Title Parish-Congregation Definitions

Proposer(s) Parish-Congregation Canons Task Force

Be it resolved that Canons XII and XIII of the Canons of the Diocese of West Missouri be amended as follows:

CANON XII - PARISHES

SECTION 1. Adult Communicants in good standing and of legal age, residing in this Diocese, or in contiguous counties of adjacent Dioceses, desiring to organize a Parish within this Diocese, shall make written application to the Bishop and to the Standing Committee stating the name of the proposed Parish and giving evidence that, for the calendar year of the application and the calendar year immediately prior to date of application, the Congregation they represent has been in substantial compliance, as determined by the Bishop with the consent of the Standing Committee, with the following criteria:

(a) has use or possession of a suitable building;~~,~~

(b) has been served by a priest, whether ~~on a~~ full-time ~~basis~~ or part-time, serving (1) under a written letter of agreement approved by the Ecclesiastical Authority and exercising the authority and responsibilities set forth in Canon III.9 of the Constitution & Canons of the General Convention, or (2) as an appointed Minister pursuant to Canon XI.4 of these canons;~~,~~ and

(c) ~~had paid in full~~ has fully paid all expenses for the calendar year of application and the calendar year immediately preceding. Said expenses shall include, but not be limited to, (1) the diocesan assessment;~~,~~ (2) normal operating expenditures;~~,~~ and (3) ~~either~~ the compensation (stipend and housing) and ~~full~~ benefits (including medical insurance, pension, and auto reimbursement) ~~paid for a full-time~~ of the priest serving the Congregation according to the Diocesan Compensation Standard applicable to the terms of that priest's service or, ~~priest serving the Congregation for the calendar year of application and thecalendar year immediately prior to application or,~~ at the discretion of the Bishop, with the consent of the Standing Committee, any of such expenses for the services of a non-stipendiary priest. Further, the Congregation shall give evidence that they are attached to the doctrine, discipline, and worship of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America, and will submit and conform to the same, and also to the *Constitution and Canons* of the General Convention and of this Diocese, and will not erect, without consent of the Ecclesiastical Authority, a place at any point within one mile of the place of worship of any other Parish or Congregation of this Diocese, or of land acquired by any other Parish or Congregation of this Diocese for the erection of a place of worship, and that they are able and willing to meet all of the assessments that may be levied upon them for the support of the Church and of this Diocese.

CANON XIII - CONCERNING A CHANGE OF STATUS OF A PARISH OR CONGREGATION

SECTION 1. When any Parish, which has been admitted into union with the Diocese, shall fall below the minimum criteria which are canonically required for admission into union with the Diocese, or shall neglect to make an annual report within six months of the stipulated date, it shall be entered into such a process of evaluation and assistance which the Ecclesiastical Authority shall deem appropriate to determine the strengths, weaknesses and opportunities for the furtherance of the mission and ministry of the Church in that Parish. If ~~after two years of this process~~ conditions have not improved within the timeframe established by the Ecclesiastical Authority, the Parish may, with the consent of the Bishop and the Standing Committee, be placed upon the ecclesiastical and canonical basis of a Congregation and title to all its properties, real, personal and mixed, may at that time revert to "The Diocese of West Missouri," a corporation, which may execute such conveyances and take such other actions as may be necessary to effect such reversion. The Bishop and the Standing Committee may, however, choose to continue other processes of remediation at their discretion in dealing with such a Parish.

Explanation

Canon XII.1 establishes the requirements for a congregation to become a parish. Under the canons, a parish must continue to meet those requirements to maintain its status. Among them, the current canon requires that a parish be served by a full-time priest and pay that priest's full compensation (including pension, health insurance, etc.). A parish that falls below these standards must enter a process of evaluation and assistance. After two years, the Bishop and Standing Committee may move the parish to congregation status.

These requirements no longer adequately reflect the life of our Diocese or the wider Episcopal Church. A number of our parishes are faithfully served by part-time or bi-vocational priests. Under the current canon, these parishes fall below the minimum standard for parish status, regardless of the health and vitality of their common life.
The proposed amendment to Canon XII removes the requirement for a full-time priest while continuing the expectation of a stable and accountable pastoral relationship. A parish must continue to be served by one priest who has clear pastoral authority and responsibility. Whether full-time or part-time, that priest must serve either under a written letter of agreement approved by the Ecclesiastical Authority, with the authority and responsibilities set out in Canon III.9 of the Canons of the General Convention, or as a Minister (priest-in-charge) appointed by the Bishop. An informal arrangement with supply clergy would not satisfy this requirement.

Clergy compensation must follow the Diocesan Compensation Standard applicable to the actual terms of the priest's position. The amendment requires substantial compliance with these provisions, as determined by the Bishop with the consent of the Standing Committee. All other requirements for parish status, including payment of the diocesan assessment, remain unchanged.

The proposed amendment to Canon XIII replaces the fixed two-year evaluation period with a timeframe established by the Ecclesiastical Authority. One parish which is experiencing a temporary setback and another facing more substantial challenges do not need to be held to the same fixed timetable. This change allows for a process of evaluation and support which is appropriate to the circumstances of each parish, while maintaining accountability for the requirements of parish status.

If these amendments are not adopted, the current canons will remain in force. Parishes not served by a full-time priest, or not providing full-time compensation, will continue to fall below the canonical requirements for parish status and will be subject to the evaluation and assistance process prescribed by Canon XIII.1, including its fixed two-year timeline.

The choice before Convention is therefore whether to revise these requirements to reflect the present circumstances of our Diocese while maintaining clear standards for parish life or to retain – and enforce – the existing requirements.