

# Clergy want to be allowed to marry same-sex couples

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Most Church of England priests want the church to conduct same-sex weddings and drop its opposition to premarital and gay sex, in a historic shift that campaigners hope will lead to a change in doctrine.

The results of a survey conducted by The Times among almost 1,200 serving church clergy have been hailed as “absolutely huge” by gay rights campaigners. Traditionalists who oppose same-sex marriage have said they show that “substantial and deep divisions” exist.

The Church of England teaches that only weddings between a man and a woman are permitted in church and that sex is permissible only within heterosexual marriages.

Bishops have, however, said that they will allow priests to “bless” gay couples, and are under pressure to go further and permit same-sex weddings in church.

They are actively considering whether to drop the church doctrine that gay sex is incompatible with Christian teaching and whether to allow gay priests to have civil weddings. The bishops will present their recommendations to the church’s assembly, the General Synod, this autumn.

The Times survey has found majority support among Church of England priests for a change in church law to allow them to marry gay couples for the first time, with 53.4 per cent in favour, compared with 36.5 per cent against.

This is a reversal of the proportions seen the last time that Anglican priests were asked about the broad issue in 2014, shortly after the legalisation of same-sex civil marriage, when 51 per cent declared same-sex marriage to be “wrong” compared with 39 per cent who said they backed it. Professor

Linda Woodhead, head of the religious studies department at King’s College London, conducted the 2014 survey. She said: “It’s a very rapid change. These are very interesting findings. It’s fascinating that you’ve now got this change in attitudes.”

It had not been known how many priests would be willing to offer blessings to people in gay relationships once they were given the green light. The Times poll found that 59 per cent of priests would offer them whereas 32 per cent would opt out. Asked if they would personally be willing to conduct same-sex weddings if they were ever permitted, almost half of priests, 49.2 per cent, said they would, and 41 per cent said they would not. The survey results suggest that some priests would be happy to see the church permit same-sex weddings even though they would not want to conduct them personally.

The poll also found that 62.6 per cent of priests think that the church should drop its opposition to premarital sex, with 21.6 per cent backing a complete end to the ban and 41 per cent saying the church should drop its opposition but only for people in “committed relationships”. Just over a third said the teaching should remain unchanged.

A resolution agreed upon by Anglican churches worldwide states that “homosexual practice is incompatible with scripture”. The Times poll found that 64.5 per cent of priests backed an end to this teaching, with 27.3 per cent backing an end to any requirement for celibacy for gay people and 37.2 per cent willing to accept sex between gay people in “committed” relationships such as civil partnerships or marriage. Almost a third, 29.7 per cent, said the teaching should not change.

Bishops are also considering whether to lift a ban on gay priests entering into civil marriages with their partners. The poll found that 63.3 per cent of priests

back such a move, while 28.7 per cent oppose it.

The Rev Andrew Foreshew-Cain, who runs the Campaign for Equal Marriage in the Church of England and married his partner in defiance of church rules, said of the survey results: “This is absolutely huge. I really think this is really important. It is clear evidence of the direction of change the church needs to pursue. I hope this kind of evidence will enable the bishops to feel confidence that there is a wide majority for change.”

The Bishop of Oxford, the Right Rev Steven Croft, is one of the most prominent figures in the church to back same-sex marriage, having changed his position from one of opposition.

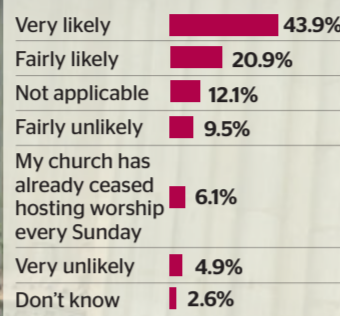
He said: “It’s really interesting. I think it’s very important that the question has been asked [of frontline priests]. It does show very much that the stance of clergy across the country is more in favour of change than the balance of views in the General Synod... I hope the synod will take notice of that as we move the proposals forward. I am really hopeful and really encouraged by the strength and particularly by the numbers of priests who would offer blessings to same sex couples.”

The Rev Canon John Dunnett is director of the Church of England Evangelical Council, which has led protests against plans to offer blessings to same-sex couples. He said: “My overarching response is that it signposts a thoroughly divided Church of England. The question it raises, the million-dollar question, is how is the Church of England going to face a situation in which the level of division is both so substantial and runs so deep?”

He suggested that separate bishops, dioceses or provinces might be needed to cater for churches that opposed the recognition of same-sex relationships. Anglicanism should get on and modernise, leading article, page 27

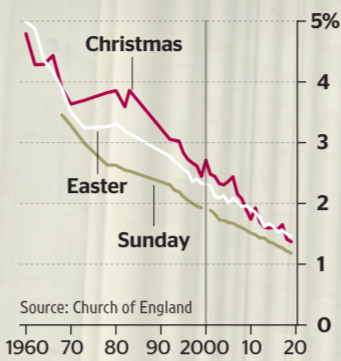
## The future of the church

How likely do you think it is that your church will still be holding a service every Sunday in ten years’ time?

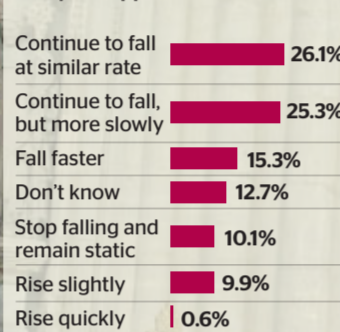


## Fewer worshippers

Proportion of England’s population attending Church of England services

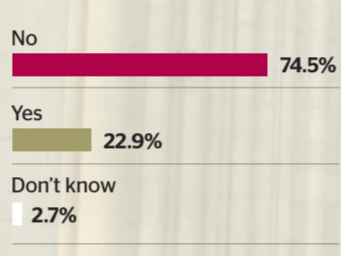


Thinking about church attendance over the next 10 years, what do you think is most likely to happen?



## Workload pressures

Has your workload or any other pressures of your role led you to seriously consider quitting the priesthood in the past five years?



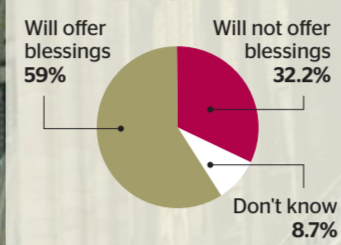
Data based on a survey of 1,185 Church of England priests conducted in August 2023



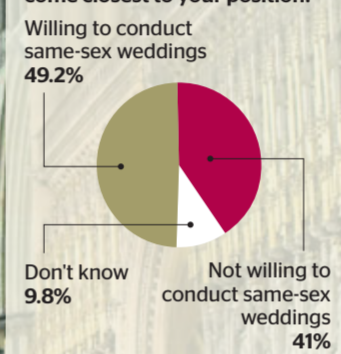
## THE STATE OF THE CHURCH

## Priests on gay marriage

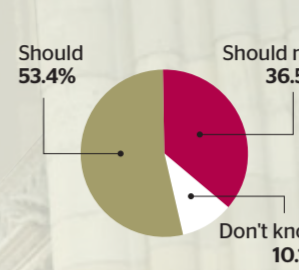
The General Synod backed proposals in February to allow priests to offer blessings to same-sex couples if they wish to, according to their conscience. Which best describes your position?



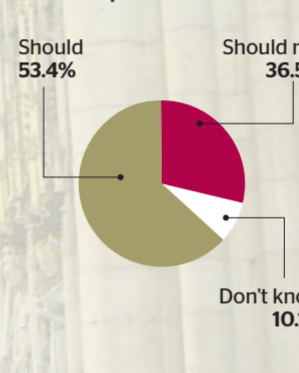
If the Church of England were to permit priests to conduct same-sex weddings if they wished to, according to their conscience, which would come closest to your position?



Do you think the Church of England should or should not allow priests to conduct same-sex weddings if they wish to, according to their conscience?



Do you think the Church of England should or should not allow gay priests to enter into civil marriages with their same-sex partners?



# Slave-era statues ‘should stay but links must be explained’

Kaya Burgess, Ryan Watts

Fewer than one in six priests back the removal of slave-trader memorials and statues from Church of England property, but two thirds would like to see information added alongside them to highlight their links to slavery.

Lord Boateng, who was Britain’s first black cabinet minister and now runs the church’s racial justice commission, welcomed the results of a Times survey of almost 1,200 active Church of England priests and said he hoped they would be “taken very seriously” as a sign that priests want to “confront the failings and sins of the past”.

Sonita Alleyne, the master of Jesus College, Cambridge, whose efforts to remove a memorial to Tobias Rustat from the college chapel were blocked by a church court, warned that simply adding extra information “may not be sufficient” to prevent people of colour feeling unwelcome.

The survey asked: “If there is a statue or memorial on church property dedicated to an individual who owned slaves or profited from the slave trade, what is the best course of action in your view?” Of the 1,139 respondents, only

11 per cent said the memorials should be destroyed, while 13.9 per cent said they should be “removed from church property and moved to a museum or display space”, as was proposed and blocked in the case of Jesus College.

A memorial in a Dorchester church to a plantation owner that praised him for violently suppressing a slave rebellion was removed to a neighbouring museum earlier this year.

A similarly small proportion, at 14.1 per cent, said such a memorial should be “left as it is” while a large majority, at 67.2 per cent, said it “should be left in place, but with information added to explain the links to slavery”. This often involves adding a plaque or information board to highlight the individual’s involvement in the slave trade.

The Times understands a number of contentious cases are due to emerge in the coming months.

Boateng said of the survey: “It will be taken seriously by the commission and I hope it will be taken seriously by the Church of England. It demonstrates a recognition by the overwhelming majority of clergy of the seriousness of the need to confront the failings and sins of the past.”

# A third have considered quitting

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Almost a third of working age priests have “seriously considered” quitting the Church of England in the past five years, while more than 40 per cent feel “overworked or over-stretched”, with some citing an “abject” lack of support from bishops.

Campaigners calling for more support for parish priests said the results of The Times’s survey showed a “very worrying trend” and “how low morale is”.

The poll found that two thirds of priests thought that the church’s efforts to stop the decline in attendance would fail, with 10.1 per cent believing the decline would be halted and 10.5 per cent believing congregations would grow again.

Attendance at Sunday services fell to 690,000 in 2019, against 1.2 million in 1986. In 2013, Lord Carey of Clifton, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, warned that the church could be “one generation away from extinction”.

Almost a third of priests — 31.9 per cent — agreed “the Church of England could face extinction if decline continues”, although 56.6 per cent said the church “will never go extinct”.

Out of 1,162 priests, 174 per cent felt “a little over-worked or over-stretched”

with 10.9 per cent feeling very over-stretched, totalling 28.5 per cent.

However, when those above retirement age were excluded — such as priests over 70 who still assist in lighter duties — 40.5 per cent said they felt over-worked or over-stretched, with 24.2 per cent responding “a little” and 16.3 per cent responding “very”.

The days when each church had its own dedicated vicar or rector are gone, leaving priests to cover wide areas and more churches as congregations fall.

The survey revealed that 61.4 per cent of parish priests “manage or work across” more than one church, with 19 per cent working across five or more churches and five per cent working across eight or more.

The poll asked priests: “Has your workload or any other pressures of your role led you to seriously consider quitting the priesthood in the past five years?” Among priests aged under 70, almost a third, at 32.7 per cent, said yes while 64 per cent said no.

Asked why, one priest cited an “abject lack of support” from senior clergy while another cited the “sheer relentless nature of the job coupled to no help whatsoever from those in authority over us”. The poll found that 49.6 per cent thought bishops were doing a good job of leading the church versus 42.5 per

cent who thought they were doing a bad job.

The church recently scrapped a law stipulating that all churches must hold a service every Sunday, as congregations fall and priests get more stretched.

Asked whether their own church would be holding regular Sunday services in 10 years, 16.4 per cent said it was fairly or very unlikely, while 7 per cent said their church had already stopped. Among priests of working age, 16.4 per cent said they were finding it “fairly or very difficult to get by” financially.

The Rev Marcus Walker, rector at Great St Bartholomew’s in London, who runs the Save The Parish campaign group, said: “It’s a hugely helpful [survey], particularly for the church authorities to realise quite how low morale is. I think they are so isolated from the realities of their clergy... It’s a very worrying trend.”

Dr Liz Graveling, a church spokeswoman, said: “Our clergy provide unstinting spiritual, pastoral and practical support to their communities on a daily basis. We are seeking to listen to their concerns through research and the adoption of a Covenant for Clergy Care and Well Being.”

The church said it had invested £3.6 billion in the mission and ministry of the church up to 2031.

# Eight in ten priests would back a woman becoming archbishop

Kaya Burgess, Ryan Watts

The appointment of a woman as Archbishop of Canterbury would be backed by more than 80 per cent of Church of England priests, while two thirds want an end to the system that lets parishes reject female leaders.

The Bishop of Dover, the Right Rev Rose Hudson-Wilkin, welcomed the results of a Times survey of almost 1,200 active priests and said that the church “cannot continue to speak with a forked tongue” by backing women in the priesthood while also allowing parishes to reject them. She warned that this policy would “destroy the ministry of women”.

Hudson-Wilkin called for a review of measures that allow churches to turn down female applicants for vacant priest positions and reject the leadership of female bishops.

The Times survey asked Church of England priests: “Would you support or oppose the appointment of a woman as Archbishop of Canterbury?” Among the 1,179 who responded to the question, 80.2 per cent said that they would support a woman in the church’s senior clerical role, compared with 13.4 per cent who would oppose it. The support among female priests was even higher, at 97.1 per cent.

The Most Rev Justin Welby is the 105th Archbishop of Canterbury. Women have been able to become bishops in the Church of England only since 2014.

Welby does not reach the retirement age of 70 until January 2026 and so does not have to step down for more than two years. When he announces his exit, a secretive committee called the Crown Nominations Commission will begin choosing a successor in a process that involves interviews, consultations and a period of “discernment” in which members try to ascertain God’s will.

About a third of currently serving bishops are women, suggesting that there is a wide field of possible female candidates for the role, including the Right Rev Sarah Mullally, the Bishop of London and the third most senior cleric in the church.

A total of 590 parishes in the Church of England, 4.8 per cent of the total, have formally declared that they will not accept a woman as lead priest or accept the oversight of a female bishop.

The system that allows parishes to reject female priests was put in place in 2014. It was designed to support about 150 evangelical or “complementary” parishes and about 440 Anglo-Catholic parishes that did not accept women as senior priests.

Asked about the future of the system, 33.5 per cent of priests said it should “remain in place indefinitely”, while 62.9 per cent said it should be “phased out” to ultimately prevent parishes from rejecting women.

Hudson-Wilkin said she took collective responsibility with other bishops to “do all I can to make the present system work”. But she added: “I do believe that the Church of England, in embracing women as priests and bishops, cannot continue to speak with a forked tongue. The ministry of women in the church cannot be left permanently in a state of ‘reception’.”

“To do so will be to ultimately destroy the ministry of women in the church as it will always be looked at with suspicion as well as being second class to that of the ministry of men.

“Enough time has passed for this

## The favourites

**RACHEL TREWEK**  
Bishop of Gloucester, 60  
became the church’s first female diocesan bishop in 2015. She is the fourth longest serving female bishop and the church’s spokeswoman on prisons.

**GULI FRANCIS-DEHQANI**  
Bishop of Chelmsford, 57  
She was promoted in 2021 after only four years as the first Bishop of Loughborough. She was born in Iran and fled to the UK as a child.

**SARAH MULLALLY**  
Bishop of London, 61  
The former Chief Nursing Officer for England took up her senior church role in 2018. She has led efforts to keep a divided church together on issues of gay rights.

**LIBBY LANE**  
Bishop of Derby, 56  
She was the first woman to be appointed as a bishop in the church, named as Bishop of Stockport in 2015. She is the church’s spokeswoman on sport.

**HELEN-ANN HARTLEY**  
Bishop of Newcastle, 50  
Edinburgh-born, her first senior role was as Bishop of Waikato in the Anglican church in New Zealand. She was later the Bishop of Ripon.

whole matter to be reviewed.” On the prospect of a female Archbishop of Canterbury, she said: “If a woman meets the qualification and has the essential criteria for becoming an archbishop, then there is no reason why the discernment process should not reflect this.”

The Bishop of Ebbsfleet, the Right Rev Rob Munro, represents evangelical parishes that do not accept women as leaders. He said the church had designed the system “without specifying a limit of time” and claimed that “the appointment of a female Archbishop of Canterbury would provide a particular challenge” in a church where a significant minority did not accept female leadership.

The Bishop of Lichfield, the Right Rev Michael Ipgrave, who monitors the system, said the church was committed to “the flourishing of all within the church” including the “great majority” who support women priests and those who cannot do so, “without limit of time”.

## Analysis

When even Church of England priests believe modern Britain can no longer be described as a Christian country, the fabric of society has changed beyond recognition (Kaya Burgess writes).  
Once almost every man, woman and child in England would have identified as Anglican by default. That is no longer the case. So what has filled the hole left behind by the dwindling of Christianity?  
Census data last year showed that the biggest leap has not been in Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs or Jews, but in those with “no religion”, jumping to

37.5 per cent of the population in England and Wales.  
This does not necessarily mean that Britain has become a nation of atheists, however. Many of these people may be agnostic or possess some kind of spirituality.  
A more fundamental question is to ask what has replaced the sense of community seen in areas where places of worship have acted for generations as focal points to bring neighbours together every Sunday for services and for rites of passage.  
Professor Linda Woodhead, head of the department of religious studies at King’s College London, said: “People

find new ways of supporting one another. In the pandemic, society didn’t fall apart, people did rally around each other and causes like the NHS. There is still a very strong sense of common conviction and values, but they have perhaps floated free somewhat from their Christian anchoring.”  
She said that many would be alarmed by an existential threat to the Church of England, noting: “Lots of people would be very sad if the Church of England disappeared completely.”  
She said, however, that it could end up becoming “a church of very few” if there was a widening of the gap between the church’s teaching and public opinion, which

spent centuries in tight lockstep until diverging in recent decades on issues such as sex, abortion and marriage.  
Woodhead noted, however, that the church had changed its doctrine many times in its history, including through the acceptance of remarriage after divorce, as shown by its blessing for the King’s marriage to Camilla, less than 90 years after Edward VIII was forced to abdicate because of his desire to marry a divorcee.  
Woodhead said of The Times’s survey that the church had, in the past, been “responsive to the views of its congregations and its clergy” and said it might need to be so again.