

St Simon † St Jude

Roman Catholic Church Streatham Hill

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Dr. Dilys Wadman
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Dear Dr. Wadman,

I am writing to you in grave concern over the lack of school places for children in the parish of St Simon and St Jude, Streatham Hill. I have been Parish Priest here for nearly two years and, having gone through the second year of the Parish process of school applications, have noticed most significantly this year that our parishioners are severely disadvantaged in trying to obtain a place in a Catholic School.

Since arriving in this Parish and deliberately trying to build up the sense of Parish life and community, with a special emphasis on family life and the support of Parish youth work, our Parish numbers have increased by 40% to 350 people. Of this number, 94 are school-aged children, equating to 27% of our Parish congregation. To further illustrate the rise in our Parish numbers, I have already, in the first quarter of the year, baptised more children than I did in the whole of the last year, indicating just how much our Parish is growing through its manifest support of family life and the care of the individual.

Although the Parish boundary does not equate to the civil ward boundary, it is of interest to note that, in comparison to the Streatham Hill Ward civil population, we have a higher proportion of school-aged children: the civil figure is 21% compared to our Parish figure of 27%. Incidentally, the 2001 Census information (the most recent figures available) shows that, of this 21%, 6.7% are Nursery-aged children, 6.3% Primary-aged and 7.5% Secondary school-aged children.¹ Presumably the Schools Commission will have the exact figures for the number of candidates that have sought places in Catholic Schools from our Parish, but the comparison with the civil population shows

¹ Lambeth Council, *Streatham Hill Ward Data Table*. <http://www.lambeth.gov.uk/NR/rdonlyres/53B285B1-5CE2-41E5-9B09-7E58C92C72EA/0/024705.pdf>. 04.05.2010.

that, in this Parish, we have a high proportion of children and subsequently, an urgent need for places in Catholic schools.

The source of my concern lies in the fact that the lack of places on offer to children in this Parish causes direct distress to families that have been unsuccessful in their application. In addition to this, families are faced with the dilemma of where to place their children in Nursery in order to provide the best opportunity for a Catholic education whilst minimising the lack of stability in having to move their child from one school to another. The reality for many parents is that, although a Catholic Nursery place may be available, there is no guarantee of a place in Reception, let alone a place in the same Primary school, resulting potentially in a child having to move to three different schools at a very vulnerable age in their young lives, where stability would be much more preferable.

Some parents in this Parish have failed to obtain any place at all in a Catholic school for their children; others have succeeded in obtaining a Catholic Nursery place only for their child to be denied a place in Reception; and some have gained entry to a Primary school only for their child to have to move to a non-Catholic Secondary School for the remainder of their education. This presents a real dilemma for many parents who wish to avoid the trauma that could result from having to move from one school to another, resulting in the fact that many parents feel they are being forced to forego catholic education altogether, even though this would be contrary to their deeply-held convictions that all Catholic children should be entitled to a Catholic education.

A further consequence of the absence of sufficient Catholic school places could be the demise of this Parish, even though our numbers, particularly in relation to families with school-aged children, have increased. This could come about as parents may have to face the prospect of not just a 'post-code lottery' of school catchment areas, but a parish one too. The reality of this may be that parents either move away into the direct catchment area of a Catholic school or into the Parish that is directly associated with school places. As St Simon and St Jude has no so-called 'Parish School' within its boundaries our parents are unfairly penalised by being directly discriminated against when schools offer a higher proportion of places to members of other parishes that are seen to be directly linked with the school. If there is no transparent and fair proportion of places on offer for school-aged children in any parish that has no school within its boundaries, then those children face the prospect of never having a Catholic education.

I am urging the parents of this Parish to write to the Commission for Schools and Colleges to request that the inequity within the allocation of school places be addressed immediately. I respectfully request that each school, both Primary and Secondary, be required to publish, on the basis of a fair and transparent policy, how many school places will be offered to each Parish within the Deanery. The issue of siblings automatically gaining preference for admission further complicates the provision of school places; however it would be fairer for the percentage of places offered for each Parish to be judged on the total number of places available, not the numbers of places left

over once siblings have been placed. Although this may well result in some children that would automatically have been admitted failing to gain a place, overall it would provide a fairer distribution of places between Parishes whilst still allowing for schools to place a proportion of siblings together.

Sadly, many parents in this Parish have failed to gain a place in a Catholic School for their children. If an equitable system of provision is not established this situation will only increase. Furthermore, if a school was to determine that candidates from this Parish were to be excluded from consideration, in preference to candidates from Parishes directly linked to the school, then children from this Parish stand little or no chance of gaining a Catholic education. This is discrimination on a very large scale and I would expect the Schools' Commission to oversee the establishment of a fair and open system of allocation.

Simply because historically this Parish has no school or no set and transparent system of allocation of school places, this should not mean that our children be denied a Catholic education. Just because the numbers of children in the parish were lower in the past and therefore probably proportionate in earlier times should not mean that the system of allocation should remain the same. Weight should be given to the fact that our numbers of school-aged children have increased and that the number of children within our Parish is proportionately higher than the Ward percentage. Such weight would surely result in the Commission having to recognise that our Parish is in need of places in Catholic Schools and that we should be treated on a par with other Parishes, regardless of whether they have a school or not.

Our concerns as a Parish have to be taken into consideration with the view that there is an overall shortage of places in London schools. Details from a London Councils' report, *Understanding Primary School Capacity Issues*, show that in the next seven years, London will need considerably more school places, with an urgent need for some places by this September.² By implication this would suggest that a proportionate number of Catholic places are also urgently needed, shown not least by the increase in the numbers of school-aged children in this Parish. If the Commission is unable to effect change in the provision of school places as a whole then many parents will fail to gain a Catholic education and the children of this Parish in particular will continue to receive an inequitable number of places in our local Catholic schools in proportion to the children of other Parishes.

I earnestly hope that a number of parishioners write to you to emphasise the strength of feeling experienced by so many of our parents, either through the difficulty of trying to obtain a place in a Catholic School or through the trauma of having to balance the needs of their child against the almost negligible chance of successfully gaining a Catholic place within the Nursery and Reception classes of the same Primary school and, later on, the 'lottery' of Secondary school places.

² London Councils, *Understanding Primary School Capacity Issues*.
<http://www.londoncouncils.gov.uk/London%20Councils/7.Primaryschoolplaces.doc>. 04.05.2010.

I have spoken to Bishop Lynch about my concerns and, at his suggestion, have sent him a copy of this letter. I am genuinely concerned about the anxieties experienced by my parishioners and the traumas suffered by those children I know that have had to go from one school to the next or by having been denied a Catholic education entirely. The least of my worries is for the future of this Parish, yet, even if it were to become a satellite of another Parish which had an associated school, the question of the lack of places and the inadequate allocation procedures would remain and the people of this parish would continue to be disadvantaged. Please give consideration to the case I have made and reply with an outline of how the Commission proposes to address the issues that have a profound impact upon our Parish, upon our parents and most importantly upon our children.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Adrian McKenna-Whyte', written in a cursive style.

Rev. Adrian McKenna-Whyte

CC Bishop Patrick Lynch ss.cc