

**FORWARD IN FAITH 2014 NATIONAL ASSEMBLY**  
**FLOURISHING WITHIN THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND'S**  
**LIFE AND STRUCTURES**

**1: VOCATIONS**

**Presentation by Fr Darren Smith**

The Church Times reported on 7 February that there were “Not enough boots on the ground”. This headline was generated in response to the Church of England’s recent statistics on the number of stipendiary clergy. Without wanting to over complicate things and quote too many facts and figures the reality is that:

There are fewer ordinands coming forward.

The Age Profile is worryingly high. 42% are over 50

There are more unpaid self-supporting ministers than ever The number of full time stipendiary clergy has fallen to 7674 with the greatest decrease in among male clergy

The proportion of women has seen a 40% increase in the last decade.

I am sure that you are all only too aware the effects that this is having upon us as a constituency with the increase in vacant parishes and with the difficulty in recruiting clergy to serve in these parishes. Departures to the Roman Catholic Church, coupled with retirements and fewer ordinations has left us seriously challenged. And as much as we all want to see our constituency flourish and grow this is simply not going to happen without more priests, be they full time or self-supporting.

The Catholic Societies under the leadership of the ACS has re-branded its vocational work under the new title ”Here I Am”, something I hope that you are all already familiar with. But this is not simply a re-launch, this is, dare I say a re-think about how we present ourselves in a new and confident way in a church that has invited us to flourish and grow.

I may be somewhat biased but I would say that the new material that we have produced be it our posters, leaflets, You-Tube channel, or our vibrant new Twitter account, shows a constituency that confident about the future and that is looking outward A group that’s dynamic, relevant and prepared to take risks.

The effects of this initiative have already started to bear fruit, not only in the Vocations Conference this last August that had 34 men attending but also in a number of other things such as the fact that Ministry Division asked to attend the conference rather than wait for us to invite or cajole them , the figures of traditionalists at Theological Colleges and courses are at a level that we haven’t seen for many years and the age profile of our ordinands is amongst some of the lowest of any tradition in the C of E

But please brothers and sisters, don’t be tempted to relax back in your pews and pat yourselves on your back saying haven’t we done well, for this is just the beginning. And if we are to take our place around the Justin Wellby table we need to press on together with this

important task of resourcing our church's ministry for the future. Believe me no matter how good our literature is or engaging our Videos on you tube are, without us all claiming ownership of the initiative then we are ultimately going to fail.

Recently I was asked to address a Forward in Faith Diocesan AGM and I simply asked the question How Many people had heard a sermon, or seen an article in a parish magazine, or attended a prayer event in the last 12 months that was simply about vocation, and sadly no one held their hand up. My brothers and sisters perhaps many of us need to hold our heads in shame, for the message of vocations to the priesthood and the religious life should come towards the top of our new priorities in a church committing itself to mission and evangelism.

So I want to end by asking you all to remember four simple words and put these into practice over the next 12 months. These words are:

Challenge

Look

Ask yourself

Pray

The first letter of each spells the word Clap.

Challenge – never be afraid to challenge anybody with a thought of being called to priesthood or the religious life. This is what somebody may desperately want to hear, almost as a validation of their call.

Look – The person next to you, in front of you or behind you, many indeed be the very one that God is calling to some form of ministry within the church. It is not so ridiculous that someone from your own congregation may fit in this category and it is only by looking that you will then be able to encourage and support them.

Ask – Ask yourself – am I being called? Please don't hide behind excuses. You might not be too old, you could well be clever enough, you are no less holy than anybody else. God calls all sorts of strange people to ministry; you only have to look at the clergy here today to see how true that is. And in spite of what some of the priests may say, none of us are perfect.

Pray – vocations begin with God and not our need. Ministry is not a job vacancy but a calling and a way of life. Constantly ask the Lord to send more labourers for the harvest. Encourage prayer before the Blessed Sacrament, arrange vigils and days of prayer, put vocations on your parish and personal prayer list and please use the ACS prayer, Almighty God Give us Priests.

So my dear friends let me leave you considering this four letter word CLAP, Challenge, Look, Ask and Pray. We may not all be charismatic's Christians but I hope we will all CLAP when I say no priest, no future. So please do follow us on Twitter @hereiamvocations or log into our website at [www.here-i-am.org.uk](http://www.here-i-am.org.uk) and please put the 6<sup>th</sup> December Saint Mary's Somers Town into your diary as this is the next vocations event.