

# EXPLORING THE STATE OF THE CHURCH

As a new and renewing church, The Episcopal Church celebrates the joys and challenges of a global community called to mission and filled with hope. Amid growing concern about the state of the Church in turbulent times, there are signs of growing mission, transformation, resiliency, and the presence of the ever-creative and renewing work of the Spirit. Our Church is changing as we shift our gaze from an inward view on conflict resolution to an outward focus on mission. Hope, collaboration, and joy are the images that will describe the State of the Church as we move into a new triennium.

Over the past three years, a group from across the Church has been listening to stories, analyzing data, and developing a snapshot of our collective health and vitality. This information has been compiled into a State of the Church (SOTC) report, which will be presented to the 2015 General Convention. This report not only provides a glimpse of the Church in action, as it is now, captured into freeze-frame stillness, but it also will be an important artifact, serving as a point on a historical timeline—something to observe and say wisely with the clarity of hindsight, yes, this is when THIS all began, or ended, or shifted. You can read the whole report at <https://extranet.generalconvention.org/staff/files/download/12702.pdf>

Here is an overview of what we've learned. Consider this food for thought or grist for the mill of your imagination.

## THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH TODAY

### HOW WE SEEK AND SERVE

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- What constitutes a worshipping community is an emerging and changing definition. How we count congregations and measure the vitality of congregations is changing.
- Many dioceses and congregations are discovering how to measure and fund mission instead of adhering to traditional models of maintenance and budget priorities.
- How we communicate is undoubtedly changing at all levels. Face-to-face (and virtual face-to-face) meetings create opportunities to break down isolation and to reflect on what unites us in the Church. More change in communications is likely; more collaboration is also likely, especially in the form of mission hubs.
- Fewer congregations report being in conflict than in the previous years. Money has replaced issues of sexuality as the most commonly reported topic of conflict.
- Dioceses that were once in conflict and have reorganized after a portion of the members left The Episcopal Church continue to explore creative ways to “be church,” quite possibly leading the way for new ways of thriving and serving.

### HOW WE LEAD

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- Many dioceses are addressing leadership needs by more fully engaging all the baptized in ministry roles.
- There is new energy for the task of clergy formation. Seminaries are exploring alternatives to the traditional three-year residential model of formation and are reconfiguring their efforts with positive motivation and momentum.
- Collaboration, rather than competition, among the ten seminaries of The Episcopal Church is an important focus for the future.
- Dioceses are exploring local options for those preparing for all kinds of ministry, including the priesthood and the diaconate.

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As gleaned from the parochial report, supplemented by data from Kirk Hadaway, congregational research officer for The Episcopal Church; Matthew Price, vice president for research and data, Church Pension Group; and interviews with seminary deans and provincial leaders.

## BY THE NUMBERS

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- Average Sunday Attendance (ASA) has dropped from 80 to 61 in the last thirteen years.
- The 2010 US Census reported 72 percent of the population as non-Hispanic white, while in 2009, The Episcopal Church reported 87 percent as non-Hispanic white.
- The number of congregations that reported having a female rector or vicar rose from 24 percent in 2005 to 30 percent in 2008, and to 36 percent in 2014.
- The two most commonly cited priorities for provinces are youth engagement (IV, VI, VIII, and IX) and outreach (VIII, IV, II, and I).
- Nearly half (45 percent) of domestic parishes and missions are served by clergy who are not full-time.
- The average age of those ordained continues slowly to rise; currently the average age is 48 years old.
- The advanced—and still advancing—age of the Church's membership, combined with a low birth rate, means that the Church loses 16,000 people a year—nearly the equivalent of one average-sized diocese per year through deaths over births.
- In 2014, 38 percent of Episcopal congregations (versus 28 percent in 2010) report that their financial condition is good or excellent. At the same time, 62 percent of congregations are in some kind of financial stress in 2014, as compared to 72 percent in 2010, and only 44 percent in 2000.

## FOR REFLECTION

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We need to change the ways in which we assess vitality. A vital church is defined by more than just people in the pews on Sunday mornings. What other questions do we need to ask? A proposed resolution that lets us assess more accurately who we are follows the SOTC report. Look for it at General Convention.

Also, and more importantly, we need to make changes in our systems so that we become more vital and healthy. We must build upon our sacred traditions but also be willing to adapt and embrace new ways of being Church.

The bottom line is that the numbers suggest decline. Still, while many of these statistics are alarming or negative, the SOTC report offers hope and optimism, not despair and resignation. The State of the Church Committee heard too many good things to call hospice or ring the death knell just yet. God is at work! The question is not “are we dying,” but rather “where is resurrection occurring?” We are, after all, an Easter people!

## STUDY QUESTIONS

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- Where is the energy in your parish right now? How has this shifted, if at all?
- When and where do people gather in your church or as part of the church family?
- What about The Episcopal Church gives you hope?
- Reflect on the past year (or other specific time frame) and identify “redemptive moments” in the life of your church (or community or the wider church).

*The General Convention is the governing body of The Episcopal Church that meets every three years. The convention is a bicameral legislature that includes the House of Deputies and the House of Bishops. The work at convention is carried out by deputies and bishops representing each diocese. During its triennial meeting, deputies and bishops consider a wide range of important matters facing the Church.*

*General Convention meets June 25-July 3 in Salt Lake City, Utah. Learn more at [www.generalconvention.org](http://www.generalconvention.org)*

