

EDITORIAL

The Importance of Being Earnest

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‘To lose one Archbishop may be regarded as a misfortune. But to lose all four looks like carelessness’.

I have been writing and reporting on crises of power and authority in mainstream churches for over 35 years – and especially my own denomination, Anglicanism. Never before have all four leaders of Anglicanism in England, Wales and Scotland faced calls for their resignations at the same time. The Archbishop of Canterbury has already departed ‘stage left’. I noted only six months ago that the Church of England was broken beyond repair, little imagining that the same genre of scandals that brought down Welby would be shared by other parts of the Anglican church.¹

But what has happened to make Oscar Wilde’s 1895 play, and the words spoken by Lady Bracknell – ‘*To lose one parent, Mr Worthing, may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness*’ – to echo with such ecclesial redolence? There are trivial similarities that connect the farce of Wilde’s play to the severe crises Anglicanism finds itself mired in. Wilde’s play centres on the entangled affairs of two young men who lead double lives to evade unwanted social obligations. But whilst Wilde’s drama is a comedy-farce, British Anglicanism’s theatre is national tragedy. The crisis, in summary, is this.

First, the Archbishop of Canterbury was found to have dragged his feet and obfuscated over many years relating to the serial abuser John Smyth QC. Smyth, a barrister and senior member of a Christian charity, was found to have abused up to

Since the original article was written, the Archbishop of Wales, the Most Revd Andy John, has announced his early retirement, effective from August 2025. The article did not discuss the recent calls for the Primate of Ireland to step down, citing some of the same reasons presented in this essay, although these appeals are acknowledged. It remains the case that across England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland, the lack of public trust in safeguarding within the Anglican churches continues, and that is unlikely to be changed until such time as it is subject to fully independent regulation and external professional scrutiny

¹(<https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/ideas/religion/church-of-england/68523/welby-is-gonebut-trust-in-the-church-is-broken-beyond-repair>).

100 boys aged 13 to 17. A report (the *Makin Review*) found Welby could have done more. Welby resigned.²

Second, Stephen Cottrell the Archbishop of York was found to have not acted on information relating to one of his senior clergymen, David Tudor, when Cottrell was Bishop of Chelmsford. There was clear evidence of the threat posed by Tudor to young girls, but nothing was done. Despite other victims of abuse calling for Cottrell to resign,³ and around 40,000 people calling for his resignation in a public petition, the Archbishop of York has remained in post.⁴

Third, the Archbishop of Wales, Andy John, has faced calls for his resignation over the handling of safeguarding issues at Bangor Cathedral, and more generally the governance and finances of his diocese.^{5,6} As Archbishop of Wales, he also declined to investigate a Cathedral Dean (Richard Peers at Llandaff) for allegedly forging risk assessments in safeguarding, in order to weaponize false allegations against another clergyman. Bishop John stated that it would 'not be in the interests of the Church in Wales to pursue [that] case'.⁷ As with Bangor Cathedral, anything that looked like a potential scandal was simply swept under the carpet.

Fourth, the Primus of the Episcopal Church of Scotland has also faced calls for his resignation over the handling of safeguarding concerns relating to the Bishop of Aberdeen and Orkney, Anne Dyer. Victims of abuse claim that the statements made by the Primus are at variance with their experiences.⁸ The policies for safeguarding in the Scottish Episcopal Church appear to have been set aside.⁹

With the examples from England, Scotland and Wales, disciplinary processes appear to be unevenly applied in relation to bishops and favoured or senior clergy. So far, only Archbishop Welby has resigned. Yet despite widespread press coverage of the other three Anglican Archbishops in the UK, the media have been slow to join the dots on this unique historical happenstance. Never in ecclesiastical history have the four most senior Anglican clergy in the UK faced calls for their resignation at the same time, and essentially for the same reasons. To lose one Archbishop might be unfortunate. Two could be construed as clumsy. But three or four is plainly developing into a pattern. The common denominators are worth noting.

First, safeguarding practices and disciplinary proceedings are unevenly applied in Anglican churches, and to the public, this looks like hypocrisy and cover-ups. The recent case of Canon Andrew Hindley at Blackburn Cathedral reveals an episcopal culture and Church of England disciplinary processes that are mired in opacity, reputation management, unevenness, injustice and incompetence. There is no accountability or transparency. The fact that the Bishop of Blackburn (Philip North)

²<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c5y5l7116g1o>

³<https://churchabuse.uk/2025/05/16/oh-dear-here-we-go-again/>.

⁴<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cwydgjev70o> and c.f., <https://survivingchurch.org/2025/05/23/open-letter-re-auditing-and-governance-of-safeguarding-in-the-church-of-england/>

⁵<https://nation.cymru/news/archbishop-of-wales-may-step-down-early-say-critics/>

⁶<https://www.thinkinganglicans.org.uk/bangor-cathedral-update/#comments>

⁷<https://survivingchurch.org/2024/12/16/the-weaponization-of-safeguarding/>

⁸<https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2025/16-may/news/uk/concerns-about-bishop-anne-dyer-disciplinary-case-continue>

⁹<https://www.thetimes.com/article/fa90b5e3-4728-4ee6-9500-1693a0a82116>

will still not disclose the full report on the Hindley debacle suggests even more secrecy and cover-ups.¹⁰

Second, the biblical idiom ‘strain the gnat yet swallow the camel’ infers being excessively concerned with minor details while ignoring or neglecting more significant issues. The waspish phrase of Jesus highlights hypocrisy or being overly fussy about unimportant things, whilst being lax about more fundamental ones. The phrase that originates from the Gospel of Matthew (23:24) perfectly captures the culture of safeguarding within the UK Anglican churches. The British public entirely understands that double standards are now operating in Anglican polity.

Third, whilst there is clearly concern for churches that are left to struggle with the demands of legal compliance and financial challenges, Anglicanism has largely opted to keep itself aloof from public accountability and recognized forms of regulation in employment, governance and safeguarding. The consequence, inevitably, is an indifferent or hostile population that does not warm to any church expecting to enjoy the privileges of being a public body whilst behaving like some private fiefdom. Anglicanism is a lofty ecclesial expression that operates as ‘a law unto itself’ and is increasingly isolated and mistrusted as a result.

Fourth, it follows that public trust and confidence in the leadership of the church continues to collapse, both within and without. Those charged with selecting a new Archbishop of Canterbury may assume that the views of potential candidates on sexuality are key to the appointment. But from the perspective of the wider public, this makes little difference. What is the point of a bishop who is passionately in favour of progressive views on equal marriage, or one claiming to be biblically orthodox and against equal marriage, if neither can be trusted to tell the truth on matters of governance, safeguarding and the like?

Plainly, one way forward for the Anglican churches in the UK to recover public trust and confidence is to be voluntarily placed under robust external regulation and serious independent professional scrutiny. But it is hard to imagine the leadership of the Anglican churches in the UK exploring such avenues, as this could easily lead to the position of bishops being precarious and becoming as expendable as their clergy. This leaves the hierarchy of Anglicanism in the UK with the uncomfortable questions posed by the British parliamentarian, Tony Benn, who constantly asked of the established powers he faced:

‘What power have you got? Where did you get it from? In whose interests do you exercise it? To whom are you accountable? And how can we get rid of you?’¹¹

Other Concerns

The multiple safeguarding crises that have consumed Anglicanism in the UK in the 21st century have quickly evolved into a litmus test of the public trust and confidence in the church and its leadership. It is a test that has been repeatedly failed, <>and

¹⁰<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cv2gj77pvwwo>

¹¹c.f., *Hansard*, vol. 577, March 20th 2014: <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2014-03-20/debates/14032059000004/TributesToTonyBenn>

there is no sign than the ensuing demoralization and decline of support within the denomination can easily recover. The accompanying crises of late modernity are also posing serious challenges to the standing of Anglican leadership. Several concerns could be mentioned here, but the following five are particularly pressing.

First, there is no question that Anglicanism is struggling with declining rates of churchgoing, ageing congregations, soaring costs in the upkeep of its church buildings, and overall viability. There have been attempts to invest some faith and hope in the slight upturn in millennial and gen-z church attendance amongst males. However, this modest upsurge is almost exclusively confined to fashionable metropolitan Roman Catholic churches (e.g., Kensington) and amongst Pentecostal, Evangelical and diaspora churches.¹²

Second, church closures are beginning to bite.¹³ Although the secular cycles in culture that once saw every era of famine greeted with some later degree of plenty, the decline in churchgoing for Anglicans now looks to be stubbornly set and irreversible. As a report in *The Economist* notes, 3,500 Anglican churches have closed in the last decade alone.¹⁴ Although 16,000 remain open, reports of rural churches being abandoned are now common, with churchwardens simply walking away from the burdensome responsibility of trying to maintain an expensive building in a community that can no longer afford to keep it heated, maintained and insured.¹⁵

Third, the politics of moderate consensus within UK Anglican polity has also deteriorated markedly in the 21st century. The presenting issue might be sexuality, but as with secular politics, the 'party systems' within ecclesial polity have come apart at the seams. Evangelicals who were once broadly aligned are now divided on gender, spirituality, sexuality and the merits (or otherwise) of separatism. The more catholic wing of Anglicanism has experienced similar fragmentation. The more 'broad church' (or even liberal) centre-sphere of Anglicanism has lacked dynamic leadership and even basic organization.

Fourth, a weakened broad-central Anglican polity has found it hard to pivot in the face of ecclesial populism that plays to a right-wing base on issues of morality. As with UK politics, the Conservative and Labour parties were once broad coalitions. In a largely two-party system, albeit with the Scottish National Party, Plaid Cymru and the Liberal Democrats to factor, a 'first-past-the-post' electoral system usually meant that the duly elected Member of Parliament for any constituency in the UK would be picking up at least 40% of the vote to secure a seat in Parliament. But with the advent of parties such as Reform splitting the Conservative vote and also taking support from Labour, the UK electoral system can now produce an MP elected to a constituency with less than 25% of the vote. Exactly the same fragmentation and polarization are now being witnessed in Anglican polity, with elections to Synod and selections of bishops being determined by minority party interests in a system that would be more suited to proportional representation, yet is still a first-past-the-post.

¹²See 'Altered Minds', *The Economist*, May 10th 2025, p. 18.

¹³See Martyn Percy, <https://survivingchurch.org/2025/04/07/the-church-of-england-in-secular-cycles-a-case-of-corporate-long-covid/>

¹⁴See 'Going, Going, Gone'. *The Economist*, May 10th 2025, pp. 17-18.

¹⁵<https://www.thinkinganglicans.org.uk/criticism-of-church-closing-policies-continues/>

The Church of England has already seen several Vacancy-in-See processes stymied by minority concerns dictating to the majority.¹⁶

Fifth, to try and counter criticism and complaints about safeguarding policies and practices, the Church of England's leadership has unwisely resorted to using the UK's muddled laws on free speech to try and silence malcontents. Victims of abuse trying to secure truth, justice and reparation, and complaining about the Church of England's opaque obfuscations, have been reported to the police for harassment, and threatened with prosecution. This exercise in self-protection on the part of the Anglican hierarchy is designed to subdue social media posts, stifle dissent and prevent senior bishops from being criticized.¹⁷ The ambiguity of UK laws on free speech is being exploited by the hierarchy of the Church of England, who are seeking to use the police to coerce victims of abuse and injustice into silence, in order to prevent dissent, debate and complaint about their manifestly inadequate safeguarding processes.¹⁸

It would appear that Anglicanism in the UK is wrestling with an problem identified by Laurence Peter in his 1969 book, *The Peter Principle*, which observed that people in a hierarchy tend to rise to 'a level of respective incompetence'.¹⁹ The 'Peter Principle' is a concept in management theory developed to show that employees are promoted based on their success in previous jobs until they reach a level at which they are no longer competent, as skills in one job do not always translate to another.

The 'Peter Principle' states that a person who is competent at their job will earn a promotion to a position that requires different skills. If the promoted person lacks the skills required for the new role, they will be incompetent at the new level and will not be promoted again. If the person is competent in the new role, they will be promoted again and will continue to be promoted until reaching a level at which they are incompetent. Being incompetent, the individual will not qualify for promotion again and thus remains stuck at this final placement (also known as 'Peter's Plateau'). But if the 'Peter Principle' is a fit for the episcopacy in Anglicanism, then we have a hierarchiology, where omnicompetence is assumed, and cannot be questioned, even when all the evidence points to a rather different analysis.²⁰

Conclusion

The field of kairology derives from the ancient Greek (but largely unknown) deity Kairos, who was deemed to be in control of opportunity and the right moment. Kairos is the alternate spelling of the name of the minor Greek deity Caerus, the god of luck and opportunity. In ancient Greek mythology, Caerus was the youngest son of Zeus who neglected to overthrow his father as everyone supposed he would, preferring instead to accept what was convenient and fit, and at the right time. Hence the god of timing – Caerus – from which we derive our term Kairos.

¹⁶c.f. Philip Collins, 'Could it Happen Here?', *Prospect*, June 2025, pp. 12-21.

¹⁷<https://survivingchurch.org/2020/02/09/general-synod-survivors-and-institutional-power/>

¹⁸See 'Amend Thyself', *The Economist*, May 17th 2025, pp. 19-20.

¹⁹L. Peter, *The Peter Principle*, London: William Morrow and Company, 1969.

²⁰See Martyn Percy, 'Credo', *The Times*, 17th May 2025, p. 70.

I think the leadership of Anglicanism in the UK now sits within the nexus of a highly problematic kairology and hierarchyology. It is increasingly hard to see how the leadership can negotiate the challenges of the present age, irrespective of any potential opportunity that might lie latent within the present. The theological construction of leadership in Anglican polity is unfit for its present purposes, and the underlying cultural-structural ecclesiology does not provide an adequate rationale for the evolutionary adaptation that is now necessary. This has bequeathed a leadership legacy to the principals of English, Scottish and Welsh Anglicanism which cannot work and will only lead to a greater deterioration in public trust and confidence. No amount of personal charisma will be able to compensate for the structural deficits inherent within the leadership.

It will take a major overhaul, or far deeper crises (e.g., reform, revolution, etc) to resolve these issues. The present time offers little leeway to the leadership of Anglicanism in the UK. It will continue to pivot on individuals who can model authentic and earnest forbearance in these most challenging times, but the following four concluding points are present for consideration in terms of future leadership.

First, the importance of being earnest should not be underestimated. It is not enough for the leadership to sound sincere, especially when words do not tally with action. In the 'show and tell' of UK Anglican leadership, congregations and the wider public want to see far less 'tell' and a lot more transparent demonstrable 'show'; less talk, more action. However, the leadership lacks the resolve to deliver on its promises, which undermines the identity and authenticity of the Anglican church.

Second, earnestness itself is, etymologically, derived from Old English and Norse words meaning 'serious', 'grave', 'pledge', 'promise', 'resolve' and 'binding word'. In safeguarding, there is little sense that the words and actions from the UK leaders of the Anglican churches carry conviction, reliability or substance. Repeated failures to carry forward deep and searching investigations or reviews of policy and practice suggest a church that is fundamentally insincere.

Third, the lack of resolution is hardly surprising in an ecclesial polity that lacks resolution in most other spheres of its identity. It is not just the hoary issues of sexuality and gender and sexuality that highlight the problem. Even in something as basic as liturgy, Anglicanism in the UK no longer enjoys liturgical coherence or the theological unity upon which sincerity and the earnest exposition of truth can be established. The consequence for the leadership is that they are left trying to hold together an increasingly attenuated unity through substandard buttery verbiage.

Fourth, if liturgy and theology are no longer holding the congregations and factions of UK Anglicanism together, and the Synods of England, Wales and Scotland mired in political and moral infighting, then the means for establishing truth, justice, transparency and accountability within the polity on matters of dispute (especially in employment and disciplinary processes) will need to be relocated. It cannot be left to internal procedures that are founded on insecure and contested resolutions. The only way forward is to have independent regulation for the churches, which will establish equality of arms in seeking resolution and justice.

There is a deep summons to earnestness that UK Anglicanism and its leadership currently lacks. Sharp differences of opinion can no longer be mediated within the polity. Nor can the injustices perpetrated by the institution be managed by perpetual

promises of further talks, but then no action. What Anglican polity now needs is some means of securing processes of binding arbitration within the polity and that externally commits the parties to resolutions that plainly support Anglicanism in the importance of being earnest. Without such resolution, Anglicanism in the UK will continue to struggle with leadership that cannot be taken seriously and indeed does not deserve to be regarded as such.

Senior bishops have, thus far, largely dealt with the most serious unresolved abuse scandals and safeguarding failures by offering pastoral care and mediation. Neither is adequate, or even appropriate. Pastoral care, as offered by the hierarchy of the UK Anglican church, will not deal with the structural instruments and procedures that have perpetuated the abuse and continue to perpetrate systemic cruelty. Victims will always be short-changed. Indeed, there will be no change. Likewise, any mediation offered will not result in any accountability or structural transformation. Processes of binding arbitration, in contrast, would probably require the institution and its leadership to become accountable and reform.

Pastoral care and mediation is a thin gruel to be offering victims of abuse and those who have been betrayed by egregious systemic failures in safeguarding processes. All we can note here is that an ecclesial polity that lacks the necessary means for internal resolutions will not be able to broker solutions that resolve the pain and injustice others experience and especially cruelties perpetrated by the church against other parties. Naturally enough, the leadership of UK Anglicanism will continue to resist any moves towards egalitarian transparency.

The unresolved – and increasingly unravelled – nature of UK Anglican polity and its leadership means that being resolved, serious and even truthful is losing out to a thin polity of executive managerialism focused on short-term reputational PR and crisis management. This is corroding the core identity and morale of the church from within. Plainly, a church not gathered around clarity and unity in liturgy, order and belief, cannot live or last long by deploying more managerial triage and PR initiatives. The polity of UK Anglicanism needs to be deeper and far more concrete. Otherwise, it will just unravel further and has already thinned out to the point where it has been arguably rendered pointless.

A new moment in Anglican polity has arrived, and the accommodation and inherent compromise telegraphed in the myth of Caerus will not suffice in the times we find ourselves in. The obvious importance of a polity being known as earnest is that it can be trusted to be serious and resolved in its actions and not merely reliant on a defective rhetoric of sincerity which continually translates into inaction, broken promises and unresolvedness. The current crises that have consumed the leadership of UK Anglicanism, and will continue to frame the public perception of the polity, are probably unresolvable. But if UK Anglicanism is serious about being earnest in the vocation of embodying of truth, justice, accountability and reliability, clear steps must be taken to resolve the nature and identity of the polity if it is to have any meaningful future as a church.