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Aussie bishop goes \"priest hunting\" in India

by Kim Cain by Religion News Service

MELBOURNE, Australia -- A Catholic bishop has gone to India to find priests to work in a swath of Australia that stretches from tropical islands to the wilderness of the Australian outback.

Bishop Brian Heenan of Rockhampton in the state of Queensland told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation that Indian priests could help overcome an extreme shortage of native clergy.

"These priests can come, please God, for maybe two years or three years and then, if all is going well, they will probably go back to India, and others will come and take their place," Heenan said.

The bishop said he would also be happy to hear from priests elsewhere in the world who were interested in working in his diocese. He noted that other Australian bishops had gone "priest hunting."

"Most of the dioceses have journeyed overseas, as I am doing, to South America, South Africa, the Philippines or to Europe, and including India, simply because ... not as many young people are offering themselves for the priesthood at this time."

The diocese covers some 160,000 square miles -- slightly smaller than all of Sweden -- but has only 400,000 people.

In his ABC interview, Heenan said the Catholic Church in Australia is having difficulty attracting new priests because there are better-paying jobs. "I think they find those much more attractive than going off to a seminary or to a training college, where the rate of recompense, or pay, is very ordinary."

Heenan said "there is a little bit of déjà vu" in searching overseas for clergy, noting that "when Australia was first established [in the 19th century], a lot of Irish priests left their country and came here."

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