

COMMITTEE SEES VITALITY IN EPISCOPAL CHURCH AMIDST CHALLENGES

By Mary Frances Schjonberg, December 01, 2009

[Episcopal News Service] The Episcopal Church has underlying indications of vitality despite membership declines in 2008 and signs that the church is "swimming against some difficult cultural tides."

That was the assessment of Matilda Kistler, chair of the House of Deputies [Committee on the State of the Church](#), after the group [met](#) Nov. 17-20 in Chicago.

Kistler also acknowledged in a [press release](#) that "the internal conflicts within the Episcopal Church have also distracted from the message of hope our clergy and lay leaders seek to share."

"However, those issues have not clouded our commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ," she added.

Kistler said that previous eras of difficulty in church history have led "to periods of reflection, focus, recommitment to mission and ultimately growth in the community of faith. I think we are on the brink of seeing a transformation within the body of Christ, in general, and in the Episcopal Church, in particular."

Statistical information collected by the Episcopal Church Center in New York "indicates the challenges that the Episcopal Church faces, along with other Christian bodies, in pursuing mission and ministry in this society," said Kistler of Morganton in the Diocese of Western North Carolina. "However, we believe that the committee's research will confirm what most of us know instinctively -- that active, vital and transformative gospel ministry is being done on all levels of the church."

The primary source of the statistics is the canonically required ([Canon 6.1.1](#)) information filed annually with diocesan bishops by each congregation. The so-called parochial reports are due by March 1 of the following year. An example of the sort of information gathered in the report is available [here](#). Kirk Hadaway, the church's program officer for congregational research, analyzes the data received to compile a variety of statistical reports.

The 2008 parochial report statistics are available in a diocese-by-diocese format [here](#) along with a "Fast Facts" report about the church's domestic dioceses [here](#) and a Fast Facts document that traces trends since 2004 [here](#). Other analyses are [here](#) and [here](#).

Some of the statistical reports were [released](#) Oct. 16, a week after Executive Council members received them during their Oct. 5-8 meeting in Memphis, Tennessee, but did not discuss the findings.

The 2008 parochial reports show overall church membership at 2,225,682 people, with a total average Sunday attendance (ASA) at 747,376. Those totals compare with 2007 membership of 2,285,143 and total average Sunday attendance 768,476. The dioceses in the United States saw a 2.8 percent drop in membership and a 3.1 percent decrease in ASA. Overall church membership -- including 10 non-U.S. dioceses -- was down 2.6 percent and attendance dropped 2.7 percent for the entire church.

The median Episcopal Church congregation in 2008 had 164 active members (down four members from 2007) and 69 people in Sunday worship, the same as in the previous year. Membership declines in the Episcopal Church [mirror a pattern](#) seen in other Christian denominations. Recent nationwide [data](#) shows the median non-Roman Catholic congregation has 75 regular participants at worship on Sundays.

Four domestic Episcopal Church dioceses grew during 2008 in both overall membership and average Sunday attendance: Alabama, Navajoland Area Mission, North Dakota and Wyoming.

In the dioceses outside the United States, membership in the Diocese of Ecuador-Litoral grew by 8.6 percent, the Dominican Republic by 5.5 percent, Colombia by 4 percent and Taiwan by 3 percent, according to statistics available [here](#).

"We are delighted with the significant growth that has occurred in Haiti and Latin American dioceses," Kistler said in the release. "The church's presence and witness in those areas are being well-received."

Kistler said that the Episcopal Church is not unique in "facing challenges from the current cultural and economic conditions."

In terms of economic challenges, while the average [pledge](#) to local congregations increased to \$2,302 in 2008, overall income decreased. Kistler said that "church endowments and reserves were greatly impacted by the decline in the market and overall economy," adding that the committee anticipates its research in the coming months will show "adjustments in many congregations and dioceses."

Cultural conditions facing faith communities have been documented, in part, by the recent [U.S. Religious Landscape Survey](#). The study found that "the proportion of the population that is Protestant has declined markedly in recent decades while the proportion of the population that is not affiliated with any particular religion has increased significantly."

Researchers for the [American Religious Identification Survey](#), released March by Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, also noted the trend, finding that while one in 10 Americans claimed no religious identity in 1990, today that ratio is one in five.

The researchers said that their latest findings confirm earlier findings that "Americans are slowly becoming less Christian and that in recent decades the challenge to Christianity in American society does not come from other world religions or new religious movements but rather from a rejection of all organized religions."

Kistler, noting that there are "cultural and internal hurdles for the church to clear," said that "we find ourselves facing a society that is gravitating toward secularism.

"We also believe that the church-going segment of the public is aging significantly, though the committee will be seeking more definitive data to ascertain if that is so," she added.

The State of the Church committee researches and presents a report to the next meeting of the House of Deputies on the vitality, functioning and overall well-being of the Episcopal Church. The deputies then normally forward that report to the House of Bishops. The report to the 2009 meeting of convention is available [here](#).

Kistler said in the release that the committee plans to release interim reports to the church between now and the 77th meeting of General Convention in the summer of 2012. "We hope that our reports will help the church build on what is being done well and to find new focus in other areas," she said.

The committee is the longest-functioning such committee of the church, having been first formed in 1808. The first meeting of General Convention occurred in 1785.

The current members in addition to Kistler are Joseph Ferrell, North Carolina; Victoria Garvey, Chicago; Dr. Anita George, Mississippi; Pauline Getz, San Diego; the Rev. David Johnson, Mississippi; the Rev. John Kitagawa, Arizona; the Rev. Canon Dr. Neal Michell, Dallas; Richard Miller, Southeast Florida; and the Rev. Dr. Peter Strimer, Olympia. All were appointed by House of Deputies President Bonnie Anderson.

-- The Rev. Mary Frances Schjonberg is national correspondent for the Episcopal News Service.