

The Episcopal Church in Colorado

Small and Rural Church Task Force Report

Executive Summary

In early 2022, Bishop Kym Lucas charged a group of individuals from across the diocese with the task of identifying the current strengths and challenges facing our smallest (ASA around 25 persons or less) and more remote congregations. The Small and Rural Church Task Force began its work in March. An overarching objective of the Task Force was to identify ways in which the Office of the Bishop and the diocese at large could offer support to these congregations. Task Force members collected data, conducted interviews and summarized their findings and recommendations in the present report.

The Task Force focused on three major areas of concern: Lay Pastoral Leaders (LPLs), Clergy Utilization and “Thriving” Small and Rural Congregations. To be sure, there is no “one right way” for these congregations to carry out ministry in their unique settings. The Task Force took an appreciative approach, gathering information about things as they are “on the ground” and in keeping with the desires and hopes of these congregations.

Despite the understandable limits of funding and personnel, many small and rural congregations in the diocese of Colorado are not just surviving but, indeed, thriving. Those with Lay Pastoral Leaders, for example, continue to offer regular worship and do not feel as though they are somehow “less than” congregations with active clergy. The dedicated men and women who function as LPLs deserve adequate training and ongoing support, as the full report outlines.

The availability of ordained clergy for supply services, let alone full- or part-time employment, is a clear need. There are ways in which deacons, specifically, might be more fully utilized in these congregations. Congregations working in partnership have been able to share clergy and make the most of their part-time presence. Ecumenical cooperation has allowed several congregations to remain viable.

Outreach efforts seem to be an indicator of most thriving congregations. A number of congregations are involved in impressive service to their local communities, mostly through feeding programs. Even with only a handful of church members, modest programs of outreach have made a notable difference in the community at-large.

In each of the three areas of focus, the Task Force report offers a set of recommendations to encourage the diocese of Colorado and its leaders to provide tangible and measurable support, mostly through program assistance and relationship building. An estimated one-fourth of all congregations in the Episcopal Church in Colorado fit the criteria of being both small and rural. We hope the wider church will recognize the need to increase its awareness of and support for these small and rural congregations. Without them, our diocese would indeed be diminished.