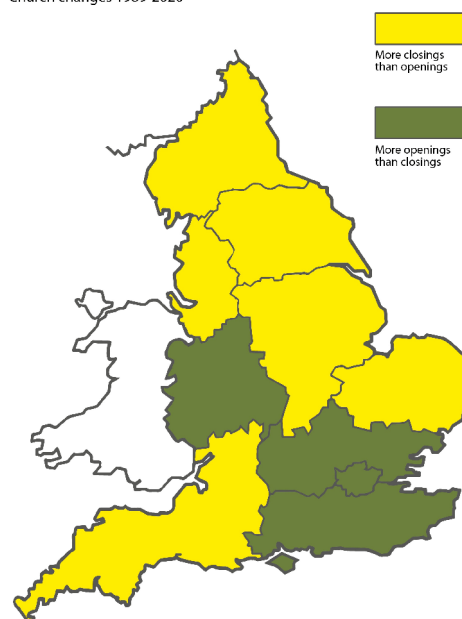


Figure 16.1.3: Regions where Churches are growing [shaded green] or where they are closing [shaded yellow]

Figure 16.1.2 shows that the most fruitful time for church openings has been in the last five years, 2010 to 2015, and that numbers of new churches are likely to be fewer in the five years ahead. Of the different time periods, only two had more openings than closures – 1998 to 2005, and 2010 to 2015. Many immigrant churches were started in the first of these as well as especial efforts by some of the big black denominations like the Redeemed Christian Church of God which expanded particularly in the first few years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Table 16.1.3 indicates that between 1989 and 2020 something like 9,782 churches in England have started. That's almost exactly a quarter, 25%, of the number existing in 1989. Against that number some 8,309, closed, just over a fifth, 22%. Some of the closures will be of those newly opened, the proportion varying but probably between 7% (as found in the 2012 London Church Census) and up to 25% as experienced by the Pentecostals in the 1990s. They continue to have a relatively high percentage (15%?) of new churches not proving viable after a year or so, but many are led by individuals, and this probably shows the need for denominational support for success. If the overall average of new churches not continuing is taken, say, as 10%, that is still 8,800 new units established in this period – some 284 a year, just over one per weekday. Or put it another way, for every 120 churches in England, another will be started this year, a rate of +0.8% per annum.

Figure 16.1.3 illustrates Table 16.1.2.

Of the closures, some 236 close every year, these not being newly established-failing-to-get-off-the-ground, but churches which have been around for decades and sometimes centuries. A valuable piece of history becomes someone's home, or an art gallery, a commercial building, a mosque, or simply a ruin. The total closure rate is -0.7% per annum, or one church in every 150. While this is very sad, we should rejoice that the overall numbers are increasing not declining.

It will be appreciated that "churches" represent congregations meeting not just in ecclesiastical buildings, and it would be interesting to know if the new churches are primarily in non-church-type buildings and if the closures were primarily of church-type buildings, but, alas, such information does not seem to exist, except that it is known that many of the new churches, Fresh Expressions and immigrant churches are not in church-type buildings, so that maybe the balance is changing, offset doubtless by more mature gatherings in non-church-type quarters seeking to build their own church nearby.

### **What does all this say?**

That the church is not in irreversible decline. What this analysis shows is that there is still a huge amount of life and initiative. Many new churches are being started, and while others close, nevertheless a huge amount of energy is being poured into its continuance. While the South East area generally leads the way, the growth of new churches is occurring everywhere. Even in denominations mainly characterised by decline, growth is still evident in places such as Catholic growth in London, Baptist growth in the Midlands and South West. Unlike their counterparts, the Independent churches are doing far less well in the South East, but instead are seeing strong growth in the North, especially in the Yorkshires.

New Churches seem to be springing up everywhere, but there are some areas where they have been less successful (West Midlands, East Anglia and London). The Orthodox Church is gaining ground across the whole of England, as are the Pentecostals (especially in the West Midlands and London for reasons already mentioned) and the Smaller Denominations, including the Yorkshires and the South West.

The Methodists and the URC are finding the challenges hardest, especially the former which in this period of 31 years saw almost half, 48%, of its churches close – a rate of two per week. The Catholics are closing just one a week, the Anglicans one every 10 days. But 6 new churches are opening somewhere in England every week, and have been on average for 31 years!

*Sources: UK Church Statistics, and Capital Growth, both by Peter Brierley, and both published by ADBC Publishers, Tonbridge, Kent, respectively 2014 and 2013, ISBNs 978-0-9566577-7-0 and 978-0-9566577-6-3 respectively.*

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