



Christianity in Britain

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Overview

- Christians are followers (disciples) of Jesus Christ, whom they believe to be God incarnate, and who strive to live by his teachings as set out in the New Testament of the Bible and to have their lives ordered by his life, death and resurrection in first-century Palestine under the rule of the Roman Empire.
- Christianity is the largest religious affiliation in Britain, with nearly 59% of the population calling themselves Christian in the 2011 census. Christianity has dominated the countries that formed the United Kingdom (in the Act of Union of 1707) since St Augustine converted England in 597 and became the first Archbishop of Canterbury.
- Anglicans, who represent the mainstream of the Church of England, form the largest denomination, followed by Roman Catholics, Presbyterians, Methodists and Baptists. The English Reformation, as distinct from the continental European Reformation, was precipitated by King Henry VIII's break with the Church of Rome in the 16th century. The Church of England was established in law in the reign of Elizabeth I in the Act of Supremacy, and is the "state church" of England, with the monarch as its Supreme Governor and 26 bishops taking seats in the House of Lords.

Denominations

- **Anglicans** – Technically, all members of the Church of England (which is the mother Church for the worldwide Anglican Communion) are Anglicans. But the term has evolved to be a short-form for the more traditional of worshippers, from Anglo-Catholics (who maintain the catholic traditions of mysticism and contemplative prayer) to those who simply wear vestments and sing the Church's liturgies. Sometimes these congregations are known as "High Church". By contrast, Evangelicals in the Church of England are in the more reformed tradition and emphasise a personal relationship with the living Christ and the provenance of scripture. Sometimes this is characterised by more informal and modern styles of worship and is known as "Low Church".
- **Roman Catholics** – This is the second largest denomination in England and Wales with some five million members and has its own structures under a Nuncio (Papal Ambassador), Archbishop and Cardinals. Roman Catholics worship in more modern cathedrals and churches, the Church of England having assumed the medieval churches in the Reformation. Russian and Greek Orthodox churches, which are represented in Britain, are also early schisms from the Church of Rome. The post-Reformation persecution of Catholics in Britain is a fact of history, but it remains the case today that by the Act of Succession no Roman Catholic can accede to the British throne.

- **Presbyterians and Congregationalists** - The Presbyterian (a reformed tradition within Protestantism) Church of Scotland is the national church in Scotland. The protestants of Northern Ireland are also predominantly Presbyterian, the largest denomination there after Roman Catholics. Congregationalists are autonomously run churches in the reformed Protestant tradition. The United Reformed Church is a union between Presbyterian and Congregational churches.
- **Methodists** – Methodism grew out of the Evangelical Revival of the 18th century and was founded by brothers John and Charles Wesley. A re-union of the Methodist Church and the Church of England has been a developing aspiration in recent decades.
- **Baptists** – Baptists are another non-conformist tradition (meaning that they do not conform to the established law of the Church of England) and hold that baptism into the Christian faith is for those who can profess the faith and therefore not a ritual for infants.
- **Charismatics and Pentecostals** – Characterised by services that feature song, long preaching and healing, these churches have enjoyed considerable growth, spurred by immigrant communities from the West Indies.
- **Quakers** – The common name for the Religious Society of Friends, Quakers believe in the provenance of the individual’s revelation of God and worship in a highly participatory manner in Meeting Houses.

Liturgies and services in the Church of England

- The staple liturgy for the Church of England since the Reformation has been the Book of Common Prayer, first published under the authorship and editorship of Archbishop Thomas Cranmer in 1549, a major revision being undertaken to produce the prayer book in 1662 which is still in use today. After the First World War, further and alternative liturgies were produced, culminating in the Common Worship series that the Church uses today.
- Every parish in the Church of England is required in canon law (the law of the Church) to celebrate a service of Holy Communion, sometimes called the Eucharist (meaning “thanksgiving” in Greek), every Sunday. Holy Communion is a historical continuance of the last supper that Jesus Christ shared with his friends before his crucifixion, at which he distributed bread and wine to his disciples as his body and blood, sacrificed for them. Christians believe that in sharing his body and blood today they become the Body of Christ in the world and historically the belief was that the bread and wine became in Communion the body and blood of Christ, though more common in the Church today is the belief that there is a “real presence” of the Christ in them.

- Other sung services in the Church of England are Matins (Morning Prayer), Evensong and Compline (Night Prayer).

Structure of the Church of England

- The monarch is the Supreme Governor of the Church of England, charged with being “Defender of the Faith”. The most senior cleric in the Church of England is the Archbishop of Canterbury, who is also head of the global Anglican Communion. The Church is divided into 44 Dioceses, each of which has a diocesan bishop and area bishops. Each Diocese is divided into parishes, which are run by priests (vicars or rectors or priests-in-charge), their churchwardens and Parochial Church Councils (PCCs). Administratively, Archdeacons have area oversight, with parishes divided into collections of Archdeaconaries and Area Deaneries. Cathedrals are separately run by Deans and Chapters.
- Titles and terms of address are formally complicated (with, for example, Archbishops being the “Most Reverend” and other bishops being “Right Reverend”, or historically “Your Grace”). Parish clergy are generally and simply “Reverend”. Today, a reasonable rule of thumb is simply to use a clergyperson’s title and name as a form of address – so “Dear Bishop David” or simply “Dear Archdeacon” or “Dear Bishop”.

Christianity in numbers

- In the 2011 Census, 33.2 million people identified themselves as Christians. The number declined from 71.7 % in 2001, to 59.3% in 2011. Knowsley was the local authority with the highest proportion of people reporting to be Christians at 80.9 per cent
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/articles/religioninenglandandwales2011/2012-12-11>
- **Church of England:**
An average of 930,000 people attended services each week in October 2016.
2.6 million people attended Church of England churches at Christmas 2016
<https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2017-10/2016statisticsformission.pdf>
- **Church in Wales:**
Average Sunday attendance in 2016: over 18 - 28,291; under 18 - 5,963. Figures showed a decline from 2015 in Easter communicants (down 6%), baptisms (down 8%), and confirmations (down 21%) <http://s3.amazonaws.com/cinw/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/42416-CIW-Memberships-and-Finances-2016.pdf>

- **Roman Catholic Church in Britain:**

Catholicism is the second largest denomination in England and Wales, with more than four million members and 695,000 in Scotland. Estimated attendance figures for England and Wales in 2012 are 848,960

<https://www.prct.org.uk/blogs>

<http://www.brin.ac.uk/figures/catholic-community-estimates/>

- **Methodist Church in Great Britain:**

Membership 188,000 at 31 October 2016, a 3.5% year-on-year decline over a decade

http://www.methodist.org.uk/media/2767/methodism_in_numbers_2017.pdf

- **Baptist Union of Great Britain:**

Figures from December 2016 show 122, 752 church members

<https://www.baptist.org.uk/Groups/277439/Statistics.aspx>

- **United Reformed Church, UK:**

Figures from December 2016 show 49,517 members

<https://www.urc.org.uk/statistics.html>

- **Useful sites:**

British Religion in Numbers <http://www.brin.ac.uk>

UK Church statistics <http://www.brierleyconsultancy.com/statistics/>