



**From the Editor**

**Failing and Flourishing**

Andrew McGowan<sup>1</sup>

andrew.b.mcgowan@yale.edu

*A Tale of Two Realities*

The Episcopal Church<sup>2</sup> (TEC) recently held its remarkable General Convention in Austin, Texas. Part synod, part trade exhibition, and part extended family reunion, the event described as one of the largest democratic legislative gatherings in the world brought more than 3000 people together in an apparent display of energy and confidence.<sup>3</sup> Its work included taking positions on the wider issues of immigration, Israel-Palestine, and the ecological crisis. There were also the more in-house questions of readmitting the Episcopal Church of Cuba as a diocese, and of prayer book revision, including a complex debate about the calendar of saints and its membership.

1. The Very Revd Dr Andrew McGowan is Dean and President of the Berkeley Divinity School at Yale. This editorial is based on a talk given to the Board of the Consortium of Endowed Episcopal Parishes, Church of the Heavenly Rest, New York City, September 2018.

2. The term used by what was historically referred to as the Episcopal Church in the United States of America, but which includes dioceses in Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Haiti, Honduras, Puerto Rico, Taiwan, Venezuela and the Virgin Islands, as well as the Convocation of Episcopal Churches in Europe.

3. Various suggested to be 'the largest legislative body in North America' (<https://centeraisle.blog/about-general-convention/>, accessed 9 October 2018), 'reputedly the largest legislative body in the world' (<http://edod.org/resources/articles/primer-on-general-convention-legislative-process/>, accessed 9 October 2018), or 'second largest legislative body in the world' (<https://dohio.org/blog/june-2018/79th-general-convention-of-the-episcopal-church>, accessed 9 October 2018). The website of TEC itself makes the more modest suggestion of 'fourth largest' (<https://www.episcopalchurch.org/posts/publicaffairs/episcopal-church-finances>, accessed 9 October 2018).

A few weeks later the same Church published statistics that painted a bracing picture of statistical decline.<sup>4</sup> Put simply, membership in TEC dropped by a quarter between 2000 and 2017; average Sunday attendance had dropped by 35 per cent in the same period. Interestingly, parishes and missions declined in number by only 10 per cent in the same period, and dioceses not at all. The General Convention's size has already been mentioned. The disparity in these changes, and the lack of institutional adjustment in particular, gives some food for thought. Not only does it seem odd to have so many people deliberating and administering, the manifest decline in those who want to be saints in the Church militant makes for an unfortunate contrast with time-consuming arguments about the Church triumphant on the calendar.

The deflating impression these numbers offer may even be rosier than the reality. What is not reflected in the statistics is that the dwindling population of the present Church is defined not just by the well-publicized departure of the disaffected, or the bloody-minded, or the unfaithful. Most obviously it is the young who are so often missing. This is not so much a decline as a looming precipice, as the median age of many congregations moves quickly into the 70s and beyond. Institutionally this may start to look less like shrinkage than collapse.

This story is not unique to the Church in the USA and its dependencies, but is repeated to some extent in most other parts of the West, across Anglicanism and in many other Christian churches too. The rise of aggressive as well as merely passive forms of secularization, preferences for different forms of religious and spiritual life when there is openness to it, and a range of other factors all seem to be taking a toll. The prominence of decline in TEC owes something to the combination of factors or events involved, including the schisms that have so far largely been avoided in other places, in part because of different structures, as well as different distributions of opinion on contentious issues.

But there is another story that coincides with, yet contradicts this one. Although there are glib accounts suggesting that growth and vitality only appear in Churches with certain theologies, or Churches in certain parts of the world, the truth is much more complex.<sup>5</sup> Around TEC as well as elsewhere, there are many communities of faith that are

4. <https://www.generalconvention.org/research-and-statistics/>, accessed 5 October 2018. See also <https://livingchurch.org/covenant/2018/08/30/facing-more-episcopal-church-decline/>, accessed 5 October 2018.

5. See in particular Daniel Muñoz, 'North to South: A Reappraisal of Anglican Communion Membership Figures', *Journal of Anglican Studies* 14. 1 (2015), 71–95.

growing, and which do have younger members. And there are also movements harder to discern and define, but whose faithfulness, vigour, and youth offers a sort of counter-narrative to a bigger picture of decline.

So there are two stories here, two narratives, two realities. Two mistakes in their interpretation however seem to be common. One is to make what can only be called specious theological claims about either the decline, or the real or supposed signs of hope, particularly to invoke the hand of God or the presence of the Spirit as though these were readily discernible (and apparently aligned with one's own institutional commitments and interests). The other is to harmonize these two narratives by compromise or averaging; to decide things are not so bad, most obviously, because clearly not everything is bad. Yet denial is not a very useful planning tool. In fact things really are that bad; but that is not the only story. The Church is failing and flourishing at the same time.

#### *Facts, Theories, and Theologies*

Harvard professor of ancient religion A.D. Nock is said to have quipped that 'A fact is a sacred thing – its life should not be sacrificed on the altar of a general theory'.<sup>6</sup> Those who live life in the service of faith are in some danger on this front, because of course they deal with general theories, not least about God and the world. But the facts sometimes defy the theories, or at least defy the sorts of theology employed on them. Success and failure in the contemporary Church need to be interpreted honestly rather than ignoring them, or placing values on them that are not so much real theological interpretations as spiritualized rationalizations. They are separate facts, and both are real.

One heresy already noted that seems to be growing, not only in synods but in other parts of the Church, consists of the tendency to claim that certain ecclesial initiatives, or certain programmes or practices, are somehow manifestly the will of God and the place of the Holy Spirit's presence – and that by implication, certain others are not. In reality, success and God's presence are both important, but they are not necessarily correlated, nor are claims of God's presence and favour more convincing for the vigour with which they are made.

Our fundamentalist cousins in megachurches make it easier to demonstrate the point. If success were theologically significant, then the relative success of such groups at present would seem to indicate that Western Anglicans have been proven faithless, and they blessed.

6. I owe the reported quote to Professor H.W. Attridge.

We know this is not true – at least I will assert it is not – yet the contrast between relative successes in conservative movements (over a half century and more) and the decline of the mainstream is significant.

There are reasons for this that are not actually mysterious, and neither are they always pernicious. What is pernicious is the claim that success reflects divine approval. Some (but not all) fundamentalist groups are successful because they believe in what they are doing, have articulated that clearly, and have been led purposefully and well. This success is not a kind of fundamentalist gnosis, but observable and measurable, and a variety of empirically based studies can confirm which churches are at least more likely to succeed.<sup>7</sup> Factors like these apply to congregations that are not fundamentalist as well; the problem is that these criteria are often not found in many Anglican churches of more liberal or catholic leanings. These have arguably been too satisfied with being a safe place for the ambivalent, rather than being clear about a heartfelt, thoughtful and nuanced faith.

While Anglicans need to be thoughtful as well as confident, there is more room for them to work for what will lead us to greater forms of measurable, numerical, success, as well as to other forms of faithful service. Indications are that local faith communities, not bureaucracies, are likely to be the place where a counter-narrative of success can flourish in the face of the broader reality of decline, although leadership at any level that has the appropriate characteristics – and Michael Curry's forthright advocacy of the Gospel comes readily to mind – can make a difference. If ministry and community could be graphed on axes of Faithfulness (X) and Success (Y), more need to plan for existence in that upper-right quadrant of the graph where both these are possible, all the while knowing that God is glorified also in those who are faithful but may not be succeeding, or not known to be so.

While a clear sense of purpose is likely to be a condition of success, it does not guarantee it, and even less does it indicate divine blessing. We actually do not where and how God is active in the present ferment of religion and secularism, but that is what the underrated category of faith is supposed to be for. With primary reference to Scripture, and with celebration of the sacraments as tokens of God's presence and purpose, historic Christianity engages with the present reality without claiming tools to discern the will of God in history other than to identify

7. See, for instance, the Australian data from its National Church Life Survey; 'Trends in Protestant Church Vitality over Twenty Years (1991–2011)', available at: <https://www.ncls.org.au/research/ncls-occasional-paper-23-01> (accessed 11 October 2018).

what is holy, good and loving. The faith that God is present and active is not the same thing as claiming to know just where and how.

Even when good work is done in the Church, admittedly, and when Jesus is proclaimed faithfully, success does not always follow. Yet this is a sociological fact as much or more than a theological one. Failure does not indicate that the Spirit was absent or that God was not glorified. There are many faithful Christians now glorifying God as they and their communities journey to extinction, in faith and hope.

It is also worth adding that extinction might not be all the world imagines. Even imminent institutional collapse does not mean the disappearance or vanishing of the Church. History teaches fairly clearly that nothing much actually vanishes, although its forms can change beyond recognition. What would be presumptuous – and which some are quite fond of doing – would be to claim that we know already what will and will not come next.

### *The City of God*

In the fourth century, the Emperor Constantine was converted to Christianity, and the Church rejoiced. However we view this now, after centuries of persecution it was not such a bad thing. Yet there were strings, institutional and theological. One of the theological consequences was the temptation to an early form of prosperity theology. Constantine's accession was hailed as divine provision, not just for the Church but for Rome which would surely be made great again.

Just a few decades later, in the year 410, Rome was sacked by the Goths. The bright Constantinian day had gone into eclipse; divine favour seemed to have been withdrawn from Rome, despite its newly Christian character, and of course there were those devotees of the old order who saw the catastrophe precisely as induced by the abandonment of tradition. The predictable Christian response was to claim that the calamity of Rome's sack was only a flesh wound, relative to the inexorable spread of the Gospel and the general progress of peace and justice. If the Church and the world were not yet as one, this was only a matter of time, and the indications were that everything was fine.

Augustine of Hippo, who saw these events unfold, famously took a very different view. While affirming divine sovereignty, Augustine saw the present age – the *saeculum* of our term 'secular' – as opaque to theological interpretation. While events are ultimately meaningful, their meaning can and will only be disclosed eschatologically. In the meantime we must act faithfully. This was a sort of theological agnosticism about the character of history, or at least about the interpretation

of specific events. Augustine thus formulated his famous view of the relationship between the Church and society, or rather between the city of God and the earthly city. These two communities co-exist, and together constitute society and its history, but are not fully distinguishable in the present.<sup>8</sup> Augustine would thus remind us that history itself must not be interpreted through the narrow focus of present experience, but from the perspective of eternity – which is not accessible to us by experience, but of which we are given a vision in Scripture, and for which we are fed by the sacraments.

So success and failure at a given point may not be what they appear. This is the message of Augustine's *City of God*, but is also reflected in the very fact that he and other early African Christians are still worth thinking about. Augustine's own episcopal see of Hippo was being besieged by Vandals at the time of his death, and the whole North African Church which spawned the examples and the thoughts of people like Perpetua and Augustine ultimately disintegrated in the aftermath of the Arab conquests.

We do not, however, interpret their significance to us by pious and proud appeals to the numerical strength of Christianity in Tunisia and Algeria, but rather through reflection on the examples of their courage, the abiding significance of their ideas, and the inspiration of their faith. While deeply culturally and historically specific, their witness continues to inform and interrogate our own constructions of success and failure. They remind Anglicans that God's presence and purpose are not really the stuff of programmes and statistics, even though these matter. In the last analysis, we are called to be faithful, and some of us may also be blessed with success.

8. See R.A. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).