

Nine myths debunked

1. Why can't we stay as we are? We are thriving as it is.

In his response to this myth, Steven Webb quoted some stark statistics from a 2014 report by the Benedict XVI Centre for Religion and Society at St Mary's University in Twickenham. It found that 56% of people raised as Catholics identified as Catholic in adulthood. This compares to over 70% in 1993. Moreover almost 50% of weekly or more mass attenders are aged 65+. "In our own diocese numeric decline has been masked by a significant number of immigrants and the general increase of the population in the south east but we are losing children and young people at an alarming rate. Many of your responses to the questionnaires speak of ageing congregations and, according to our Annual Report for the year 2016/17, our Mass attendance fell by 10% in one year. In reality it was less than that but still a decline."

He continued: "So in summary we currently retain about 56% of those raised as Catholic and of those only just over a quarter attend Mass once a week and nearly 40% never attend. In terms of simplistic recruitment and retention this is not a good result."

"This is our status quo. This is what we have now and I would suggest that this is not good enough to hold on to at all costs. In any environment these statistics should lead anyone to think that an overhaul of how we do things is necessary - and this has nothing at all to do with a diminishing number of priests."

2. How can we cope with all these changes when we have a large property development on our doorstep?

"Our population has been growing across Essex and East London for years but even with this significant increase in our population our church numbers have never matched the increase in general population. The last census in 2011 put the population in our diocese at 2,661,600 and in 2017 even by a conservative estimate it was at least 2,826,000. Our overall Mass attendance has not increased during that time. It remained steady until 2016 when it started to decline."

3. Why not just bring more foreign priests in?

“According to the *Pontifical Yearbook 2017* and the *Annuarium Statisticum Ecclesiae*, our European ratio of people to priests is far, far better than India or Asia or Africa. It may be acceptable for us to accept priests from abroad when those places choose of their own volition to send priests to us to serve immigrant communities with some sort of national chaplaincy; it is far more questionable whether it is right for us to actively seek to deprive countries of their priests when they need them more than we do. Moreover, in recent years every one of our visas has been used. We do not have any margin to bring in many more foreign priests even if it were right so to do.”

4. Why co-operate with the consultation exercise when it is a sham and the outcome a fait accompli?

“I do not think Bishop Alan could have been any clearer about the fact that he wants to hear what parishioners have to say BEFORE he makes the difficult decisions that will fall to him as our bishop. Listening to people and hearing what they have to say DOES NOT necessarily mean that comments or suggestions will be agreed. Furthermore, even those that are agreed will not necessarily be implemented simply because Bishop Alan will have to look at the big picture across our diocese and do what he thinks is best for all of us.”

5. Surely we just need to pray for vocations?

“I agree entirely that we need to pray for vocations but this must be as well as this initiative (part of which is aimed at the promotion of vocations). The *2017 Pontifical Yearbook* says ‘*the number of seminarians, after reaching a maximum in 2011, has suffered a gradual reduction. The sole exception remains Africa, which does not yet seem to be affected by the crisis in vocations and is confirmed as the geographical area with the greatest potential.*’”

“In Africa the growth in the number of Catholics has been 19.4% and the number of priests has increased almost as quickly by 17.4%. This demonstrates that priests tend to come from the home Catholic community

and in Africa birth rates are far higher than they are here. One son out of several might get more encouragement from his family to listen for God's call to serve as a priest. Our families tend to be smaller these days. Factor in also that we are losing young people (men and women) at an alarming rate and the position is compounded."

6. Could we ordain more married men?

"I set aside the rights and wrongs of ordaining married men and focus simply on the total number of priests that we might expect. So, while at first sight this may seem like an attractive argument in numerical terms, one needs to exercise caution because there is no evidence to support it. However, the issue itself is outside our control. Some might pray that the Holy Father will allow married men to become priests and some might not but if it were in his heart today it would still take years to bring it to being and then many more years before any new married priests were ordained. We cannot justifiably plan for a scenario that shows no prospect of coming to pass and even if it did would be years in the making."

7. Could we ordain women?

"Again the same points arise. We cannot justifiably plan for a scenario that shows no prospect of coming to pass and even if it did would be years in the making."

8. Change is necessary but not here please.

"At worst this attitude is selfish; at best it assumes that 'our parish' is more special than 'your parish' and should be given preferential treatment. We need to move beyond this sort of defensive parochialism towards an attitude that wants to serve the common good. I would suggest that we need to move beyond thinking of our neighbour as people we are friends with and start to love the neighbours we do not know personally."

9. Is there any point in doing the renewal bit when we have a shortage of priests?

"Africa and Asia are where our Catholic church is growing the most. They have a priest to people ratio that is over three times worse than ours. Every

priest in Africa has about 3.5 times as many Catholics to minister to as a priest has here.

Moreover, the distances those priests have to cover are huge by comparison, with far worse infrastructure and far fewer material resources. Yet it is in Africa and Asia that our church is finding a way to grow and to thrive.

Even if the forecast of having half as many priests as we have today comes to pass we will still have a much better ratio of priests to Catholics than they do in Africa today.

We do not have to copy what happens there: indeed I don't think we could or should but we should take heart from this statistic alone. We can and we should find new ways to use all of our time, talents and treasures for the greater glory of God and the salvation of humanity in our diocese."

Read Steven's full text in the resources section

<http://www.dioceseofbrentwood.net/departments/development/resources>

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