



# **Religious Life in England and Wales**

## **Executive Report**

**2010 study commissioned by the  
Compass Project**

*Compass is sponsored by a group of Roman Catholic  
Religious Orders and Congregations.*

## Introduction

In recent years and decades, anecdotal evidence and observation have pointed to a decline in the numbers of men and women Religious in England and Wales and an increase in their average age as fewer younger members join. The Conference of Religious collate annual statistics for new entrants to their member communities and these statistics would support this theory, with entrants declining from the nineteen-eighties before stabilising in the early part of the twenty first century.

These figures are broken down into male and female/ apostolic and contemplative, by age and also by educational attainment. However, there are a number of other key statistics not collated, most importantly retention rates and the overall age distribution of the entire community membership. In addition, approximately 80% of congregations belong to CoR and there has been no previous attempt to capture vocations data for the 20% of congregations who are not members.

A recent Study commissioned by the National Religious Vocations Center in Chicago and undertaken by CARA (see [www.nrv.net/study](http://www.nrv.net/study)) has shown how helpful data can be in formulating best practise for Vocations Ministry. This study gathered both quantitative and qualitative data using surveys and focus groups. Though available resources were not sufficient to commission a study of this scope, a scaled down version specific to England and Wales was undertaken.

This study comprises two major components:

- A statistical survey that was sent to every religious house in England and Wales
- An electronic survey on faith, vocation and discernment sent to Catholic adults aged 18-30 who attended Mass regularly.

The aims of this study were as follows:

- To collate accurate and complete entry statistics for the last ten years and to measure retention rates.
- To identify those religious congregations which are attracting and retaining new members
- To build a population profile for religious men and women in England and Wales.
- To sketch an outline of young practising Catholics who may be discerning a vocation and identify the key issues.

Finally, it was the hope of the Compass advisory board that the findings and signposts of this study could enable the identification of best practices for vocations ministry in England and Wales so that all who work to foster vocations can better equip men and women with the tools of discernment. The findings of this study were varied and in some instances, surprising but one fact remains- the Lord is still calling young men and women to religious life and many of them respond generously to this call and serve Him faithfully.

## Methods and Response Rates

**The Statistical Survey** was sent to 1465 religious houses in England and Wales. The request was that it was filled in only once for each congregation by either the superior or designated vocations minister. A few (<1%) responses were undeliverable. The houses on the mailing list represent approximately 310 congregations and we received 210 responses - around two thirds, a good response rate for this kind of survey. The survey clearly requested that figures supplied should be only for members entering from the UK. These would count those domiciled outside the England-Wales territory in Scotland and N. Ireland but not Europe or Rest of World. Where it looked as though this residency requirement may have been overlooked, the congregation was contacted to check the origin of the new members.

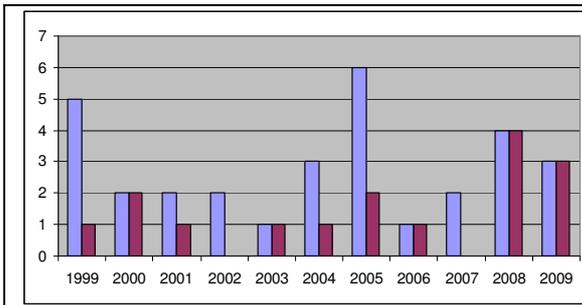
A foreign national would be counted but only if they entered the UK for reasons other than entering the congregations, for example if they came to work and were employed for some time before entering. We did not carry out ethnic monitoring. We also allowed congregations to supply information about vocations overseas separately. This requirement was not to place any less value on vocations from other countries but to ensure that any conclusions for best practice emerging from this study are appropriate for vocations ministry in this country, the United Kingdom.

**The Vocations Surveys** were sent to young people electronically. The upper age was set at 30 since this is the average age for marriage in the United Kingdom [1]. It seems sensible to view vocations ministry for religious life in the context of other life choices and there was no intention of placing less value on older vocations. Over 300 completed the general survey and 38 who identified as 'attending Mass every week or almost every week' completed the detailed vocations survey, a relatively small sample but still yielding helpful information. Because this sample is small, it is hoped the survey will be extended in future as this is not large enough to give any definitive conclusions. Most of the answers were open-ended text based answers. Most respondents were aged 20-28. The survey was again hosted online by a third party software tool. The male to female ratio was 1:1

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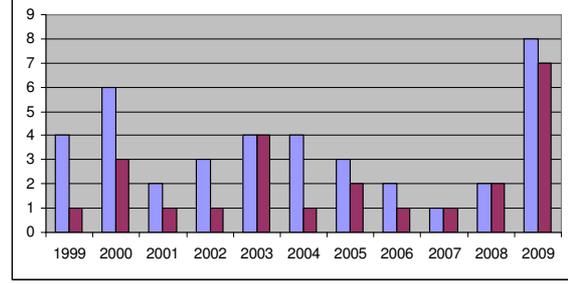
1. In 2008, average age at first marriage in the UK was 29.9 for women and 32.1 for men. These are the latest available statistics from the ONS

## Summary of Results - Men's Congregations – New Entrants 1999-2009



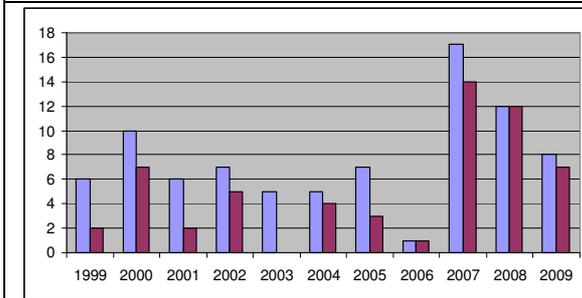
Men's Contemplative Congregations with some apostolic ministries.

Average retention: 45.3%



Men's Contemplative Congregations (autonomous monastic houses).

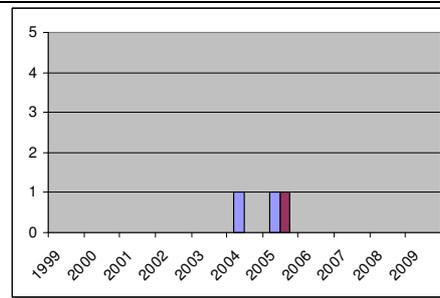
Average retention: 66%



Men's Apostolic Congregations (Clerical)

- These are 'clerical' congregations where some members are ordained (though some may remain lay brothers).

Average retention: 50%

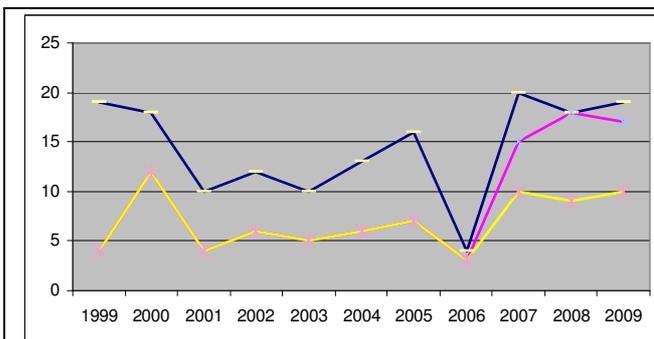


Men's Apostolic Congregations (Lay Brothers)

- Community emailed information for their new member who joined in last ten years and has made solemn profession but did not give year of entry (inserted in 2005 for illustration) and therefore this is not included in the appendix of full report or aggregate data.

Average retention: 60%

## Summary of Men's Religious Life Vocation Entrants Statistics since 1999

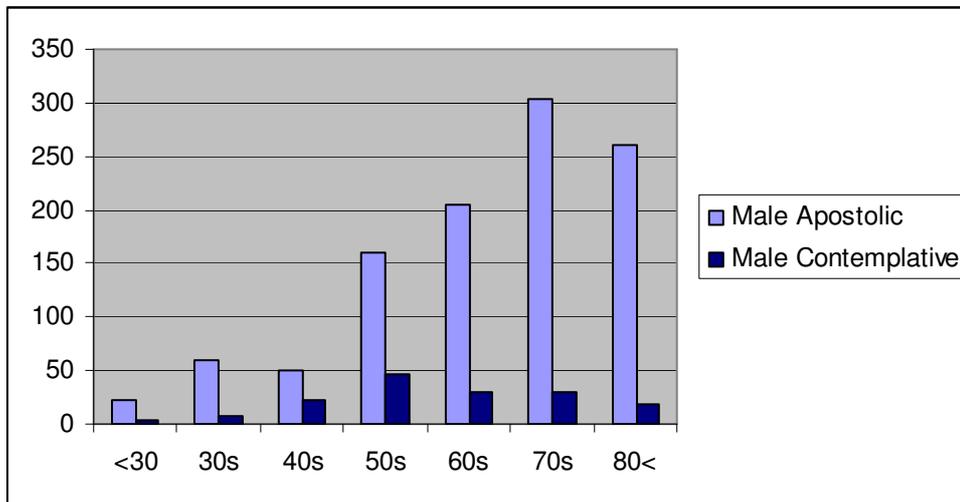


— Total Entrants      — Entrants remaining (to date)  
— Entrants remaining (projected)

Most people who discern that they are not called to religious life with the community they joined leave in the first 2-3 years. Therefore the retention for the last three years is projected on the basis of the average retention rate from 1999-2007 (see appendix I ) to give an estimation of what the figures are likely to be once these novices/ postulants have completed two to three years of formation.

## Age Profile for all Men's Religious Congregations

The following profile is for all members of religious congregations (not just new members).



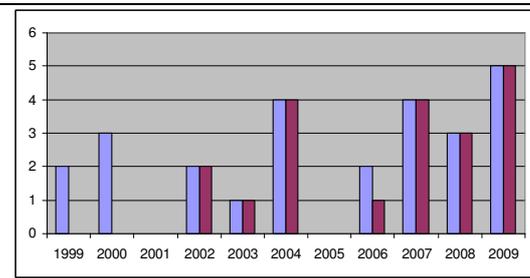
(Those contemplatives with some apostolic ministries are grouped with contemplative orders for this profile).

*The vocations statistics for male religious congregations reveal varied trends in different forms of religious orders and also between individual communities and congregations.*



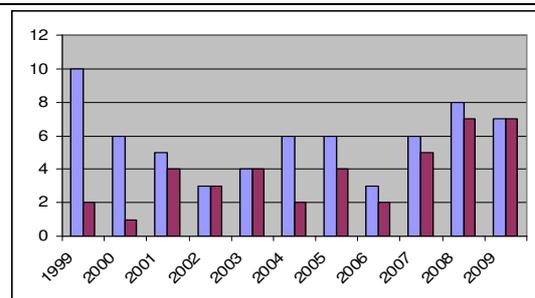
- There are two apostolic (clerical) congregations performing very strongly and accounting for a large proportion of overall numbers (both have a strong contemplative dimension). One is a new order (founded in the nineteen-eighties), the other founded in the twelfth century.
- All 11 Apostolic congregations who have received new members have some ministry with young people and cite personal contact with an existing member as how most new members make a vocations enquiry.
- The monastic houses with some outside have shown a rise in new members in the latter half of the decade. The enclosed monastic orders are also receiving more new members in the last two years.

## Summary of Results - Women's Congregations – New Entrants 1999-2009



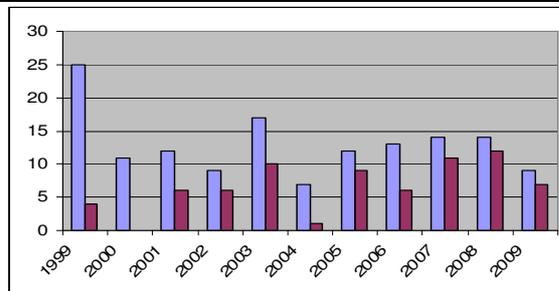
Women's Contemplative Congregations with some apostolic ministries.

Average retention: 45.3%



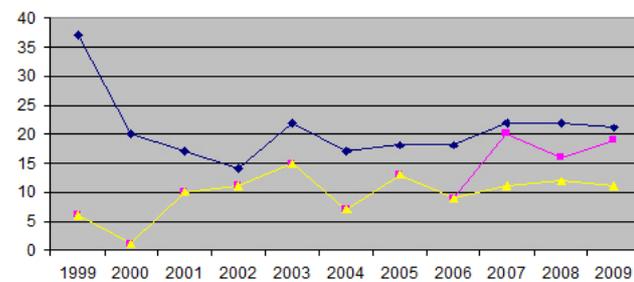
Women's Contemplative Congregations (autonomous monastic houses).

Average retention: 66%



Women's Apostolic Congregations

Average retention: 50%

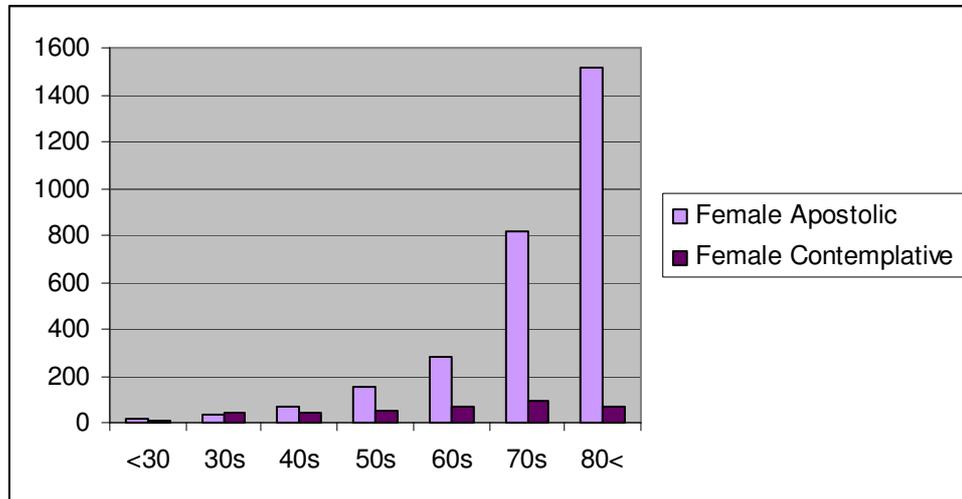


—◆— Total Entrants     —◆— Entrants remaining (to date)  
—◆— Entrants remaining (projected)

Most people who discern that they are not called to religious life with the community they joined leave in the first 2-3 years. It is very unusual for someone to leave after solemn vows. Therefore the retention for the last three years is projected on the basis of the average retention rate from 1999-2007 (see appendix I ) to give a picture of what the figures are likely to be once these novices/ postulants have completed two to three years of formation.

## Age Profile for all Women's Religious Congregations

The following profile is for all members of religious congregations (not just new members).



(Those contemplatives with some apostolic ministries are grouped with contemplative orders for this profile).

*The vocations statistics for female religious congregations show that apostolic and contemplative orders are attracting new members in approximately equal numbers but there are many more apostolic congregations so new members per congregation is much higher for contemplative houses .*



Service for Religious at Westminster Cathedral  
© Mazur/ CCN

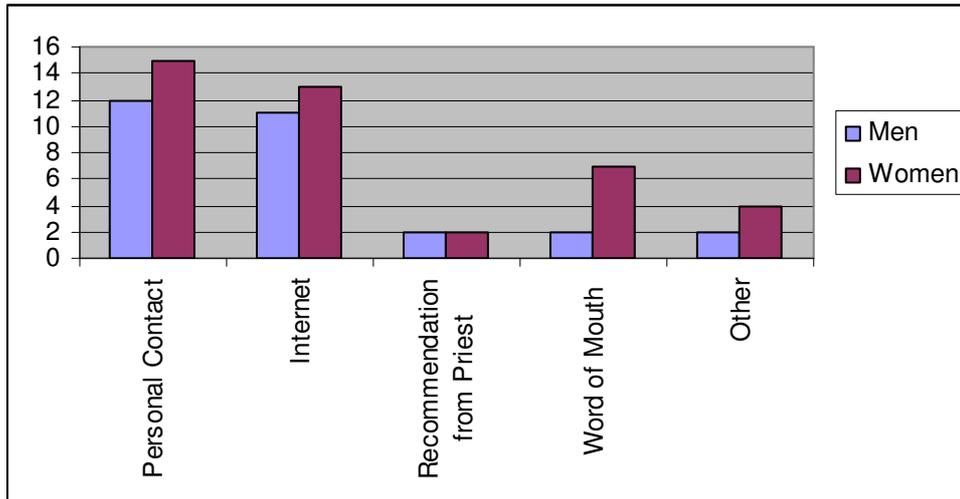
There are higher numbers of women (as a percentage of the total) than men religious over the age of 80. This is unsurprising since women have a higher life expectancy than men. Apostolic women's orders have few younger members and are more likely to have younger members from overseas. Although we did not ask this question, some supplied this information (especially if sisters are here for a fixed time) and this can be deduced when communities have sisters in their twenties but have not received any new members who are UK national/resident in the last eleven years. Once these congregations are discounted, the typical age profiles are heavily weighted to those in their seventies and eighty+

Contemplative congregations have a more uniform age distribution and those attracting the most members tend to be smaller communities <30 members in total with a very uniform age distribution.

## Additional Results

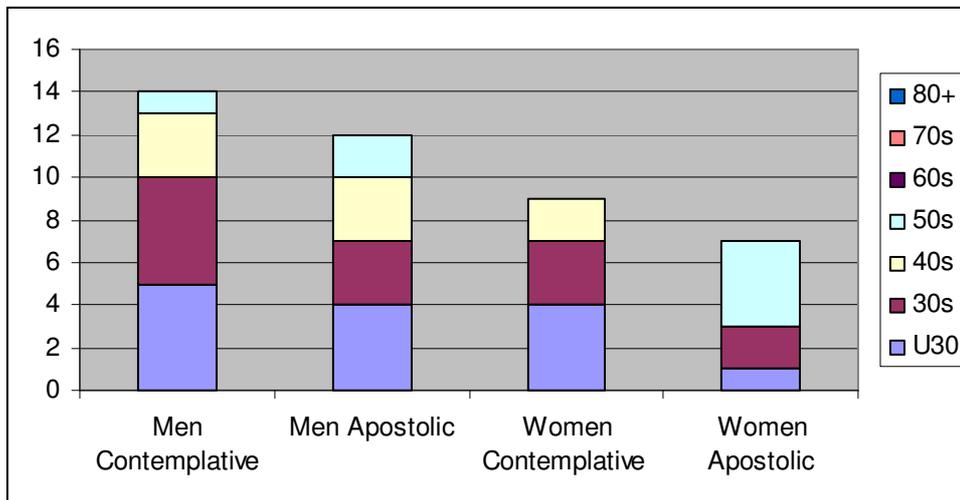
We asked congregations how new members or enquirers made contact (this was an open text answer not a multi choice. Of those congregations who have received new members in the last eleven years, the following responses were given.

### How New Members First Contact Community

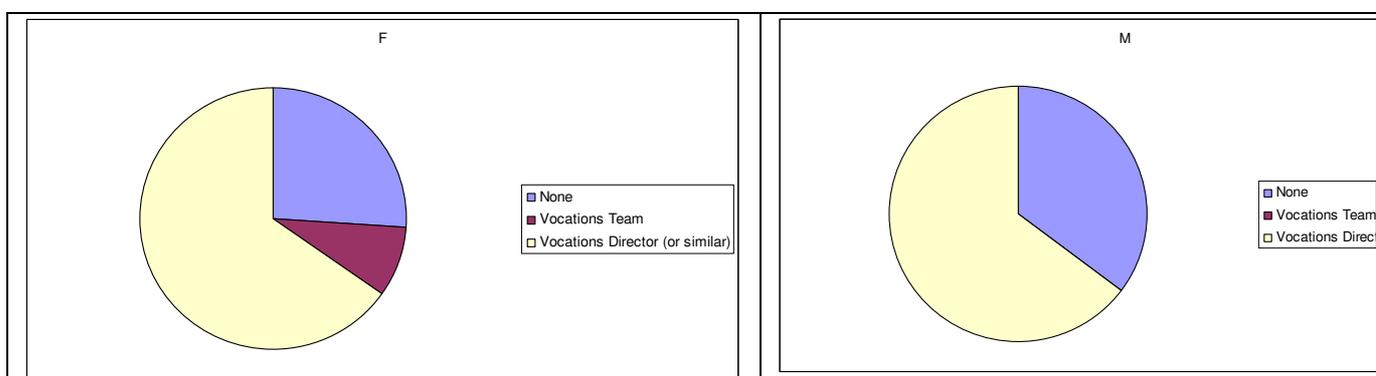


For both men and women contact with an existing member was most commonly cited. "Other" included organised events (but generally not vocations events) and discernment programmes.

### Age breakdown of new members (2009 only)



## Presence of a Vocations Director



Unlike the US study, there was no correlation between having a dedicated vocations person or team and attracting new members. Of the two male apostolic congregations attracting the most new members, one did not have a vocations director at all. Very few of the male congregations attracting new members had a person working on this as their main or full-time ministry.

This coupled with comments from the surveys of young people suggest that all that is important in this regard is that one member is consistently available to a discernor or candidate and enquiries are answered promptly.

## What congregations are attracting new members? The following have received more than ten members in the last decade .

- 3 male apostolic (clerical).
- 3 male independent contemplative houses.
- 1 male contemplative English Congregation of Monks (covering several monasteries) who also have some apostolic ministries.
- 2 female autonomous contemplative houses.
- 2 female contemplative congregations with some apostolic ministries.

## **Results of Vocations Surveys (Key findings)**

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### **Young Catholics**

Survey I was sent to a wide age range though only 18-30s have been analysed in detail.

10% have considered the possibility of a religious vocation (priesthood or religious life) either "very seriously" or "quite seriously" at some point in their lives.

### **Young Committed Catholics and Vocations**

38 committed Catholics (19 M/ 19F) aged 18-30 completed survey II. These were defined as attending Mass most weeks or every week.

Most cited parents or priests as the people most encouraging of their faith.

55% had considered the possibility of a religious vocation but only 33% had discussed this with another person.

Concerns about choosing a religious vocation often centred on the celibacy requirement and the loss of family life; the counter-culturalism of religious vocation and the lack of peer support.

For women in particular there was a lack of structured discernment programs (men can access groups for diocesan priesthood). Some women felt called but not to any of the congregations they had encountered. These responses can be considered as helpful indicators but due to the small data sample should be treated with caution.

*Peer support was very important to young Catholics*



**The vocations survey also mirrored the US findings as young discerners highlighted the following characteristics as being 'very important':**

- Community prayer
- Community living
- A sense of shared mission
- Authentic spirituality and Charism lived out joyfully
- A distinct Catholic identity



*Personal contact with inspiring priests and religious was important to young people*



**The following helped their discernment:**

- Inspiring priests and religious
- Supportive friends
- Supportive family
- Spiritual directors
- Strong chaplaincies or youth ministry featuring good catechesis
- Discernment groups

**The following did not help**

- Lack of peer support/ feelings of isolation
- Fears about family's reactions
- Not knowing any religious well
- Busy Vocations Directors and unanswered emails



World Youth Day © Mazur/ CCN



## **How do new members make contact and what attracts them?**

- The vast majority of new members come through personal contact with a member outside a 'vocations ministry' context.
- The next most common form of initial contact is via the Internet. This was especially important to contemplative orders. No congregation that attracted more than ten members in the last eleven years mentioned printed materials or careers fairs.
- Most communities host 'come and see' weekends but where the attendees joined communities, they were already known to members of the community. These weekends have limited value if 'cold-calling' / advertising for participants.
- Prayer, daily Eucharist and some contemplative dimension feature in all the congregations that attracted more than ten members in the last eleven years. All are either contemplative with some apostolic ministry or apostolic with contemplative prayer forming a significant part of the members' lives.
- Evangelisation was part of the mission work of all those congregations with some apostolic ministry and who attracted more than ten members in the last eleven years and all worked with young people (chaplains, youth events etc.)

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Report administered with assistance from the National Office for Vocation

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