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Way ahead for 'hard-to-call' churches outlined

PC(USA) is 'a denomination of small churches,' GAC told

by Bill Lancaster
and Jerry L. Van Marter

LOUISVILLE * The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has launched an effort to help provide pastoral leadership for small churches who may not have any pastoral leader, may have been seeking a pastor for a long time, and may even have lost any expectation of being able to call a pastor.

The effort, called the Hard-to-Call Churches Project, calls upon the energies of presbyteries and synods, Committees on Ministry, Committees on Preparation for Ministry, Presbyterian colleges and seminaries, and the General Assembly Council (GAC) to seek to alleviate the situation.

According to project team leader Deborah Fortel in the Office of Ministry Support, 48 percent (5,191) of PC(USA) congregations have 100 or fewer members and the number of small churches increased by 187 from 2002 to 2005.

In contrast, she added, just 9.4 percent (1,024) of the church's congregations had 500 members or more. During the same period, the number of small churches increased and the number of 500+ member churches decreased.

"We are a denomination of small churches," Fortel concluded.

Moreover, she told the GAC during its Sept. 26-29 meeting here, in 2005 only 57 percent of PC(USA) congregations had an installed pastor, and 2,050 were without any pastoral leadership. Of these 1,689 were small churches.

The final project report presented to the GAC Sept. 28 cites small church strengths and challenges.

Among the strengths listed are strong close relationships, a high level of commitment and involvement by members, engage in highly personal mission and service, and "consider each person a beloved child of God."

Among the challenges are that they have limited person power, limited finances, sometimes geographic isolation, and frequently face questions of survival as congregations.

"Small congregations are increasingly unlikely to be served by full-time installed ministers, partly because small churches can seldom match the compensation offered to pastors by larger congregations," Fortel said.

Small congregations and racial ethnic congregations also face an "experience gap" in trying to find pastoral leadership. "Because 48 percent of ministerial candidates come from congregations of 500 members or more, many lack experience in small churches," Fortel said.

"There has been much conversation about a shortage of pastors in the PC(USA)," she continued. "However, it has been clear for a number of years that the problem is not a lack of pastors, but rather a lack of pastors willing and able to serve small congregations."

Fortel cited research showing that in 2005 85 percent of PC(USA) congregations were served by uninstalled pastors (interim, designated or supply pastors), commissioned lay pastors, lay leaders or pastors of other denominations.

"That so many congregations are indeed served by such leaders is a tribute to the persistence and creativity of presbytery leaders and small congregations in finding pastoral leadership," Fortel said.

It would be preferable for every congregation to have a full-time installed pastor, Fortel said, but given the large number of PC(USA) churches with "significant financial limitations," the project team report suggests that "the PC(USA) must be concerned with whether all congregations have appropriate and effective pastoral leadership."

Included in the report's 11 recommendations:

Presbyteries must lead congregations in strategies for mission and ministry, encourage all congregations and congregational leaders, and support "norms of excellence" that equally value the strengths of small churches as much as larger ones;

Presbyteries and congregations must engage in "intentional transformation" as close partners;

Presbyteries must encourage "shared ministry" among PC(USA) congregations and congregations of other denominations with which the PC(USA) is in full communion (the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the United Church of Christ and the Reformed Church in America);

Committees on Ministry must work closely with small congregations seeking pastoral leadership and Committees on Preparation for Ministry must assist inquirers and candidates "to be clear about the reality of serving as ministers" and help them prepare to serve as small church pastors;

PC(USA)-related colleges and seminaries can help students interested in ministry explore options such as commissioned lay pastor programs, tentmaking ministry and other small

church service opportunities;

The GAC should partner with presbyteries and synods in developing training and support programs for newly-ordained ministers "that will keep strong the vocation of those called to small church ministry," develop pilot programs that could attract candidates to small church ministry, and help strengthen commissioned lay pastor programs throughout the church.

Those serving with Fortel on the Hard-to-Call Project Team * which was one of the key objectives in the GAC's 2005-2006 Mission Work Plan * were John Evans of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary; Clint McCoy, executive for the Synod of the Northeast; Alexander "Sandy" McLachlan of the Board of Pensions; Jewel McCrae, associate for Church Leadership Connection administration and racial ethnic referral; Hector Rodriguez, associate for Hispanic congregational enhancement; Gary Torrens, middle governing bodies coordinator for the GAC and the Office of the General Assembly; and Diana Stephen, associate for rural and small church network support (whose position was eliminated in the May 1, 2006 GAC downsizing). Associate director for theology and worship Joe Small and associate director for leadership and vocation Marcia Myers were project "sponsors."

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