

Episcopal membership loss 'precipitous' Homosexuality issues fueling departures: Homosexuality issues fueling departures

by [John Dart](#) in the [November 14, 2006](#) issue

After a period of modest declines and gains, the Episcopal Church has suffered a net loss of nearly 115,000 members over the past three years—with homosexuality issues fueling the departures.

The Episcopal Church, whose active membership has slipped to 2,205,376, has built-in deterrents to growth because Episcopalians have the lowest birth rate among U.S. Christians and nearly 60 percent of the people in the pews are over 50, said Kirk Hadaway, the denomination's director of research.

Though Episcopalians are not known for evangelistic endeavors, the church had offset its death rate and defections with an influx of Catholics and other churchgoers, the formation of new churches and the rising popular interest in spiritual matters. In 2002 the church lost only 8,200 members overall.

"In fact we were actually doing better than most other mainline denominations in the 1990s through 2002, with a few years of growth," Hadaway told the Century. "So it is a precipitous drop in losing 36,000 in both 2003 and 2004, and now 42,000 in 2005."

Half of the losses stemmed from parish conflicts over the 2003 Episcopal General Convention's approval of the election of an openly gay bishop, V. Gene Robinson of New Hampshire, according to Hadaway.

A partial indication of the outflow comes from the traditionalist American Anglican Council in its September newsletter. The AAC reported a 33 percent rise in individual memberships from the mid-2003 Episcopal convention to the end of 2004, and a rise

of another 25 percent in a similar period before the 2006 convention.

The newer Anglican Communion Network, guided by Pittsburgh bishop Robert Duncan, claimed in January that it has an estimated constituency of 250,000 communicants, more than 1,000 parishes and 2,500 clergy—although even those figures are small compared to the more than 7,000 U.S. congregations in the Episcopal Church.

Duncan said after the June 2006 Episcopal convention, “We are two churches under one roof.” At present, for instance, some nine dioceses say they are seeking the alternate leadership of a foreign-based presiding bishop instead of Bishop Katherine Jefferts Schori, who succeeded Frank Griswold in that post this month.

A study by Hadaway and Penny Long Marler of Samford University, presented last month at the annual Religious Research Association (RRA) meeting, reported that the member losses occurred mostly in congregations identified in surveys as already in conflict over gay ordination and same-sex unions. Conservatives contend that the church’s unwillingness to reverse its direction in the 2006 convention is bringing schism in both the denomination and the worldwide Anglican Communion.

Using data from the Faith Communities Today survey, Hadaway and Marder found that 48 percent of Episcopal congregations experienced moderate to very severe conflict over the 2003 vote to permit Robinson’s consecration. In 2005 those same congregations declined by 1.9 percent, compared to a decline of 1 percent at churches with minor conflict on the issue and growth of 0.7 percent in congregations suffering no conflict over that issue.

By the time of the October 19-21 RRA meeting in Portland, Oregon, the new membership figures had not been posted on the Episcopal Church Web site. Unlike some other mainline churches, the Episcopal Church in the recent past has not issued news stories on its annual membership statistics, Hadaway said.

Without explanations to accompany the data, Hadaway said, the numbers may be misinterpreted, as was the case with “some conservative commentators” about two years ago. They reported “a large decline in the numbers of congregations, but almost all of that was the result of my effort in 2002 to clean up the listings of inactive churches that probably hadn’t been done for a decade,” he said in an interview. “A lot of churches were not holding regular services, but it was reported that we were having defections left and right.”

On the three-year loss of 115,000 members, James B. Lemler, Episcopal director of mission, said in an interview that the totals “are not more than we expected.” Lemler also said that officials were heartened that average Sunday attendance in 2005 did not decline as it did in the previous two years. The average Sunday worship attendance in 2005 was 787,000 people, down only 8,500.

Nevertheless, Lemler said, “this is a call to us and to all of mainline Christians to be intentional in our evangelistic outreach, and we are providing dioceses with resources for that purpose.”