

Giving from Episcopal dioceses dips 7 percent: Possible fallout from Robinson ordination

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The Episcopal Church has seen a 7 percent drop in contributions from local dioceses since it voted last year to approve an openly gay bishop, but officials say it may be premature to link the two developments directly.

A report presented to the church's Executive Council February 9 revealed a decline of about \$2 million in six months—perhaps the first tangible measure of the fallout from the controversial decision to approve openly gay Bishop V. Gene Robinson of New Hampshire.

As a result, church treasurer Kurt Barnes has ordered a 5 percent spending cut at the church's New York City headquarters. "The bottom line is we are continuing the mission of the church," Barnes said in an interview. "The doomsday forecast or scenario that was thrown around at General Convention has not materialized."

The 2.3-million-member church asks dioceses to send 21 percent of their budgets to fund the national church. That money—expected to be \$27.5 million this year, down from \$29.4 million—funds 62 percent of the church's operations.

The conservative dioceses of Dallas and Pittsburgh have said they will no longer send money to church headquarters. Forty dioceses said they will meet their pledges, and 42 dioceses will send a lower amount. Twenty-four dioceses have yet to finalize their budgets.

Barnes said the lagging economy had as much impact on the budget as any protest decision to withhold funds—especially since 2004 pledges are based on income in 2002, when the economy was more sluggish. "Many have struggled, or have not been able, to give the 21 percent in the past," he said in an interview. "Some of that reflects a decline in their own income."

According to Barnes, no diocese has explicitly linked any decline in giving with the Robinson vote. "The zeros said zero with no explanation," he said, "but clearly Dallas and Pittsburgh should not be surprises." Both dioceses allow individual parishes to send money directly to the national church if they choose. Pittsburgh had been giving only about 6 to 8 percent in the past few years; figures for Dallas were not immediately available.

Pittsburgh and Dallas, along with ten other dioceses, have joined a new conservative network that has encouraged parishioners and churches to redirect their funding away from the national church. "Conscience has always been a part of giving," said Kendall Harmon of South Carolina, an architect of the new network. "You can't give to something that you believe is against God."

(The network got an important morale boost February 6 from 14 primates, or chief bishops, of Third World churches in the Anglican Communion. "We offer our support and the full weight of our ministries and offices to those who are gathering in a network . . . now being organized in North America," the primates said. "We regard this network as a hopeful sign of a faithful Anglican future in North America.")

Harmon said the Episcopal Church cannot continue to hemorrhage money without major cutbacks. Dioceses that continue to make their 21 percent pledge are forced to eat the cost elsewhere, especially as frustrated conservatives "vote with their feet as well as their pocketbooks" and choose to leave the church.

Opponents, meanwhile, say it is hypocritical for conservatives to stay in the church but refuse to support it financially. Lionel Deimel, president of Progressive Episcopalians of Pittsburgh, said he does not expect the church to take a "major hit" from tight-fisted dioceses like his own. "What looks like a terrible blow to the Episcopal Church really isn't," he said. "The church has done a little scaling back, they have reserve funds. The national church is going to be OK." -*Religion News Service*