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New Anglican church faces fiscal challenges

by G. Jeffrey MacDonald by Religion News Service

Amesbury, Mass.-- When the Anglican Church in North America launched last year, founders were clear on what they didn't want to be: the Episcopal Church.

But as the ACNA marks its first anniversary with a meeting here this week, members are finding that carving out a new identity requires a good dose of patience, and more money than they have on hand.

The ACNA knows what it wants to be: a church-planting, soul-saving province officially recognized by other churches and leaders in the 77-million-member Anglican Communion.

Leaders reported some progress on those goals this week, but fiscal hurdles remain.

Archbishop Robert Duncan of Pittsburgh, who leads the ACNA, said June 8 that membership grew from 703 congregations to 811 during the last year, a step toward fulfilling his mission to plant 1,000 new churches within the first five years.

Meeting those goals, however, will mean surmounting financial challenges. The church's \$1.36 million budget, approved by the ACNA's Provincial Council Tuesday, counts on a new initiative to raise \$500,000 within the next six months. If the fundraising comes up short, projects central to establishing the young church's identity may stall.

"The vision for 'Anglican 1000' is contingent on us being able to raise \$500,000," said treasurer Bill Roemer, referring to the church-planting plans.

Delegates to the ACNA's meeting here said these early years are critical for establishing it as a dynamic alternative to the Episcopal Church, which has been wracked by internal disputes and losing members for decades.

"The fear is that if we don't push forward with a mission effort, we're going to fall back to the old settled denominational pattern, which didn't serve the Episcopal Church well and won't serve us well, either," said the Rev. Tom Finnie, Rector of Christ Church in Midland, Texas.

Many parts of the ACNA, which is composed of a number of conservative Anglican bodies, split from the Episcopal Church in recent years after long battles over homosexuality and theological issues.

Some Anglican critics worry it threatens church unity to have overlapping jurisdictions for competing forms of Anglicanism in a single geographic area.

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But the ACNA, which says it hasn't yet petitioned for official standing in the Anglican Communion, enjoys significant support in Africa and other developing regions.

At an April meeting in Singapore, delegates from 20 of the communion's 38 provinces affirmed the ACNA as "a faithful expression of Anglicanism" in a region they said is in need of one.

The new church would need official approval from two-thirds of the world's nearly 40 Anglican primates and the imprimatur of a key Anglican committee before it could be granted membership in the communion.

Even within the ACNA, hot-button issues aren't entirely settled. Some ACNA dioceses ordain women as priests, while others regard the practice as un-biblical. A closed-door panel during the College of Bishops meeting Friday will feature arguments for and against ordaining women.

"The ordination of women to the (priesthood) remains a matter that divides us," Duncan said in his state-of-the-church address. "Despite the deep theological and ecclesiological divide we have remained committed to each other, and have honored each other as our Constitution envisions."

Still recovering from emotionally bruising fights within the Episcopal Church, members of ACNA congregations seem to have little appetite left for pushing one another to conform. The council voted, for instance, to waive its size requirements for dioceses and accept new ones from the Great Lakes region and the South.

But on highly charged issues, observers say, time will tell how much diversity the church can tolerate within its ranks.

"On matters of women, polity and the role of the bishop, they may have different views -- and they're going to have to work it out," said David Holmes, a professor of American religious history at the College of William and Mary and author of "A Brief History of the Episcopal Church."

"I don't see why an Anglican schismatic group would be doomed to fail, (but) I would be surprised if they didn't encounter such problems that some groups split off."

For now, the ACNA is focused on laying foundations. Task forces on topics from liturgy to prayer book and ecumenism reported to the council this week.

Chief Operating Officer Brad Root, a former entrepreneur, likens the organization to "a start up" in the business world; it aims to grow rapidly and all administrative systems need to be built from square one.

Delegates raised some concerns during discussion of the budget.

"It's said that staff expands to consume the money available, and this has been a problem in the Episcopal Church," said John Whelchel, a delegate from Atlanta.

Others put a finer point on how to be distinct from the church they left.

"The longest report we have is about money, and the most time is spent on money," said the Rev. Mary Maggard Hays of Pittsburgh. "The concern is that we not repeat the mistakes of the past."

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