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*English Churches: Living Congregations or Museum Buildings?*  
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In London's Westminster Abbey, the last resting place of kings and saints, the tour guides suddenly go silent at the top of each hour. They stop in mid-sentence and urge their tour group to listen respectfully. A priest enters the pulpit and says a one-minute prayer. The tourists shuffle uneasily, surprised at the sudden interruption. They are here to view the past, the graves of King Edward the Confessor, Queen Elizabeth I, Mary Queen of Scots, for instance. This reminder that the Abbey is a living church—a place where Christians believe God hears prayers today—jars with their experience of it as a tourist attraction, as a museum of the past.

Westminster Abbey symbolizes the challenge facing the Anglican Church in England. Is it a vital religion serving a dynamic body of believers, or has it become a relic of the past, to be preserved for what it has been rather than what it is now?

A strong argument can be made that the Church's day is past. Fewer than a million people attend services each Sunday, in a country of more than 60 million. Given that the Church has 16,000 parishes, that averages out to fewer than 65 people per church.

To make matters worse, the average age of the congregation is increasing. Fewer and fewer families with children join the Church and even fewer young adults think the Church is relevant to their lives. While traditionally young people in England have started training for the ministry right out of high school, increasingly ministerial students are mature adults beginning second careers.

If Westminster Abbey represents one kind of English church, the village church in a rural valley represents the other. For centuries, English country life has been dominated, even defined, by the local church. It has been the worship center and the community center, the focus for family celebrations of weddings and deaths; its bell tower has soared above the surrounding houses, giving each village its visual character.

Many of these churches are historically important, having been built from the 19th century back into the

Middle Ages. Indeed, 13,000 of the 16,000 churches are classified as historic monuments. As these buildings age, many of them are becoming unsafe. Bits of stone fall on passersby, church towers are becoming unsafe, roofs leak and the wind enters through holes in the weathered walls.

The combination of aging church buildings and aging church congregations is a recipe for collapse. The upkeep of historic buildings is increasingly expensive. The Anglican Church spent a sixth of its budget last year on repairing church buildings, and that amount did not even reduce the maintenance backlog. Nearly all those funds came from the local congregations themselves. As Church membership dwindles even further, the total amount of these funds will grow smaller.

Soon, the Church will have to decide between maintaining its church buildings and meeting the needs of its congregations. Most important of these to the continuation of the Church itself is increasing evangelization to bring young people and young families back into the fold.

As the Manchester newspaper, *The Guardian*, observed on Christmas Eve 1999, "Non-churchgoers expect beautiful old church buildings to be there in perpetuity, to draw the tourists and to provide an attractive frame for christenings, weddings and funerals. They do not like it when the buildings begin to fall down. Yet they expect the churchgoing minority to pay to prevent this."

If the Anglican Church does not take steps to expand its membership and make its message relevant to today's young adults, then its church buildings will increasingly become unpopulated museums. In order to maintain the buildings, then, other sources for funding building repairs must be found.

The obvious source of funding is the government, either directly, through lottery funds, or perhaps through special taxes on alcohol and tobacco. If no such funds are found, then either the buildings will be lost or the government will find itself funding church "museums," after the living congregations have disappeared.