

Presbyterians, Lutherans cut jobs, reduce budgets: Slumping stock portfolios; declines in donations

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The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America both have slashed their 2009 budgets, cutting programs and laying off scores of personnel as denominations continue to suffer from the recession.

The ELCA, the nation's largest Lutheran denomination, announced a \$5.6 million reduction in its 2009 budget on March 31. The cut was necessary in part because regional synods plan to decrease their contributions to the denomination by \$2.4 million this year, church leaders said.

Since last November, the ELCA has eliminated more than 23 jobs and cut 12 additional vacant positions. All churchwide units reduced their budgets for 2009, staff salaries were cut by 3 percent, and grants to churches, colleges, universities, seminaries and social services were slashed, according to an ELCA statement.

The Chicago-based Lutheran body also decided to cut its radio ministry, *Grace Matters*, which has aired weekly since 1947. Easter Sunday, April 12, was picked as the date for the final broadcast. The program had aired on nearly 180 radio stations in the U.S. and overseas, the church said.

The largest U.S. Presbyterian church body, based in Louisville, Kentucky, made a similar announcement on March 27. PCUSA officials said that contributions from its congregations and regional presbyteries were nearly \$4 million less than expected, contributing to a \$10 million shortfall.

The denomination has eliminated 56 jobs since September of last year, though 12 new positions have been added. The PCUSA closed its National Health Ministries office and consolidated its collegiate and youth ministries. Remaining staff will have to take a furlough, and salary increases planned for 2010 have been eliminated,

according to the church.

“The decision to eliminate positions was difficult,” said Linda Valentine, executive director of the denomination’s General Assembly Council. “We know it will have a real-life impact on people for whom we care and with whom we have worked side by side.” The church projects a similar shortfall in 2010, “so we will be looking closely at program areas,” she said.

One important program area for mainline churches—now that they have receptive ears in Congress and the White House—is their lobbying efforts in Washington, D.C. But slumping stock portfolios and drops in donations have caused pullbacks.

“Everybody’s hurting,” said Jim Winkler, general secretary of the Washington-based General Board of Church and Society of the United Methodist Church. “I don’t know any major denomination that’s not having hard times.”

Winkler said his office, which is supported by a small portion of the money collected in Methodist congregations, is asking staffers to cut down on telephone and travel expenses—to stay at friends’ houses instead of hotels and to forgo rental cars.

The Friends Committee on National Legislation, a Quaker lobby that has been an ardent opponent of the Iraq war, recently laid off more than a dozen staffers, said legislative director Ruth Flower.

“We have a seat at the table now,” Flower said. “We can talk to people in the administration and propose things and actually be listened to. We just have fewer people to fill the seats.”

The Friends committee lost 20 percent of its budget to last year’s collapsing stock market, Flower said, making the staff reductions painful but necessary. The remaining 30 employees are taking 10 to 20 percent salary cuts, she said.

The Church of the Brethren’s six-decade-long presence in Washington became too expensive to maintain after the small Pietist/Anabaptist denomination lost \$7 million in assets in 2008, largely because of the free-falling stock market, said spokesperson Cheryl Brumbaugh-Cayford.

Church leaders shuttered the Brethren Witness/Washington Office on March 19, making director Phil Jones, a clergyperson who was its only full-time staffer, a man without a job.

Said Jones, 54: "One of the real struggles is that I was really looking forward to having access to the White House in this administration." -*Religion News Service*