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EDITORIAL

New Installation, Same Old Problems

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Not so long ago, the installation of the new Archbishop of Canterbury was primarily an English affair, heaving with Church of England bishops and a smattering of representatives from the wider Anglican Communion in attendance. It is only in modern times that planners have tried to make the event resemble something like the British Commonwealth at prayer.

That might have worked some magic in the late 20th century, but by casting this event as a grand international affair, the pomp and ceremony now have more than an air of out-of-date imperial hubris. This is the Church of England trying to create the impression and aura of being a premium-brand global Catholic church, anointing its new leader. Substantial sums of money have been poured into the event to ensure it conveys the *appearance* of some grand international celebration of global-ecclesial diversity, centred on Canterbury-led pre-eminence. The polity is projected to the wider world as a more palatable hybrid of meek and languid Protestant reforms with understated Catholic aesthetic accents and that innate English fondness for temperate mildness.

Yet this installation masked far deeper problems for the Anglican Communion. Whilst many have welcomed Dame Sarah Mullally's appointment, it is, of course, already a sign of continuing divisions across the Anglican Communion that some quietly opted to skip the ecclesiastical jamboree. Some openly declared their rejection of a female Archbishop of Canterbury, whilst others cited their reasons for boycotting the event as opposition to the theological positions Mullaly allegedly holds.

Other archbishops from overseas stayed away, not so much in protest as because the status theatre of the occasion no longer resonated. So, despite the planned grandeur of the Arch-episcopal installation, it struggled to gain purchase, let alone win widespread approval across the Communion. To paraphrase T. S. Eliot ('The Hollow Men', 1925), this indicates the beginning of something marked by less of a bang and more of a whimper.

The imperial hubris that shaped the occasion may be partly to blame. Those planning the installation seem to have colluded in the serious fiction that the scale of global Anglicanism is vast. For many years, the Church of England has touted the global number of Anglicans at around 88 million members, making it the third

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largest and most extensive Christian denomination in the world after Roman Catholicism (1.3 billion) and the Orthodox churches (350 million).

But there are no reliable statistics for these Anglican claims. Only a tiny handful of Anglican provinces can even count their membership, and most are unable to return numbers to the bean counters at Lambeth Palace. Packed into the inflated 88 million assertion are 25 million 'members' in England, but that is a nation where the current usual Sunday attendance (uSa) figure barely hovers above the 0.5 million mark – 1% of the population.

More recent, reliable, detailed analyses by academics (e.g., Daniel Munoz) suggest the true figure for global Anglicanism is closer to 55 million.[1] That would place it in the same league as Presbyterians, Lutherans, and Methodists. But almost certainly behind the Baptists and Pentecostal churches. True, partly because of the legacy of the British Empire, Anglicanism is found in 160 of the world's 200 countries, making it very extensive, and probably the most geographically widespread Protestant denomination. Yet it is modest in scale and spread very thinly.

In footballing terms, Anglicanism is more Championship material than Premiership. If it does belong in the latter elite league, it is more of an Everton (my club, and our last silverware was the Charity Shield in 1996) than a Liverpool. It is certainly not an Arsenal, Chelsea, Manchester City or Manchester United. Everton tends to dwell more in the bottom half of the table than the top half. The club feasts on its memories, not the present, nor on some future promise. Frankly, the global fanbase is very small compared to that of larger clubs.

The apparent benign indifference of much of the rest of the Anglican Communion to the new incumbent at Lambeth Palace is a sobering indication that this fixes nothing. A new installation, but the same old problems? Attending a somewhat grandiose ecclesiastical liturgy of obeisance in Canterbury doesn't really help. Each province faces its own set of issues and challenges. Deep divisions remain on power, authority, doctrine, gender, and sexuality.

Yet the continued promotion of a non-partitioned polity will only deepen division and accelerate decline. The only viable way forward for the Church of England and the wider Anglican Communion is now to create similar structures of affinity and organization to those found in other major, mainstream pan-national Protestant churches, such as those in Lutheran, Methodist and Presbyterian polity. This is realpolitik in any case, with a new rival head of global Anglicanism now appointed. However, even here, global Anglicanism has somehow managed to show that just as it cannot manage unity, neither can it effect a proper divorce. The GAFCON meeting of early March 2026 produced a classic Anglican fudge, positing power and authority in a new Global Anglican Council for governance, but stopping short of naming a rival to the Archbishop of Canterbury. Laurent Mbnanda,

[1]On the statistics, see Daniel Muñoz 'North to South: A Reappraisal of Anglican Communion Membership Figures', *Journal of Anglican Studies* [online], (2015), pp. 1–25. Muñoz noted that when the Anglican Communion Office claimed 88 million members, it only had up-to-date statistical information from 6 of the 38 Anglican provinces, and that membership details on official provincial websites are notoriously patchy and unreliable. Peter Brierley (*Painting by Numbers: An Introduction to Church Statistics*, London: Christian Research, 2005, p. 22) suggested that the more realistic figure for Anglicans in 2005 was 53 million.

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Archbishop of Rwanda, was elected to lead the new body. So it appears that the parties have now split, but have yet to divorce.[2] The GAFCON gathering marks another chapter in Anglican fragmentation and partition. This is a church imploding and splintering.

As global Anglicanism hirples on, some attribute the escape from the denouement of a final divorce and split in Anglicanism to recent (March 2026) amendments to the Advent 2025 Inter-Anglican Standing Committee on Unity, Faith and Order (IASCUFO) proposals, redefining Anglicanism in even more elastic and contorted terms. However, the March 2026 supplementary propositions amounted to little more than tweaks to the original proposals and schemes and are underwhelming in tone and theological content.[3] Despite warnings from other Anglican provinces that the proposals lacked ecclesial coherence and would be dangerous and divisive to adopt, IASCUFO has continued to promote the view that any church 'with a historic connection' to the See of Canterbury might form part of adequate criteria for being Anglican. The IASCUFO resolutions are theologically feeble and ecclesiologically porous. Anyone claiming a historic connection to Canterbury can now qualify and, if they so choose, count themselves as Anglican. This is a vapid form of inclusion and represents the sanctification of the lowest common denominator. It is merely pragmatism consecrated to preserve the weakest possible unity. It cannot endure.

So it is hard not to concur with the Emeritus Professor of the History of the Church at the University of Oxford, Diarmaid MacCulloch, and his assessment that as far as Anglicanism is concerned, 'this is a schism, even if they [i.e., global Anglican and Church of England leadership] don't want to say that'.[4] It is hard to square the circle when one party in a marital relationship insists that the marriage is over, announces divorce proceedings, moves out and lives a separate life, whilst the other party insists that the relationship is still functioning normally.

Meanwhile, the Church of England claims that Sarah Mullally is the 105th Archbishop of Canterbury. This is another serious myth that the Church of England still likes to push, claiming that it traces its archbishops back to Augustine, sent by Pope Gregory in 597. But the Church of England formally repudiated papal authority at the Reformation, beginning in 1534. So, is the '105th Archbishop of Canterbury' claim accurate? The Roman Catholic objection to this numbering argues that Mullally should be considered the 36th Protestant archbishop, following the 69 Catholic Archbishops of Canterbury from St. Augustine to Cardinal Reginald Pole. This spat over numbering may seem like historical pedantry, but '105th' is a

[2]See: https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/bbc/Laurent-Mbanda-of-Rwanda-emerge-new-leader-of-Global-Anglican-Church-body-Gafcon-2024519; https://americananglican.org/gafcon-establishes-global-anglican-council-elects-mbanda-as-chairman/; https://anglican.ink/2026/03/05/no-primus-for-gafcon-rebrands-itself-as-the-global-anglican-council/; and https://americananglican.org/gafcon-leaders-announce-historic-developments-for-global-anglican-governance/

[3]For the full text, see: https://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/546289/Supplement-to-NCPs_Lent-2026.pdf

[4]See the article from Lebo Diseko, BBC Global religion correspondent, reporting from Lagos in Nigeria on 3rd March 2026: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cgrz1rx0ejzo and see also the report from Reuters at: https://www.reuters.com/world/conservative-anglicans-pick-rival-leader-widening-church-rifts-2026-03-03/).

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Protestant revisionist account that serves more as national propaganda than as accurate history.

After legal separation from Rome in November 1534, the Church of England rapidly developed into a Protestant national church. It also quickly became organizationally pragmatic, under the monarchy, and subject to parliament. But in separating from Roman Catholicism, Anglicans lost any ecclesial authority structures and apparatus to resolve their internal theological disputes. As Anglicanism has spread globally, it has essentially been fragmenting at the same rate. It has no means of maintaining unity and is more akin to a Protestant federation than some Catholic Communion.

Meanwhile, there are plenty of problems at home for the new Archbishop of Canterbury to address. The safeguarding scandals keep coming with no end in sight. The Church of England thinks it can fix these, but it doesn't understand them and cannot. The reality of continually perpetrating wrongdoing, complicity, cover-ups, incompetence, and dishonesty persists, and at the highest levels of governance.[5] There is substantial evidence of bishops actively engaged in such activity, and even weaponizing bogus safeguarding allegations against their own clergy, whom they want to see silenced, punished or removed. This is draining trust and confidence in the leadership to the point where the integrity and honesty of the episcopacy are at risk of collapsing into moral bankruptcy.

On 20th February 2026, the BBC announced that the Diocese of Lincoln had confirmed to the BBC that an initial complaint of sexual assault made against the Bishop of Lincoln, Stephen Conway, had been made to the Church of England's National Safeguarding Team (NST) some three weeks earlier.[6] The NST did nothing, so it seems, and thus the alleged victim went to the police, who then arrested the bishop. This is worth contrasting with the rapid NST 'kangaroo court' that suspended a previous Dean and Bishop of Lincoln without any prior investigation. As with Bishop George Bell, the Church of England can move fast against those it regards as expendable (i.e., most clergy), but it will invariably be a case of slow-dead-stop when it comes to allegations against any of its favoured bishops, which is most of them. The new Archbishop of Canterbury, Sarah Mullally, suspended Conway only after the police arrest, but did not act in the weeks before, when the matter was first referred to the NST.

Naturally, it may yet turn out to be the case that Conway is entirely innocent. But that is hardly the point. If he were not a bishop, he would have been suspended by the NST promptly. But as bishops sit above church law, exonerating and absolving one another of third-party complaints through the misuse of their internal processes, safeguarding complainants now seek remedies through secular law. This is despite the Church of England pouring huge energies and resources into maintaining and promoting the *appearance* of independent scrutiny, as though this will convince those in the pews and the wider public that the bishops are exemplars of

[5]See Gavin Drake, March 2nd 2026, https://churchabuse.uk/2026/03/03/safeguarding-direction-of-travel-is-not-a-destination/

[6]Aleem Maqbool, Religion Editor, BBC News, 20th February 2026: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c5y5e32vwdwo.

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probity and integrity in safeguarding scrutiny. Yet, as Michelle Burns and others have shown, this is all for show and illusion, and should not be trusted at all.[7]

Bishops don't want accountability or independent scrutiny. Consequently, trust and confidence in their probity and integrity have entirely collapsed. Their traditional episcopal functions as teachers, pastors and moral leaders have been rendered redundant. No one believes them. As Tanya Gold noted in *The Observer*, 'these are bad days for the [English] class system and its founding theology: the idea that if you are noble, you are good, perhaps even invested with residual divinity'.[8] (Gold was referring to the ongoing crisis involving the British royal family regarding Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor, formerly Prince Andrew, and Duke of York, following his arrest over alleged misconduct in public office linked to the Jeffrey Epstein scandals).[9] As Gold observes, the age of deference is over, and the magic and mystique that royals – and, by extension, English Anglican bishops – could once have appealed to is most definitely deceased. Bishops are no longer looked to, or looked up to, and arguably, they only have themselves to blame for their rapid fall from grace.

The public today demands accountability and transparency, and they expect clarity in the face of glaring scrutiny. Yet most English Anglican bishops will still harbour hopes of evading this cultural, social and political tsunami, so they resist it. Increasingly, it is highly likely that the rising tide will now sweep them away.

Over the past few decades, the Church of England's leadership has poured hundreds of millions of pounds into speculative new initiatives aimed at capturing the youth market or opening up voguish mission fronts designed to catch the eye or demonstrate zeitgeist resonance. With rare exceptions, these have fallen flat, whilst also draining much-needed resources, money and support from mainstream parish ministry. Perhaps the hope in investing so much money was to shift the focus away from floundering leadership and unaccountable governance by delivering on promises of growth? If so, this has failed, and badly so. Equally, the much-vaunted rise of the charismatic evangelicals, which might have turned around the future of the Church of England, has proven to be something of a mirage. The fizzy wine of renewal has gone rather flat. What was supposed to flip the fortunes of English Anglicanism has turned out to be a bit of a flop.

The Church of England's leadership has entered what mountaineers call 'the death zone', namely the altitude above 8,000 metres at which the human body consumes itself faster than its core can be replenished. In its torturous attempts to preserve unity at any price, the church has also been destroying its future capacity. The polity is no longer an exemplar of some *via media*, but has, rather, collapsed into a state of 'negative equilibrium'. Income, membership and vocations are all falling, and the emerging economic crises cannot be filled by taxing parishes with ever-higher quota tariffs. At the same time, the Church of England is trying to spend its way out of its recession by investing in speculative new growth bids.

[7]See: https://www.guardingtheflock.com/post/one-of-the-lads-auditing-the-boys-in-church-of-england-safeguarding.

[8]Tanya Gold, 'Forum', *The Observer*, (2026) p. 34.

[9]See https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/live/c70kjr9wjw0t.

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This leads to the polity entering the death zone. Some parts of the body are designated as vital organs and receive priority blood flow and funding. These parts of the church are hiring and investing more and more, as evidenced by job advertisements in the *Church Times*, with new executive directors, mission enablers, and middle managers all being sought on attractive salaries. Meanwhile, the standard pastoral work in parishes becomes the default extremities and is left out in the cold. But such reversals in any ecclesial polity burn more resources than can be replenished.

Thus, hardly a week goes by without the *Church Times* reporting that some diocese has 'won', been 'granted' or 'awarded' many millions of pounds for planting new congregations, or developing some innovative initiative designed to reach some new summit. But this is madness when the Church of England cannot afford to run its core parish operations, take care of the churches it has, and pay its clergy a basic wage. For the Church of England, the body is already metabolizing its own core muscle tissue for energy. In the past, the usual remedy would have been rest and recovery to beat the fatigue. But in mountaineering, the 'death zone' comes through a kind of altitude sickness. The longer you spend in denial, the less chance there is that any recuperation can help. The body at its centre thinks it is warm and winning. At its extremities, however, the body tissue is dead, gangrenous and frostbitten.

Furthermore, the over-hyped assertion that Gen Z are returning to religion as never before also seems another example of altitude sickness, or a morning-mis-t-moment for most of the mainstream Christian denominations in the UK. A detailed analysis comes from Ryan P. Burges[10] where he shows that Gen Z adults record the lowest figures of church attendance and belief in God in American history. Church attendance has continued to decline in Britain, as it has in the USA, although there is some evidence of a very slight plateau in the overall statistics. The figures for Gen Z and Millennial adults indicate significant falls in church attendance, religious affiliation and observance, and declining trust and confidence in church leaders. It is hard to see how *any* appointment to the See of Canterbury could change the prevailing cultural weather in England, let alone reverse the steady supply of statistical surveys that all point to deeper decline and wider disengagement.[11]

Then there is the question of what to do about the bloated church bureaucracies that are growing up in each Church of England diocese, and in central London for national control. These account for hundreds of millions of pounds of annual expenditure. There is no real evidence that they're making any difference to morale and effectiveness in the parishes. These diocesan HQs levy heavy taxation (in the form of quota payments) on parishes, draining money and morale from frontline ministry to bolster centralized church bureaucracies. That is a cause of resentment and growing concern, as the diocesan structures lack meaningful accountability or

[10]Ryan P. Burges, *The Vanishing Church* (Ada, MI: Brazos Press, 2026); and see his *The American Religious Landscape: Facts, Trends, and the Future* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2025).

[11]NB: the dispute over data is carefully explained in this BBC article https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c0k1jddl51no, dated 22nd February 2026, suggesting that the churches are exaggerating recent findings which lack empirical depth. For another useful summary, see the commentary by Dr. Andrew Henry, 'Why the Gen Z Revival Isn't Real', *Religion for Breakfast*: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v = UdsPPxaGVUs.

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even much transparency. But as the parishes are literally frozen out from the centre, their main focus will be on survival.

For decades, the creeping grip of church bureaucracy has been taking over the running of the Church of England. Each new bishop is now a product of that culture. In ancient times, bishops were expected to be outstanding teachers, exemplary carers of their clergy and laity, courageous and sacrificial public servants in mission, and foci of unity. Today's Church of England bishops sport lanyards, have been DBS-checked, are fluent in social media and attended a mini-MBA course. It is thin gruel.

Modern Archbishops of Canterbury are no longer chosen by some catholic conclave. They emerge from entirely secular procedures designed by church bureaucrats and signed off on by them, then committed to prayer. The senior bureaucrats – ecclesiocrats – are the literal power behind the throne of St. Augustine. Again, serious issues of trust, confidence, transparency and accountability are looming. The lack of trust in the Church of England's episcopacy and its ecclesiocracy is emerging as the dominant ecclesial paradigm of the 21st century.

Mullally's proclivities are yet to emerge, but she must have (literally) ticked the boxes to fit the profile and procedures that ecclesial bureaucrats crafted to find Justin Welby's successor. Whether someone who is the product of such processes can radically resist and reform them remains to be seen. The selection panel does not appear to have used the *Ordinal*, which requires bishops to be consummate theological educators (note: episcopacy is a teaching office), exemplary carers of clergy and laity, foci of unity, and courageous leaders of public mission (note: here, safeguarding failures would disqualify most potential candidates). Meanwhile, many observers now quietly opine that, unless power, authority, and agency are returned from the aloof, unaccountable bureaucratic hierarchy to grassroots parishes and the clergy, membership and vocations will continue to decline.

If the Church of England is in the equivalent of some mountaineering 'death zone', then we should remember that Christian faith also believes in resurrection. But death comes first, and I am not sure that the Church of England has understood its own obsolescence and mortality. I am as against pessimism as I am opposed to false optimism. Realism and truthfulness are now urgently required at Lambeth Palace. Such things really ought to come quite naturally to the upper echelons of the Church of England's senior leadership. We shall see.

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