

Standing Commission for Small Congregations

Membership

Ms. DonnaLee Pettit, <i>Chair</i>	North Dakota, VI	2012
The Rev. Katherine Harrigan, <i>Vice-Chair</i>	Central Pennsylvania, III	2015
Ms. LaVerne Cormerie-Hubbard, <i>Secretary</i>	West Tennessee, IV	2012
Ms. Maggie Brown	Navajoland Area Mission, VIII	2012
The Rt. Rev. Dan Edwards	Nevada, VIII	2015
Mr. Robert Fox*	New Jersey, II	2015
The Rev. Nancy Sargent McGrath Green	Eastern Oregon, VIII	2015
The Rt. Rev. E. Ambrose Gumbs	Virgin Islands, II	2012
Ms. Joan Kline	Southwest Florida, IV	2015
The Rev. Ivette Linares	Puerto Rico, IX	2012
The Rt. Rev. James J. Shand*	Easton, III	2012
The Rt. Rev. John Tarrant*	South Dakota, VI	2012
Mr. George Wing	Colorado, VI	2015
The Rev. Cristobal Leon Lozano	Ecuador Litoral, IX	
The Rev. Robert Honeychurch, <i>Staff</i>		

Changes in Membership

Three changes in membership occurred during the triennium: Mr. Robert Fox resigned; and The Rt. Rev. James J. Shand resigned, replaced by The Rt. Rev. John Tarrant.

Summary of Work

Mandate

Canon 1.1.2(n)(2)

A Standing Commission for Small Congregations. It shall be the duty of the commission to identify and recommend to General Convention policies, priorities, and opportunities to affirm and strengthen the health and development of small congregations.

Meetings

- November 17-20, 2009, Chicago, Illinois
- Conference Call, May 1, 2010
- February 18-20, 2011, Episcopal Church Center, Salt Lake City, Utah
- September 7-10, 2011, Duncan Gray Episcopal Center, Canton, MS
- Web conference, October 6, 2011
- Web conference, November 7, 2011
- Web conference, November 29, 2011

Introduction

A reality of The Episcopal Church is that more than half its congregations are considered small congregations, with an average Sunday attendance (ASA) of fewer than 70 persons. These congregations are equally divided between rural and urban settings. Another reality is that way more than half the members of The Episcopal Church belong to larger churches. This means that their voices are often louder and more able to control and direct the conversations and programs in the church. It is the duty of this Commission to speak for the smaller congregations to make sure their challenges and strengths and successes are heard throughout the Church.

Discussion

Churches are small for many reasons. Some are in small communities or rural areas with limited populations. Some are ethnic congregations, where language and culture determine their appeal. Some are in areas that are declining, and,

unless there is a rebirth in the community, they will not be able to attract additional members. Most new starts and emerging churches begin as small churches, and they may or may not grow into larger categories. Some small churches are vital and have very healthy congregations, while others are in decline. Many small congregations will always be small congregations, and this is in no way a disappointing or discouraging situation for them. Most small congregation members will talk about the family aspect of their churches in ways that are not possible in larger congregations.

The Commission was guided this triennium by Resolution 2009-A113. The Rev. Robert Honeychurch of the Office of Congregational Vitality met with the Commission throughout the triennium and was very helpful in sharing the joys and hurdles of small churches and in helping to guide in productive areas of discussion.

The Commission has tried to learn about the other organizations in the Church focused on small or rural ministry. A September 2011 meeting with the Domestic Missionary Partnership (DMP) allowed both groups to learn about the other, provided an ability to talk about issues facing small churches, and do some brainstorming about how to proceed in looking for solutions in some areas. Informal discussions during meals and social hours with members of the other group were particularly valuable to Commission members, able to learn about some of the very creative and successful small church ministries supported by DMP. The dioceses in DMP have a history of doing ministry in creative ways that overcome the hurdles created by size and limited resources. During these meetings, Commission members have spoken with local persons about small congregations whenever possible.

For a number of years the Commission has had an ongoing discussion with the Church Pension Fund, discussing several issues where current Church Pension Fund policies are not conducive to small church ministry. The Commission has sent the Fund a letter about these issues, in hopes they will be able to address some of these issues. The Commission knows current policies do not allow some of it needed, so the Commission strongly encourages the Church Pension Fund to change the policy. Some issues of concern include the way lower pay affects how much full time credit is earned toward a pension, which often makes small church employment less desirable than employment in larger churches. There are many new models for local ordination, and many of these involve non-stipendiary positions; can these persons in non-stipendiary positions pay into the Pension Fund themselves? Just as small congregations need to be more flexible to survive, additional flexibility from the Church Pension Fund would be helpful.

The Commission was charged with planning with the General Convention Office to make the mission, ministry, and vitality of small congregations a major emphasis of the 77th General Convention. This was exciting for all who felt some attention for small congregations was long overdue. Much time was spent talking about this and planning how to showcase small congregations. After presenting our ideas to the Joint Standing Committee on Planning and Arrangements, and getting approval, the unfortunate reality of funding became apparent: there is no funding. No funding was attached to Resolution 2009-A113, so there is no money to carry out the charge. There will have to be a much scaled back presence at General Convention, and the message that cannot be made too strongly is that if a resolution asks for action, it is useless unless funding is attached.

However, the Commission is pleased to offer six workshops at General Convention during the noon breaks on Monday, July 9 and Tuesday, July 10. The object of the workshops is to share ideas and existing resources for ministry in small congregations. Hopefully, those attending will bring the information and ideas back to their dioceses to share with members of small congregations. The goal of the Commission is to share the success stories and possibilities that exist around the Church. A small church may feel they exist alone or in a vacuum, but that isn't true. Wonderful things are happening in small congregations throughout the Church and the Commission wants to spread that joy and enthusiasm.

The workshops will cover:

- **Ecumenical and alternative ministries:** The Episcopal Church has wisdom to offer the wider church in its experience and tradition. So also do others. When a small congregation joins with another from a different denomination, honoring their respective traditions and worship, a fuller tableau of God's actions in history is painted. Liturgically, communally and economically, their combined presence can empower more effective ministry in caring for one's neighbor while honoring the truth of being One in Christ. Alternative and nontraditional ministries are needed everywhere - among miners, oilfield workers, migrant workers, ethnic minorities, Native Americans, seamen, resorts, etc. Most will be small congregations. Many will require going out to where the people are even though the local Episcopal Church may have a lovely church building to offer in town.

- **Preaching and liturgy:** Small congregations need flexibility in liturgy, both in the materials available and in the ways in which liturgy is done. A service led by a deacon or lay person and with a handful of congregants will not look like a Cathedral service. What service resources can be used, and what new sermon materials are available?
- **Music:** As with preaching and liturgy, the music needed for small congregations is different. Musical settings for large church performances do not usually translate well into small church spaces. Small churches need tunes and hymns that do not require an organ, a choir master, and many trained voices.
- **Lay leadership and local ordination:** The fact that the Church can afford fewer full time seminary trained priests has led to an increase in the role of lay people in the Church. Programs for training lay leaders are needed everywhere in every aspect of Church ministry. As more lay leaders are trained, there is a greater call for local ordination of these leaders. Dioceses are looking at programs for training, and there is no single, perfect program that suits every diocese. What do these programs look like and what will work in each diocese?
- **Passion:** No, no! Not sexual passion! We mean passion of the heart; mission. What makes us happy and fulfilled, gives us joy, and makes us feel useful? What questions lead us to identify that passion? When we realize what we want to do is to be Christians loving one another, then we find our purpose and the reason for being a congregation. Time and again, an active mission life brings a congregation together in successful ministry.
- **Latino/Hispanic:** What are some of the key characteristics of vital Latino/Hispanic congregations in the United States today? What makes those small congregations different from their non-Latino/Hispanic counterparts in the Church today? Hear some of the first hand stories of people who have found The Episcopal Church to be a place of energy, hope and vision—all with a Latino/Hispanic flair.

The Commission is very excited about these workshops, and hopes attendees will find ideas to bring home to their dioceses. Small congregations can accomplish almost anything but the methods and materials they need must suit small churches.

In reading past Blue Book reports, it is apparent that many of the same issues previously reported have been problem areas for small congregations for many years. Sometimes progress is made, and sometimes it isn't. Clergy deployment, for instance, has been a chronic problem for small congregations for many years, and it is unlikely to stop being a problem any time soon. Nevertheless, the Commission believes it is always worth the effort to keep trying to address these areas. The numbers make it plain that The Episcopal Church is a church of small congregations, and that is unlikely to change. Many other realities have changed. For instance, as a Church it is not possible to have a seminary trained priest in every parish. It takes about \$100,000 a year from a parish budget to have a full-time stipendiary priest. Successful small congregations, once they get over their disappointment at their inability to fund a full-time paid position and to provide communion every Sunday, adjust their thinking and find ways to move ahead. Morning Prayer, led by lay leaders, with occasional communion services led by a visiting or supply clergy can be a fully acceptable way of worship in addition to being necessary. The financial burden of paying stipendiary clergy is among the reasons for lay leadership and training programs and local ordination programs becoming so widespread across the Church. This is not a "one size fits all" issue, and solutions vary widely.

Many small congregations have found new life by joining with congregations from other denominations. Again, there is no single way to do this, and churches have been very creative in finding ways to join together as God's people. They have found they can move across denominational lines without losing their own traditions and identity. Others have found that focusing on "mission" and finding alternative ways of reaching out to their communities leads to growth in the life and spirit of their churches.

There are several other issues the Commission hopes to continue to examine. Worship in small congregations requires different materials than in a larger setting. Not all music can be sung by a small group. Small congregations may not have the skilled pianists and organists that provide music in large churches. Materials for liturgy should follow the lectionary and should be affordable.

Seminary debt is a huge impediment to taking small church positions, where the pay is often less. Young priests and newer but older priests hesitate to take lower paying positions while they carry large seminary debts.

Many small congregations, particularly in rural areas and in urban areas where the community has changed, support old buildings, too large for the size of the congregation, expensive to heat and cool, and in need of substantial repairs. Although having fully paid buildings is in many ways a blessing to small congregations, the existence of the buildings

can also be an impediment in making the decisions and taking the actions needed for a small church to survive and attract new members to replace those that move away or die. Some congregations have sold their buildings and now meet in stores, theaters, schools, member's homes, and so on. The relief from the burden of the building has led them to expanded mission and ministry and created a new life for the group. Small churches may need to embrace the new technologies and methods of communication that are so increasingly important in our world in order to effectively attract and invite youth and young adults.

General Convention actions can be insensitive to the realities of small congregations. Economic justice actions appropriate for large congregations often have a devastating effect on smaller places and smaller budgets. Lay pensions, changes in health insurance, and pension policies often are not affordable in small church budgets. Small congregations which find paying for a priest difficult will either go without or cut back lay employment, relying instead on volunteers. At General Convention it would be helpful for small congregations to be kept in mind when considering legislation.

The Commission expects in its future work to collect different models for ministry in small congregations and make them more readily available to the Church. It will also include other issues: for instance, how much training for small church ministry is available in Episcopal seminaries? How much do seminarians know about what small church work may look like? How can this Commission communicate with the seminaries? Can dioceses and seminaries use Internet technologies and new forms of social media and communication to make education and training more widely available? Can congregations in thinly settled areas leverage Internet technology to reduce the disadvantages they suffer in doing ministry? How can small congregations and dioceses fully utilize available technologies and media to provide more equal opportunities for small congregations to have access to the kinds of resources that are available in larger communities? These are all questions that have been and will continue to be discussed in future meetings.

The web conference training offered through the General Convention office has been very helpful and the Commission has used it for several meetings. Several members are not technologically savvy, but were still able to use and enjoy the system. It is a big benefit for the Commission to be able to meet more often.

Budget Report

The Commission had a budget of \$30,000 for the 2010-2012 triennium. The Commission spent \$1,000 in 2010 and \$14,000 in 2011. \$15,000 remains for 2012. The Standing Commission for Small Congregations will meet in person approximately three times in the next triennium, and it will meet regularly through web conferencing. This will require \$10,000 for 2013, \$10,000 for 2014, and \$10,000 for 2015, for a total of \$30,000 for the triennium.

Proposed Resolutions

Resolution A076 Strengthen Small Congregations

Resolved, the House of _____ concurring, That the Standing Commission for Small Congregations in partnership with the Office of Congregational Vitality publish information about effective ministry practices for small congregations currently in use and being developed in small congregations and dioceses; and be it further

Resolved, That the Standing Commission for Small Congregations collaborate with other Commissions, Committees, Agencies, Boards, networks, and organizations throughout the Church (such as Living Stones, the Domestic Missionary Partnership, Ministry Developer's Collaborative, Native American and other ethnic specific ministries, Episcopal Appalachian Ministries, Rural Ministry Network, Center for Baptismal Living, Church Deployment Office) about issues and concerns related to the strengthening of small congregations; and be it further

Resolved, That the Standing Commission for Small Congregations continue strategic discussions with the Church Pension Fund regarding compensation and benefit issues for participating ordained and non-ordained persons serving small congregations; and be it further

Resolved, That the Standing Commission for Small Congregations be an active participant in current and future conversations throughout the Church related to Seminary education and other vehicles of life-long Christian Formation for ordained and non-ordained leaders serving small congregations; and be it further

Resolved, That the Standing Commission for Small Congregations plan with the General Convention Office to make the mission, ministry and vitality of small congregations a major emphasis of the 78th General Convention; and that a budget of \$25,000 be allotted for this.