

STANDING COMMISSION ON SMALL CONGREGATIONS

**MEMBERSHIP**

The Rev. Richard M. Graybill, <i>Chair</i>	Northern Michigan, V, 2012
The Rev. Canon Kristi Philip, <i>Vice-Chair</i>	Spokane, VIII, 2009
The Rev. Ivette Linares, <i>Secretary</i>	Puerto Rico, IX, 2012
The Rev. Augusta A. Anderson, <i>PHOD Representative</i>	Western North Carolina, IV, 2009
Ms. Maggie Brown	Navajoland Area Mission, VIII, 2012
Ms. LaVerne K. Comerie-Hubbard	West Tennessee, IV, 2012
Mr. Frank Connizzo	Kansas, VII, 2009
Ms. Sharon F. Denton	Western Kansas, VII
The Rt. Rev. Thomas Clark Ely	Vermont, I, 2009
The Rt. Rev. E. Ambrose Gumbs	Virgin Islands, II, 2012
The Rev. Robert Honeychurch, <i>Program Officer, Congregational Vitality</i>	California, VIII
Ms. DonnaLee Pettit	North Dakota, VI, 2012
The Rt. Rev. James J. Shand	Easton, III, 2009
The Rev. Suzanne Watson, <i>Staff Officer, Congregational Development</i>	El Camino Real, VIII
The Rev. Lonell Wright	Louisiana, IV, 2009

**SUMMARY OF WORK**

Some Episcopalians may be surprised to learn that we are a church of small congregations. According to figures released late in 2008, more than one half of Episcopal congregations are classified as small churches, with an average Sunday attendance of fewer than 70 persons. Of the 7,044 congregations who reported attendance figures in 2007, 3,573 churches had 70 or fewer attendees on Sunday.

In addition, the median average Sunday worship attendance in 2007 was 69, down from 72 in 2006. There were 288 congregations reporting an average Sunday attendance of 10 or fewer in 2007.

There are many reasons why these churches are small. Many of these churches are in small communities or rural areas. Some are ethnic congregations where culture and language influence the number of members. Some are in areas where the population is declining. Some small congregations are healthy and vital, while others are in decline. Some are new congregations and some are re-starts. Still, others have existed for many years. Each congregation has its unique challenges and opportunities, and each, in its own way, exists to further the reign of God.

During this past triennium the Standing Commission on Small Congregations met three times, primarily in conversation about the diverse issues surrounding small congregations. Our 2006 meeting in Chicago was a time to get acquainted and to organize and prepare for our work. At our 2007 meeting in Kansas City, there was a protracted conversation on many issues, including a commitment to identify many partners in the enterprise of supporting and strengthening small congregations. We also reviewed some material from “emergent” congregations, viewed a television advertisement that was created by a small congregation and discussed an event that would share some “best practices” for small congregations at the 2009 General Convention.

Our 2008 meeting in Albuquerque gave us the opportunity to review our work, to discuss plans for a General Convention event and to visit the Navajoland Area Mission. We shared meals and conversations—encountering the spirit, faithfulness and creativity of these small congregations, who minister in a vast area characterized by extreme poverty. We came away with a deeper appreciation for the efforts to preserve the Navajo culture and to gracefully weave its teachings with the teachings of the Christian faith. (Our visit was cut short due to our bus

breaking down. We were stranded on a mountain pass for two hours, before the folks in Episcopal Church vans graciously came to our rescue. We were sorry to miss visits to two churches on the other side of the pass.)

**AN ACCOUNTING OF SOME OF THE ISSUES IDENTIFIED BY THE COMMISSION**

Because churches are small for a variety of reasons, their needs and challenges are different. Some of the groups and organizations involved in the collaboration to support these churches are: the Church Deployment Office, Congregational Vitality, Native and other ethnic ministries, Episcopal Appalachian Ministries, the Center for Baptismal Living, the Ministry Developers' Collaborative, the Church Pension Fund, the Living Stones Partnership and many others.

Many small congregations are challenged to find clergy who can serve among them. A good number of positions in small congregations are part-time, pay poorly, in geographically isolated communities and are in ethnic congregations with distinct language requirements. These positions are not always easy to fill.

In some situations, clergy are ill-prepared to serve small congregations. However, some retired clergy have very effectively served these congregations. With the option for early retirement, there are younger retired clergy available, who are interested in this specialized part-time service.

There are other strategies at work, as well. Some dioceses have chosen ministry development (sometimes known as mutual ministry, total ministry or baptismal ministry) as a path toward supporting and strengthening small congregations. Ministry teams are formed in which congregations identify members with gifts for specific ministries. Those identified are formed and educated for their ministries and then commissioned or ordained. Most often, the teams are supervised or coached by a ministry developer or missionary, who serves churches in a region.

Some dioceses have developed models that work well for their congregations. In other dioceses there are immense struggles to form and educate persons to minister in small congregations and to provide adequate supervision and ongoing formation. We believe that The Episcopal Church would be wise to dedicate resources to develop creative models of ministry formation and thereby strengthen the ministries of many small congregations.

In response to Resolutions D048 and D057, we have begun productive conversations with the Church Pension Fund to explore ways to make it possible for more clergy to serve in small congregations. We hope that the result of these conversations will be positive next steps that can be implemented and shared at General Convention.

There is a strong desire to share "best practices" for small congregations. Some of this information is available in a handbook for small congregations, created and updated periodically by Church Center staff (also available online). At a conference at Kanuga in 2007, which was coordinated by the Rev. Suzanne Watson of the Church Center staff, ministry models for small congregations were presented. Much of the content from that conference is available on the DVD 'Creative Models of Sacramental Leadership in Small Congregations.'

Also in response to Resolution D057, the Commission and Church Center staff are planning opportunities at General Convention that focus on what has worked well in various small congregations. We thank the Rev. Suzanne Watson, former Staff Officer for Congregational Development, for her effective work with this Commission and the wider church. We look forward to our unfolding relationship with the Rev. Bob Honeychurch, who began his new ministry as Program Officer for Congregational Vitality on September 1, 2008. During this triennium, the Commission worked with *Episcopal Life* to publish stories of vital small congregations from across the church. We hope that these stories have been both an inspiration to readers and an example of the creativity and energy present in our small churches.

We remain committed to the work of furthering the ministry of the many diverse and faithful small congregations in The Episcopal Church and look forward to continuing our work in the next triennium.

**BUDGET REPORT**

The Commission budgeted \$5,000 for its work in 2007; \$11,000 for 2008; and \$5,000 for 2009, for a total of \$21,000 for the triennium. The Commission spent \$7,884 in 2007 and \$12,064 in 2008, with a remaining balance of \$1,052. The Commission will meet approximately three times in the next triennium and also collaborate with other interim bodies. This will require \$15,000 for 2010; \$25,000 for 2011; and \$18,000 for 2012.

**RESOLUTION**

**RESOLUTION A113 STRENGTHENING SMALL CONGREGATIONS**

- 1 *Resolved*, the House of \_\_\_\_\_ concurring, That the Standing Commission for Small Congregations raise awareness
- 2 of and publish information about innovative ministry models for small congregations currently evolving and
- 3 being developed in small congregations and dioceses; and be it further
- 4
- 5 *Resolved*, That the Standing Commission for Small Congregations collaborate with other CCABs, networks and
- 6 organizations throughout the Church (such as Living Stones, Domestic Missionary Partnership, Ministry
- 7 Developer's Collaborative, Native American and other ethnic specific ministries, Episcopal Appalachian
- 8 Ministries, Rural Ministry Network, Center for Baptismal Living, Church Deployment Office) around issues and
- 9 concerns related to the strengthening of small congregations; and be it further
- 10
- 11 *Resolved*, That the Standing Commission for Small Congregations continue strategic discussions with the Church
- 12 Pension Fund regarding compensation and benefit issues for participating ordained and non-ordained persons
- 13 serving small congregations; and be it further
- 14
- 15 *Resolved*, That the Standing Commission for Small Congregations be an active participant in current and future
- 16 conversations throughout the Church related to Seminary education and other vehicles of life-long Christian
- 17 Formation for ordained and non-ordained leaders serving small congregations; and be it further
- 18
- 19 *Resolved*, That the Standing Commission for Small Congregations plan with the General Convention Office
- 20 opportunities to celebrate the life and ministry of small congregations at the 77<sup>th</sup> General Convention.