

The Standing Commission on the Church in Small Communities

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The Rev. Richard E. Gary, National Church Staff, New York
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A. PURPOSE

(Canon I.1.2 (h)) "To concern itself with plans for new directions for Church in Small Communities."

B. BACKGROUND

Prior to 1977, this commission had concerned itself with the guidance of the Leadership Academy for New Directions (LAND) and the Ministry to National Parks. From its first meeting in 1977, the present commission began a transition from a program advocating and/or overseeing unit, to a group which studied large issues, sought ideas from across the church and prepared proposals for Convention consideration, which would assist the church in small communities.

The SCCSC continues to appreciate and advocate the work of LAND. It has given support and encouragement to the new Resource Center for Small Churches.

It has concerned itself with the property at Roanridge and its disposal. But through this, it has shifted from a preoccupation with programs and their implementation to a study of visions and issues, identification of agencies with common interests, and the pinpointing of points of action for General Convention, all in the interest of seeing the emergence of a broad general church strategy in small communities.

A forum, held in June, 1978, involved representatives of a seminary, APSO, CODE, the Alban Institute, LAND, National Church staff, General Convention representatives, plus many others. In small group sessions and in plenary groups, members wrestled with the issues before them which have at least a five year span of significance. The purpose was to have everyone there making contributions to everyone's planning. And that is what happened according to follow-up reports.

The Commission plans to have annual forums similar to the June, 1978, meeting. In the years ahead we plan to involve agency leaders and diocesan officials as well. Out of the experience of these forums the Commission gains much of the insight which leads to its proposals to Convention and, furthermore, has ample opportunity to sense the degree to which there is broad consensus in the church in matters of long range significance to the church in small communities.

C. THE SCCSC APPROACH

The church's strategy in small communities is formed and addressed by many people and agencies in the church; diocesan leaders, national program groups and independent church-related agencies. Insofar as Episcopalians have a plan for the church in small communities, it is not one assembled by any special commission but rather one which is multi-faceted, emerging out of the response of many separate groups attempting to be faithful to the promptings of the Spirit.

In view of this, the SCCSC does not look for the development of a "master plan" but for a higher level of communication flow and interaction among those who are at work on the issues of the church in small communities. Our approach is to provide opportunity for these people to receive encouragement and stimulation in their work, and to learn about the work of others in order that the overall effort is strengthened and hangs together as something that we can indeed think of as the church's "strategy" in small communities. Commission members pay careful heed to all this in order to discover matters which should be brought to the attention of the General Convention for action . . . action which might offer encouragement or support, open doors, remove blocks or otherwise contribute to the health and well-being of the church's work in small communities.

D. THE NEXT THREE YEARS

Through the Triennium, 1980-1982, the Commission expects to focus its efforts on the small congregation. 69.1% of our churches have less than 300 baptized members. While recent economic and church attendance trends have affected all congregations, and many feel the bind, the small congregation has been hit particularly hard. Moreover, the unique strength and resilience of small churches is frequently overlooked or not appreciated.

Things could be different for the small congregation and the commission has attempted to set forth a *vision* of what could be, in terms of attitudes and conditions surrounding the small church.

APPENDICES

A Vision of the Future of the Small Congregation: Here is our vision:

- No congregation experiences itself as a "dependent." Nor do members feel that their congregation is alone in its ministry.
- Members are proud to stand in the tradition of the Episcopal Church: supporting of the mature in the faith, as well as those who are seekers yet unsure.
- The congregation is a true mix of people in various states . . . in different stages of religious growth . . . people affirming and depending upon each other.
- Varieties of small congregations are appreciated. "Small" does not imply inferiority. Small congregations are seen as complete Christian communities capable of carrying on the full ministry and mission of Christ; yet "small" as a value does not stand as a block to energetic evangelistic efforts.
- Members are aware of each other's ministries . . . each ministry validated; each person involved . . . vital. "Total ministry" is understood and finds many expressions; and the plight of the poor and the powerless is receiving attention.
- Newly ordained clergy as well as mature and experienced priests see small congregations as an attractive option, not a stepping stone.
- Leaders are competent; teaching, preaching, and living the Gospel. Environmental forces and events affecting the congregation are recognized. Decisions are formed in prayer and with an awareness of the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

E. THE PLAN AND SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

The commission plans to address this vision in several ways.

1) Through the support and encouragement of agencies, groups and organizations also working toward this vision in such areas as: raising awareness of issues; changing attitudes; or sharing information; through leadership and ministry development; or through research and experimentation.

2) Through providing opportunity for dialogue among those who share these concerns and are actively pursuing the vision in some manner. Primarily by holding occasional forums which will include commission members, members of particular agencies serving the cause of small churches in some way, and diocesan leaders. The forums are occasions for these people to share progress and new concerns; to coordinate where possible; and to contribute to the commission's long range planning toward subsequent conventions.

Objective 1: To encourage and assist the formation of regional strategies of mission in the non-metropolitan areas of the nation.

Objective 2: To foster increased communication and sharing of experience relevant to the needs of small congregations.

Objective 3: To encourage efforts seeking to promote leadership development, educational programs and other appropriate services to small congregations.

Objective 4: To assist and support occasional research and studies which will inform this commission and others in their planning.

Objective 5: To continue to exercise a strong advocacy for the needs of: church in small communities in the interest of seeing a broad national strategy of small church support emerge out of what could be isolated and sporadic attempts to contribute solutions to small church problems: and to bring to the attention of the General Convention, via resolutions or recommendations, appropriate national church action which will be supportive of national strategy for small congregations.

F. RESOLUTIONS

I. Proposed Budget

	1980	1981	1982
<i>For commission meetings (2 per year)</i>	\$ 5,880	\$ 6,300	\$ 6,740
<i>For forums (2 in 1981: 1 each in 1980 and 1982)</i>	4,070	8,700	4,650
<i>For study/research/reporting</i>	2,400	2,400	2,400
<i>For professional assistance</i>	3,000	3,210	3,430
	<u>\$15,350</u>	<u>\$20,610</u>	<u>\$17,220</u>

Resolution #A-79

Resolved, the House of _____ concurring, that \$53,180 be appropriated for the Standing Commission of the Church in Small Communities.

II. Completing the Transition

Resolution #A-80

Whereas, the Commission on the Church in Small Communities has, with this report to Convention, completed its transition from an agency primarily concerned with programming to one which seeks mainly to encourage and stimulate strategic thinking about the future of the church in small communities; thus leaving the program advocacy function vacant in our national church structures: and

Whereas, the church in small communities and small churches in nearly all settings are faced with severe economic stress and therefore problems relating to providing for leadership needs; and the crisis is likely to deepen unless positive and decisive corrective efforts are undertaken; therefore, be it

Resolved the House of _____ concurring, that an appropriate Executive Council Standing Committee, through a sub-committee or other structural arrangement, and in cooperation with National Church Center staff, provide for program advocacy and review, and the development of such research and communication as will benefit the church in small communities and small congregations in any population setting; and be it further

Resolved, the House of _____ concurring, that these efforts be coordinated with other Episcopal Church agencies and ecumenical groups where appropriate and possible; and be it further

Resolved, the House of _____ concurring, that said committee and staff be responsible for liaison and grant administration in relation to such programs as Leadership Academy for New Directions, the ministry to National Parks, the Resource Center for Small Churches; and be accountable for other such National Church programs as the Executive Council shall approve and assign to them; and be it further

Resolved, the House of _____ concurring, that the convention approve the following grants or programs to be administered by aforementioned accountable agencies:

APPENDICES

- 1) A grant to the Resource Center for Small Churches in the amount: \$18,000 in 1980; \$15,000 in 1981; and \$12,000 in 1982.
- 2) Program funding of LAND in the amount of \$25,000 each year: 1980, 1981, 1982.
- 3) A grant to National Park Ministry of \$3,300 per year for 1980, 1981, and 1982.

Notes:

- 1) The Resource Center for Small Churches is an independent organization dedicated to serving small congregations. It provides a forum for the exchange of ideas, a network of resources, occasional research projects and documentation of experience. A quarterly called "Grassroots" is published. While relatively new, the Center has already brought a new vision and sense of hope to the small congregation.
- 2) The Leadership Academy for New Directions (LAND) provides leadership training for those who offer back-up services to the clergy and people of small congregations.
- 3) The National Park Ministry is an ongoing inter-denominational program providing a summer intern experience for seminary students in recreational ministries.

III. Affirming the Congregation

Resolution #A—81

Whereas, in recent years we have seen a tremendous awakening to ministry on the part of the members of our church, accompanied by a hunger for theological education and a desire for training in a variety of ministries in church and world; and,

Whereas, the congregations of our church have worked with diligence and imagination in enabling these ministries, and deserve the support and encouragement of the whole church; therefore, be it

Resolved, the House of _____ concurring, that, while many national and regional programs, seminaries and diocesan schools of religion are making significant and necessary contributions to the preparation and continued education of career persons and others with special vocations,

This church affirms the congregation as the primary locus for ministry; the center which determines what ministry is; and the normal base for the nourishment and training of ministers.

IV. Retirement Support Review

Resolution #A—82

Whereas, many skilled and able clergy have, by choice, served long and faithfully in the small rural and urban churches which in turn have, over the years, supplied our larger congregations with strong, well-prepared members; and,

Whereas, these clergy have typically received the lowest salaries paid by the church, and have thereby been disadvantaged in later years by low pensions; and,

Whereas, other clergy with late vocations or short periods of service are unable to accrue sufficient credit for a respectable pension; and,

Whereas, The Church Pension Fund is not an individual insurance program, but a pooled fund supported by all our (clergy employing) congregations for the benefit of all our clergy (a fund which could perhaps be supported in additional ways within the total stewardship of the church); therefore, be it

Resolved, the House of _____ concurring, that The Church Pension Fund review these matters and report to the next General Convention recommendations which would:

SMALL COMMUNITIES

- 1) In the interest of a greater degree of equality of retirement income and a higher minimum pension, gradually move us toward the standard that no individual's pension will be more than double the amount of the minimum benefit computed on equivalent years of service.
- 2) Suggest new ways of adding capital to the pool, and show what kinds of improved support would be possible for those on very low pensions.