

Time to Sow in the North

Report on Growth
in Churches of the Catholic Tradition
in the Province of York



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With a Foreword by Bishop Philip North



Equipping Christians for Mission in a World of Change for over 150 years

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Foreword

The Catholic renewal in the Church of England was from the first characterised by an extraordinary programme of renewal which impacted the whole country. Not only did the Movement's proponents work for the renovation of parish life and call upon parochial clergy to 'magnify their office,' but there was also a remarkable process of church planting into the new urban areas which the established church was in danger of leaving behind.

Motivated by a genuine, Gospel-rooted love for the poor and necessitated in part by the reluctance of Bishops to appoint Anglo-Catholics to more respectable parishes, great churches sprung up in the industrial conurbations, the mining areas and the mill towns. The combination of transcendent worship that lifted hearts from mundanity of the pit or the factory line and extraordinarily committed pastoral ministry brought tremendous life to such parishes - a Eucharistic (and much less financially subsidised) equivalent of today's Resource Churches perhaps?

Behind this evangelistic energy lay a theology of the church which emphasised the catholicity of the Church of England and its unbroken continuity with the early church, expressed in the three-fold order and the apostolic succession. This inspired a rich devotional life rooted in the sacraments and the communion of saints, and a desire to help laypeople grow in personal devotion through guilds and societies.

A question for Catholics today then is, given that we subscribe to the same theological position, how do we discover afresh that zeal for souls in a radically changed cultural context? There is plenty of evidence that many faithful priests and parishes are asking exactly that question and coming up with a range of answers.

I welcome 'Time to Sow in the North,' a thorough and grounded piece of research, for two reasons. The first is the direct question it asks about encouraging growth in Anglo-Catholic parishes in the northern province. There is a lazy presumption in some quarters that parishes in the Catholic tradition are universally in decline and cannot grow. In actual fact it is not hard to find Catholic parishes where Church life is vibrant and alive, and the identification of common features associated with such growth is important if parishes in this tradition are to grow in evangelistic confidence.

But there is a second indirect question behind this piece of work associated with the fact that Catholic parishes still so overwhelmingly serve areas characterised by deprivation. In recent years, the Church of England has committed itself anew to mission and ministry in such areas, and it is interesting to note that traditional Catholic parishes are slightly larger in their regular weekly attendance than the national average for parishes in the bottom 20% for deprivation nationally. So, John Tomlinson is also indirectly asking how we renew church life in deprived areas, and his appeal for greater fairness in resourcing is especially pertinent here.

Rather than a list of common features, Tomlinson reaches some clear but challenging conclusions which deserve attention not just from those within the Catholic movement but amongst all who genuinely appreciate the theological breadth of the Church of England.

There are strong resonances between the conclusions reached in this report and the priorities set forth in 'Forming Missionary Disciples' which is the strategy for growth developed by the Society of St Wilfrid and St Hilda. This report provides clear motivation for putting into practice what that strategy calls for, especially a lay apostolate and stronger support for clergy who treasure the evangelistic dimension of their vocation.

I am grateful to John Tomlinson for an important piece of work and hope that it will not just be widely read and studied but also acted upon. Above all I am grateful to the clergy and parishes who shared in the research for the faithfulness and energy they bring to ministry in Christ's service.

+Philip Burnley

This report looks to be of real interest and value to the church in the north and I hope it will help break the ground and sow seeds of faith.

+Stephen Archbishop-designate of York

Summary

Inspired by a recent survey in London this research into growth in parishes of the Anglican catholic tradition in the north of England draws attention to four main themes: the **faithful parish ministry** of parish priests committed to the growth of the Church, many of them working in deprived communities; the way that **necessary support networks** enable this ministry and help to strengthen priests to be resilient in their faithfulness; the **lack of resources** in parishes in the north, both in terms of people and financial assets, and how this impacts on the growth of churches; the need to be **looking for three dimension growth** so that success in mission in all forms is fully recognised and celebrated, even in those places where growth seems particularly challenging or less obvious. These themes are backed by evidence from twenty-three interviews with a range of priests in the catholic tradition and seven congregational surveys that gathered the views of lay people, in response to questions of how the Church can grow. Nearly 400 people have contributed to this research.

Arising from these observations this report calls for action from the Church of England at every level to support and enhance the ministry of growth, so as to build a strategic and practical approach that will enable parish priests and their churches to be part of the vibrant and living Church. There is a four-fold task to **support growth-minded priests** who are committed to the parish ministry that expectantly works for growth, to **support sustainable parishes** recognising that not all places will experience growth and resources are scarce, to **develop the lay theology for the current context**, where the whole Church needs to be trained and energised to be the evangelistic servant people of God, and to **develop the theology of the liturgy as mission**, a distinctive contribution from this tradition of the Church.

The story of these faithful people, ordained and lay, committed to enabling the Church to be sustained and to grow, is testimony to the depth and devotion of ministry in the Church of England in the north. Despite the signs of struggle and challenge, there is tangible hope expressed in the dedication and commitment which shows that this is fertile ground, where it is time to sow to the glory of God.

Introduction

During the Summer and Autumn of 2019 twenty-three parish priests were interviewed across eight dioceses in the Province of York, the northern province of the Church of England. These priests consider themselves to be part of the catholic tradition within Anglicanism, though they represent a range of perspectives on key issues. In seven of the parishes a snap-shot survey was also undertaken of the main congregation on a particular Sunday, which was an opportunity to gather the views of lay people who worship at a church in the catholic tradition. The main questions in both the interviews and the surveys were about mission and how churches in this tradition in the northern province can be sustained and grow.

The inspiration for this research was *A Time to Sow*, a survey of Anglican Catholic parishes in London, published by The Centre for Theology and Community in 2017. This important report looked at seven churches in the dioceses of London and Southwark in some detail and reached interesting conclusions about how and why churches in the catholic tradition can grow. All the parishes were in the top 15% of the most deprived parishes in England, and yet most had experienced increases in Sunday attendance of 5-10% per year.

A Time to Sow identified seven ‘habits of growth’:

1. Growth-minded priest, trained to lead effectively
2. Maximising of resources, including buildings
3. Building lay leadership capacity in the congregation
4. Good hospitality
5. Children made welcome
6. Working with local partners, such as schools and community groups
7. Provision of midweek events

The challenges of fulfilling these habits were considered, not least that growth is not the normal expectation in Anglican Catholic parishes. The report suggested that deprivation in neighbourhoods does not necessarily affect growth and cannot in any case be used as an excuse for the lack of growth.

However, notwithstanding the important conclusions of *A Time to Sow*, parishes in London are a special case, with particular advantages that may not be experienced elsewhere. It was natural to ask what a similar report on parishes in the north of England might conclude.¹ In as much as growth may relate to the availability of resources, how do parishes grow in areas where those resources are scarce? What is the distinctive approach of the catholic tradition in northern parishes? Do the same conclusions arise for the churches in former mining villages and post-industrial cities as they do for those in a capital city? These important questions, focussed on the need for the Church to understand how and where growth is achieved, have led to the research of this report, which therefore takes the title, *Time to Sow in the North*.

¹ Voas and Watt consider the north-south contrast in their research but draw no firm conclusions other than social and cultural differences. Voas, D. and Watt, L., *Report on Strands 1 and 2*, The Church Growth Research Programme, 214, p31-32

Traditional catholic and liberal catholic

In *A Time to Sow* the churches in the research were defined as 'Anglican Catholic', recognising that within this group there was a wide range of catholic practice and theology, most especially in the attitudes to women's ministry as priests and bishops. It became apparent in the study of northern parishes that the term 'Anglican Catholic' was generally not popular, nor precise enough. It was decided to define priests and churches in the catholic tradition as belonging to one of two groups: 'traditional catholic' and 'liberal catholic'. No doubt there could be much debate over the usefulness or accuracy of such terms but the categorisation for the purposes of this research is a practical solution.

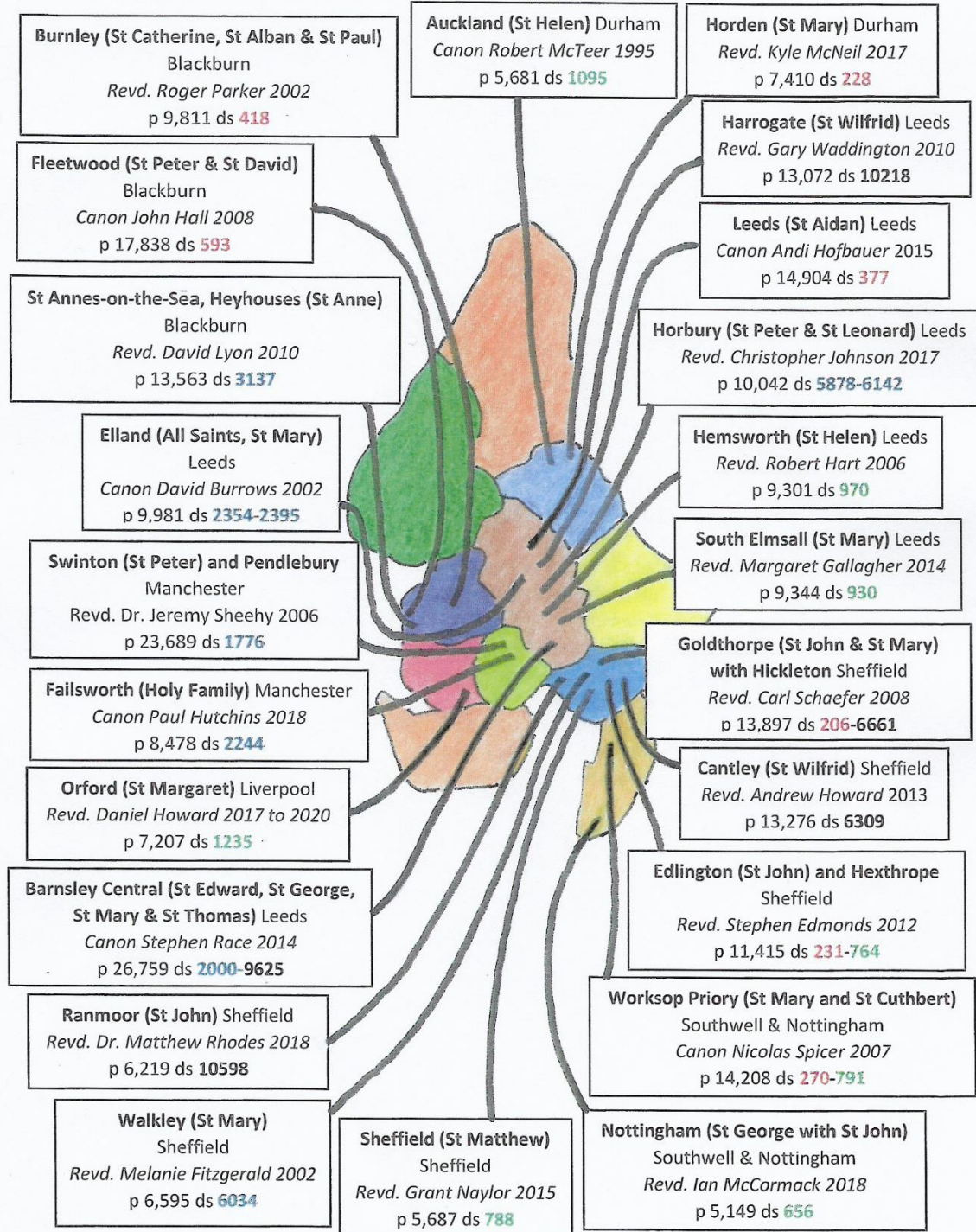
Firstly, the term traditional catholic refers to those who take a traditional view in aspects of catholic practice and theology, most obviously expressed in their commitment to an all-male priesthood and episcopate. One association for this group is The Society under the patronage of Saint Wilfrid and Saint Hilda, often referred to as The Society, an independent association established in 2010 to promote and maintain traditional catholic teaching and practice within the Church of England, providing episcopal oversight to churches, institutions, priests and lay people. Another is Societas Sanctae Crucis or Society of the Holy Cross (SSC), a Congregation of traditional catholic priests in the Anglican Communion who live and minister under a common Rule of Life, with the stated objective to defend and strengthen the spiritual life of the clergy, to defend the faith of the Church, and to carry on and aid mission work both at home and abroad. Attendance at the local Chapter is obligatory. Most of the clergy interviewed in this research were members of the Society and SSC. In relation to this research the Society has produced a six-point mission strategy entitled *Forming Missionary Disciples*.

Secondly, the term liberal catholic is similar to modern catholic or inclusive catholic or progressive catholic, although there are subtle and important differences between these descriptions. Liberal catholics will affirm the place of women as priests and bishops, but are less likely to be affiliated to an association, although liberal catholic priests might be members of Affirming Catholicism (Aff Cath) or the Society of Catholic Priests (SCP), as was found in this research.

This broad categorisation of traditional catholic and liberal catholic, although not accepted by all, does help to define the different approaches. It might be said that the only difference lies within the view of the role of women as priests and bishops, but as this matter is essentially ecclesiological, the differences may well be much deeper. Unfortunately, this division does represent a schism within the catholic tradition of the Church of England that has emerged in the last thirty years, and it is understandable that there are those, such as the Anglican Catholic Future movement, who are trying to unite the divergent voices. Within the catholic tradition there is much to be agreed upon, including the continuity of the Church's teachings from the Apostolic period, the central importance of the sacraments and the presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Certainly, this report does empathise that in approaches to parish life, in the practice of incarnational ministry, in the commitment to life-enhancing liturgy, and the desire for a Church that grows in order to survive, there is much common ground shared by priests and churches across this tradition.

Parishes and Priests included in the Research

Parish - diocese - priest - date of appointment - population (2011)
deprivation score (2019): top 50% 10% 5% of most deprived out of 12400 in England



The Scope of this Report

Whereas *A Time to Sow* studied seven churches in London, this report has widened the focus to a larger group of 23, partly because it covers a much wider geographical area. Furthermore, although there is no attempt to study a representative sample of catholic traditional churches in the north, there is sufficient difference within the 23 to cover a rich variety of contexts. For this reason, the analysis of the detail of each parish is not as granular as it was in the London report, although the key points about ministry and mission are included. A common feature of both reports is that the parishes tend to be towards the more deprived. Well over half of those included in the north are in the top 10% of the most deprived parishes in England.

The London report contained one congregational survey, whereas this report has included seven. These surveys are not definitive in the description of the attitudes of people in churches of the catholic tradition in the north, but they do present a snap-shot view of each congregation taken on one particular day. As a whole the seven surveys do present a significant sample.

There was no scientific selection of the priests and the parishes involved in this research. The list began with recommendations of those who had experienced a growing church, and this list changed as more parishes were visited and other names suggested. That is not to say that all the most relevant churches in the catholic tradition in the northern province were included, as there are significant omissions, if only because of the limitations of time. The very nature of the sample is that it is in some sense random, but no less important for this reason. Circumstances prevented some priests from responding to the request to be interviewed, while others were either too busy, too new in the job or too close to retirement. In a real sense, the list was self-selecting as only those priests interested in growth would want to be involved.

Before each priest was visited, they were sent a list of questions that would be covered along with the encouragement to add anything else that they thought was relevant. Details were sought about the parish, the state it was in when they arrived, how it has changed during their ministry, the main obstacles to growth, and how 'mission' and 'discipleship' are interpreted in that place. All the interviews were strictly confidential, which allowed the priest to speak freely if they wished, and why none of the comments in this report have been attributed. The interviews could last two hours or more and sometimes included a visit to the church building.

Those congregations chosen for surveys were selected according to the constraints of the Sunday diary. The service was always the main Mass or Eucharist on the Sunday and on most occasions included a sermon to explain what the questionnaire was about. The responses of over 370 people in all of these churches was generally very positive, and several interesting conversations were had after the end of each service. Again, all the comments made through the surveys are anonymous. Although the parish priest was supplied with an analysis of the survey in their church, all seven have been gathered into one overall result. Whilst recognising that the churches were in some very different contexts, the combined results reveal some common and important themes.

Key Themes

Faithful Parish Ministry

On my visits I was much impressed with the quality of parish ministry shown in the commitment and dedication of priests, often in some very deprived settings and thus challenging situations. Well over half of the visits were to parishes in the top 10% of deprivation scores confirming the impression that the Catholic Tradition has a particular ministry in such areas.² Sometimes largely unrecognised and unsung, such parish priests are sustaining the presence of the Church of England in places where other mainline denominations have long since withdrawn.



This wholesome commitment to parish ministry is expressed in two particular ways: a heart for the welfare of the people of the community, both inside and outside the Church, and the provision of sacramental worship, often on a daily basis. Furthermore, this two-fold emphasis of parish ministry was reflected in the views of the congregations as shown in the congregational surveys. The people and the worship were the two key factors that attracted newcomers to the church.³

Crucially, priests in the catholic tradition are not content with ministering to just a congregation but have a real concern to minister to the whole parish. *'I have a zeal for souls,'* a urgent phrase from St. Vincent de Paul.⁴ *'Parishes grow when priests engage with people at the personal level,'* *'priestly ministry is relational, and mission is about being personable,'* *'I personally invite people to feel they are worthy of God's love,'* *'I find them an easy community to love, and this makes mission all the more easier,'* *'we are the yeast in the community, working for the good of everybody,'* *'we respect this community – which means not just doing things for them – but perhaps even let them do things for us,'* *'mission is about receiving as much as it is about giving.'*

² 13 of the 23 parishes visited were in the top 10% of most deprived parishes in England, and of these 6 were in the top 5%. Deprivation scores are from the English Indices of Deprivation (July 2019) available at www.churchofengland.org

³ The congregational surveys reveal that these are significantly more important than any other factor.

⁴ The seventeenth century founder of the Roman Catholic Order, The Congregation of the Mission, is a strong inspiration for some of those ministering in deprived communities.

This enthusiasm is matched by the need to be the visible presence of the ordained person in the public realm, on the streets and in the shops, dressed distinctly. This is emphasised again and again in the interviews: *'I need to be seen,' 'I need to get to know these people and they need to know me.'* Some think it important to walk around the parish in a cassock, while others take the worshipping community out of the building in processions and other acts of witness on a regular basis. The need to be distinctively Christian in public and in traditional ways, in an increasingly secular society is very apparent: *'At Corpus Christi we take our Lord out onto the streets to emphasise that God is there already.'* Ironically the confidence in being 'churchy,' the unashamed use of traditional liturgy and symbolism, emphasises the sacred-secular divide in order to bridge it. Such practical expressions of incarnational ministry are the key vehicles for mission for several of these priests.⁵

One or two revealed that it was their commitment to all people in a parish that dissuaded them from transferring to Roman Catholicism. This feature of the Established Church, however untenable in many places, finds a particular expression in the catholic tradition of the Church of England. The church is seen at the centre of the community, expressing God's love for and presence in all the community: *'a key text for me is Colossians 1:16-17: "For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible ... all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together".'* There is still a residual demonstration of a kind of Christendom in some parishes of the north, and on these natural links in the community the basis for mission can be built. *'There is a huge fringe here who will look to the church on the big occasions,' 'we still get large turnouts at Remembrance Sunday and for Midnight Mass.'* This marks a contrast to the experience of some priests in the London report.

This is much more than just the provision of church halls and rooms for community use, as these features alone do not necessarily ensure that the church is more accessible: *'A thousand people use the hall but only a hundred have ever been in the church,' 'our community facilities do not help our mission.'* Much more depends on the willingness of priest and people to engage with the community and to go where people are. In one parish the new community space sits alongside the nave of the church and people have to pass from one to get to the other. It is a tangible expression of the close relationship of Church to community and also how the parish priest has lived his fruitful ministry in that place for many years.

'Our aim is to bless the community, not condone all that goes on, but rather connect with it.' Another priest was eager to officially bless the local Aldi when it was opened. In one parish holding a 'big lunch' for everyone was an effective way to show the love of God and help make connections with people. *'It is also important to let the people bless you as well.'* In another parish some young men who happened to be walking past the churchyard offered to lend a hand in laying a path, and thus showed their support for the Church in a very practical way. Even where the local community might not be receptive, either because it is diverse, transient, or largely involved in another faith, the priests are not deterred. The potential is always for the presence of God to be revealed: *'the Muslims in the parish know who I am not least because I am out and about in my cassock.'*

⁵ The centrality of the incarnation as the basis for mission is discussed by Martin Warner in Goodhew D (ed), *Toward a Theology of Church Growth*, Ashgate, 2015, p107-125



In most of the parishes visited the school is the key place of contact outside of the church building. Regardless of any official status as a church or community school the crucial relationship is between the parish priest and headteacher. Where this works, significant and valuable ministry and mission are possible, putting the Church into direct contact with the core of the local population. School Masses take place in schools of all types and are often very well attended: *'this is how we do Fresh Expressions, in the Mass just after school with parents and children.'* Other opportunities in schools include classroom teaching, supporting staff and serving on the governing body, although clergy do feel in need of training for such roles. They are also very time consuming particularly in those communities where there is a lack of other people to take on such responsibilities, a feature of many deprived parishes. *'This is my sixth head teacher in a decade – they have all needed a lot of support.'* Work with young people over the age of 11 is much less apparent, actively pursued in a handful of parishes, but it is everywhere recognised as an area for development. In all the congregational surveys 'youth work' was highlighted as the crucial need, usually seen as the priority for future plans.⁶

There was some discussion of the appropriate size of a community where such a parish ministry is possible. There are many factors, depending on the features of each neighbourhood, such as fragmentation, but it is generally recognised that parishes are too large for traditional parish ministry. This is particularly the case where priests have more than one parish and are attempting to maintain a daily Mass in each church: *'I almost had a breakdown trying to keep all the services going in both churches.'* Recognising that historically parish ministry was based on relatively small populations, there has long been debate as to the optimum number to which a priest can effectively minister.⁷ There is a real sense that catholic parish ministry has not fully come to terms with the realities of deployment and resources, as they are currently organised, and it is the parish priest who has to deal with this painful disparity on a daily basis. *'I pray I won't be given another parish to look after', 'I feel quite detached from the other parish because I don't live there.'*⁸ It is important to allow parish ministry to flourish and not be a burden because it is a vital expression of catholic theology. This also raises the question of the role of laity and how they effectively support and develop the ministry of the Christian presence and mission in every community.

⁶ In the congregational surveys youth work is by far the most common suggestion for development. Nurturing young disciples is one of the six priorities of *Mission Strategy for The Society*. Research suggest that churches with paid youth workers are more likely to grow, *From Anecdote to Evidence: Findings form the Church Growth Research Programme 2011-2013*, The Church Commissioners, 2014, p26

⁷ Sociologist Robin Dunbar suggested the maximum number a person can have meaningful interaction with is around 150.

⁸ Ever increasing benefices are described by Bob Jackson as the 'nightmare vision' and certainly counter-productive to church growth, Jackson B., *What Makes Churches Grow?* Church House Publishing, 2015, p98. The link between clergy deployment and church growth was highlighted in *Going Deeper: Church attendance statistics and clergy deployment*, The Church Growth Research Programme, www.churchofengland.org

A common expression amongst the clergy is a desire to be properly supported and resourced to be parish priests: *'Just let us get on with the job,' 'we are bombarded with courses and initiatives, or new management schemes, when I know what I need to do.'* From the parish level it seems as if the wider institution is attempting to make up for the greater call on resources by offering new methods and ways of working that do not address the fundamental issues. The commitment of many parish priests and their wealth of experience makes it clear to most of them what needs to be done. From their point of view given the right support they will fulfil a faithful and fruitful parish ministry wherever they are called to be.

Necessary Support Networks

One interesting feature that emerged during the interviews is the presence or absence of support networks. The various experiences of support from colleagues can make a tangible difference to the welfare and ministerial function of the parish priest: there are those who feel part of a group that offers spiritual and practical support and there are those who feel isolated and even estranged from other clergy.⁹ The resilience of priests and their effectiveness in working for growth is dependent on what support they feel they have.

Where the boundaries of belief and practice are more defined, as with traditional Catholics, the experience of collegiality tends to be stronger. Membership of chapters of The Society and of the SSC for some brings a very valuable fellowship of assistance, and in a few cases a degree of informal and useful mentoring. This is not to say all clergy in these groups are incalculably kind to each other or indeed have only the best to say about one another, but there are many examples of guidance in practical and spiritual matters. Priests within the group will attend and participate in one another's key annual services, and a social gathering of the clergy after such an event is quite common. *'If I needed help with my church boiler, I would ask one of the Chapter if they knew a good engineer,' 'I know I can always go and speak to one of the Chapter about anything if I need to,' 'the Chapter helped me see what is sustainable in this parish, to make sure I wasn't over-working.'*¹⁰

Some traditional Catholic clergy choose to avoid the diocesan structure as best they can, but others are fully committed to the wider Church of England, taking on the role of area dean or serving on synods. These clergy in particular can contrast the experience of the traditional Catholic chapters with those of the local deanery. *'The latter tends to be more business-like, and less social or spiritual,' 'I attend the deanery chapter in a sense of discipline because it is good to be with those who are theologically different, from time to time.'* The Catholic chapters can be more geographically relevant, crossing diocesan boundaries where this makes more sense. For instance, in Southwell and Nottingham, clergy in the south of the diocese gather from other places such as Derby, while in the north they can meet with clergy from Sheffield. Another feature of the traditional Catholic structure is that the hierarchy appears to be less distant and has more regular contact with the parish clergy. *'Our bishop is more pastoral and knows the priests and parishes well.'* The advantages of the role of the Provincial Episcopal Visitor is that he has fewer clergy and less of an administrative function to fulfil, although a very large area to cover.¹¹ This alternative episcopal oversight can provide particular pastoral support for clergy during any disciplinary cases.

⁹ The mental health of clergy has been identified as a priority for all dioceses, and the latest report from the Living Ministry programme which relates to this was in December 2019.

¹⁰ There are similar support networks in other parts of the Church such as New Wine

¹¹ The PEV covers ten dioceses in the Northern Province, while in the remaining two the support role is undertaken by a suffragan.

The experience of support from the local diocese varies across the eight that were visited. Some feel that their diocesan bishop does not fully appreciate or understand their ministry and as a consequence is only willing to tolerate them at best. *'At times we feel ignored, or at least rarely affirmed.'* Others feel that the Evangelical agenda of the diocese, perhaps focused on a particular model of church growth, is not easily translated into what catholic clergy can either support or provide. In other dioceses the catholic tradition is well-represented in the hierarchy and churches of the tradition are numerous in some deaneries, both of which help to strengthen their voice. This is felt to be more the case with traditional catholics than liberal catholics.

Several thought that the traditional model of parish ministry is under severe pressure, and even those working in large and apparently thriving churches spoke of the fragility of the system. However, despite the general strain on parish ministry some priests serving in traditional catholic parishes remain hopeful, if only because they felt they have a protected status. *'Our parishes survive interregnums better because we have something unique to offer.'* Ironically, this is less likely to be the case where traditional catholic parishes are more abundant, and to lose one or two seems not to be significant. It also means some priests have to work harder to keep associated parishes afloat, and the burden of maintaining a daily Mass in neighbouring vacant parishes was regarded by some as an onerous but unavoidable responsibility: *'I have to make sure that the people in that parish are looked after.'*

It is interesting to learn how people were appointed to their current position. Most spoke of being approached about the job, and for some, even if interviews were undertaken, they had been assured of the successful outcome, in all probability. In a relatively small group of clergy who know something of each other, vacant parishes are likely to be filled more informally, but this is more evidence of the supportive network at work. Some recognised that this could be too inward-looking: *'we need to avoid becoming a ghetto'*.



The association and support felt by liberal catholics would seem to be less tangible. Some are members of Aff Cath and of the SCP, with an explicit acceptance of women's priestly and episcopal ministry. As liberal catholics are less willing to be restricted by narrow statements of belief and practice, they are likely to be a much less close-knit group, and not wish to join an alternative chapter nor have the option of targeted support from a PEV. There is a real sense felt by some that liberal catholics have no voice in their dioceses, possible evidence of polarisation within the Church of England. Furthermore, the defining of boundaries within the catholic tradition has been a particularly painful experience for some clergy who have made the difficult but necessary decision to join The Society, in order to preserve traditional catholic ministry in a parish or be able to lead worship in such churches: *'I cried when I knew I had to join The Society to fulfil my ministry, but it was the only way forward.'* Effectively, this has meant denying the priestly ministry of friends and former colleagues. Sharper demarcation has been uncomfortable for some. Conversely, some female clergy felt more able to work with traditional catholic clergy precisely because they knew where they stood, something that is less clear with some other colleagues.

It was inevitable that some of those interviewed would want to talk about the failed episcopal appointment in Sheffield in 2017. It had been an unpleasant experience where friendships had been broken and mutual trust lost, so that the possibilities of working with other parishes are no longer likely, at least for the time being. Quite a few saw it as evidence that traditional catholics will not be appointed to senior positions in the future. Also, it was thought by some that the report into the events did not adequately address all the concerns that remained, most particularly the practical outcomes of promoting mutual flourishing.¹²

Despite this, a growing confidence within the traditional catholic group was detected, particularly among those ordained in the last ten years or so.¹³ One or two of the older priests suggested that this was 'youthful enthusiasm', but it seemed more concrete than this. *'We know who we are – a Catholic parish,' 'we have not had to fight the battle to be traditional catholic,' 'it is really positive – we define what we are for, rather than what we are against.'* This confidence has freed them to be more energised and hopeful. It has emerged out of the setting of clearer boundaries and the commitment, however difficult to fulfil, to the Five Guiding Principles.¹⁴ *'Off the battlefield and onto the mission field,'* was a phrase heard a few times on the visits.

In the past it might have been expected that there would be some support from ecumenical colleagues in the community. Two features of this became apparent during the visits: firstly, the change in attitude of some Roman Catholic clergy, the younger of whom seemed less willing to work with Anglicans, perhaps because they are less appreciative of the historical position of the Church of England; secondly, the withdrawal of the Methodist Church, except in one or two places, as its ministers become much less prevalent. Such local networks of ecumenical support have always depended on the openness and eagerness of local clergy to work together, but with fewer willing ordained ministers, much of this important work, and the support it provided, is falling away.

¹² *Review of Nomination to the See of Sheffield and Other Concerns*, published in 2017.

¹³ This is not to ignore the growing need for more vocations to the priesthood across the catholic tradition.

¹⁴ The Five Guiding Principles were set out in the House of Bishops' *Declaration on the Ministry of Bishops and Priests* in 2014.

Lack of Resources

It is not surprising that the clergy interviewed wanted to talk about the parish share, however it is termed, because it is the major expense for all the parishes visited and for many it is a struggle to pay it. In the smaller churches this cost is proportionally high, and along with the maintenance of the building makes up the vast majority of parish expenses. In such cases, this leaves very little for spending on mission and development. Only in a minority of the parishes is the parish share met in full every year, and there is even an expectation in a few that such is an aspiration that could never be achieved. For some, depending on how it is calculated in different dioceses, it is seen as a tax on growth, and the response from one or two is to be unconcerned about the underestimate of attendance: *'It wouldn't be right to include all the people who come, as it is really a one-off service,' 'I don't want to be penalised for increasing my numbers.'* If that is the perception, then probably the fault lies primarily with the system.

Voluntary giving is the main source of income for most of the parishes, with the common tendency to rely on a small proportion of the congregation: *'In this parish 20% of the congregation give 80%.'* This reliance on the small minority in the congregation, especially where churches take a stance on particular issues, can be problematic. The pressure of the clergy to *'dance to the tune'* of the few was a regret expressed by one or two, and such an unhealthy dependency is more of an issue in the poorer congregations. It is another indication of the fragility of the parish system.

The congregational surveys asked the question about household income, which most people were happy to answer because the response was anonymous. Across the seven congregations, with some significant variation reflecting the social composition of parishes, there was a predominance of people under the national household income. Very few working high earners are present in the congregations, which reinforces the dependency on the few.¹⁵ This shows another contrast to some of the churches in the London report. If more income came from investments or lettings this would not be such an important issue. The financial accounts and returns show that some parishes rely on legacies to give them a boost every year or so, helping them to make up the shortfall of the parish share, or more creatively invest in some development. *'This year we have been left a significant amount of money which means we can relax about the parish share for a while.'* Where income, particularly that which is unexpected, is needed to just maintain the system, then investment in mission will necessarily be minimalised.



¹⁵ The Office for National Statistics declared the average national household income in 2019 to be £29,400. The congregational surveys show the largest category to be under £20,000, and in some churches this was significantly higher. Overall, those with at least £40,000 were less than 6%.

Only a small number of the parishes visited could rely on investments from property. This marks another contrast to some of the churches in the London report where income from property made a substantial contribution to the cost of mission and ministry. Even where parishes in the north might have a hall or a house to let out the potential for a good return was minimal. There was no hope that a youth worker or another lay worker could be funded in this way, which might be possible in a London parish. The situation in most of the northern parishes is significantly different: *'to have paid staff is just a dream,' 'what a difference it would make if we could afford a youth worker, or a parish assistant.'* It raises a question about how deprivation levels of parishes are assessed. The calculation of the score needs to take into account the wider context where the wealth in property in the area can help to mitigate the effects of deprivation. It is possible that a church in a so-called deprived parish can be well endowed with such assets, and have the opportunity to use its income not just to sustain the church but grow it as well. In contrast, a church hall in a former mining village may be an underused and an expensive liability, rather than the valuable source of potential income that only needs to be properly managed.

Furthermore, the financial viability and policies of the diocese have a direct effect on the parish, with a significant variation between dioceses in how the parish share is calculated, what is actually asked for and what is expected. The move to relocate the calculation of parish share to the deanery rather than the diocesan level, as experienced in some places, is not popular as it is dependent on good relations within deaneries which some churches of the catholic tradition do not experience. In a real sense churches of this tradition often tend to look beyond their deaneries and even dioceses. A few clergy express the view that parish share was becoming increasingly difficult to pay, particularly those who can look back over a long parish ministry. The records show that over the years in most cases the overall increases are well ahead of inflation. Some perceived recent reductions in relief of parish share, where discounts had been applied in relation to deprivation, have made matters worse. In one diocese the discount applied to the parish share, described by one as *'from the Church Commissioners to help poorer parishes,'* has been removed or much reduced. At the same time funding is directed to certain projects, such as those involving the national Strategic Development Fund (SDF), a source that only a few churches of the catholic tradition have been able to draw on so far.

The attitude of the priests of the catholic tradition to Renewal and Reform, and the possibilities of using the SDF, does vary. The upheavals in the tradition since 1992 have absorbed much of the energy within these churches and further change is not welcomed. However, a degree of renewed confidence in traditional catholic clergy have given many of them a clearer view of their recognised place in the Church of England. Most of them see the vital importance of mission and growth, which are very much part of the catholic tradition, but there seems to be some hesitation to be involved in the funding opportunities presented by the SDF. This may be because the models of Church that are associated with this funding are not so readily found in the catholic tradition, or such churches do not have the capacity to take up the opportunities. Therefore, there is a need for churches to work together to apply for funding, which has been tried in a few dioceses but requires extra coordination. There is some disquiet expressed about the whole structure of the SDF, how it absorbs resources in order to be maintained, and how its effects will be measured.¹⁶ It may be too soon to make such an assessment but there is a need for more churches of the catholic tradition to be involved, not least so that Renewal and Reform can fulfil the aim to *"prayerfully build on our rich inheritance."*¹⁷

¹⁶ Measuring the effectiveness of SDF was reported on in *The Church Times* in November 2019.

¹⁷ *A Vision and Narrative for Renewal and Reform*, GS2038, 2016, paragraph 11

On the visits an interesting distinction between dioceses which affects the viability of catholic parishes was noted. In some there is a policy to concentrate resources in fewer parishes to create places of growth. This enables the 'one priest, one parish' principle to still be a possibility, which fits well with the catholic tradition of parish ministry focused on one centre of worship in one community. The expectation is raised that such resourcing will produce a centre of excellence, which is a challenge that some in the catholic tradition are very willing to take up. In other dioceses the policy of trying to cover all parishes is leading to a serious strain in ministry. One priest said he was told *'whatever you do don't close it'* when appointed to an extra church, presumably even if this had been the right outcome. Others are finding it hard to reconcile their vision and training for parish ministry, predicated on the 'one priest, one parish' model, with the fact of ever extending benefices. *'I kept being asked to take on another church as well,'* said one, and another spoke of wanting to leave his diocese because of such a policy: *'I feel a real danger of being swamped.'* This is a particular problem where ministry is expressed in the daily Mass and the commitment to the visible presence in the whole community is strong. Some priests feel a certain amount of pressure to help maintain the catholic tradition in nearby vacant parishes and there is a dependency on the retired and non-stipendiary clergy to keep such places open.

Another contrast between the churches in the north and those studied in the London report is the availability of such priests. In places where the clergy may not choose to retire or the pool of clergy working in other professions is small, as is the case in many northern parishes, a greater burden falls on the stipendiary clergy to maintain the sacramental ministry. *'Why can't we be like the Roman Catholics and simply close churches when they are no longer viable?'* was a view repeated a few times. Different dioceses in the Church of England will have their own approaches to this issue, but the emphasis in the catholic tradition on visible priestly ministry cannot be sustained through the continued expansion of multiple church benefices.

Beyond the financial viability of parishes, the most important resource is the lay people and here the official deprivation scores do not necessarily reflect the situation. Most of the clergy in this survey spoke of a lack of capable people to support the mission and ministry of the parish. *'We are good at*



attracting people who need help, rather than those who have a lot to give.' In some places it is hardly possible to maintain the PCC structure or to find people willing and able to serve as churchwardens. *'Our PCC minutes are handwritten,' 'not everyone has access to a computer or email.'* It is not just about the lack of IT skills but the capacity of lay people to take on leadership roles, or at least fulfil the model of lay leadership that is imposed through the institution. *'In this parish people are working class and having formal meetings doesn't work,' 'most people here have been disempowered all their lives, and sometimes we just add to this,' 'the PCC was in a complete mess when I arrived – even the safeguarding wasn't being done properly.'* There is a need to be more flexible and thus more responsible about how the Church is structured in parishes where the predominant culture is not middle class, and the experience and ideas of those priests who work in such parishes would be a valuable contribution to such a debate.

In such situations where the laity are not fully active, the danger in the catholic tradition is to revert to the priest-manager model where ‘Father knows best’ and the laity are encouraged to abdicate all their responsibilities to the clergy.¹⁸ However, this is contrary to the theology of lay ministry that is central to the catholic tradition. The very distinctiveness of the priesthood with its defined spiritual roles, along with a commitment to embodiment of the Church through incarnational ministry, should inspire the laity to take up their complementary functions within the life of the Church.¹⁹ *‘Mission is not possible without empowering the laity.’* The sacrament of Baptism gives people a God-given part to play in the Church, as affirmed in Confirmation. Referring to the leading of intercessions in the service one priest said, *‘I just let the lay people get on with it as it is their ministry.’* Most priests, in principle at least, can see the need for an assured place for the laity: *‘I make sure the laity are onboard, and this requires a strategic approach.’* Getting the right person for the job and making certain they are supported are seen as crucial: *‘I think being a churchwarden can be a very fruitful discipleship,’ ‘I try and find people who will encourage others to grow as well.’* Furthermore, a robust theology of the laity will inspire lay people to minister outside the church building, in the community and in the workplace. Speaking of how people come on a daily basis to his church for Mass, one priest said, *‘we equip people to follow Jesus with confidence in every sphere of life.’* Another called for the establishment of a Lay Apostolate, a renewal movement of laypeople that could be spearheaded by the PEV. There is definitely a need for such support: *‘In this diocese we are looking for focal leadership in parishes, but I am not sure how they will be trained and supported.’* There is scope for assessing the practice of the theology of the laity in some of the catholic parishes of the north, in line with the priorities set out in the national report *Setting God’s People Free.*²⁰



The role of Readers in catholic parishes varies greatly. In some they are welcomed and encouraged to develop a particular ministry based not just on the proclamation of the Word but on other spiritual and pastoral ministries as well. In some parishes they are the natural choice for

eucharistic ministers, along with others, taking Holy Communion to the sick and the house bound. In contrast, in other parishes they do not seem to have any role at all, and their absence is not regretted. *‘I have a Reader, but I don’t know what to do with him as all our services are Eucharistic.’* However, in virtually all the parishes visited there was a range of liturgical and pastoral roles for the laity, such as in the main Mass as members of the serving team or the choir, or being part of a Baptismal visitors scheme. These groups include men and women, young and old. This is where the catholic tradition can be seen to promote a rich variety of people involved in lay ministry, based on traditional and newly developed roles, in the Church and in the community, often in a very visible way.

¹⁸ Certain well-defined legal responsibilities do rest with the parish priest, such as in safeguarding.

¹⁹ Theology of the Laity emphasises the vocation of laypeople and their particular role of mission in the world.

²⁰ This recent initiative across the Church of England seeks to enable the whole people of God to live out the Good News of Jesus confidently in all of life.

The congregational surveys revealed a predominance of older people at worship, with the over 65-year olds accounting for over half of people present.²¹ An advantage of this is that these people often have the time and experience to offer through volunteering in the Church, and there seem to be plenty of opportunities for this in the catholic parishes surveyed. 76% stated that they volunteered in the Church at least occasionally. However, although younger people, in all age groups below 65, were less common, the volunteering in these groups was higher.²² This is an indication that finding an active role in the Church is possible for most people, particularly for the young. The presence of children and young people taking part in the service in the sanctuary is a common feature of Mass on a Sunday, and is an aspect of the catholic tradition that needs to be celebrated.

It is well documented that growth of churches is dependent on leadership, a point highlighted by the London report.²³ Although this sample of clergy in the north was self-selected it does indicate that there are several priests in the catholic tradition that are mission-minded and committed to evangelism. Very often the desire to see the Church grow and not just be maintained, was expressed. *'I have worked all my life to see the Church grow,' 'mission is vital and part of our calling.'* It can be reiterated that the growth-minded priests are an essential part of successful mission, but they are often held back by the lack of the resources of finance and people.²⁴ Recognising that the ultimate resource for mission is the Holy Spirit, the Church has a duty to direct what resources it has to those parts of the Church that will bring forth growth.

Looking for Three-Dimensional Growth

The very nature of this research means that those clergy visited were committed to the concept of growth in the Church; they were recommended for their interest or success in mission and chose to be part of the survey. However, during the interviews some were embarrassed that they had not produced the kind of growth that might be expected, at least not in recent times. Those who have several years of experience in parish ministry on which to reflect can take a long view and describe how over time there are periods of growth but also times of stagnation, which could not be easily explained away. Sometimes growth was hidden only to be revealed in the fulness of



time. *'God gives the growth and ultimately we are dependent on him,' 'for years I laboured in that parish and it was only much later that I realised what had been achieved.'* This suggests that growth is subject to a range of factors, and that the different dimensions of growth can sometimes only become apparent over time.

²¹ 57% over 65, 15% 55-64, and the remaining 28% under 54.

²² About 85% of those under 65 are active volunteers on at least an occasional basis.

²³ Voas and Watt maintain that a key to church growth is leadership that is motivating and inspirational, *Report on Strands 1 and 2*, The Church Growth Programme, 2014, p3

²⁴ Ibid, p60-66



There is certainly an acceptance of the need for parishes in the catholic tradition to recognise that growth is essential. Building on the history of such Anglicans, who were often in the forefront of planting churches and noted for some prominent and successful parishes served by teams of curates in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there is no reason to suppose that the catholic tradition should be opposed to growth, even if the more recent models and examples for such have become much more associated with Evangelicals. Indeed, with the

differences that have emerged within the catholic wing of the Church of England, some of the traditional catholics, with their newfound confidence, are very keen to be involved in growing churches: *'just 'being' is no longer an option - we have got to be involved in evangelism.'* That is not to say that liberal catholics are not interested in growth, although this survey showed a greater affinity in this respect between traditional catholics and Evangelicals in their approach to mission. One or two spoke of their interest in the Partnership for Missional Church, which works well with the commitment to know and serve the local community. Others had effectively used *Leading your Church into Growth*, which expressly assists churches of all traditions. Others saw the resource church module, along with the planting and grafting of churches, as very much compatible with the catholic tradition.²⁵

What is clear is that there has to be a broader definition of growth.²⁶ It is more than an increase in the number of people attending Church, although this is so easily measured. Historically ever since the first major religious census of 1851 there have been problems with simply counting how many come to services, even where this is extended beyond the main Sunday service. It is an important statistic, but it can be misleading and must not be the only way to measure growth. The aim of the London report was to identify those churches that had shown an increase in attendance, with some dramatic examples. Most recently one of those churches has shown further improvement in attendances over the Christmas period, accounted for in part by investing in advertising and the quality of the music in services.²⁷ The danger of relying on this one statistic is that it can dismiss the growth apparent in other ways. . The relationships between “growth in personal holiness, growth in societal transformation and the numerical growth of church congregations” does merit further research.²⁸

In missiology we recognise that the context of mission is at least as important as the method and the commitment of those involved. In some parishes growth can be achieved relatively easily provided the funds are available and the motivation, to the glory of God, is clear. In other parishes, including some of those visited, the challenges brought by social deprivation, isolation and the paucity of resources, means that growth is much harder to achieve. In such parishes improved advertising and better quality of music will probably not bring the desired results, even if such investment could be afforded.

²⁵ However, it is noted how few churches in the catholic tradition are large, possibly a reflection of the relational nature of the priestly ministry. Church planting is part of the *Mission Strategy for The Society*

²⁶ This is accepted by most missiologists, but the point does need underlining: Jackson, *What Makes Churches Grow?* p 3

²⁷ <http://www.saintbenets.org.uk/2020/01/christmas-attendance-statistics/>

²⁸ Goodhew, D (ed), *Towards a Theology of Church Growth*, p4-7

Furthermore, most of those interviewed for this study were concerned to stress that growth may not always be expressed in an increase in congregational size at the main service. It may also be apparent in a faithful support for daily Mass, a call for more devotional services, an interest in seasonal study groups, a willingness to go on pilgrimage, a campaign for social justice, or a practical involvement in the community: *'the love of God in some of those who come week in and week out to the Thursday Mass is extraordinary,' 'I see faith growing as more people come to say their confession,' 'the design and commissioning of our fantastic new stained glass windows is a sign of growth as it has got people talking about faith.'*²⁹ Within the catholic tradition there are several means to express discipleship both in worship and in service, in the way that commitment to God is shown in commitment to the local communities. Some clergy described how powerful it is when these commitments are combined: in outdoor processions being approached by people on the street who want to talk about spiritual things, linking a week-day Mass to an English class for asylum seekers, keeping the building unlocked as a sanctuary of peace and reflection in a busy world, and remaining open when so many other public buildings and institutions have closed in the neighbourhood: *'we have kept our doors open, and our lights on,' 'discipleship is about faithfulness and perseverance as much as anything else.'*

In those communities where extreme deprivation is a reality and the Church relatively under-resourced, the very fact that the Church survives as a tangible presence can be seen as a mark of growth. With the general decline in congregations across the country in recent years, a local church in a challenging context which bucks that trend, even by just remaining the same size, is to be commended. Growth at 2% or 3% would in some parishes be exemplary. Where the context is all the more challenging such a local church ought to be celebrated. The crude figures of attendance alone will not reveal such encouraging stories of growth in genuinely deprived parishes, and may even discourage those who are working hard to minister in such places.

In the catholic tradition the linking of personal discipleship to formal worship is particularly strong, and the mutual dependency of both aspects of the Christian life is emphasised: *'I always link our soup-run with the Mass of the day, and I expect people to be involved in both – it is a way of grounding our faith,' 'we begin our house groups with a house Mass, taking the readings in worship before we discuss them,' 'it is the Eucharist that nourishes us in our discipleship,' 'personal faith has got to be expressed in prayer and in the service of others.'* Here is evidence of the deepening of faith, tangible growth expressed in worship and in service. Furthermore, the linking of personal growth in faith to the sacraments can help to make it less individualistic. Called to be part of the Communion of Saints, the growth in discipleship strengthens the whole Church.



²⁹ Ultimately it is important that such things bring people to experience the love of God through the sacraments



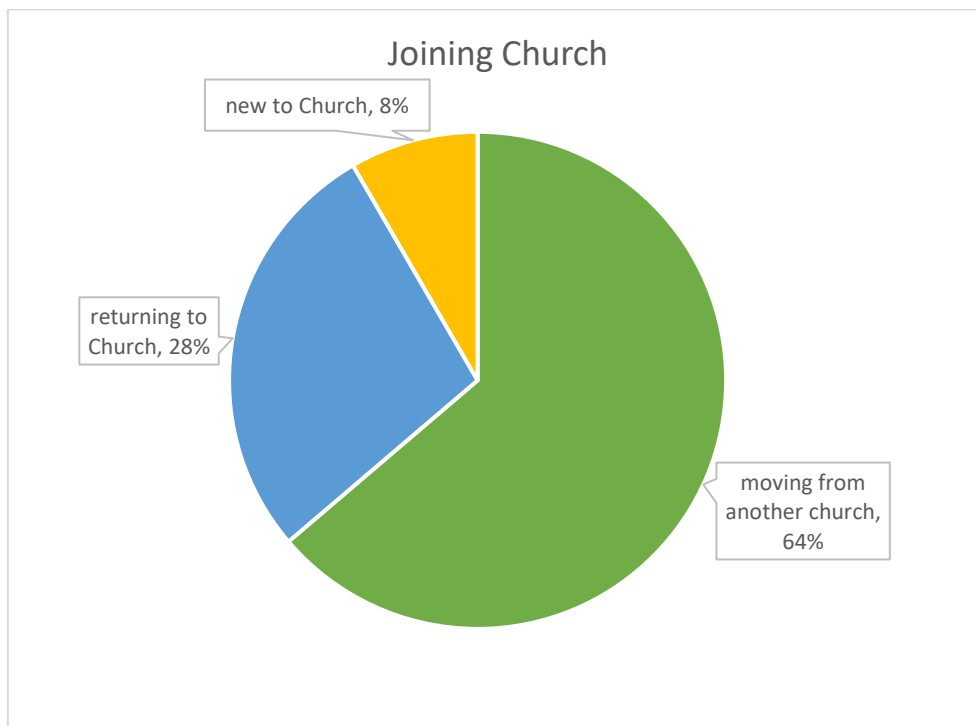
The influence of the liturgy when done well and in the power of the Holy Spirit was highlighted by several of those interviewed as an effective tool of mission: *'I know for sure that the Mass is where people have come to faith.'* Providing services of worship rooted in tradition and yet accessible, formal yet relaxed, understood and made relevant to the lives of those attending, is one of the most important tasks for the local church: *'getting a friendly atmosphere at Sunday Mass is crucial, so that everyone feels welcome,' 'I make sure I explain what the Mass is all about, why we do things the way we do.'* For some it means worshipping God with all the senses knowing that the grace of God is shown and is effective through the sacraments: *'my job is to enable people to worship God, which they were created to do,' 'I have never been afraid to invite people to services because I know it can change their lives,' 'because this place is special, sacred in some way, I want people to leave the building feeling better.'* It means being visible as Church, perhaps in some very traditional ways that help people recognise this as a way to connect with God: *'this is how we know we can worship God effectively,' 'attendance at the solemnities is increasing because neighbouring parishes are not doing them anymore,' 'even the silence in church before the service, anticipating what is about to begin, is powerful.'* It means being open to anyone and everyone in the occasional offices and letting the power of the liturgy reveal God's love in the grace received. In the congregational surveys it was notable how many people became part of the Church and began the journey of faith through the occasional offices.³⁰ *'I have a funeral ministry that brings me into contact with many people who know so little about the faith,' 'our baptismal policy makes us open to every parent in the parish – I would not turn anyone away because the sacrament is such a powerful tool for mission,' 'our toddler group arose quite naturally out of the baptisms, and this has now boosted the All Age Mass.'*

Growth has to be seen as three-dimensional, reflected in attendance at services, individual discipleship, and commitment to the local community.

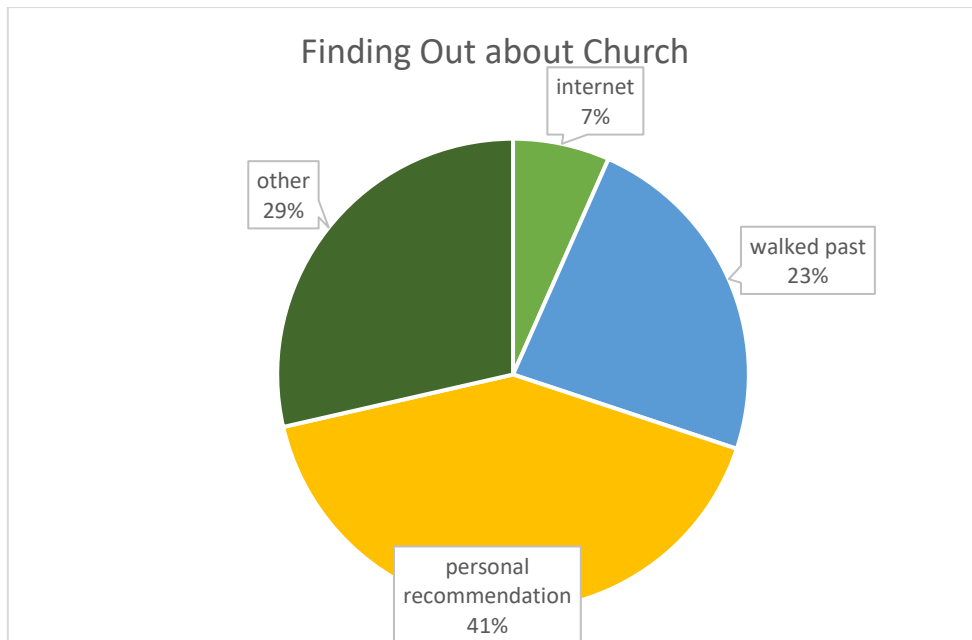
³⁰ Over a third of the respondents in the congregational surveys had been drawn to Church through the occasional offices of baptism, marriage or funeral

Congregational Surveys

During the Summer and Autumn of 2019 members of seven congregations were given the opportunity to complete an anonymous survey to add to this research. The setting was the main Sunday Mass, with an explanation given about the survey during the service and usually referenced in the sermon. Survey sheets with fourteen questions were distributed to everyone attending and included questions about each respondent, their view of the church they attend and primarily what would make this church more attractive or mission focussed. The anonymity of the survey was stressed and in most cases all questions were answered fully. In total 374 people completed the survey. Thanks are due to the congregations that took part and the priests who facilitated this aspect of the research. The seven churches were St John in Ranmoor, St Peter in Fleetwood, St Anne in St Anne's-on-the-Sea, Worksop Priory, St Mary in South Elmsall, St Wilfrid in Cantley, and St Helen in Auckland.

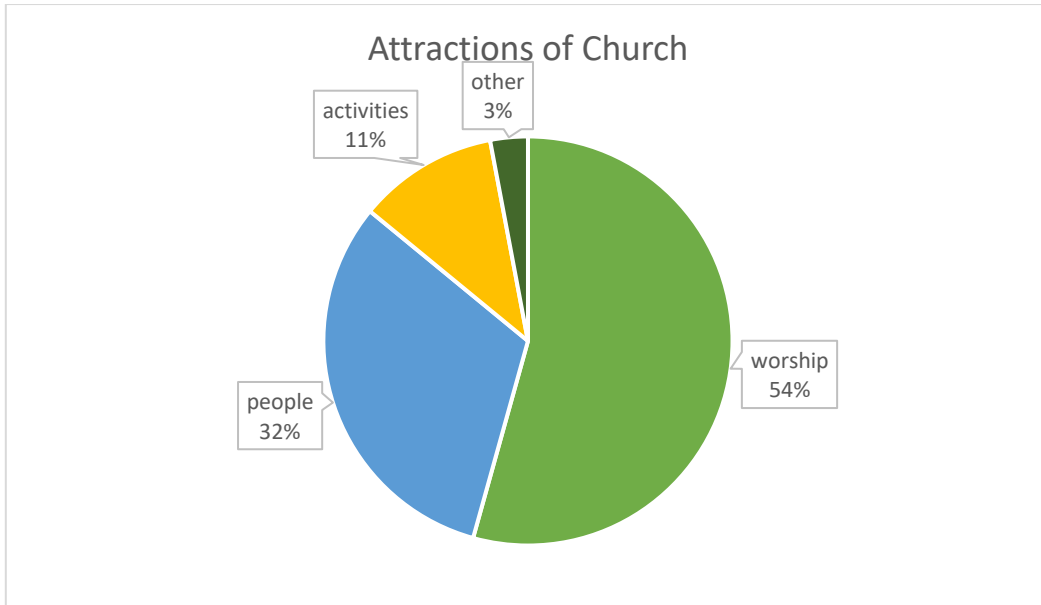


The origin of a new member when joining a church is a crucial factor in mission. For some respondents this reflects a situation some decades ago, and those who were introduced to the Church through their families at an early age did not tend to answer this question. By far the majority of those who did respond either transferred from another church, due to moving to a new house or deciding to leave another church for other reasons, or returning to Church after a long period of absence. Most crucially, only 8% were new to Church, which is an indication of actual growth rather than relative growth.

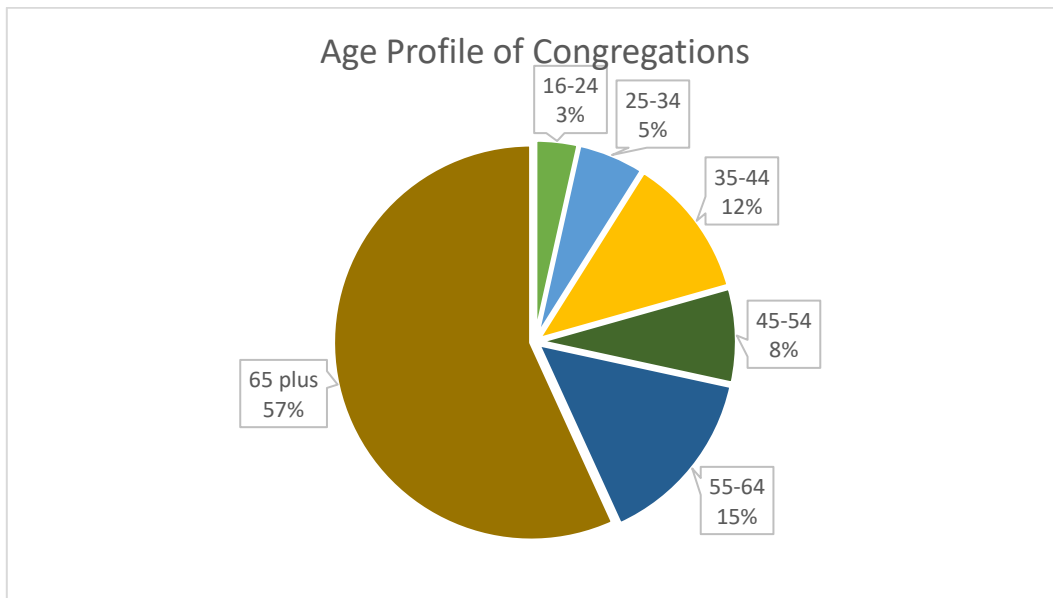


How people find out about Church is vital for mission, although it is often a combination of factors. Personal recommendation was by far the most commonly expressed reason, perhaps with the offer to accompany someone to a service. The importance of the personal approach was underlined when respondents indicated who encouraged them into Church, and very often the priest was mentioned by name. The individual invitation is a powerful act of mission. Within the smaller though not insignificant 'other' category there was publicity about activities, such as the choir or the youth club, and the availability of occasional offices, most particularly baptisms and funerals. The 'kerb appeal' of the local church, as shown in the 'walked past' category, should not be discounted as a means to draw people in, particularly in churches that have an open outreach to their local community. Specifically, the internet was rated quite low, although this may reflect the age profile of congregations and the period in which they joined.



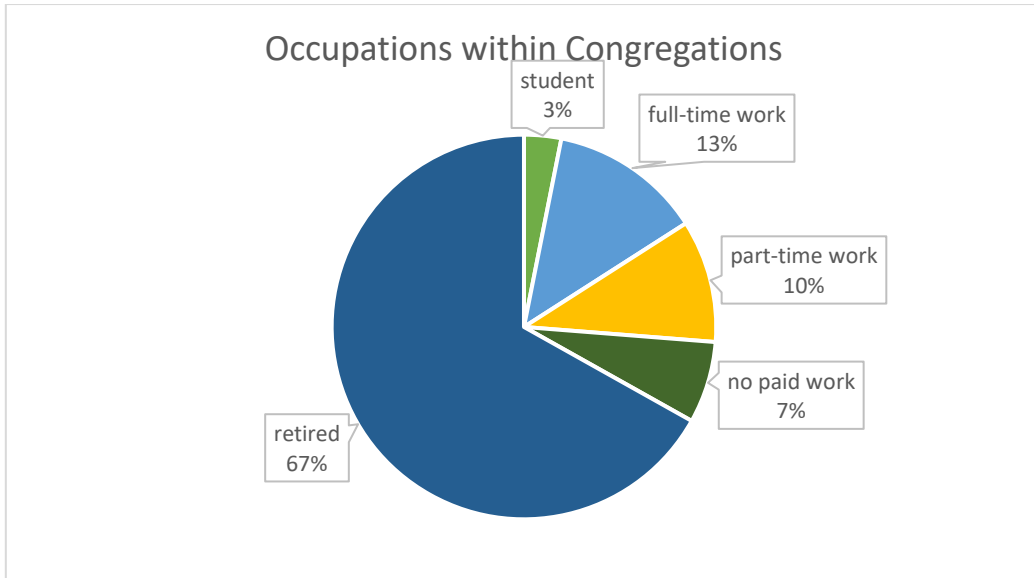


By far the most attractive aspect of these churches in the catholic tradition was the worship, and it is this above all else that brought people to these places. It was the distinctive style and approach to services that is important, and some cases people will travel miles to be part of such worship. The presence of people, presumably because of their friendliness and welcome, was also important. Other factors, such as activities and social events, were relatively unimportant, an indication of where the Church needs to place its emphasis on mission.

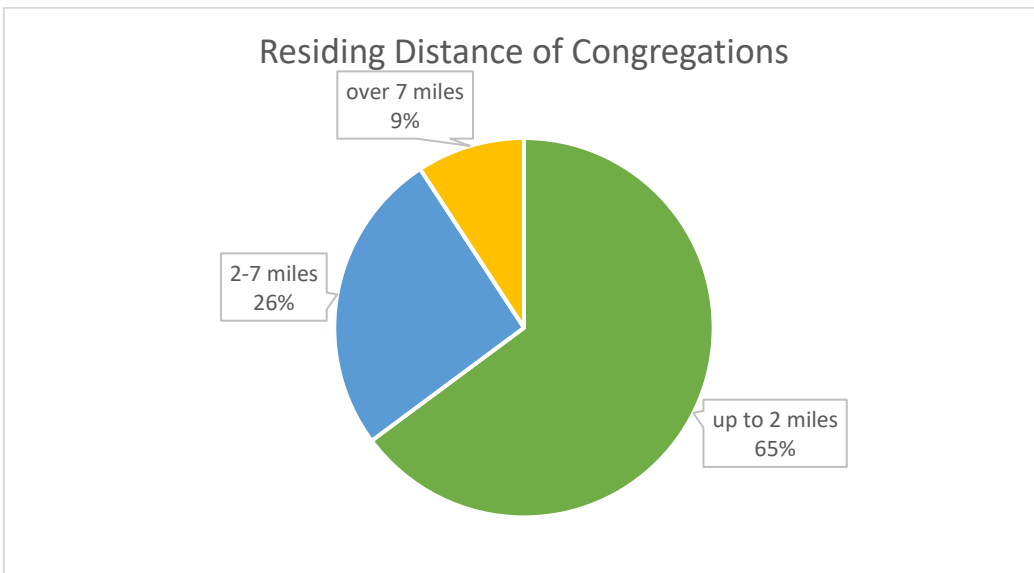


These congregations contained a majority of older people, which is not surprising. However, it should be noted that there was a good proportion in other age groups: over one third were aged 35-54. Those under 16 were not included in the survey. These churches are a little older than the national average.³¹ In some congregations the percentage of young people was much higher, and in one case nearly half of the congregation was under 55. However, in four out of the seven congregations there was no one present under 24.

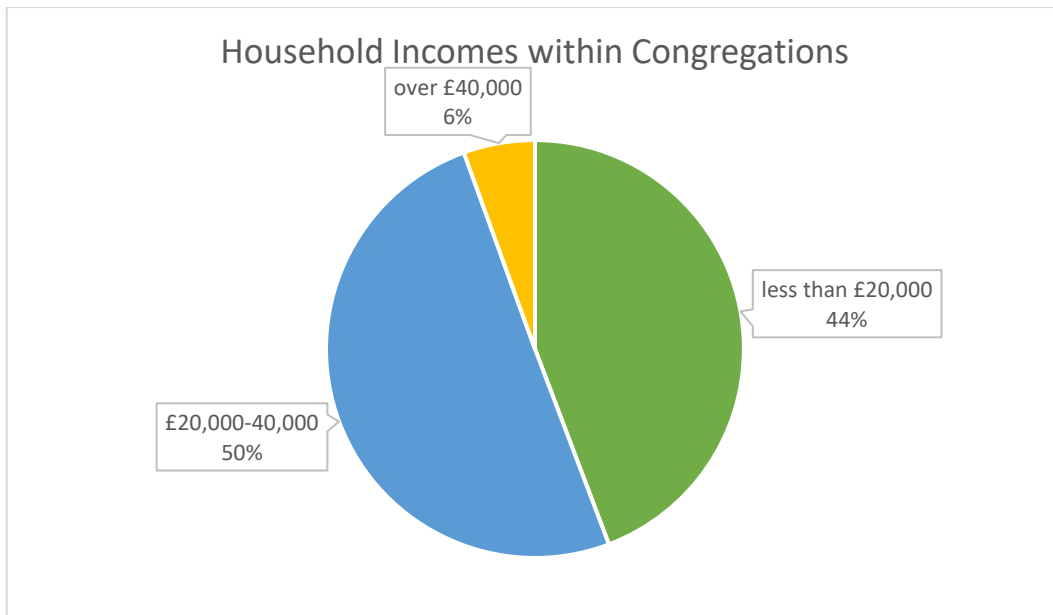
³¹ The national average figures, which relate to slightly different age groups, are younger: 60% were 18-69 and 40% were 70 and over. *Statistics for Mission 2018*, Church House, 2019.



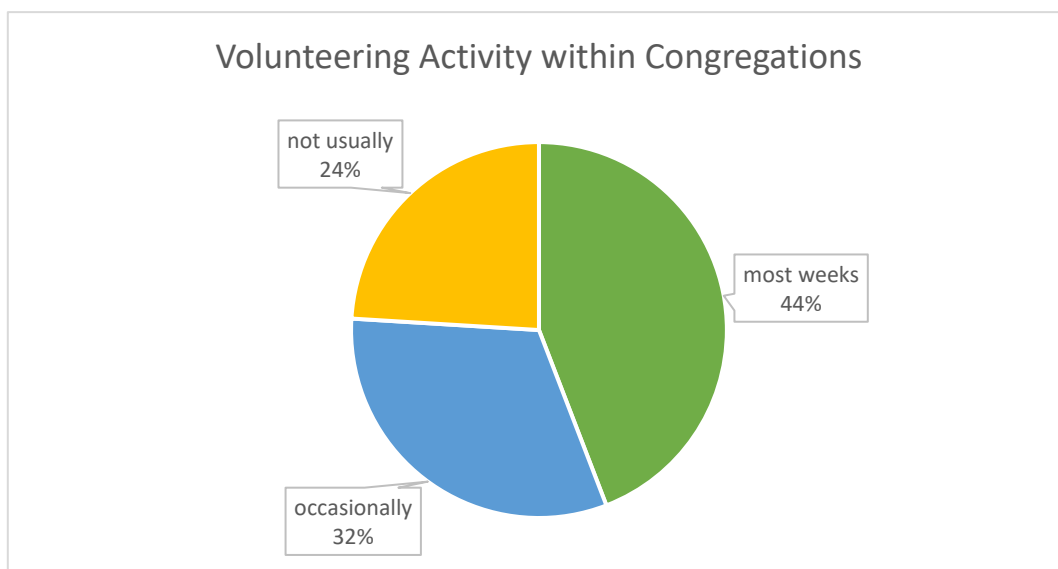
As this tends to relate to the age of people in the congregations it is not surprising that two-thirds were retired. Only a small group, 13%, were in full-time work, an important factor in the finance of the local church.



This is a vital issue for churches that are ministering to their local communities. Almost two-thirds were living close to the church building, in reasonable walking distance. In some congregations, particularly those that represent a particular tradition, it is not unusual for some people to travel a distance to attend the church of their choice. In one or two congregations this was as high as 15%, but never a large group. The main emphasis is on drawing a congregation from the local community.



A few people objected to this question, even though the responses were anonymous. Congregations were on average poorer than the wider population, which may reflect the number of people living on pensions, or part-time income. The small percentage of high earners, which was half of those in full-time work, is an important factor to note as these people are increasingly relied upon for the financial support of the local church.



Activity in the church is a crucial factor for lay involvement. The survey revealed a reasonably high commitment to volunteer support, particularly among the younger respondents. It is an indication of how the Church relies on such work, but at the same time should not deflect from the important role of lay people as disciples in their communities outside the activities of the local church.

The penultimate question of the survey asked the respondents to declare their view on the mission state of their church. 51% believed it was growing, 13% stated it was declining and 36% thought it was staying about the same. This shows the perception of the members of the congregation, with a tendency to be more pessimistic than reality because most of the churches in the survey have actually grown in recent years.

Finally, each respondent was asked to suggest one new thing that would make their church more attractive. Common answers related to the building ('get rid of the pews,' 'improve the facilities'), to the community ('work for social justice,' 'serve the local needs,' 'increase social media presence'), to the worship ('shorter services,' 'less formal') and to the clergy ('support X more,' 'let X get on with the job!'). However, the most common response was a call to increase the work with children and young people, either through youth activities or the local schools. By far the most popular request was for a paid youth worker.



Conclusions: Sowing for Growth

This research is not a comprehensive reflection of all the views and experiences of growth in churches of the catholic tradition in the northern province. Nevertheless, patterns and themes have emerged from this study which may assist further reflection and the planning for growth. “Mystical notions without a solid social and missionary outreach are of no help to evangelization, nor are dissertations or social or pastoral practices which lack a spirituality which can change hearts.”³²



1. Support Growth-Minded Priests

For churches to grow they need parish priests who are committed to sustaining and growing the Church.³³ The nature of possible growth will vary across different contexts, and as has been shown, to maintain a congregation in a challenging parish setting should be recognised as an achievement in itself. In other places where the circumstances are more favourable numerical growth should be expected. The evidence overwhelming suggests that it is those priests who feel supported who are most likely to have a positive attitude to the future of the Church.

Growth-minded priests will look for growth in three dimensions. They will nurture discipleship, expressed in the commitment of people to the sacramental life of the Church and practical service in the community. They will show that there is vitality and excitement about a parish that has a growth-minded priest at its heart. They will not be content to keep things as they are but will look for ways to foster discipleship arising from greater depths of service grounded in the theological insights of the catholic tradition. They will not be afraid to make changes where necessary, leading people into new opportunities, sometimes with the sense of urgency that is required. They will have a love for the liturgy, expressed in their own devotional life, providing services that are both of high quality and accessible. They will also have a love for the community which they serve, in order that the love of God might be made tangible to people of the parish. They will live their daily ministry in the incarnational theology of the catholic tradition. They will have special regard for those in the community who are disadvantaged because such people are close to the heart of God. They will do all this regardless of the scepticism of those inside and outside of the Church. They will work with others in the many ways that are possible regardless of differing views, in the ecumenical spirit of the Five Guiding Principles.

³² *The Joy of the Gospel: Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013, p78

³³ The intentionality to be missional is a key characteristic as argued by Jackson, *What Makes Churches Grow?* p73-91

However, such priests do need to be supported and feel secure in their place in the catholic tradition and in the Church of England. This is achieved through formal and informal associations with other priests, and by being valued by the dioceses and deaneries where they work. No priest should feel that they are working on their own, or that their ministry is not highly significant. Priests should be given the opportunity to regularly reflect on how their parish ministry relates to theology, so that each underpins the other. This is all the more important in an era when parish ministry is changing quickly and what was learned in training does not necessarily fully sustain priests in their current experience. Opportunities for further study, whether validated or informal, need to be offered and facilitated, mainly because the experience of such priests is a valuable contribution to academic theology in keeping it grounded and relevant. There is scope for encouraging the mentoring of priests and identifying good practice to be shared. Adequately supporting growth-minded priests has to be a key priority for any policy to grow the Church.

2. Support Sustainable Parishes

Support for growth-minded priests is dependent on support for sustainable parishes. The fragility of the present system is apparent in several places, even in the larger and more resilient of churches. As dioceses face difficult decisions about where priests are deployed, growth is most likely to happen where sufficient resources are made available. To be meaningful this may need to be in a concentrated form rather than spread too thinly. In some places it is obvious that the system of parish share is not working and even detrimental to growth. If it appears to be a tax on growth it is completely self-defeating. The resource potential of each parish needs to be properly assessed not just through the scale of deprivation scores, but also by means of a realistic account of the assets of property and people. Some parishes in the north present an opportunity for investment precisely because they serve communities that have been starved in the past. Great possibilities for growth may be lost because such places have not been given the resources they need. There is an imperative in the Gospel that means that the Church must have a special concern for the parts of society left behind or forgotten. Recent events in the political sphere have reminded us of this but such a concern has always been part of the catholic tradition.³⁴

The difficult decision is determining where the investment will be placed and where it will not. The evidence suggests that the future of the Church depends on ensuring such investment is targeted in parishes that have the most potential to grow. Such a strategic approach depends on the availability of growth-minded priests, who are given the freedom to explore their parish ministry as led by the Holy Spirit. An open-hearted and willing congregation of lay people is also needed, who should be trusted to develop their own ministries. Another factor is the absence of other churches, for there is a deep need to cooperate ecumenically with our sisters and brothers in Christ, with whom we should not be in direct competition. Regretfully, there was no significant evidence of this strategic cooperation in the research.

Where the 'one priest, one church' model has been actively supported the benefits of incarnational ministry have been realised. Creating centres of excellence where commitment to the liturgy is matched by commitment to the community, will produce churches that grow. The London report shows that this the case, which gives hope for the Church to grow in all such places.

³⁴ *Evangelii Gaudium*, pp58-77

In one particular area there is a need for an obvious investment, which is in children and youth ministry. This was highlighted by priests and people throughout this research. Churches in the catholic tradition already show their potential for developing such important work, as evidenced by the involvement of young people in the liturgy and through the work in schools. There is much to build on here, and parish priests and their congregations are determinedly asking for investment in this area.

Consideration needs to be given to how the SDF has been used effectively in parishes of the catholic tradition and how some models for church growth need to be reinterpreted for such churches. There is much in the history of the catholic tradition that needs to be reclaimed, though there are signs of this in the newfound confidence expressed by some younger parish priests. Distinctively the involvement of such priests will emphasise the best of the commitment of incarnational ministry to the local community and how the sacraments reveal in a unique way the love and grace of God for all.

3. Develop the Lay Theology for Current Context

In a time when the Church is facing particular vocational challenges there could be no more important era than this for developing a theology of the laity.³⁵ Growth will come where ministry is shared, and the catholic tradition has a distinctive and well-grounded approach to complementary ministry. Priests and laity support each other in the work of the Church, and incarnational parish ministry is dependent on the laity being active in their discipleship in the community. The danger is that as the structures of the Church become more stretched the laity are drawn in just to prop up a failing ecclesiastical system. To avoid this some administrative and governance structures of the Church may need to be streamlined. It is the experience of some parish priests in the north that this point has already been reached, and what is needed is an efficient and focused church structure that prioritises worship and the provision of the sacraments in the context of serving the community. Ironically, it is where the parish bureaucracy cannot be maintained that the reality of vital parish ministry can become apparent. Lay people need to have the capacity not to maintain the institutional Church but rather to grow the Kingdom of God in whatever way is right for their community.

The theology of the laity empowers them to discern their discipleship in cooperation with the parish priest. The lay people are uniquely placed to ensure the mission of the Church is fully extended into all areas where people live, work and interact. Parish priests recognise that they cannot be in all places and that they depend on the laity to show God's love in every place. We need to fully understand and implement the statement "The entire people of God proclaims the Gospel."³⁶ The opportunities for mission by lay people are enormous, empowered and commissioned as they are through the Sacrament of Baptism.

Parish priests need to encourage the laity to develop their theology, although ultimately this is a movement that has to be lay led. This would need to be a key part of a Lay Apostolate, if this was invigorated. The experience of lay people in northern parishes in the catholic tradition would make a substantial contribution to this, particularly with regard to the Anglican view of the role of laity in the Church. All times of growth in the Church in the past, from the early centuries to the present, have involved the impetus of lay people and so it is not possible to grow the Church without them fulfilling their proper place in the life of the Church as disciples and as ministers in their communities.

³⁵ Research confirms that lay people have a crucial role in church growth. See *From Anecdote to Evidence: Findings from the Church Growth Research Programme 2011-2013*, The Church Commissioners, 2014, p8

³⁶ *Evangelii Gaudium*, p39

Furthermore, a revitalised theology of the laity, based on the experiences of challenging parishes, will help to invigorate the theology of priesthood, which at this time in the Church of England is a particular need. Almost thirty years on from the ordination of women to the priesthood and the recent turbulence of working this through in the life of the Church, an opportunity is presented for all ministry, ordained and lay, to be re-assessed. The confidence of some of the traditional Catholics observed in this research, along with the hopeful assurance that different views can be held within the Church of England, should encourage the development of robust theologies of all callings in the Church. Growth in the Church will depend upon it.

4. Develop the Theology of the Liturgy as Mission

A strong theme that arose in this study was the power of the liturgy as a vehicle of outreach and mission.³⁷ Parish priests shared many instances where worship had brought a strong sense of the need of God into people's lives. It could be in the intimate setting of the daily Mass, in all the ritual of a festival service, on a noisy procession through the streets, or just silently before the Blessed Sacrament in an almost empty church. In a secular society the presence of a distinctly spiritual act has a power to draw and convict. In a secular society where people's unmet spiritual need is just below the surface that power is even stronger. The evidence is that the liturgy even has an attraction among the young and those unfamiliar with Christian traditions.

The liturgy has the twin functions of drawing us closer to God and then sending us out into the world to be his people. The very act of the Eucharist is inherently missional: "For as much as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor. 11:26, NRSV). The final words of the Mass after the blessing instruct us to go into our communities to share the love of God. That sharing is the beginning of any form of evangelism that leads ultimately to a Church that grows. "Jesus leaves us the Eucharist as the Church's daily remembrance of, and deeper sharing in, the event of his Passover The joy of evangelizing always arises from grateful remembrance."³⁸

In the Catholic tradition the Word and the Sacrament are brought together to create a liturgy that reminds us that we are witnesses in the power of the Holy Spirit to what God has done in the past and what God will do in the future. We remember and re-enact the love of God in the giving of himself through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ in order to re-discover and live out that love beyond the act of formal worship. In the Catholic tradition the liturgy and the world interact, a blending of sacred and secular that is powerful and life-changing.

This research has shown that Catholic worship is missional. It provides a bedrock on which people can build their own discipleship, a vital dimension in a growing Church. The very structure of the liturgy and the regular nourishment in a seasonal pattern, gives people the confidence to live the resurrection faith. In touching all the senses, it embodies the faith as relevant to all of life and all creation. It moves the focus away from the individual to the communal desire to be the people of God in that place and time, and beyond to the people of God in all places and all times. Ultimately, liturgy brings us back to the main purpose of our lives, for which we were created, to worship God with the whole of our lives. This purpose is only fulfilled when we share our experience of knowing God, through love, justice and mercy in the communities where God has called us to be.

³⁷ This is an area for further research suggested in *Towards a Theology of Church Growth*, p240

³⁸ *Evangelii Gaudium*, p10

Final Word

This research in the northern province, although limited in scope, has drawn some large conclusions. These priests and churches of the catholic tradition are committed to mission, to the expression of God's love through the liturgy, and through wholehearted engagement and service in their communities, which include some of the very most deprived in England. There is much to be gained through the reaffirmation of catholic ministry in the context of third decade of the 21st century if the Church of England can use its resources wisely and be committed to the allowing the rich spectrum of Christian ministry to be expressed.

The work of the Church is founded on prayer, and no more so than in the desire to see the Church grow. Prayer is in the beginning and in the accomplishment of mission, and as the Church grows it engages more deeply with God, through worship, dedication and service. In prayer this research is offered as an encouragement to all who are expectant for the Church to grow at a time when the need is as great as ever.

The London report was entitled *A Time to Sow*, but from what has been discovered and discussed, this report demands the title, *The Time to Sow in the North*.



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