

About The Zacchaeus Project

Over the past fifty years, the Episcopal Church has changed in many ways. Its place in society and its identity as a mainline denomination are uncertain because of the extent to which they are being redefined. Congregations, seminaries, dioceses, and other ministries confront a rapidly changing social environment.

These cultural trends greatly impact all ministries as they strive to maintain some balance between the need to adapt and the need to retain the essence of our professed traditions and faith. Church leaders must assess these realities in order to prepare effectively for the future.

The Zacchaeus Project, a gift to the Church from The Episcopal Church Foundation marking its 50th Anniversary, **has explored what it means to be an Episcopalian in today's society and how Episcopalians renew their sense of identity in communities of faith.** It has examined emerging trends and patterns of leadership as well as issues and challenges faced by our diverse ministries. Its findings will serve to inform the ongoing conversations and planning efforts of the Church and suggest possible future directions for work to enable the Church to thrive in the next millennium.

The major questions the Zacchaeus research has addressed include:

- What draws people to our Church and sustains their involvement in its various ministries?
- What core commitments do we share, and how do we deal with differences?
- What distinctive religious perspective does the Episcopal Church cultivate, and how does that shape our formation?
- How are we drawing on our spiritual and organizational resources to carry out our ministries?
- How can we embrace new spiritual forms while preserving the best of our Episcopal tra-

ditions?

- What are the growth areas of the Church?
- How are congregations connected/disconnected with wider Church structures?
- What are the major challenges facing the church, and how are we preparing ourselves to deal with these challenges?
- How are our ministries fostering effective leadership for the future?

With the guidance of a national advisory panel, nine diverse dioceses were identified and used as sites for intensive interviews: Central Florida, Massachusetts, North Carolina, Texas, West Missouri, Kansas, Minnesota, Nevada, and Los Angeles. Five research associates – all Episcopalians, three of whom are priests, one a historian, and one a sociologist – assisted the project's co-directors in gathering qualitative data. **The largest segment of the project's data results from their experiences in hearing lay Episcopalians in congregational groups recount their experiences with the Church.** In addition to the data drawn from these groups, focus groups were organized in other locations with specialized groups, including seminarians, clergy, residents of a retirement community, and young adults.

In seeking to address vital questions on patterns and trends in the Episcopal Church, The Zacchaeus Project also collected and analyzed a variety of quantitative data in such key areas as membership, attendance, finances, patterns of giving, and other indicators of organizational performance. Sources have included The Episcopal Church Center, The Church Pension Fund, The Church Report Company, and an independent survey of senior wardens.

At all times during the research phase of the project, the focus was on lay people in local Episcopal congregations, recognizing that the Church's identity rests largely with its membership.

He entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. When Jesus came into the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry down, for I must stay at your house today." So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him.

Luke 19:1-6

A Summary of Key Findings

A significant portion of the research for The Zacchaeus Project was done in the form of focus groups and one-on-one interviews. Meeting with approximately 2,000 people in these interviews, the five Zacchaeus research associates and co-directors of the project, Dr. Thomas P. Holland and The Rev. Dr. William L. Sachs, used a set of questions addressing three basic themes in each group's experience of the Episcopal Church:

- success
- failure
- the future

The goal of the interview process was to elicit from the participants:

- stories about how Episcopalians work together - both success stories and stories of failure;
- descriptions of how they view their Church locally and beyond;
- what resources they utilize; and
- how they see their futures.

Through the months of research several key themes began to emerge. And though the research was done in nine very diverse dioceses across the country, these themes had significant consistency in almost every location where the interviews took place. Their nuances may have varied, but the themes surfaced over and over again.

The following is a summary of those themes:

A Strong Commitment to Worship and Tradition

- The Prayer Book and liturgy emphasizing the Eucharist have become core dimensions of Episcopal identity and are viewed as central to peoples' lives and the life of congregations.
- Living with questions of faith and tolerating ambiguities in beliefs are common patterns among many Episcopalians.
- For most Episcopalians, their profound sense of community thrives through their calling to follow Christ together, inspiring a sense of mission and outreach.
- An emphasis on both affirming tradition and welcoming innovation is a consistent feature of Episcopal congregations.

Creative Ferment and Vitality in Local Congregations

- Episcopalians celebrate a powerful feeling of "pulling together" with a sense of common purpose and mutual support.
- A heightened emphasis on worship, and especially on the sacraments, has accompanied the increased emphasis on the role of the laity. Though its implementation may fall short of perfection, this ideal of shared ministry is firmly held by many Episcopalians.
- Energy for outreach, evangelism, and Christian education is widely apparent.
- A clear sense of shared ministry of both clergy and lay leadership in local churches has been an important fruit of the Episcopal Church's shift in emphasis over the past fifty years.

Tensions in the Church

- Difficult questions related to sexuality, doctrinal clarity, and other volatile issues, are not distracting local congregations. When these issues surface, members often seek ways to engage them with thoughtfulness and Christian understanding.
- On the other hand, these issues do affect many congregations' perceptions of wider Church structures.
- Among the most difficult of all congregational challenges are conflicts with clergy and a widespread perception that effective leadership is absent.
- The linkages between local congregations and wider structures are seen as ineffectual and growing weaker. There is widespread confusion about the roles and functions of bishops.

Embracing Diversity and Change

- The increasing role of women as ordained and lay leaders is not an issue for most Episcopalians.
- A major challenge to the Church today is to draw on both its Christian traditions and its search for contemporary spirituality in a way that will strengthen Christian community.
- Local congregations seek to be inclusive and to affirm different cultures but recognize the challenges inherent in diversity issues.

This issue of Vestry Papers is devoted to The Zacchaeus Project. This year long research effort provides a snapshot of the Episcopal Church at the dawn of the new millennium. It is a gift to the national Church from The Episcopal Church Foundation in honor of the Foundation's 50th anniversary. It is our hope that the Project's findings will serve as a platform for continued dialogue within the Church and suggest possible future directions that will enable the Church to thrive in the next millennium.

Additional copies of The Zacchaeus Report can be purchased for \$5.00 a copy through Cornerstone. Contact us by telephone at 901-527-1450, by FAX at 901-523-8952, or by E-mail at cstone@mem.net.

What the Focus Group Participants Had to Say

The following quotations are excerpts from the Zacchaeus Report. They offer some insights into what the interview participants had to say. The key findings of the report were drawn from these conversations with over 2,000 people in 250 separate individual or focus group interviews representing nearly 5% of Episcopal congregations.

On commitment to worship and tradition . .

- “The weekly celebration of the Eucharist is the major component of Episcopal identity,” members of one West Coast congregation announced.

- “We are Christians who happen to be Episcopalians in our tradition,” was an opinion offered with some regularity. But during the conversation, members of the group were certain of their loyalty to the Church. **“The Episcopal Church has a long history and many rich traditions that shape our liturgy. That is our common ground. Also, it doesn’t discourage thinking, facing your doubts, and struggling with them. I believe that is a major attraction. It certainly has been a major part of my growth.”**

On creative ferment and vitality in local congregations . . .

- One lay leader in a congregation in the Northeast United States captured this sense of how Episcopalians are joining with one another in new common endeavors. *“The development of relationships that are significant was evidence of our success. I saw it in terms of group growth, as well as personal growth, and the opportunities for service that came through that growth.”*

- In the words of one typical respondent, *“The gospel transforms your life. After a while, you just want to share God’s love with others, whether they come to this church or not. As I reflected on how God loved my own hurt parts, I began to want to respond to others who were hurting or in need. When I was invited to help with the shelter project, I was hesitant at first, but soon knew that was where I was supposed to be. The inward journey and the outward journey are linked parts of a whole life.”*

- “We need to be hosts, receiving and supporting the people coming to us,” another group declared. *“More important than the money we raised in our fund drive was the intangible benefit – we saw many people hard at work on a vision. The reality was this was faith at work: hard work and real deeds of faith.”*

On tensions in the Church . . .

- A member of a Southern congregation stated, *“We really are evangelical and try to stay focused on the Scriptures. God’s Word shows us what we are supposed to do, not the Bishop. The Bible says we are to preach the Gospel, bring in the lost, reach the unreached. The diocese and the national Church are about all sorts of things that have little to do with Christ’s commission to us. They have wandered off into apostasy.”*

- At one seminary, when asked to name a significant challenge, students readily named leadership, both clergy and lay, stating, *“Our Church needs to have a vision for forming leaders. We are on a different terrain, and we need to decide how to get where we’re going. We are about forming leaders.”*

- In one diocese, a senior respondent said, *“I hope we will see some major changes among the bishops. Those guys see themselves at the top of some pyramid of power, telling us what to do, when really they ought to be at the bottom, asking us what we need, supporting us and helping us do our jobs here better. **The local congregation IS the Church.** The Church is not a set of abstract ideas, reports or announcements coming from Manhattan. Do they understand what it means to model your faith? Businesses are recognizing the importance of servant leadership and teamwork, but the Church hierarchy seems stuck in the past and incapable of change.”*

On embracing diversity and change . . .

- At times the extent of a congregation’s diversity makes the fact of its success astounding. *“We have over 20 zip codes represented among our members. Yet our worship has never been more vital, and this parish, which had been a sleeping giant, has come to life.”* That sense of worthwhile struggle was widely echoed. *“We are stronger than we thought. We’re not fragile, we’re not going to fall apart. If we have a situation, we know we can handle it.”*

- On the West Coast one congregation trumpeted the extensive diversity of its membership, including age, race and ethnicity, and sexual orientation. Yet a powerful sense of shared experience and purpose was apparent. *“We take parish camping trips, and people look at us and say ‘Now just what brought that group together?’ It’s our love and enjoyment of one another.”*

“The report shows the centrality of worship to the life of our congregations, and that they are thriving centers of mission. Our whole Church can be grateful for this anniversary gift from the Foundation.”

Frank T. Griswold
Presiding Bishop and
Primate

Roots & Wings: Episcopal Identity and Vocation in the New Millennium

Trinity Institute's 30th national conference will draw on the conclusions of The Zacchaeus Project's report when it airs via satellite downlink September 27-29, 1999. Entitled "Roots and Wings: Episcopal Identity and Vocation in the New Millennium," this year's conference is part of a church-wide discernment process co-sponsored by the Office of the Presiding Bishop, The Episcopal Church Foundation, and the Parish of Trinity Church, New York City.

The Zacchaeus Report addresses the "roots" question: Who are we? What core commitments do we share? What draws people to our churches and sustains their commitment? Trinity Institute's Conference looks at the "wings" question: What is our vocation at this millennial moment? How can we be true to who we are and yet open to a new spiritual life?

What's new and exciting about this year's conference is that it includes five Episcopal lay people as its panelists, each of whom, by virtue of their professions, is on the cusp between church and culture.

- Stephen Carter, Professor of Law at Yale University, is the author of the widely acclaimed defense of religion, *The Culture of Disbelief*. He is a communicant at St. Luke's Church in New Haven, CT.

- George Gallup, Jr., Chairman of the George H. Gallup International Institute and Co-Chairman of The Gallup Organization, Inc., has been a leading spokesperson for the evangelical wing of the Church and active in small group ministries. He is a communicant at All Saints' Episcopal Church in Princeton, NJ.

- Donald Miller is Professor of Religion and Executive Director of the Center for Religion and Civic Culture at the University of Southern California and the author of *Reinventing American Protestantism: Christianity in the Next Millennium*. He is a communicant at All Saints' Episcopal Church in Pasadena, CA.

- Phyllis Tickle is Contributing Editor in Religion for *Publishers Weekly* and the author of *God-Talk in America*. She is a member of St. Ann's Episcopal Church in Millington, TN.

- Robert Wuthnow is Professor of Sociology and Director of Princeton University's Center for the Study of Religion. He is the author of *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s*. He is a member of Trinity Episcopal Church in Princeton, NJ.

Each of these speakers is a recognized commentator on the rebirth of religious dialogue

and spiritual practice in America. And each of them wrestles each day, as each of us does, with what it means to be an Episcopalian at the dawn of a new century. They will be asked to talk about the future of the Church from the perspective of their personal faith and their professional knowledge.

Presiding Bishop Frank T. Griswold will introduce the conference. Deeply committed to the kind of interactive dialogue that can be achieved through a broadcast of this nature, he believes that church-wide conversation such as this "can surprise and quite wonderfully change us and land us in places of perceiving and understanding we never dreamt of occupying. Such is God's imagination and persistent humor."

Trinity Institute was begun 30 years ago at the height of the social turmoil of the 1960s. Its founding director, Robert Terwilliger, saw it as a way to relate the gospel to current culture. In its early stages, it was a bi-coastal live event providing clergy an opportunity for continuing education. Beginning in 1992, the conference was broadcast live from New York to 23 downlinks. The Episcopal Cathedral Teleconferencing Network (ECTN) was born, and for the first time, the conference was opened to the laity as well. ECTN currently has approximately 450 downlink sites.

Trinity Institute, currently directed by The Rev. Dr. Frederic B. Burnham, is dedicated to theological renewal within the Episcopal Church. Of this year's conference, Burnham states, "This collaborative effort is the first of its kind in the Episcopal Church. Taking the results of a year-long study and engaging the church at the grassroots level in an interactive dialogue about substantive issues affecting the Church is unique. It is a project that has no precedent in its scale."

The September conference will be followed by four additional broadcasts over the ensuing 8 month period. These, combined with the continued work of The Zacchaeus Project, will provide an ongoing resource to assist congregations in engaging in their own millennial moment of discernment.

For information on how to participate in the teleconference, call 1-800-697-2858 or your diocesan Zacchaeus/"Roots & Wings" coordinator.

"Congregations should strive to give members both roots and wings – roots to ground them solidly in the traditions of their particular faiths, wings to explore the mysteries of the sacred."

Robert Wuthnow

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