

## STANDING COMMISSION FOR SMALL CONGREGATIONS

[www.episcopalchurch.org/congdev/Rural/Rural.htm](http://www.episcopalchurch.org/congdev/Rural/Rural.htm)

### Membership

Ms. Ramona Burroughs, <i>Co-chair</i>	South Dakota, 2006
Ms. Judith W. Fleener, <i>Co-chair</i>	Western Michigan, 2003
Mrs. Karen DuPlantier, <i>Secretary</i>	Louisiana, 2006
The Rt. Rev. Bruce Caldwell	Wyoming, 2003
The Rt. Rev. Thomas Clark Ely	Vermont, 2003
The Very Rev. Marilyn J. Engstrom	Wyoming, 2003
The Very Rev. Canon H. W. Herrmann, SSC	Quincy, 2006
The Rt. Rev. F. Neff Powell	Southern Virginia, 2003
Mr. Richard H. Snyder	Nevada, 2003
Ms. Bonnie Studdiford	Maine, 2006
<i>Staff</i>	
The Rev. Ben E. Helmer	Missioner for Rural and Small Communities Office of Congregational Development

### WORK SUMMARY

The Standing Commission for Small Congregations (SCSC) canonical mandate is to concern itself with plans for directions for small congregations. SCSC met three times and held one telephone conference. We have:

- Examined vitality in small congregations. Our work during the triennium leads us to propose “*Expanding Mission and Vitality in Small Congregations: A Framework for Affirming and Strengthening the Ministry of Small Churches*” as a strategy that would be available to small congregations.
- Reviewed available demographic material on small churches. It is posted on our web-site.
- Continued our conversations with seminaries regarding their offerings for small congregations.
- Met with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ECLA) to investigate the possibility of ecumenical activities.
- Met with members of the Commission on Domestic Missions and Evangelism, the 20/20 Task Force, and the Standing Commission for Ministry Development.
- Collaborated with networks and organizations involved with ministry development.
- Compiled a list of resources for small congregations as part of our report, and posted on our web-site.

### **Report of Our Findings: “Expanding Mission and Vitality in Small Congregations: A Framework for Affirming and Strengthening the Ministry of Small Churches”**

#### *Introduction*

The Commission’s discussions have been shaped by the Episcopal Church’s teaching about the primacy of mission and the centrality of baptismal ministry. As stated in the Catechism, “the mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ” and “The Church pursues its mission as it prays and worships, proclaims the Gospel, and promotes justice, peace and love.” (p. 855, BCP) The Baptismal Covenant gives expression to the Church’s understanding of the ministry of all the baptized.

#### ***Principles informing our work about small congregations (those with 150 or less average Sunday attendance)***

- Vitality in small congregations is achieved when abundance is claimed.
- Vitality in small congregations is a sign that God is transforming those faith communities and the wider community of which those congregations are a part.
- Incarnation and Resurrection are manifested as all members of a congregation claim new life and engage in mission and ministry individually and together, in the church and in every part of their lives.

- The gifts of the Holy Spirit are present in every congregation for the work God desires to be done in and through that faith community.
- Learning that equips every member for full participation in the mission and ministry of Christ is a life-long process.
- Vitality can be sustained by a variety of ministry development strategies.
- Congregational viability is assessed locally, in partnership with the Bishop.

***Characteristics of a Vital Small Church in the Episcopal Tradition***

- The Eucharist and other sacraments are available as needed and desired, no matter the size, location, or wealth of the congregation.
- Worship is participatory, mediates a sense of God's presence and helps transform people for baptismal living.
- There is full local engagement in determining strategies for mission and ministry in partnership with the Bishop.
- Members understand and support mission direction and priorities.
- Members are open to possibilities and willing to embrace new opportunities for mission.
- Members engage in broad-based, collaborative-decision making in which issues and agenda are discerned by the community, which takes ownership of decisions.
- There is collegiality and collaboration between local leaders--who provide sustainability, continuity, and local wisdom--and leaders from beyond the local community--who provide additional knowledge, experience, and expertise in ministry development.
- Members display a clear capacity to do the hard work of reconciliation with one another, keep faith with one another and speak the truth in love.
- The ministry priorities of pastoral care, liturgy, and administration are well provided by leaders local to the community.
- The congregation is organized for ministry and mission as is appropriate to its circumstances.
- Members participate in on-going engagement with the Gospel through theological education and reflection; prayer and worship; and the nurturing of each person's gifts as a minister.
- Effective support of the ministry of all members in daily life is ongoing. The unique perspective and contribution of every member is valued.
- Were a vital congregation to disappear from its community, it would truly be missed by others in that community, even those who had never been its members.

***A Strategy***

A strategy for expanding and sustaining vitality in small congregations involves equipping those congregations for self-assessment, discernment, local ownership and development.

Self-assessment is an honest evaluation by a congregation of its history, resources, strengths, challenges, opportunities and organizational structure.

As discernment this process is prayerful, patient, imaginative, collaborative, hopeful, flexible, attentive to God's intention, and leads to clear shared vision of the unique calling of that particular faith community, including the effect its life and work will have beyond itself. Outside resources can be helpful in facilitating this step.

Local ownership or commitment can be seen as the congregation as a whole steps forward to embrace that calling, to claim its responsibility and authority to become what God intends it to be. It includes the discovery of gifts and resources, claiming of abundance and embracing the power unleashed by interdependence. It involves a decision on the part of the congregation to commit itself to a time of planning and development of its capacity to extend its participation in the mission of God in Christ, and readiness to collaborate with others in the diocese and beyond as it engages in its life and work.

Congregational development involves training and theological education, using the variety of resources available to identify and develop ministry, as well as establish appropriate structures for mission and decision

making. It results in total, confident engagement of the full membership in life-long spiritual formation, theological learning, and work for justice and peace.

***Resources for Small Congregations to Expand Mission and Vitality***

There is an impressive amount and quality of resources available for small congregations. We have found that there are organizations within the Church that can provide information, materials and assistance. Available resources include: books; web-sites; consultants available to work with parishes and with dioceses and conferences and workshops.

We urge congregations seeking any assistance to check the Rural/Small Community Ministries web-page of the Episcopal Church's web site. All available resources from SCSC are on the web-page, and we urge its use both by those seeking information and those offering it.

**RESOURCES FOR SMALL CONGREGATIONS FROM THE CHURCH'S SEMINARIES**

SCSC began conversations with the Episcopal Church's seminaries during the last triennium. We believe these conversations have been helpful in identifying ways in which the seminaries are working with small congregations, and in which the seminaries are preparing their graduates to work in small congregations. We believe that it is valuable for both the Standing Commission and for the seminaries to continue these conversations so that the needs and concerns of small congregations are addressed.

***Church Divinity School of the Pacific*** 2451 Ridge Rd., Berkeley, CA 94709; (510) 204-0700. [info@cdsp.edu](mailto:info@cdsp.edu).

Church Divinity School of the Pacific (CDSP) has a record of involvement with and for small congregations. Classes available on site for MDiv students include ministry development and congregational development classes, some of which are taught in coordination with members of the Ministry Developers' Collaborative. A variety of classes designed to prepare clergy for working in small congregations is available through the Graduate Theological Union, a consortium of seminaries in Berkeley, Calif., of which CDSP is a member.

CDSP has pioneered efforts at providing on-line education, including classes for credit that are available to people throughout the country. Several such classes are available now.

The Seminary's Center for Anglican Learning and Life (CALL) collaborates with dioceses of Province 8 to assist in meeting their program needs, including a variety of workshops and assistance for educational programs within the dioceses. CALL's two-year program "Anglican Studies On-Line" offers other on-line courses and opportunities for continuing education workshops both at the seminary and at other sites, many of them designed to meet the needs of small congregations.

***Episcopal Divinity School*** 99 Brattle, Cambridge, MA 02138; (617) 868-3450. [info@episdivschool.org](mailto:info@episdivschool.org)

EDS offers Congregational Studies programs which focus on aspects of training and support for laity and clergy in small congregations, especially those in the region. Topics offered have included lay pastoral teams, preaching and teaching the lectionary, anti-racism training and stewardship. There are also annual workshops and resources for Christian Education and leadership development. Costs for the programs are kept low through subsidies from the seminary.

Students at EDS take a course in "congregational contexts," half of which is devoted to ministry in small congregations. Many of the field education sites are in small congregations, and course offerings in pastoral theology focus on the small congregation. The seminary is exploring several partnerships with dioceses that will provide additional support to congregations. Also being developed is an on-line education component.

***Episcopal Theological Seminary of the Southwest*** PO Box 2247, Austin, TX 78768; (512) 472-4133. [seminary@etss.edu](mailto:seminary@etss.edu)

Certificate Programs in Youth Ministry and Christian Education are offered by Episcopal Seminary of the Southwest. The programs offer basic theological education which includes scripture, theology and practical skills of ministry on basic, associate and advanced levels. Distance learning courses began in the fall of 2002. Courses are offered each semester on a non-credit basis. The seminary's statement of purpose defines mission comprehensively in terms of living out the Baptismal Covenant in a multicultural context.

**Nashotah House** 2777 Mission Road, Nashotah, Wisconsin 53058-9793; 1-800-Nashotah

There are two summer programs that would benefit small congregations. The School of Evangelization is designed to equip laity and clergy intellectually, spiritually and practically for evangelization. The school explores spirituality and evangelization in different congregational settings. Participants develop a strategic plan for their home congregations.

The Boone Porter Institute for local ministry is designed to strengthen the already existing network of Christians working in local and regional ministries. Education, training and support are offered for both lay and ordained leadership. Epiphany Term, offered between the fall and spring terms, offers graduate-level, intensive classes.

**The Protestant Episcopal Theological Seminary in Virginia** Seminary Post Office, 3737 Seminary Road, Alexandria, Virginia 22304; [www.vts.edu](http://www.vts.edu)

Small congregation issues are included as part of virtually every pastoral theology and pastoral care course offered at Virginia Theological Seminary. In addition, there are courses explicitly for small congregation ministry. A small church ministry course is planned for the January 2004 term. The bishops of West Virginia and Easton led classes exploring alternative models for church organization and leadership in areas with many small congregations. Students may also take courses in Appalachian ministry, which include on-site study and reflection.

The Leadership Program in Music is sponsored and hosted by VTS. It concentrates on musical ministry in small congregations. The seminary participated in a program with a nearby diocese to offer concentrated workshops on homiletics and liturgics for small congregations, taught by the regular faculty.

The Center for the Ministry of Teaching provides resources, materials and consultation for Christian education in small congregation settings, and the Lifetime Theological Education program invites clergy and lay leaders of small congregations for workshops and courses.

**The School of Theology, The University of the South**, Sewanee, TN 37383; (800) 722-1974. [theology@sewanee.edu](mailto:theology@sewanee.edu)

The Center for Ministry in Small Churches is associated with the seminary and offers workshops, retreats and consultations to small congregations. It also hosts an annual conference on themes of interest to a small congregation. Several dioceses formerly helped fund CMSC, which is now completely under the School of Theology.

The seminary offers a small church ministry elective, and classes have covered specific areas of ministry such as ministry in Appalachia and small-church lay ministry training. Seminarians take part in field education in a number of smaller parishes near the seminary.

A five-church regional ministry, located in churches near the seminary, has been started to model mutual ministry in a program that was coordinated with CMSC. This has provided students with a practical knowledge in the creating of a regional ministry with the seminary as a resource for their training.

A quarterly journal, "Tuesday Morning," offers articles on ecumenical ministry and liturgical preaching. There is a focus on articles and material for small congregations which may not have access to the resources that are more easily accessed in larger congregations. Subscription rate is \$20 annually.

**Trinity Episcopal School for Ministry**, 311 Eleventh St., Ambridge, PA 15003. 1-800-874-8754. [tesm@tesm.edu](mailto:tesm@tesm.edu)

Second year students in the ordination track participate in Field Based Placement. The liturgical expectation for these students encourages many to do their work in rural and small community parishes. The course also has a critical issues seminar to prepare students for small as well as larger church ministries.

The pastoral theology department has several offerings that recognize that "most of the churches in America are small churches." The needs of small churches, as contrasted with those of larger churches, are noted and addressed in the classes.

Trinity offers a professional doctoral degree that affords clergy in small churches the opportunity to address the skills they identify as needed in their ministry.

**Resolution A133 Adopt “*Expanding Mission and Vitality in Small Congregations*”**

1     Resolved, the House of \_\_\_\_\_ concurring, That the 74th General Convention adopt “*Expanding Mission*  
2     *and Vitality in Small Congregations: A Framework Affirming and Strengthening the Ministry of Small*  
3     *Churches*” offered by the Standing Commission for Small Congregations; and be it further  
4     Resolved, That the Office of Congregational Development and the Missioner for Rural and Small  
5     Communities be directed to print and distribute this document throughout the Episcopal Church.

**EXPLANATION**

There are many valid measures for determining congregational vitality. This document offers ways for dioceses and small congregations to determine their vitality and to develop plans for enhancing their ability to do Christ’s work in the world.

**Financial Report**

The Standing Commission for Small Congregations was budgeted \$31,000 for the 2001-2003 Triennium. At the time of this report, SCSC had expended \$15,699 of its budget.

The Standing Commission for Small Congregations will meet approximately three times during the 2004-2006 Triennium. This will require \$8,000 in 2004, \$17,000 in 2005, and \$10,000 in 2005 for a total of \$35,000 for the Triennium.