

Ageing Church of England 'will be dead in 20 years'

The Church of England will cease to exist in 20 years as the current generation of elderly worshippers dies, Anglican leaders warned yesterday.

12 JULY - The average age of its members is now 61 and by 2020 a “crisis” of “natural wastage” will lead to their numbers falling “through the floor”, the Church’s national assembly was told.

The Church was compared to a company “impeccably” managing itself into failure, during exchanges at the General Synod in York.

The warnings follow an internal report calling for an urgent national recruitment drive to attract more members.

In the past 40 years, the number of adult churchgoers has halved, while the number of children attending regular worship has declined by four fifths.

The Rev Dr Patrick Richmond, a Synod member from Norwich, told the meeting that some projections suggested that the Church would no longer be “functionally extant” in 20 years’ time.

“The perfect storm we can see arriving fast on the horizon is the ageing congregations,” he said. “The average age is 61 now, with many congregations above that.

“These congregations will be led by fewer and fewer stipendiary clergy ... 2020 apparently is when our congregations start falling through the floor because of natural wastage, that is people dying.

“Another 10 years on, some extrapolations put the Church of England as no longer functionally extant at all.”

Andreas Whittam Smith, the first Church Estates Commissioner, who leads the Church’s £5.3billion investment fund, said the demographic “time bomb” for Anglicans should be seen as “a crisis”.

He told the assembly: “One of our problems may be that decline is so slow and imperceptible that we don’t really see it coming clearly enough.

“I have seen large companies perfectly and impeccably manage themselves into failure. Every step along the road has been well done.

“Every account is neatly signed off.”

Then finally they find they have “gone bust”, he said. “I sometimes feel the Church is a bit like that.”

He added: “I wish that all of us would have a sense of real crisis about this.”

Maths lessons are too “capitalist” and should be reformed to promote Christian values, the Rt Rev Paul Butler, Bishop of Southwell and Nottingham, told Synod.

The meeting heard that teachers should not illustrate lessons with examples of “profit and loss”, or encourage children to save in order to buy bikes or toys.

Instead, lessons should focus on the maths involved in giving donations to charity, saving for an overseas project, or even “tithing” – giving 10 per cent of one’s income to the Church, Synod members said.

In his speech to the assembly, Bishop Butler said: “We need to explore different models from a Christian perspective of how we approach all the curriculum, not just RE.”