

STANDING COMMISSION FOR SMALL CONGREGATIONS

www.episcopalchurch.org/congdev/Rural/Rural.htm

MEMBERSHIP

The Rt. Rev. Larry Maze, <i>Chair</i>	Arkansas VII, 2006
The Rev. Canon Kristi Philip, <i>Vice-Chair</i>	Spokane VIII, 2009
Ms. Karen DuPlantier, <i>Secretary</i>	Louisiana IV, 2006
Ms. Ramona Burroughs	South Dakota VI, 2006
Mr. Frank Connizzo	Kansas VII, 2009
The Rt. Rev. Thomas Clark Ely	Vermont I, 2009
The Very Rev. Canon H. W. Herrmann, SSC	Quincy V, 2006
The Rt. Rev. James J. Shand	Easton III, 2009
Ms. Bonnie Studdiford	Maine I, 2006
Mr. Lonell Wright	Louisiana IV, 2009
Ms. Terry Roberts, <i>Executive Council Liaison</i>	Minnesota VI, 2006
The Rev. Ben E. Helmer, <i>Staff Liaison</i>	<i>Missioner for Rural and Small Communities</i>

SUMMARY OF WORK

The Standing Commission for Small Congregations' (SCSC) canonical mandate is to “concern itself with plans for new directions for small congregations” [Canon I.1.2(n)(2)]. The past triennium was a time of connecting, of listening, and of resource-development and sharing for this Commission. In their conversations, members and Church Center Staff agreed that the life and health of small congregations is of interest and concern to a number of organizations and ministry areas within the Episcopal Church.

There were three Commission meetings in the triennium: in Chesterfield, MO, August 2004; New Orleans, LA, April 2005; and Burlington, VT, August 2005.

Commission members attended meetings of groups whose work includes small congregations: The Standing Commission on Ministry Development, the Domestic Missionary Partnership, the Small Church Total Ministry Consultation, and Living Stones Partnership. Contact was made with the Council of Seminary Deans, the Rural Ministries Network (formerly Rural Workers' Fellowship), and the Office of Ethnic Congregational Development.

The Commission has begun conversation with the Church Pension Fund with respect to issues of compensation and benefits as they pertain to clergy serving in small congregations. The Commission met with the Rev. Rebecca McLain, new director of the Church Deployment Office, to discuss deployment issues of special concern to small congregations. During their August, 2005 meeting, Commission members visited three small congregations in the Diocese of Vermont and had conversations with their leadership about congregational vitality.

SCSC would like to commend the Rev. Ben Helmer and the Office of Congregational Development for their hard work and dedication to small congregations. Their work has made a significant difference in the life of the church.

Telling the Stories of Vital Small Congregations

During the triennium, the work of the Commission and staff support has focused on vitality in small congregations. Commission members gathered information from individuals and groups as well as sharing the material in the Small Church Growth Strategy Handbook prepared by the Rev. Ben Helmer and other Church Center staff. The handbook includes the document “Expanding Mission and Vitality in Small Congregations: A Strategy Affirming and Strengthening the Ministry of Small Churches” which was adopted by the 74th General Convention in Resolution 2003–A133. The handbook lists several “benchmarks” of vital small churches in the Episcopal tradition, including:

- Availability of the Eucharist and other sacraments;
- Participatory worship that mediates God's presence and helps transform people for baptismal living;
- Local engagement in determining strategies for mission and ministry in partnership with the Bishop;

- Understanding and supporting mission direction and priorities;
- Openness to possibilities and a willingness to embrace new opportunities for mission;
- Broad-based, collaborative decision-making in which the community takes ownership of decisions;
- Collegiality and collaboration between local leaders and leaders from beyond the community.

Another important part of building vitality in small congregations is learning from the experiences of a variety of congregations, some of these stories are:

Trinity Church, Hermantown, Minnesota *Average Sunday Attendance: 60*

Trinity Church, Hermantown, was formed when two churches merged after realizing that they could no longer afford the traditional way of doing ministry. The two congregations had worked together previously and had been yoked for part of the time. After a period of discernment, they moved to a new area that has growth in the community. They bought an existing church building and modified it to suit Episcopal worship.

In the summer of 2005, they ordained and commissioned a third ministry team. The congregation is served by a permanent deacon and a supervising priest from a nearby church. Trinity Church is involved in the local community and in the diocese and offers an intentional welcome to new members. Their process of forming the new congregation was slow, deliberate, and locally-determined, and valued the assistance of several experienced mentors. (Reported by Terry Roberts)

St. Martin's Church, Palmyra, Maine *Average Sunday Attendance: 27*

St. Martin's Episcopal Church is literally at a crossroads— situated at the only occupied corner of a four-way intersection. They are at another kind of crossroads as they work through a transition in clergy leadership. Outreach ministry has been a source of vitality and energy for this small congregation. Their parish hall, a former Grange hall, houses a library with computers that serve a literacy program. Turkey pie suppers, the literacy program, the library, and a county food bank are among outreach efforts, parish leaders report.

Two local fundraising events involve church members as well as people from the wider community. Placing more emphasis on outreach and less on buildings and grounds was an important decision. As with many small congregations, St. Martin's is challenged to spread ministry more widely. There have been gratifying moments as their work continues: the “thank-you's” from literacy program clients and additional help in maintaining the building and grounds. (Reported by Bonnie Studdiford)

St. James, Tanana, Alaska *Average Sunday Attendance: 12*

St. James' Episcopal Mission, Tanana, is on the north bank of the Yukon River, about 130 miles west of Fairbanks, and can only be reached by airplane or, in the summer, by a 12-hour boat ride. The Alaska Native Village is a community of 350 people that is wrapped in the river culture.

Anglican ministry began there in the 1860s by Archdeacon Robert McDonald, a Canadian missionary. St. James' is now a part of the Episcopal Church and the Rev. Canon Ginny Doctor has served as missionary since 1993. With her leadership, St. James' began identifying leaders and the diocese provided training events to equip and empower parishioners to take responsibility for ministry.

In the summer of 2000, John Star, a much respected elder in the community was ordained a transitional deacon, an event that became a rallying point for the congregation. More people began to share in the ministry, now a core of six people, including two priests—Canon Doctor and one resident of the village—are the “ministry team.” Also, many lay leaders participate in ministry.

Key indicators of mission are present: Giving has increased and St. James' gives ten percent to the diocese as well as to other causes. The congregation is rehabilitating its facilities. The average Sunday attendance has increased. There is talk of “calling a deacon” and the Sunday service “happens” with or without clergy.

The congregation's largest challenge is to increase monetary giving now that needs have been identified. Everything in Alaska, and particularly in the villages, is expensive. Overall, though, there is a sense of gratefulness for all they have been able to do. It is possible to worship in the church when the outside temperature is –60 degrees.

The Yukon River flows about 100 feet from St. James'. Canon Doctor says that every time she finishes Sunday Eucharist, she flings open the door to look at the river. "Then I wonder, what more will God bring us in our river of ministry?" (Reported by Ramona Burroughs and the Rev. Canon Ginny Doctor)

St. John's, Camden, Arkansas *Average Sunday Attendance: 37*

Camden, once a thriving river town and a leading community in Arkansas, has experienced a decline in population and vitality over a number of years. St. John's was once a large parish, but with the population decline, it is now a small mission congregation.

Five years ago, St. John's entered into a mutual ministry model with the team consisting of administrators, preachers, visitors, teachers, and two who were identified as potential priests. It was a difficult five years, because there were not a set of directions and there were times of confusion and feeling stuck. Recently with 80 percent of the congregation on board with the concept of mutual ministry, they celebrated the commissioning and licensing of the ministry team, and the ordination of two priests.

Today, the church is engaged in multiple ministries, including a nursing home ministry, an adult Bible Study, noonday prayers and meditation every Wednesday, an ecumenical health clinic, a full bell choir, and growing visibility in the community. Their percentage giving to the diocese is among the highest in Arkansas.

St. John's now believes that ministry comes in and through their own congregation. This venture has brought the whole congregation into a more loving and close-knit group that hopes to grow in number as they have grown in spirit. (Reported by St. Johns' Ministry Team)

St. Andrew's, Colchester, Vermont *Average Sunday Attendance: 100*

St. Andrews, located in a suburb of Burlington, has grown enough to move out of the "small church" category. Several years ago, the church almost closed, according to their priest, the Rev. Lisette Baxter. When she arrived, they embarked on an intense program of listening and today there are many indicators of vitality in the parish as a Christ-centered parish where people care for each other and are actively involved in outreach and hospitality. People can express concerns without fear and share their faith. There is conversation around stewardship of time, talent, and treasure.

The church building was recently expanded to add a larger nave, church school rooms, and office space. They are focusing on worship, spirituality, education, and outreach while they adjust to the new space. A visioning group is testing new ideas and sharing wisdom.

Growth at St. Andrew's has stretched its finances, for example, the challenge of a larger diocesan contribution and a desire for additional secretarial staff. St. Andrew's hopes the diocese will be a partner in providing leadership and administration training.

Baxter's advice to other congregations: "At all cost, keep your prayer and study life alive. Keep Jesus at the center. Don't be too busy so you can model a lifestyle that is not running in a thousand and one directions. Trust the Spirit." (Reported by Lonell Wright)

St. Anne's, Omak, Washington (Diocese of Spokane) *Average Sunday Attendance: 25*

St. Anne's, near the Canadian border, serves the small towns of Omak and Okanogan as well as a sparsely-populated area dotted with fruit orchards and ranches. About five years ago when their part-time, non-resident priest retired, St. Anne's considered entering into a cluster arrangement with three other small churches in the region. That plan proved to be impractical, so they began a reorganization. They were served during that time by supply priests and one member was licensed as a pastoral leader. At first there was panic and uncertainty, but eventually there was room for change and new direction.

A clear mission statement, annual goal-setting sessions, diocesan mission imperatives, and assistance from the diocese helped St. Anne's to focus and move forward. St. Anne's was able to identify people's gifts and to share ministry. Stanalee Wright was ordained after participating in a diocesan education and formation program. Ministries

include children's ministry, a vacation Bible school, and an adult study group. Looking ahead, they will be guided by their mission statement, "brainstorming sessions," the Spirit's presence and an attention to focus.

The challenges, Wright said, have come from two shortages: money and time. But members are encouraged as they feel God's presence, nurture the children in their midst, overcome fears, and pitch in to help. Wright isn't sure they've arrived at "vitality," but they are on their way. "I have no idea where God is taking us, but it is certainly turning out to be quite a ride," she said. (Reported by Kristi Philip)

Resolution A098 Small Church Growth and Strategy Handbook

- 1 *Resolved*, the House of _____ concurring, That the 75th General Convention direct the Office of Congregational
- 2 Development to distribute to all Diocesan Bishops the resource *A Handbook for Small Church Growth and Strategy*,
- 3 including all future revisions; and be it further

EXPLANATION

It is estimated that some 70 per cent of congregations in the Episcopal Church are classified as small congregations, with an average Sunday attendance of 100 or fewer. Many of these congregations have achieved vitality in their lives and ministries. The *Handbook for Small Church Growth and Strategy*, a collection of resources developed by the Office of Congregational Development and field tested in congregations, provides background materials and strategies for strengthening congregations. Another facet of that work is sharing the stories of vitality in small congregations that have flourished by a variety of means.

FINANCIAL REPORT

The Standing Commission for Small Congregations will meet approximately four times during the next triennium. This will require \$7,000 for 2007, \$15,000 for 2008 and \$9,000 for 2009 for a total of \$31,000 for the triennium.