

Interim Report
House of Deputies Committee on the State of the Church
November 2007

Introduction

The House of Deputies Committee on the State of the Church presents the following brief assessment of facts and trends that describe the state of The Episcopal Church as we see it at this point in time. This Interim Report is offered to assist and challenge the leaders of our church, especially other General Convention Committees, Commissions, Agencies and Boards (CCABs), in their on-going work of leadership. Our committee works closely with Dr. Kirk Hadaway, Director of Research at the Episcopal Church Center, and his report, *Episcopal Fast Facts 2006* (attached) follows our overview.

In a manner similar to other mainline Protestant denominations in the United States, the statistics for The Episcopal Church indicate declining membership and attendance, declines that have become more severe in the last several years. That trend means that we need a plan for action at all of our organizational levels—parish and diocese, as well as the Episcopal Church Center. At the same time, marvelous work goes forward at all levels of our church, often understated, and not fully appreciated, but truly transforming in nature.

Areas of encouragement

- Episcopal Relief and Development reports that between 2004 and 2005, their support base increased from 20,000 to 80,000 individual donors; from 400 churches to 5,000; and from just under \$9 million to about \$40 million. Annual support continues at a high level for emergency relief, while increased resources can now be allocated to longer-term development projects. Commitment to mission and outreach is increasing.
- Within our congregations, giving per member continues to increase or remain steady.
- The Church Pension Fund continues to provide increased benefits to its pensioners, driven by excellent investment performance and innovative portfolio management. Focus continues on clergy wellness (i.e. CREDO), broad medical coverage, and highly competitive property and casualty insurance packages.
- Given concern in prior years about youth, seven new campus ministries were planted in 2006.
- Reorganization of the staff at the Church Center is underway for better utilization of resources nationally and locally for support of the mission of the church.
- Recently completed renovations to the Episcopal Church Center at 815 Second Avenue in New York City have made that workplace more efficient and safer for our employees, while creating a positive and more attractive atmosphere for the whole church.

Areas of concern

- In 2006, the number of Episcopal churches growing by 10% or more has decreased, and the number declining in membership by 10% or more has increased.
- The year 2006 witnessed about a 3% drop in Average Sunday Attendance, compared to 1% in the previous year. An estimated 41% of this drop can be attributed to the departure of congregations or substantial parts of congregations from their dioceses.

- The failure of some dioceses to fully support the program of The Episcopal Church at the national level is having a deleterious impact not only upon domestic operations but also upon mission work in overseas dioceses.
- From 2001 through 2005, an increased number of congregations reported serious conflict. The consecration of the Bishop of NH, Parish finances, and the priest's leadership style were frequently mentioned as sources of conflict in 2005.
- The debt burdens of Episcopal seminarians are among the largest of all the Christian denominations.

Other facts:

- Almost half (49%) of our parishes and missions have an Average Sunday Attendance (ASA) of 70 or less. The norm - nearly two-thirds (63%) of Episcopal congregations-- has an ASA of 100 or less.

From all of our investigations thus far in the 2006-2009 triennium, we are struck by three inter-related concerns that we commend to the whole church for further reflection: **Identity, Mission, and Organization.**

Identity

“Who are we?” What does it mean to be an Episcopalian? What are our core values? How are we differentiated from other Christian faith traditions? What are our strengths and weaknesses? Where are our opportunities?

We cannot be leaders within our Church nor in the global community if we are unsure who we are or where God is calling us to go. Criticisms that we need to be more *proactive* (suggesting that we have allowed outsiders to set our agenda and dictate our identity), or that we are aggressively *reactive* (that is, we have been defending our polity to the extreme), both relate to our understanding and embrace of God's kingdom and the Salvation we are offered in Jesus Christ-- or to our lack of such understanding and engagement.

As Episcopalians, we approach and express our faith and relationship with Christ through our Baptismal Covenant and Eucharistic community. Now is the time to articulate and renew these leadership trajectories, and to re-ignite enthusiasm for both evangelism and mission. Such efforts will emphasize equally spiritual renewal for our existing long-time members, and Christian formation for our newer and younger members.

We need to undertake these efforts with a sense of urgency: urgency in evangelism, urgency in leadership development, urgency in outreach, urgency in structural reorganization-- but first and foremost, urgency in more clearly defining who we are, where God is calling us to go, and how we should “press ahead” in mission in response to the Gospel of Jesus Christ (Philippians 3:12-16).

Mission

The 75th General Convention approved prioritized goals to guide future actions of our church: Justice and Peace, including support of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs); Youth, Young Adults and Children; Reconciliation and Evangelism; Congregational Transformation and Partnerships (Resolution D031).

These goals can serve us as an excellent template for financial discipline. However, there seems to be a degree of confusion or ambivalence about the execution phase.

Substantial evidence from across the church suggests that the work of “mission” is the most successful organizational precept in bridging differences and bringing us together at this time. It is among the things that our church does best.

Organization

Conflict and change can create opportunity. Leadership, at its best, can seize that opportunity to create new momentum. Are we structured to seize it? It is difficult to execute any mission if the vision itself is cloudy, or if the means to carry it out are less than optimal.

The changing world in which we live appears to favor the most nimble administrative structures and systems. We are encouraged by the Presiding Bishop’s plan for reorganization of the Church Center staff. Greater clarity regarding congregational, diocesan, and Church Center areas of responsibility is needed-- and it is a positive sign that strategizing for the best use of our human resources is already underway. We further observe that:

- General Convention and its forty-two official Committees, Commissions, Agencies and Boards (CCABs) need continuous review for best use of our spiritual, human and material resources for our mission.
- Church Center staff turnover has been high, and morale has been problematic. Hopefully current strategies will address this issue and free the staff to be an even more significant resource to the whole church.
- The most effective organizations take maximum advantage of available technology to advance their purposes. Especially as the Church Center staff has been down-sized, it is important that we not fall behind in the area of technology for both management and communications. Compared to present-day workplace standards, an up-grade of our current systems is in order.

Conclusion

Part of the responsibility of the Committee on the State of the Church is to serve as sentinel for The Episcopal Church. As the prophet Ezekiel explained to the ancient Hebrews, the job of sentinel is to remain alert; and, when there is reason, to signal the people. (Ezekiel 33:1-6).

As the sentinel is responsible to keep watch and call out what is occurring, the House of Deputies Committee on the State of the Church presents the foregoing Interim Report to the church-at-large. We encourage the other CCABs, and all other church bodies, to consider the trends on which we report, as they engage in their work for the balance of the triennium.

Attach: Episcopal Fast Facts 2006

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