

Standing Commission on the Church in Small Communities

The Standing Commission offers this report in thanksgiving to God for the life and ministry of the Rt. Rev. Stewart C. Zabriskie, Eighth Bishop of Nevada. Stewart was a second-generation giant in the development of what we call Total Ministry, an approach to affirming the ministry of all the baptized. He died on September 20, 1999, while actively involved in ministry development in the diocese he loved and served. He was friend and mentor to many. He is greatly missed yet the grace of his ministry will be felt for generations to come.

MEMBERSHIP

The Ven. Richard I. Cluett, Bethlehem (2003)
 The Rt. Rev. Andrew H. Fairfield, North Dakota (2003)
 Mrs. Roberta P. Fairman, New Hampshire (2000)
 Ms. Judith W. Fleener, Western Michigan (2003)
 The Rev. Carolyn S. Keil-Kuhr, Montana (2000)
 The Rt. Rev. Neff Powell, Southwestern Virginia (2003)
 Mr. Richard H. Snyder, *secretary*, Nevada (2003)
 Mr. Lee Davis Thames, Mississippi (2000)
 Mr. Edward J. Thielen, Jr., Alaska (2000)
 The Rt. Rev. Martin G. Townsend, *chair*, Easton (2000)

Staff

The Rev. Allen W. Brown, Jr, Consultant (through 1998)
 The Rev. Ben E. Helmer, Interim, Rural and Small Communities Office (after February, 1999)

SUMMARY OF THE COMMISSION'S WORK

The Standing Commission on the Church in Small Communities met three times during the triennium. The first meeting was with other interim bodies in Minneapolis in February of 1998. We organized and decided on tasks for the triennium. The Commission met representatives of the anti-racism subcommittee of the JPIC and sent a representative to the anti-racism training. The material presented at the interim bodies gathering was determined to have application for small congregations and communities in addressing conditions of racism. The Commission also determined it would meet at seminaries of the church and visit others where meetings would not be held. The purpose would be to determine the place of education about small congregations in the seminary curriculum. Our meetings were held at the Church Divinity School of the Pacific in the autumn of 1998 and at the School of Theology of the University of the South in 1999. The following other seminaries were assigned to be visited by Commission members:

- Episcopal Divinity School

SMALL COMMUNITIES

- Episcopal Theological Seminary of the Southwest
- General Theological Seminary
- Nashotah House
- Protestant Episcopal Seminary in Virginia
- Seabury-Western Theological Seminary
- Trinity Episcopal School for Ministry (telephone interview)
- Bexley Hall

The following questions were addressed in these interviews:

- 1) What are seminaries doing to prepare students to work in small congregations?
- 2) What off campus opportunities are offered for people working in small congregations?
- 3) How do students view the possibility of working in small congregations?
- 4) What understanding of the concept of Total Ministry is held by the various institutions we visited?
- 5) What can the national church and its structures do to assist you?

Summary of Seminary Visits

Members of the Commission who visited seminaries found a variety of attitudes toward preparing clergy leadership for small congregations. One group of seminarians felt their institution focused primarily on priestly formation with little or no professional development as a focus in course work. Another seminary described its preparation for persons who will serve in small congregations as its major focus in field education and placement. However, it was clear to the Commission there is currently little emphasis on particular preparation of students to serve in small congregations in most seminary curriculums. Most seminaries have at least one course that introduces students to small congregations and their unique dynamics, but these courses are elective, even though the majority of seminary graduates will serve at least part of their ministries in small churches.

The Commission noted that several seminaries are working toward more flexible and focused preparation of leaders for small congregations. One seminary invests heavily in its field education placement for middler students, most of whom are placed in small congregations of less than 150 members. That seminary maintains close contact with the supervising clergy during the placement period and uses the case study method to challenge students about the small church experience that will likely be theirs. Another seminary has created a Center for Small Church Ministry that it hopes will generate interest in small congregations and continue to strengthen them. Yet another seminary, funded from a foundation grant, is developing a working relationship with two dioceses to do on-site theological training for leadership in small congregations.

Another urban seminary is developing a program that will introduce students to faith-based community organizing, a method that has application in rural communities and urban neighborhoods. Still another institution sees the need to develop teamwork skills and prepare graduates for regional ministry (clusters) experience and its complimentary strategy of Total Common Ministry.

In exploring how Episcopal seminaries introduce the concept of Total Common Ministry, the Commission found a great disparity ranging from hostility toward the concept as

being anti-clerical and unworkable, to attempts by the institution to include teaching the concepts of the ministry of all baptized persons as a strategic piece of leadership development. Often these positions existed within the same institution.

In summary, the Commission believes more could be done by the Episcopal seminaries to prepare students for what we believe is an emerging norm, that is, ordained leaders who are prepared to work in settings as team leaders for regional structures. The structures usually include three or more churches and leaders who are committed to the concepts and implementation of the ministry of all baptized persons engaged in local mission as their principal role.

THE OFFICE FOR RURAL AND SMALL COMMUNITY MINISTRIES

This office is within the Congregational Ministries Cluster at the Episcopal Church Center. Following the retirement of the Rev. Allen Brown, Jr., in January of 1997, the work of the office was maintained by consultants and non-paid persons who have had interests and skills in this area. In February of 1999 the Rev. Ben Helmer was appointed as interim officer. Helmer decided to accept the position and remain physically resident in the Diocese of West Missouri where he was missionary for a cluster of five rural parishes until appointed to the staff position at the Church Center.

The staff officer maintains a variety of liaisons with networks including Episcopal Appalachian Ministries (formerly APSO), the Domestic Missionary Partners, a group of dioceses dedicated to building a mission-based spirituality with rural, small church, and ethnic interests, and the Episcopal Migrant Ministries Network. In addition, the office provides staff support for National Episcopal Health Ministries, New Directions Ministries, Inc.—a program for developing leadership among ordained and non-ordained people engaged in the ministry of all baptized persons, and Living Stones—a group of 20 dioceses engaged in ministry development focused on Total Common Ministry strategies.

The office also supports an annual training event for newly ordained clergy assigned to rural and small churches and conducts diocesan conferences and consultations related to growth and development in small churches and rural communities.

LEARNING AND REFLECTIONS

Introduction

Throughout the Decade of Evangelism, the Standing Commission on the Church in Small Communities has focused its efforts on its canonical charge: “It shall be the duty of the commission to concern itself with plans for new directions for churches in small communities.” (Title I, Canon 1.2,(n),2)

We understand “new directions” and “for” to be operative words in our charge. The concept of new directions has led us to hold most of our meetings in dioceses that are exploring and practicing new ways to foster Christian growth and community. Through our visits and conversations we have become aware of developing diverse ways for the nurture of adult Christian responsibility, particularly in small congregations that do not have access to many traditional resources. We have learned from practitioners in the field, and we have seen the need for advocacy on behalf of the new directions some dioceses are taking. As advocates we are proposing a new name for our commission: The Standing Commission

SMALL COMMUNITIES

for Small Congregations. We are aware that small congregations exist in large cities as well as in rural and small town settings. We believe that such a simple thing as a name change invites lively conversation amongst a broader range of the church's membership.

The requested name change signals awareness of several truths:

- From the 1998 Parochial Report statistics we know that 67% of Episcopalians are served by churches of less than one hundred members. The majority of Episcopal congregations have fewer than one hundred and fifty people in average Sunday attendance.
- Some of the most exciting church development work is being done in small congregations, often in dioceses with small budgets.
- Diocesan and national church structures tend to be in the early stages of taking initiative in responding to the special needs and opportunities of small congregations.
- Seminaries are beginning to respond to emerging new directions in congregational life.

We believe that our requested new name more accurately describes the work that needs to be done in supporting the ministry of small congregations in urban as well as rural settings. The word "for" in our new name calls us to advocacy with other church structures on behalf of small congregations.

In the triennium now ending we have visited with or interviewed all of the church's seminaries to learn how the traditional educational institutions are training people for ministry, ordained and lay, in small congregations. We have also continued the dialogue with dioceses that are forging new ways of discerning God's call to ministry and of training people for adult Christian action. We have become persuaded that "Total Ministry" is a useful concept for describing a range of recent initiatives in the life of the church. These initiatives focus on the development of faith communities that call forth the ministries of their members. Total Ministry is not the only way in which the faith and vitality of small congregations can be nurtured. It is the particular new direction on which the commission has focused during the Decade of Evangelism.

Inevitably we have run into the problems of language, jargon, presuppositions, conflicting dogmatism, and congenial divergence of perspective. "Total Ministry" has as many definitions as it has advocates, plus a few more from its detractors. A common theme is that Total Ministry refers to the intentional development of ministry as grounded in the baptism of each believer and as shaped within Christian community under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

An understanding of Total Ministry affirmed by the Commission is as follows: Through baptism we are all ministers of Christ's gospel, each with a particular call to ministry. Most Christians are called to be God's hands in the world; some are called to ministry within the church; some might be called to ordination as Deacon servants or as Local Priests for service in the home congregation. Others might be called to seminary training and ordination for service within the church beyond the home congregation.

Title III, Canon 9 of the Episcopal Church allows for the ordination of parishioners for priestly service in their home congregations. During the past quarter century Canon 9 has been a tool and a strategy for moving local churches away from priestly dependence

to being a more self-reliant, inclusive, democratic ministering community. This standing commission believes that unless ordination under Canon 9 is a part of a diocesan strategy for the development of the ministry of all the baptized in a community, then we should not use it. If local clergy are used merely to save money or to fill the gaps left by a regional shortage of seminary graduates, then everybody is cheated.

Current church practice raises questions concerning whether the local priesthood, essentially confined to celebrating the sacraments, is an adequate expression of the church's understanding of what it means to be a priest. Is a local priesthood with limited responsibilities truly compatible with Episcopal polity and tradition?

The Influence of Roland Allen

The single most influential twentieth century thinker in the development of Total Ministry and of the Episcopal Church's canon permitting the ordination of priests for local service is Roland Allen. Allen was an English missionary priest who was active at the turn of the century. Presented here is an overview of Allen's thought as it relates to three focal issues for Total Ministry: 1) respect for local independence, 2) the mutual responsibility of all members of a Christian community, and 3) the discernment and call of individual believers to particular leadership responsibilities.

Although Allen wrote principally about foreign missions his insights, especially taken from St. Paul, have direct applicability to domestic church development also. The power of Allen's teaching is rooted in his twin convictions concerning the necessary independence of new churches and the authority and effectiveness of the Holy Spirit.

In his preface to the 1962 edition of Allen's *Missionary Methods*, fifty years after its original publication, Leslie Newbigin notes that Allen's "voice has a strange relevance and immediacy to the problems of the church in our day." And another thirty-eight years later it is still true. Allen's description of the results of clerical dependency in foreign missions is an accurate description of the way many congregations view their clergy, and vice versa, in the American church still. Rooted in liturgical renewal, especially the Book of Common Prayer, 1979, the centrality of baptism in Christian life and worship is now recognized. In recent years there has been an encouraging groundswell of recognition of the ministry of all the baptized.

Allen argued persistently for local churches to be self-sufficient. "I am persuaded the Apostles understood how to establish the church better than we do, and they did not appeal for pastors from the home church," wrote Allen to the Bishop of Assam, India in 1925. "'Rise up and walk' said Christ and His Apostles. We say, 'Wait till I can find the man to come here to carry you.' There is much difference between those two addresses. But the difficulty of a long tradition stays us. I do not minimize it, but I do say that it should be broken."

"The facts are these," wrote Allen. "St. Paul preached in a place for five or six months and then left behind him a church, not indeed free from the need of guidance, but capable of growth and expansion." Allen contends that Paul appointed elders with the approval of the community.

Paul established firmly the great principle of mutual responsibility. The right of the congregation to have some say in the appointment (of elders) is manifest throughout the

period with which we are dealing. By this means the principle of mutual responsibility was again made prominent.

“Mutual responsibility” is central to any understanding of Total Ministry. Mutual responsibility is the point of the Pauline teaching of the interdependence of the parts of the body. “God has so arranged the body... that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another” (1 Cor. 12:24-25).

For decades the Anglican Communion has supported the full development of autonomous indigenous churches. The Lambeth Conference of 1958 called for the ordination of local, self-supporting clergy. Following the Anglican Congress of 1963, missionary leaders met in St. Catherine’s, Ontario, where “the use of a self-supporting clergy was discussed in detail, and encouraged.” There followed in the American church a national initiative to allow for the education of people for non-stipendiary priestly ministry.

For Allen, and he would contend for Paul, “voluntary clergy” are the desirable means to a necessary end. The implications of Allen’s call for a voluntary priesthood are far reaching. Voluntary clergy are not only valid in communities that cannot afford a stipendiary priest but in all congregations. This standing commission anticipates that in the Episcopal Church seminary training and professional clergy will continue to be the norm in most communities. Yet in dioceses that ordain priests for local service, we expect that the seminary trained clergy will increasingly be called upon to be mentors to their local colleagues. Such partnerships will require special training and skills.

In all his writing, Allen calls the modern church to boldness and trust in the Holy Spirit. The standing commission believes that Roland Allen’s diagnosis of the church’s ills is correct and his prescription holds great promise. We believe also that the Episcopal Church is learning from Allen’s wisdom and translating it into our own time and place. To a modern reader Allen’s interpretation of Pauline belief and practice might be startling. Time for training seems too short. Such reliance on the Spirit’s guidance comes hard to a church with strong traditions and an established structure for governance. Yet the notions of strong local authority and financial responsibility are hardly revolutionary. Roland Allen himself predicted that an interest in the ideas that preoccupied him would begin about 1960, and this did indeed prove to be the case. The Lambeth Conference of 1958 and the Anglican Congress of 1963 were profoundly affected by Allen’s heritage.”

The Alaska Experiment

Bill Gordon had served in Alaska for five years before he was elected bishop in 1948. He was thirty years old. For almost twenty years, Bishop Gordon flew his plane from village to village, coming to know the native people of Alaska. The vision and first steps in developing a new system for ministry development came from a meeting in December 1967 in Fort Yukon. Boone Porter met with the leadership of the Diocese of Alaska, including the seventeen clergy from the native villages. The meeting established as a goal that within five years “native people assume most of the responsibility for the local church in their community.” Bill Gordon sought to have priests ordained for local service in every village. He called upon communities to identify leaders in their own communities who would then be trained for ordination and sacramental leadership in their home congregations.

There followed in the American church a national initiative to allow for the education of people for non-stipendiary priestly ministry. Wanting to explore the concept, the Executive Council began to sponsor the Idaho Pilot Project. Within this program, certain carefully selected men are given training, at the academic, spiritual, and practical levels, and thus prepared for ordination.

In 1968 the Lambeth Conference reemphasized its call from ten years earlier: In order that the church may be continually renewed for mission, there is need for a greater diversity in the exercise of the ordained ministry. In this variety of ministry the part-time non-stipendiary priest is in no way inferior to his full-time stipendiary brother. While in all parts of the church there is a vital and continuing need for the full-time ministry, in some areas the part-time non-stipendiary ministry could become the norm.

Encouraged by the call from Lambeth Bishop Gordon submitted a memorial to the PECUSA Special General Convention of 1969. The memorial noted:

There are churches and chapels in smaller towns and rural areas where the congregation is small and its financial resources limited. Such positions are notoriously difficult to staff. Ministers assigned to them rarely remain for long. While they are there they are often regarded, and regard themselves, as outsiders, not fully in touch with the inner life of the community. It is increasingly recognized that many of these churches could be more effectively ministered to by ordaining a mature and respected member of the congregation who is closely linked with the community. Such a man would and should continue, without interruption, in his secular livelihood.

This memorial proved persuasive. What is now Canon III, 9 was enacted at General Convention 1969 and it has undergone only minor changes since then:

With regard to Dioceses with Congregations or missionary opportunities in communities which are small, isolated, remote, or distinct in respect of ethnic composition, language, or culture... it shall be permissible for the Bishop, with the advice and consent of the Standing Committee, to establish procedures by which persons may be called by their Congregations and the Bishop with the Standing Committee, to be ordained local Priests and Deacons and licensed to serve the Congregations or communities...It is under the aegis of this canon that Total Ministry is practiced in dioceses from the Appalachian Mountains of West Virginia to the Cascades in Oregon, from the snows of Northern Michigan to the Nevada desert, from the Chesapeake Bay to the Mississippi Delta and back to the vastness of Alaska.

The Nevada Experience

From 1972 until 1985 Bishop Wesley Frensdorff brought to the church in Nevada a range of intellectual and ecumenical insights to the task of reshaping ministry. His theme

was constant: “The church is a ministering community, a community of ministers: inter-related, interdependent, proclaiming and sharing the love of God, in Christ Jesus.”

One of the enduring legacies of Wes Frensdorff is a vision for discerning and calling forth gifts for ministry. The process of discernment and call begins with the community and is ratified by the individual rather than the other way around. The same is true for all expressions of ministry, ordained and lay.

The theme of servanthood is sustained through Frensdorff’s writings about ministry. The story of the Zebedee brothers’ ambition for status was an anchor for Wes’ theology of service. “Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.”

In 1986 the Diocese of Nevada elected Stewart Zabriskie as Bishop to succeed Wes Frensdorff. Until his untimely death, Bishop Zabriskie led the diocese to the next stage of development and continued to oversee the evolution of Total Ministry. In partnership with diocesan people and structures, Zabriskie improved diocesan policies and congregational support so that the ministry of all the baptized was strengthened.

If a diocese is to undergo significant systemic change in its understanding of ministry development, then the bishop must be integrally involved and committed. Organizational clarity enabled Stewart Zabriskie to carry forward a core emphasis of Paul, Allen, and Frensdorff. All depends on God’s Holy Spirit, who finally is unmanageable. “I am persuaded,” Stewart wrote, “that if total-ministry development is not overorganized or systematized beyond recognition, it will lead us into being a people gifted by God for the mission of bearing and being good news as a charismatic, gifted, Spirit-filled community.”

The Broader Picture

In the dioceses that speak in terms of Total Ministry, or its other principal name Mutual Ministry, there is a marvelously wide variety of expressions, styles, policies, practices, and methods of discernment and formation. We have focused on the Diocese of Nevada as illustrative of one approach to Total Ministry. Surveying the wider church, the common threads through all expressions of Total Ministry are two: first, a reliance on the Holy Spirit as the provider of all the gifts or charisms that a community needs for faithful ministry; and second, a conviction that that Spirit works in and through all the baptized members of a congregation. Affecting over a third of all domestic jurisdictions, Total Ministry is a vibrant expression of charismatic renewal, broadly understood. It has come to full flower, significantly, in the Decade of Evangelism. Nevada is only one example among many dioceses developing their own expression of Total Ministry. Northern Michigan, West Virginia, Idaho, The Central Gulf Coast, Easton, Colorado and dozens of others are affirming people for local ordination and priestly leadership. The Standing Commission on the Church in Small Communities celebrates and affirms this new direction in the ministry of small congregations.

An image from Ralph Waldo Emerson:

*The squirrel notes to the mountain,
If I'm not so large as you,
You are not so small as I,
And not half so spry.*

*I'll not deny you make
A very pretty squirrel track;
Talents differ: all is well and wisely put;
If I cannot carry forests on my back,
Neither can you crack a nut."*

“Talents differ: all is well and wisely put.” Not every diocese of the Episcopal Church is able to carry a forest on its back. But many others are well on their way to learning how to crack nuts.

GOALS FOR THE NEXT TRIENNIUM

- To learn how the vocational diaconate is practiced in various settings in small congregations in rural and urban areas and to be advocates for its growth and development.
- To provide for the development of a practical resource and study guide supporting a broad and inclusive understanding of Total Ministry development.
- To increase our awareness of how racism impacts small congregation in rural and urban areas.
- To work collaboratively with the Church Deployment Office, the Office for Ministry Development, CEPVA, the Church Pension Fund, NNECA, etc. in order better to understand deployment realities and to advocate for just and equitable compensation packages for lay and professional employees in small congregations.
- To open discussion with new partners also interested in ministry in small congregations in the course of their work

Resolution A019 Affirming Total Ministry in Small Congregations

1 *Resolved*, the House of _____ concurring, That this 73rd General Convention acknowledges with appreciation the work done in a variety of diocesan
2 settings in the exploration of the ministry of every baptized person, including and
3 affirming the concept known as Total Ministry with its particular focus on small
4 congregations in rural and urban areas; and affirms the importance of each and
5 every congregation as a center for ecumenism, evangelism, and stewardship.
6

Resolution A020 Proposal for Commission Name Change

1 *Resolved*, the House of _____ concurring, That Canon I.1.2. is hereby
2 amended to read as follows:
3 **(n)** There shall be the following Standing Commissions:
4 2. A Standing Commission ~~on the Church in Small Communities~~ for
5 Small Congregations, consisting of 10 members (3 Bishops, 2 Priests and/or
6 Deacons, and 5 Lay Persons). It shall be the duty of the Commission to concern
7 itself with plans for new directions for ~~Churches in Small Communities~~ Small
8 Congregations.

SMALL COMMUNITIES

Explanation

The Commission believes that the proposed new name more accurately and clearly describes the work that needs to be done in supporting the ministry of small congregations in urban, as well as rural settings. The word “for” in the new name calls the Commission to advocacy with other church structures on behalf of small congregations.

PROPOSED BUDGET FOR THE TRIENNIUM

	2000	2001	2002
Meetings	-0-	\$15,000	\$10,000
Subcommittee			
Work		5,000	
Telephone, postage		300	300
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	\$ -0-	\$20,300	\$10,300

Resolution A021 Budget Appropriation for Standing Commission on the Church in Small Communities

- 1 *Resolved*, the House of _____ concurring, That there be appropriated
- 2 from the assessment budget of the General Convention the sum of \$30,600 for
- 3 the expenses of the Standing Committee on the Church’s Ministry for Small
- 4 Churches.