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Executive Council Deals with Finances, Racism -- and Healing

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(ENS) A year after it was stunned with allegations that former treasurer Ellen Cooke had embezzled funds, members of the Executive Council were greeted at their February 8-12 meeting in Miami with good news -- and bad news. The new treasurer and his staff are putting the financial affairs of the church back in order but diocesan contributions continue to decrease and may force more budget cuts.

Referring to last February's meeting in Providence, Presiding Bishop Edmond Browning said, "Together we absorbed, almost dazed, those first reports of the embezzlement of our former treasurer." Yet he observed that he and the council had "worked hard to find some redemption in this most tragic situation, to bring us through to a better place."

Browning said that, despite the tragedy, he had seen "glimpses of God's grace. The wounds dealt to our community have made us stronger. Scar tissue," he said, "is the strongest tissue there is."

Treasurer says things are back on track

To support Browning's observation, Steven Duggan said that his first eight weeks as the new treasurer had been "very challenging and, at times, frustrating." While the issues are "formidable and pervasive," he said that "we have not only stopped further slippage but have actually begun recovery" by tightening financial controls.

While he and his new staff have been able to put the church's financial affairs on a more stable footing, Duggan said that "we have a task ahead to regain the trust of many Episcopalians who may be hesitant about supporting Christ's programs through this church after a tumultuous 1995."

Diocesan giving represents nearly 60 percent of funding for the church's national offices, but about a third of the dioceses have yet to make pledges for 1996, Duggan reported. And so far the pledges are running about \$250,000 behind last year. The Diocese of Dallas recently announced that it would contribute \$200,000 less than last year. "A reduction of that magnitude wipes out the effect of favorable increases by many dioceses," Duggan said in his report.

At its fall meeting in Birmingham, the council set a 1996 budget of \$43.5 million. That budget must also include several extraordinary expenses -- including the trial of Bishop Walter Righter, a committee to nominate the next presiding bishop, as well as financial management costs at the church offices, and potential settlement of several sexual misconduct cases. If shortfalls continue, they will "sharply increase the likely necessity of program and staff cuts at the Church Center," Duggan warned. On a more optimistic note, he said that some of the funds already recovered from Cooke, and additional funds sought in pending civil suits, may help replenish the operating budget.

Chinnis calls for another look at budget process

In her address to the council, House of Deputies president Pamela Chinnis said that it may be time to take another look at the unified budget process passed at the 1994 General Convention. "Although it seemed like a good idea at the time, I'm not sure that combining the General Convention and program budgets, in effect making the entire diocesan contribution voluntary, has proven beneficial," she said.

"The program budget pays for the ministries we have decided to do together as Episcopalians," Chinnis

pointed out. "The convention expense budget pays for what makes us the Episcopal Church in the first place" because it "establishes our institutional existence as a group of dioceses bound together" by the Book of Common Prayer, constitution and canons, and houses of deputies and bishops. She argued that the mandatory assessment for the General Convention's budget helped assure "the survival of our basic decision-making structure."

Racism workshop underscores commitment

Underscoring a commitment to continue the fight against the sin of racism, council members participated in a day-long workshop on racism. Drawing on the experience in the Diocese of Southeast Florida, Bishop Calvin Schofield introduced Haitian and Cuban priests active in ministry among immigrants and refugees supported by Episcopal Migration Ministries.

The racism workshop included a Bible study and a presentation by the Rev. Ed Rodman of Massachusetts and Dr. Catherine McIntosh of Wellesley College. They helped council members explore racial attitudes, using a powerful film, "The Color of Fear." The film featured a blunt dialogue by a group that included whites, blacks, Chicanos, Chinese and Japanese men on a retreat together.

The day also included a service honoring the 200th anniversary of the ordination of the first black priest in the Episcopal Church. Absalom Jones was ordained deacon in 1795 and priest in 1802. In her sermon, Judy Conley of Iowa said that Jones had fought for the inclusion of African Americans and all people of color. "So why are we here preaching and teaching and training to combat racism in this restless sea of time? What does it take for us to understand it better?" she asked, urging council members to be instruments of peace, not of each other's oppression.

The diocese also highlighted its environmental work by taking council members to the Everglades. "We came away with a greater appreciation and understanding of this fragile earth, our island home," said the Rev. John Lane of Virginia. "The interrelationship of human beings, other fauna and flora that becomes obvious in the Everglades was a metaphor for the inter-connectedness of our lives, inside and outside the church."

