

# **Report of the Rural Ministry Subcommittee of the Episcopal Church in Colorado Commission on Ministry to the Commission on Ministry on Rural and Small Church Ministry in America and Colorado**

October 2018

## **Summary:**

The church is changing. In its current form, the church is aging and becoming less relevant to today's young people. No longer are people flocking to the red doors of our churches. We are seeing the rise of the "spiritual but not religious" crowd seeking God on a mountain top rather than a church building. The rule of thumb is that we need at least 100 households to support a traditional Episcopal parish with a building and full time clergy. Further, it has been offered 1-2% of the population may be attracted to the Episcopal tradition. The population would need to reach 15,000-20,000, at least, for each church to remain viable. During the early days of our church we often built a new church every 10- 15 miles which, in hindsight, may have partially led to the decline of our churches today.

Rather than despair and consider closing churches we need to be creative in our approaches to ministry in smaller or rural locations. We must consider part-time clergy; partnership ministry utilizing Lay Pastoral Leaders; local formation of ordained clergy; shared ministry with other local churches (ELCA, etc.); sharing physical plants with other churches; formation of small groups similar to a "house church" model and other innovative ministry initiatives. We must never lose sight of the fact that we are a resurrection people. While many long for the 1960's when people poured into our churches, we are in a different time which will require innovation and an entrepreneurial spirit.

There are approximately 40 (based on 2017 data) out of 114 churches (parishes/ missions) in the Episcopal Church in Colorado with an average Sunday attendance (ASA) of 50 or less. While some of these are in urban areas, most are in rural areas with small local populations. Approximately 39 churches in the Episcopal Church in Colorado are rural and smaller than 100 ASA (2017 data).

If we do nothing, the non-urban Episcopal Church is risking death; with small budgets, small membership the current practices and models are not succeeding. As a church we must explore new options for worship and clergy and space especially in rural regions. We need to build a zeal and passion in clergy and Diocese leadership for this unique ministry.

## **Local Committee History:**

During 2017, the Rural Sustainability Committee interviewed Regional Missioners in the Episcopal Church in Colorado. Among the findings from those responses

1. Energy and outward focus: more than one Missioner talked about the need to keep and employ the energy that comes from a viable congregation (even if small) which then uses that energy for meaningful ministry as a recognized spiritual presence in their (rural)

community, i.e., they are known as an important part of the community's fabric. At least two noted these key dimensions seem to be strongest if combined in a stated vision (something that some type of consultant might help them develop, including a do-able action plan).

2. Positives often seen in rural congregations: because of size and "knowing everybody" (in the church and even in the town), can create strong connectedness; often nimble/flexible in responding to needs; some successfully draw on strong lay leadership (especially if given training); reports of creative ministries and shared use of space with important community engagement
3. Challenges often seen in rural congregations: easy to be too internally focused; may experience burn-out as "same people always (have to) step up"; some end up with limited age spectrum, e.g., high percent of seniors and few young families/children; financially often tight due to low economic base (in community and within congregation); may have to deal with varying clergy situations (part time, only Supply, Partnerships, Shared); for some, upkeep of old facilities
4. Clergy training: most get no meaningful training at seminary or post-seminary about the common challenges and different needs in rural congregations, e.g., community size/economy/character, role church can play in life of community
5. New and strengthened directions: some cited Partnerships, Lay Pastoral Leaders
6. Life Cycle of a Church: often, "doing nothing" will spiral to closing

In June 2018, the Subcommittee reported it was working with the Partnership Vicars and Lay Pastoral Leaders groups to develop a manual of best practices/ experiences regarding Partnership ministry. (A preliminary draft of that document is attached to this report.) Anecdotal evidence based on discussions with both our transition officer as well as clergy—the role of Partnership Vicar is not clearly defined nor understood. Some of the other issues emerging are as follows:

- Lack of true Partnership Agreement Template between churches in partnership (the documents that exist are actually Rector/ Vicar Agreements NOT agreements between the churches). A Diocesan template would assist churches in their work in joining partnerships; such a document is being developed through the Bishops Office
- Lack of clear data with names of all Partnerships (including those nearing formalization) listing the leadership including Lay Pastoral Leaders (this data is being compiled and is now partially available)
- Comprehensive training materials OR Diocesan provided LPL Training. (Clergy are already caring for 2-3 congregations and adding responsibility for training LPL's is perhaps more than we should expect—a Diocese wide training offered at least once a year would be very helpful and ensure common training.)

- Locally trained clergy—it may be time to explore the feasibility of local training for clergy such as an IONA type model
- As an adjunct to the local training it is likely many will be Part-time locally trained clergy; this model should be further explored
- Lack of retired clergy to serve as part-time supply or Vicar in some areas of the state

Our follow-up work will be continuing the Manual and hopefully completing a draft after the LPL and Partnership Vicar Retreats. Further we will explore Partnership agreements and compile all those documents to understand the variety of arrangements we have in the Diocese.

It should be noted more than half our Partnership Vicars are “working while pensioned” and are maintaining several congregations while being paid very little with the minimal payment allowed under CPG guidelines.

Colorado is forward thinking in allowing LPL’s to offer consecrated elements in a service developed by the Bishops Office. This allows small churches to offer the weekly Eucharistic Meal without the presence of a priest. The lack of supply clergy in some regions causes some clergy to fail in self-care through vacation and educational or spiritual retreats. This extended lack of breaks will ultimately lead to tired and even “burned-out” clergy. The small church is the norm and yet the traditional seminary education envisions an upward trajectory defined by larger and larger church culminating in a large church or even Diocesan staff. Being called to small or rural church ministry should be encouraged and training in small church ministry must be part of the education of our clergy.

### **National Work Background/ Findings:**

During 2013-14 the Standing Commission for Small Congregations of the Episcopal Church held a series of meetings with stakeholders from multiple locales including the Episcopal Church in Colorado. After a Symposium on Formation for Small Church Leadership this group promulgated a report and key excerpts are reproduced below:

During the Symposium, Dr. Kirk Hadaway, TEC Officer for Congregational Research, gave a talk about small church statistics. One of his statistical studies revealed that small congregations are the norm in The Episcopal Church. The median church has an Average Sunday Attendance (ASA) of 61, and 69 percent of all our churches have an ASA of 100 or fewer.....

Many small churches find it financially difficult to maintain full-time, seminary-trained clergy. As a result, small churches increasingly depend on part-time, retired, and bi-vocational clergy and on licensed lay leaders to keep services going. When clergy are unavailable, lay worship leaders lead Morning Prayer.

Some Bishops have also authorized lay worship leaders to distribute previously consecrated sacraments during Sunday services. Without this authorization, the congregants in these churches would be denied regular access to the sacraments.

The traditional, three-year residential seminary model was developed as a way to train young adults, who would go directly from college to seminary. This model does not work well for persons who have families, jobs, and community involvement. Some traditional seminaries provide programs that allow remote studies and then require periods of time to be spent on campus. Over a period of time, students accumulate enough credits to graduate and be ordained as priests. This model is helpful, particularly where distances, seminary availability, and transportation may not permit easy access to the seminary campus.....

The Parochial Report has served to examine the life of The Episcopal Church over the years — a life that in the recent past has been declining in numbers of members. As the wider Church has diminished in size, its Parochial Report has not changed in tone or content. It remains a document of numbers of members, confirmations, deaths, transfers, receptions, services, and dollars budgeted.

As the number of small congregations has grown to be the prevalent model in The Episcopal Church, the Parochial Report gives no space to speak of the life-giving ministries that many of these vibrant small congregations are offering. These ministries often are the life-blood for themselves and for their community. It is holy work that should be noted. Instead, what their Parochial Reports show are smaller numbers of members and fewer dollars, which imply a diminution of their ministries. They do not capture the growth in depth of faith, breadth of mission, or the vital presence in small towns of a tradition that really does welcome everyone. It is not the total picture by any means.

“Membership” is still reflective of the days when one joined an Episcopal Church by being baptized, confirmed, or transferred. Yet more and more, we have those who want to stay on the fringes, who attend more than one church, who connect via social media, and so on. Ministry is happening but doesn’t show up in the numbers.....

Today, churches with aging congregations and dwindling numbers find their energies focused on maintaining a building that they do not need and cannot use to its fullest capacity. The financial and human resources needed to keep such buildings going hinder congregations from being able to engage in outreach or to make a real difference in their communities. It is difficult to attract new congregants to these churches when their worship space is so oversized

compared with the worshiping congregation, when the outward face of the building seems more like a fortress than a place of joy, and when every new face is seen as a volunteer to keep the bills paid and the building in repair.

The Episcopal Church Building Fund has offered some innovative ideas to these congregations through its Recasting Assets program. These ideas encourage congregations to think outside the box in reimagining the use of buildings to reach the people of God. We know that the Church is the people, not the building. But we also know that the building is, in many cases, what binds our people together, and in many cases, what is preventing our people from stepping forward in faith.

Some congregations have even found it beneficial to leave their buildings — renting them out to other denominations, letting the rental income cover costs, and perhaps using only some office space in the building, but renting alternate worship space. While it may seem a radical idea at first, many displaced congregations in dioceses where strife and litigation over church property continues have found it liberating to be free of the building — empowering the congregations to engage in outreach and forcing (or enabling) them to engage in the world outside the buildings that otherwise might be holding them back.

Potential Action/ Consideration/ Next Steps NEEDED:

- Request for complete list with contact information, names and addresses of churches, clergy and LPL information for the Diocese as well as “coming soon” partnership churches (Ann Fleming has provided this in nearly complete form.)
- Feedback on Diocese-wide LPL Training & who would be responsible
- Feedback on Locally trained clergy feasibility study (explore what/ how/ who) other Diocese are training their locally trained clergy (is there interest/ should we proceed to gather information).
- Reporting/ sharing creative ministries: Form a small church ministry sharing opportunity- “Little Church Club” for LPL and Partnership Vicars
- Encourage creative building usage/ sharing
- Consider role of Deacons in assisting the small/ rural church: can a Deacon offer consecrated element like an LPL?
- Consider the role of “assisting” Parishes to the small church: for instance there are few supply clergy in some regions so the clergy rarely have time off; inviting associates and rectors to assist the small church might be encouraged
- Consider working to educate CPG of the reality of part-time clergy and the burden an 18% charge on salary may be on small churches when many clergy enter the profession with an established 401 (k) or other retirement method and do not need nor want to be a participant in CPG

- Consider new communities in areas we see opportunities- learn from the Lessons Learned from New Congregations (see article)
- Cataloging our current Ministry Partnerships in place in the Episcopal Church in Colorado
- Identifying the characteristics (skill set) of a Partnership Vicar/ Rector
- Role of Deacons in Rural Ministry: The tension between social justice ministry and liturgical worship leadership (Are we underutilizing our sisters and brothers in ordained ministry?)
- Methods to ensure success of partnership ministry including
  - Training and maintenance of Lay Pastoral Leaders
  - Role of Laity in pastoral care
  - Shift in perception for laity (not “priest-centric” model)/ managing the expectations of the laity for clergy
  - Collaborative activities between churches in partnership
  - Difference of role of clergy when serving multiple congregations
  - Collaboration & Networking among clergy within the Diocese to manage pastoral care over larger distances
- Creative Ministries (How do we support the “lone Episcopalian” in the country who needs community and does not have access to a church?)
  - Visioning for the Christian rural diaspora—making provisions for our continuing trend of church decline (both rising costs and declining membership) in rural areas
    - House Churches
    - Common Worship Spaces (Edwards Chapel Model)
    - Missional Communities: Defined as a non-church affiliated group joining together for service and coming together as a community (Food truck; Laundry Love)
    - On-line Worship (3-D Printer for the hosts)
    - Exploration of the feasibility of 2-5 circuit driving clergy to serve a wide geographic area of rural ministries
    - “Smart” Pews for today’s technologically savvy
- Building and envisioning Rural Ministry Models without scarcity and failure culture
- Query for compensation committee: What is the status of compensation for partnership Vicars? (Are they retired?)

Respectfully submitted, The Reverend Rich Munsell & The Reverend E. Wendy Huber