



About the Author

Barry Verdi retired from Holy Family, North Hollywood, California. He served in the Dioceses of Iowa, Missouri, and Springfield and Los Angeles, California. Currently, he has been writing. His most recent book is *Genesis Quest*.

About Vintage Voice

Vintage Voice is a monthly publication for retirees of the Episcopal Church who, in sharing their stories, help deepen the sense of community. We hope you enjoy these articles and find them helpful. Articles are published with the authors' permission. If you have a reflection about your life in retirement, consider writing for the Vintage Voice! Send your submissions to vintagevoice@cp.org.

VINTAGE VOICE



Declining Numbers – A Response

By Barry Verdi

Dear colleagues, spouses, and partners,

The January Vintage Voice submission by Judy Wright Mathews regarding “declining numbers in religious organizations in the Episcopal Church” must be cause of great concern to many, if not all of us.

Her closing words were, “I wonder if we older Episcopalians are concerned about the changes (in our Church) or are we pleased? I, myself, am pleased with the current state of our Episcopal Church.” However, given the extent of the decline in population, the present state of the Church worries me. Certainly, with our cumulative knowledge and experience, we should be able to delineate ways to strengthen and support existing congregations.

My ministry began in the mid-fifties when Bishop Bloy in Los Angeles and Bishop Block in San Francisco were buying property and establishing new congregations throughout the rapidly expanding metropolitan region. One of the many things that bothers me about the decline of the Church is a reversal of their visions.

You may have read in *The Living Church* about the sale of Saint James in New Port Beach (September 10, 2017). This year, the Congregation was received into the Diocese as a Mission. But Saint James was not the only one sold. The previous year, my congregation, Holy Family, North Hollywood, was sold, even though it was in the process of being designated a “historical” site.

The Sunday before Lent, a letter from the Bishop was read informing the congregation that we had ten days to vacate the property. At 8:00AM the next morning, I received a phone call ordering me (although emeritus) to the Bishop’s office. When I arrived, the Bishop, with two witnesses present, reiterated our vow of obedience and ordered me not to interfere with his action.

That first Sunday of Lent, the Church closed. Compounding the matter, the church in the zip code immediately to the north was closed and sold, as were the ones to the east and south. Four adjoining congregations and properties lost, and I’m sure this was not unique.

Holy Family may have been a “minority” low-income congregation, but it was not a lost cause — nor were the other churches. Over the decade I was there, we baptized 800 people each year and confirmed 400 more. With over 6,000 members, according to the 1995 Advent issue of *The Anglican Digest*, we ranked as the fifth-largest congregation, tied with Christ Church Cranbrook, Bloomington Hills, Michigan.

How did we grow so much? By identifying and meeting the needs of families. At the same time, the loss of other churches in the Diocese was not the result of increased women’s roles, race, or liturgy — it was mismanagement.

The February 11 issue of *Bloomberg Business* stated that by 2050, seventy percent of the world’s population will be in rapidly expanding urban areas. That is what would make having those properties so valuable in the future. Reacquiring them will become increasingly difficult, all the more so depending on the inflationary rate.

As Vicar out of seminary, my annual cash income was \$4,000. Today it would be 12 times that, but my standard of living is the same. What annual increase in pay will people entering the priesthood today need to stay even?

Probably, all of us received the letter from The Church Pension Fund regarding our health insurance supplement. If for nothing more than our own self-interest, we should want to help keep the Church and its priesthood healthy and secure in our service to God and His people.

But what can we do?

You may have various thoughts about how we can sustain our congregations and continue ministering to the people we serve. I have two, both based on demonstrating the relevance, vitality, and value of our Church to a broad group of people. The first is a national campaign to help the homeless. Another idea is to establish a not-for-profit national communications platform (e.g., an online channel) that would speak to people of various backgrounds and needs by featuring programming created and hosted by people of those same backgrounds. The concept is based on my experience as the General Manager and Program Director of the station KPAR in San Jose.

We occupied a 1,700 square-foot studio, and with the help of about 600 volunteers, we operated 24/7. Examples of the needs-based programming we created included *The Silent Ear*, a half-hour show entirely in sign language, *Ironsides Move Over*, produced by and for people with physical disabilities, *The Rickey Riddel Show*, an after-school program hosted and produced by 5th grader Ricky Riddel, and a program by and for people of transgender. All costs were covered by donations. Today, given how easy it is to set up an online channel, something similar could be used to help get our message out, and of course, reach younger people online where they live.

Many of us likely have other such ideas to contribute to a broader discussion on this ever-pressing subject, which is why I move that we have a National Conference of Retired Clergy, Spouses, and Partners. Is there a second to this motion?

How many people would participate? Where would it be held? Of course, an organizing committee would figure out such details (and right now, there isn’t one). If you think that this would be a good place to start addressing the future wellbeing of our Church and would like to talk about this further, I invite you to contact me to help establish a steering committee. Email me at verdi.genesisquest@gmail.com or call (818) 890-5057.



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