

20/20:

Grassroots? Inclusive? And where's the money?

by *Pat McCaughan*

ADVOCATES of the Episcopal Church's "20/20" initiative point to places like All Saints' Church in Ravenswood, Ill., where a dying congregation transformed itself into a thriving, energetic community by focusing outward, instead of inward.

Or St. George's, Glenn Dale, Md., where average Sunday attendance has spiked by 70 percent in the past few years.

Or Los Angeles, where a newly created diocesan position very deliberately plans outreach to 100,000 previously ignored Native Americans, and where congregations are being trained in cultural sensitivity and inclusivity.

Some advocates say 20/20 merely attempts to articulate a grassroots movement already emerging in the culture. A vision of the future church that, with nurture and guidance, will: reshape existing structures; become inclusive; reflect society's diversity; double membership; grow disciples and leaders and revitalize congregations.

But questions about 20/20's efficacy and intent have dogged it almost from its beginnings. Questions like: If some churches are already growing and thriving, why do we need 20/20? There are concerns about ineffective communication, unclear focus and funding. Is the initiative being co-opted to shift focus away from peace and justice issues, such as the blessing of same-sex unions? If it purports to change church structures, how will that happen, especially with a lack of diversity from its very beginning and throughout the church's top-down hierarchical organizational structure?

The vision: refocusing on mission

20/20 is "more than just a numbers game [although] a lot of people have latched onto that aspect of it, doubling the size of the Episcopal Church by 2020 demographically, as well as evangelically," says Jim Lemler, dean of Seabury-Western Theological Seminary in Evanston, Ill.

"The real guts of the program are the five

areas we identified as being integral to communities of faith growing in depth and in their ministry and mission — congregational development, evangelism, leadership, spirituality and children, youth and young adults," said Lemler, 50, who authored a recent Forward Movement publication about 20/20.

The 20/20 movement grew out of a recognition that congregations and dioceses were increasingly envisioning themselves as partners in mission locally and globally, Lemler said. After the vision was put forward by members of the Standing Commission on Domestic Mission and Evangelism, the 73rd General Convention, meeting in Denver in 2000, adopted Resolution A033 which, among other things, called for the Executive Council to make 20/20 a priority.

That vision includes: creative strategies for evangelism; prayer and spiritual development; recruiting and equipping innovative leaders; strengthening congregational life; focusing on children, youth and campus ministries; recruiting, educating and training evangelists and church planters who were born after 1964 and/or people of color; and training of lay and ordained leaders in second-language skills and cross-cultural sensitivity. A task force was formed to plan ways to implement the vision and to report back to the 74th General Convention in Minneapolis.

Sarah Lawton, 36, of San Francisco, task force vice-chair and chair of the "20/20 Strategy Group," said she's "very excited about it as a vision that asks every level of church to refocus on mission. On a very local level, we are saying how do we stop huddling at our gates and feeling defensive about what we're doing and engage our communities and share the good news we have?"

"The way I see 20/20 is looking at how we tell the story of who we are. How do we share on an individual level in church, our story? How do we engage our community with that? It is about discipleship, about building disciples, about simply building our church, but not for its own

sake either.”

“I’m not always sure what 20/20 is,” said Charles Fulton, 61, national church director of Congregational Development Ministries. “Everybody wants to put it in a box, or a program or a plan. It really is more a movement and a tension to the real heart of what faith is all about.”

Fulton acknowledged that average Sunday attendance is stable at about 853,000 nationally, and has increased slightly over the past five years. “When things are stable, it’s time to revision, to rethink, to redefine the mission, and that is precisely what 20/20 is calling us to do,” he said.

Meeting people where they are

Executive Council, after reviewing initial task force findings in late 2001, instructed them to be more “inclusive.” A subsequent meeting was held at Camp Allen, Texas in January 2002 with 60 additional participants.

“When the task force reported back to Executive Council, it was very male-oriented, very Anglo, and so the Council said they needed to include more people under 30, more women and more people of color,” said Nell Gibson, a New York City AIDS educator and anti-racism activist who participated in the Camp Allen meeting.

Gibson says that so far, 20/20’s excitement hasn’t been communicated and suggested energy be focused on reimagining attitudes, rather than on numbers. “Any church should exist for something more than just filling up pews. We ought to have something to offer people, to meet them where they are. If we’re not doing that, even if we bring them in, they won’t stay.

“We need to start locally, as opposed to nationally, reimagining our attitudes toward people of different cultures, different economic levels, and sensitivity toward growing populations, like Latinos. The Episcopal Church has been most effective and most inviting when it’s responded to community needs. That’s been true of the churches I’ve been a part of, in the deep South, on the West Coast and in New York. Anyplace the church was vibrant was because it was answering the needs of a particular community, and all those communities are different.”

Concerns about communication and diversity

Ineffectual communication has fostered skepticism for many racial- and ethnic-minority Episcopalians, as well as gays and lesbians, about the way the initiative is being co-opted and about how it will be funded.

The Union of Black Episcopalians in the Diocese of New York is sponsoring a resolution to General Convention linking 20/20’s diversity aims with the shakeup of the national church ethnic desks, Gibson said. “We wondered how this was going to be communicated to people of color, and how 20/20 was going to use a national platform when there was no one in place at the national church that dealt with those particular groups.”

Replacing those positions is key to 20/20’s success, Lemler agreed. “Having strong leadership from a multicultural level in the national Church Center is one of the key ingredients for the implementation and effectiveness of this vision. I hope it becomes a priority as we implement and live into the vision.”

Fulton said the national church commitment to racial and ethnic ministries has not changed. “We’re not pulling back, there were four positions and there will continue to be four positions.” He said that, while the Hispanic position has been filled, a job description for Asiamerica ministries has been publicized and two others, for the Black and Native American ministries, are in process.

Gibson isn’t the only one questioning ineffectual communication. Michael Hopkins, 42, national president of Integrity (an organization serving lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Episcopalians), also attended the Camp Allen session. Strategy groups haven’t functioned since that January 2002 meeting, said Hopkins.

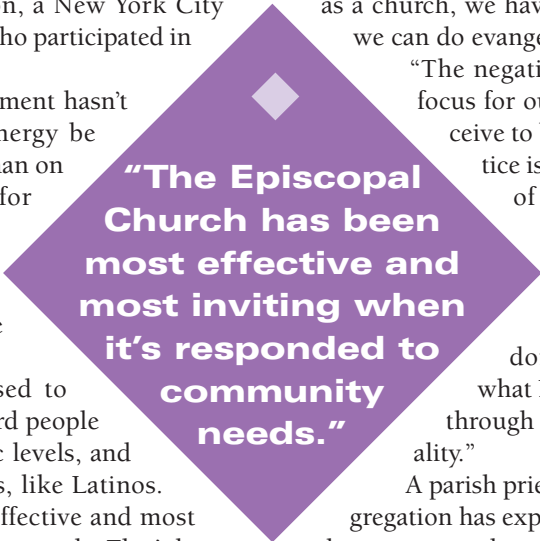
“The positive side of 20/20 is that it means a new, positive attitude about who we are and the fact that we can grow and that, as a church, we have something to offer the world and that we can do evangelism,” said Hopkins.

“The negative side is [that we are] trying to find a focus for our life other than what some people perceive to be controversial — mostly peace and justice issues. I want to be nothing but supportive of 20/20 and that positive vision of our future. But continuing to put off decisions about fundamental aspects of our life makes me highly skeptical about whether that vision is possible. I don’t know what to do with that except what I’m doing, trying to help the church work through the decision-making process about sexuality.”

A parish priest in the Diocese of Washington, his congregation has experienced a 70 percent increase in the past three years, a phenomenon “happening a lot in this diocese without much connection to 20/20,” he added.

Winnie Varghese, Episcopal chaplain at Columbia University and a member of the Camp Allen Leadership Team, believes the church’s own structure fuels miscommunication. “The Executive Council asked [that] the report be submitted before anything goes out to congregations. They’re calling it a movement, but it’s a movement from on high, like George Bush starting a movement. They want a grassroots effect, that kind of spontaneous energy. But you can’t have a movement when the Executive Council has to approve all these things before they go out. We’ve been told not to give out much information. But because it’s so broad-based, expansive and has a lot of space, there’s no real engagement in the process. The idea is that first we go to General Convention, they approve it and then we get money to fund it.

“But we’ve been talking about it for three years privately and not disseminating information and that’s a really bad process. It



is better to process it more publicly. Given how our church is structured, I don't know if that's even possible. 20/20's greatest weakness is that communication is so ineffective. All sides feel that someone else has co-opted it already and we haven't even gotten to Convention."

Gibson said the lack of communication hampers churches locally. "When I returned from Camp Allen, I shared what had happened with members of my church. I was senior warden at St. Mark's in-the-Bowery. They've been waiting to hear more, but there hasn't been a whole lot more to share," said Gibson, a member of the 20/20 communications program team. "I've had one direct communication in more than a year. At this point, my church, like a lot of churches, is dealing with issues of survival and lack of funds."

She believes 20/20 could learn from another church program, Purpose and Promise, charged to come up with a common vision of partnership between ecumenical national and regional networks, web media, publishing and academic entities, and to develop network and mission resources in this age of changing technologies.

The ecumenical Purpose and Promise initiative excited her because it was "looking at the changes taking place in denominational systems and observing new opportunities for worship, spiritual support, service and community care, and for work with people who are different from themselves. The group is asking how it can use these opportunities in building on our own faith traditions. It's a healthy approach to responding to our changing world. So many people involved in 20/20 seem to think we Episcopalians have the answer to what people are looking for or what they need, that all we need to do is give it to them and they will flock to our church. But we have never asked them what they want or what they are looking for."

Grassroots vs. national

Lawton, chair of the strategy group, acknowledged that 20/20 has had "a slow start out of the gate," but added, "I'm not terribly upset about that because a lot is going on at the grassroots level."

Acknowledging the range of opinions about it, she added: "I am also aware that everyone has a perception of it, but it's large enough and it's not containable. A lot of it we can't define from a national level. We are asking for more self-examination and engagement and that may look very different in Wyoming than in California, but we are held together by the historic tradition of our church."

Fulton agreed. "It started as a very specific thing like doubling membership in 20 years, but became a conversation about wholeness of mission. It is to engage in all aspects of mission, in peace and justice, social service and work outside ourselves.

"We've been very sleepy, relying on a Christian context, a culture that was supportive, and now congregations are having to realize we're not going to be able to just pick a few already converted Christians and make them Episcopalians. We're going to have to convert others, to take our faith to them.

"A lot of 20/20 is about starting new churches. The easiest way

to reach people is in new congregations. A new congregation starts with a new identity, younger, or multicultural or ethnic. It is much harder to get an existing system to change, but it can be done."

Change is difficult, he acknowledged. "I get calls every day from people who don't want to change, who don't care about 20/20 or growth, but who say 'we're doing the same thing we did 20 years ago and are getting unacceptable results.' We really are grappling with the Gospel."

Changing existing church structures

Among other things, 20/20 seeks to strengthen faith formation and education, forming leaders and engaging the bishops upon whom its success hinges, Lawton said.

"We need to offer more support, starting with 16-year-olds, for example, we need to make sure they have the linguistic and cultural skills they'll need to lead," she said. "The revitalization skills, managing conflict, it's not the same to be a 30-year-old priest today as it was 50 years ago. What we're really saying is that's going to be the first piece. If we have that, then we can begin to move forward."

Varghese, 31, characterized it as a classic "chicken-and-egg" scenario. "At one level, we have congregations that are welcoming and are attuned to needs of people, and on the other hand, we need to have younger people in leadership roles. At the same time, we need younger people prepared to come in and to take on those leadership roles. We want to be open to what within our structures makes it difficult for people to fully participate, to be open to seekers and to people from other denominations and also to be prepared to do Christian education and formation in a deliberate way we haven't done in the past. We want to work with bishops to recognize the gifts of younger people already in the church or as they come forward for ordination."

Campus ministry in New York is thriving, largely with the diocesan bishop's very public moral and financial support, she said. "The congregations and the institutions are talking about it, are open to it. And there are definitely students looking for a weekly liturgy who, because of their own history in the church, expect to have the resources of a priest, to discuss issues around vocational discernment and life crises. There are a number of students here this year who are beginning the discernment process toward holy orders."

At Seabury-Western, curriculum reflects 20/20, with an emphasis on developing people who are really aware of their role as mission leaders, Lemler said. "We are developing a strong partnership between the seminary and the Oneida nation in Wisconsin and are going to talk about mutual mission and training and learning as seminary experience. This kind of partnership is going to happen in places a bit more geographically isolated. There needs to be no geographic isolation any longer in the cyber world in which we live. We are asking the church to wake up, we're in the 21st century. We live in a post-modern, post-Christian world, and we need to invigorate our mission in light of those realities."

But is that possible without changing existing church structures?

That part of the conversation hasn't happened yet, Varghese said. "At its best, 20/20 represents the church that we're going to be, a very, very diverse community, but it must be integrated with peace and justice issues to maintain credibility.

"I don't think everyone working on 20/20 believes it's really a way to model what the church is going to be. Organizations tend to look like their leadership and that level of commitment, to truly make the church reflective of society's diversity, just isn't there yet. We can talk about changing language in the liturgies because who's going to oppose that? But a commitment to hiring at the diocesan level, to seeing a real shift to reflect diversity, it hasn't happened."

"There isn't a whole lot of structural change here," Hopkins agreed. "Especially in defined ways for young voices to penetrate General Convention, particularly in the House of Bishops."

Still others see change happening and view 20/20 as hopeful, exciting.

"When I first heard about 20/20, I wanted to know how people of other ethnic groups and languages would fit into the vision," said George Sotelo, Multicultural Missioner for the Diocese of California, a newly created position.

"We're making small steps toward becoming more visible. The church is seeing that we are here. It's a matter of being aware of who we are, and the fact that we are all here and are all part of the church and asking to be part of vision-making and part of the table and the power sharing. There are increasingly more and more ethnic bishops."

The diocese has also begun a new, three-year education formation program, the Latino Theological Academy, administered through the Center for Anglican Learning and Life at the Church Divinity School of the Pacific. Sotelo, 53, a priest who has served in parish ministry for several years, hopes it will become a path to ordination for young and Latino leaders.

Increasingly, Latinos are getting involved as convention deputies and serving on committees. "We are lobbying for our resolutions. There are about 10 different resolutions dealing with multicultural ministries for General Convention, everything from liturgy and music to leadership. But," he added, "the money is the real challenge."

Finding the resources

Hopkins agreed. "It sounds like it should be an easy thing for the national church to get resources to local congregations, but I've been a parish priest for 13 years now and it's a struggle. You really have to look for it. Aside from getting over the sex wars, the other significant thing standing in 20/20's way is the church's willingness to reprioritize its funding, and to do it in such a way

that doesn't gut the church's significant peace and justice ministry.

"There is a lot of confused and confusing talk from '815' [Second Avenue] about congregational development. It isn't integrated into the whole multicultural emphasis, that so many places like Los Angeles are finding to be vital to their life," he said.

Fulton said that, ultimately, funding will come from national, diocesan and local sources.

General Convention 2000 approved creation of the Alleluia Fund, which challenges dioceses to create a special fund for mission, via offerings collected in congregations during the 50 days of Easter.

"We've done research about non-budgetary fundraising and discovered that collectively, our dioceses have \$1 billion in endowment. We have \$140 million collectively in loan funds, but only about half that amount is actually loaned out," he said.

"How do we get the church to work together? One of the fastest growing areas in the country is South Las Vegas, but the diocese doesn't have a lot of resources. Is the church going to stand by and say that's Nevada's problem or are we together going to say that's an opportunity? We have assets. The question is, how do we use them?"

The questions are essentially what 20/20 is about, he said. "A big part of it is for people to articulate their own faith story. What does faith mean in my life? How does my story connect with God's story? If we're going to grow, it's because we've learned to talk about God in our lives with those who can't find language to talk about their own experience."

Lemler says the conversation must be honest.

"That means dialogue, not words from on high, which is the way the Episcopal Church has often done supposed communication. What will kill 20/20 is if it looks like some national church program being promulgated. It needs to be about dialogue and communicating about mission, and General Convention will be a very important part of this."

Fulton said that all the reports are posted on the Web. A redesigned website will debut prior to General Convention. "It will be seeker-friendly, and will present one way to someone who says 'I'm not an Episcopalian and want to know more about the church,' [and another] to a member who wants resources or to a church leader. You can type something on the Church Center website, and you may get info from Los Angeles. It's exciting, rich, efficient, all these things are part of this conversation."

Fulton, congregational development director for two years, and a priest for 35, said he hopes more people engage 20/20's conversation by asking, "Where is my ministry in relation to it?" ●

about the author

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