

YOUNG priests who lead churches in deprived parishes in London have shown that Anglo-Catholic growth is possible — but they are not typical and a change of culture will be needed to make them so.

This is the conclusion of a new report from the Centre for Theology and Community (CTC), *A Time to Sow: Anglican Catholic church growth in London*. It says that the seven churches featured give the lie to claims that growth cannot be achieved in deprived areas, but warns that many Anglo-Catholics have embraced “damaging myths” about church growth, including the idea that it is an Evangelical phenomenon.

The report “shows that Catholic growth is possible,” writes Canon Angus Ritchie, director of the CTC, and Priest-in-Charge of St George-in-the-East, London. “But it also shows that such growth is only happening in a fraction of the parishes where it could — that there is a need for a change in the culture of Catholic Anglicanism if it is to fulfil its God-given potential to transform lives and communities.”

A Time to Sow, published after a separate study that explored Evangelical church-planting in London ([News, 8 April. 2016](#)), features seven Anglo-Catholic churches in the dioceses of London and Southwark that have been growing numerically in the past five years. Most have been growing at an average annual rate of five to ten per cent, equivalent to between three and 15 new people.

The new joiners were found to be a mixture of people who are from other churches, or who are returning to church, or who are new to church. All seven churches are within the 15 per cent most deprived parishes in England, and five of the seven priests leading them are in their first postings as incumbents, and are described as “young and relatively inexperienced”. Three of the churches are defined as “traditional Catholic”; the remainder “modern Catholic”. The growth in the churches is not merely numerical, the report emphasises, but is also seen in discipleship.

Among the seven featured is St Luke’s, Woodside. Before the arrival of the Priest-in-Charge, the Revd Sam Dennis, last year, there had been talk of merging the church with another parish. “The rapid revival of the church’s fortunes appears to vividly illustrate the difference that a positive and active priest can make in a parish where church life has waned,” the report says.

The author of the report, Tim Thorlby, development director at CTC, identifies seven “habits of growth” observed across the seven churches: “ensuring a welcome to newcomers, worship which is accessible but with depth, a focus on work with children, new services mid-week and later on Sunday, community ministry, and clergy who are focused on growth.”

The report says that the leadership of priests who have growth as “part of their mindset” evinces both continuity with the past and a readiness to make changes where necessary. The seven parishes were not ones where “Father does everything”, but places where the laity was empowered. Sacrament: The Vicar of St Benet’s, Kentish Town, the Revd Dr Peter Anthony, baptising a new member of his growing congregation

It also highlights the “active management” of assets, including buildings, and campaigns to increase giving by congregations. It gives the example of one flat that

was so poorly managed that it eventually had to be sold for half of what its value might have been, and a hall used by an organisation who neither paid rent nor maintained it (a court settlement eventually resolved the matter). Several of the churches had secured increases in giving by significant amounts, after making requests of their congregations.

Relatively few of the activities or habits are new, the report says: “most are tried and tested, and some are truly ancient.” They are also, it suggests, similar to those observed in growing Evangelical churches in London: “Although worship styles and churchmanship may well differ, it is possible that the underlying habits of church growth may be more universal and not owned by any particular tradition.” This was the conclusion of *From Anecdote to Evidence*, the study published by the Church Growth Research Programme in 2014, which said that theological tradition appeared to have “no significant link with growth”, but listed “being intentional in prioritising growth” as a factor.

The CTC report also lists “habits of decline”, which, it suggests, are not theological but cultural, “acquired at some point during the 20th Century and which are no longer serving the tradition well”. Some priests are “ambivalent at best” about church growth, it says.

“Some of our interviewees suggested that the traditional mindset for a parish priest seems to be very much about being faithful in ‘running a parish’, ‘administering the sacraments’ and ‘praying for the world’ and relying upon the local community to faithfully respond to this by attending services. This may have been an appropriate stance when churchgoing in Britain was more prevalent but in a post-Christendom culture, they argue that the role of the parish priest has changed — it needs to be reimagined and the priest must become more of a ‘missionary’ to a sceptical community. A time of declining congregations requires a greater sense of urgency.”

The report also challenges claims made by some church leaders that deprivation is a reason for a lack of growth. The seven churches featured “strongly indicate that such arguments are excuses rather than explanations”, it says.

Mr Thorlby writes that the seven case studies are “unusual, rather than typical, examples of Anglican Catholic parishes in London”, and concludes that the overall picture is one of decline. CTC had “great difficulty in finding many Anglo-Catholic parishes which had grown consistently in the last five years”, and found “little evidence” of church-planting. “It is hard to see where significant Anglican Catholic growth in London might be,” he writes.

Although the report acknowledges that, across London, church attendance has been in modest decline, it argues that growth is less likely to be found among Anglo-Catholic parishes, on average. It cites the fact that there are no Anglo-Catholic “mega churches”; and that, among the large ones, few seem to be growing consistently or aiding the growth of other parishes. The argument that “mega churches” and “church

planting” are not Anglo-Catholic reflects a “modern reticence” not rooted in the tradition, it argues.

Four challenges conclude the report, including a suggestion that priests consider “well developed programmes of midweek fellowship and catechesis” and a call on larger Anglo-Catholic churches to support and resource other parishes.

After listing a number of “damaging myths” embraced by Anglo-Catholics, Canon Ritchie writes in his Afterword that the report “refutes the consoling claim that growth is ‘not for us’. For

Catholic church growth is happening in some of England’s poorest neighbourhoods. Far from selling out to the dominant culture, the churches which are growing are challenging injustice and proclaiming the faith with confidence.”

In a foreword, the Rt Revd Peter Wheatley, a former Bishop of Edmonton, now an honorary assistant bishop in the dioceses of London, Southwark, and Chichester, suggests that many clergy have learned to preach, teach and pastor, “but not how to run an effective organisation where their people feel they are hosts not guests”. He also observes that most of the clergy featured in the report were appointed by bishops “exercising patronage creatively”.

In her foreword, Canon Alison Grant Milbank, associate professor literature and theology at the University of Nottingham, writes of a “crisis of confidence in the whole movement as well as a reluctance among some Catholic parishes to engage with what can seem an instrumental attitude to church growth”.

Noting that the churches featured have not done “anything particularly revolutionary. . . What is paradoxically most encouraging here is the modest nature of the growth reported, which is evidence of its rooted and authentic nature. Our world is crying out for sacramental, holistic ways of living which unite body and soul to mediate the transcendent.”

CHURCHES FEATURED

At **St Luke’s, Hammersmith**, where the Revd Richard Bastable is serving his first incumbency as Vicar, there has been a “significant increase” in children’s attendance and a growth in Sunday attendance from 60 to 75. Teaching sessions on spirituality are attended by up to 25 people a week. Income has been increased by leasing out a flat, and by a stewardship campaign that has resulted in an increase of 60 per cent in giving. Among the social outreach activities is an after-school craft session.

At **St Benet’s, Kentish Town**, the Vicar, the Revd Dr Peter Anthony, has seen growth from 40 to 60, offering a “more family-friendly welcome” on a Sunday, and more children’s work during the week. The Sunday school has been re-established, and a children’s eucharist is held several times a year. Management of the church’s property has delivered £20,000 more income a year and congregational giving has doubled.

At **St Mary’s, Tottenham**, where the Vicar is the Revd Simon Morris, social outreach includes a night-shelter and a lunch club. A mission hall, recently repaired, now has a congregation of about 40, using it for worship for the first time in 70 years. They

include some people returning to church after years away. A new full-time children's worker and assistant curate have joined this year.

At **St Anne's, Hoxton**, where the Vicar is the Revd Christopher Woods, the congregation has grown from 45 to 65, of which a third are children. Members are involved in a growing number of mid-week activities, including study groups and a new evening rosary group. The church has also started running a weekly soup kitchen and youth group.

A **St John's, Catford**, where the Rector is the Revd Dr Martin Thomas, the congregation has grown from 50 to 150 over the past decade. A new, more informal, Sunday-afternoon service, has been created, and mid-week activities include Messy Church and choristers club. Approximately half of the congregation class themselves as returning or new to church.

At **St Luke's, Woodside**, where the Priest-in-Charge is the Revd Samuel Dennis, the congregation has grown from 60 to 90. There is a new "young church", as well as a number of mid-week services and activities, including the Pilgrim course. Before his arrival, there had been talk of a merger with another parish. Congregational giving has risen by nearly 40 per cent.

At **St George-in-the-East, Shadwell**, the living was suspended until a plan proffered by the CTC was approved by the PCC: the Rector's stipend was used to fund two part-time priests and the rectory was used to house a lay community of young people serving the parish. Sunday attendance has grown from 20 to 50, and two mid-week fresh expressions of church have begun. This has led a number of social justice initiatives, as part of Citizens UK.