

Mainline moves to trim bureaucracy

by [Daniel Burke](#) in the [January 11, 2012](#) issue

A list of the Episcopal Church's 75 commissions, committees, agencies and boards spilled over eight PowerPoint slides during a recent presentation by its new chief operating officer, Bishop Stacy Sauls. By his count, there are also nearly 50 departments and offices in the church's New York headquarters and 46 committees in its legislative body, the General Convention.

Sauls, hired by Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori in May, said that he has since learned there are even more offices "that I had never heard of before."

"It has become just Byzantine," he said. "The governance structures have grown by accretion, without any strategic plan." Nearly half of the denomination's budget is spent on overhead, according to Sauls.

Meanwhile, Episcopal membership continues to drop, dipping below 2 million in the U.S. for the first time in decades. Donations, too, are down. It is time for change, starting at the top, Sauls said.

"We've been operating in a system where certain expertise resides at the churchwide level and pronouncements get sent down the pipeline," he said. "That model is last century. It's a radically different time now."

Mainline

Protestants' national offices spread their reach into every field, from liturgy to gender equality to disaster relief. But as they seek to halt decades-long declines, a number of denominations are trimming their branches and tending to their roots: local congregations. Many are moving to decentralize power, shifting resources and responsibilities

from national headquarters and elected churchwide assemblies to regional bodies and local leaders.

"There used to be a mentality of: as goes the national office, so goes the denomination," said David Roozen, director of the Hartford Institute for Religion Research at Hartford Seminary in Connecticut.

Church leaders "are finally getting the idea that the future of their denominations are tied to the vitality of their congregations," said Roozen, coeditor of the 2005 book *Church, Identity and Change: Theology and Denominational Structures in Unsettled Times*.

But the moves have prompted protests from some longtime members who worry that lay voices will be muted and long traditions of democratic decision making will be jettisoned in favor of expediency. Roozen said mainline Protestants lag behind secular companies and entrepreneurial evangelicals in trading top-heavy bureaucracies for flat and fluid networks.

Recently, though, they have been catching up:

- The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America approved a plan in August that prioritizes congregational growth and moves its Churchwide Assemblies from every two years to every three.
- The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) enacted a less regulatory and more flexible form of government in July.
- The United Church of Christ voted overwhelmingly at its General Synod in July to form a 52-member board to succeed five existing boards that have a total of 300 members. A similar, preliminary proposal failed in 2009, but UCC leaders are optimistic that by June its 38 regional conferences will provide the two-thirds margin to ratify the unified governance plan.
- In the Episcopal Church, a proposal authored by Sauls and approved so far by 17 dioceses would appoint a special commission to study restructuring. The proposal will be debated at the

2012 General Convention. Sauls has also suggested that the triennial conventions are too expensive and should meet less often.

- Leaders in the United Methodist Church are pushing a major restructuring plan that would consolidate ten churchwide agencies into five. The agencies would be run by a 15-member board of directors, itself overseen by a 45-member advisory panel.

United Methodist Bishop John

Hopkins, who chairs a panel advocating change, said the denomination's 13 agencies, publishing house and pension board collectively have 550 board members who meet just a few times each year. That's a recipe for stagnation, he said.

The proposed changes would streamline the denomination and make it more responsive to local congregations, some of which view the national agencies as out of touch, according to Hopkins. "We've got to flatten the church a little bit to make sure this perceived distance is reduced," Hopkins said.

The UMC's Council of

Bishops overwhelmingly approved the plan and voted to redirect \$60 million in church funds to develop young leaders and congregations. The bishops, however, do not have a vote at the 2012 General Conference, where the restructuring will be debated. And some United Methodists are already lining up in opposition.

In a joint statement, leaders of

five racial and ethnic groups called the plan "oligarchic" and said it "will exclude the participation of racial/ethnic persons." In addition, the Methodist Federation for Social Action is pushing an alternative plan that would create four ministry "centers," each with its own 33-member board. "Our process will be more inclusive of folks who are not white," said Tracy Merrick, the MFSA's national treasurer.

The

Episcopal plan also has its critics. Bonnie Anderson, president of the House of Deputies and the church's top lay leader, accused Sauls of mounting an "end run" around a committee that had already been studying

restructuring.

Anderson also doubted the need for a special commission to restructure the church. The House of Deputies and the House of Bishops have already demonstrated the ability to make major decisions—to allow gay bishops, for example—at recent General Conventions, according to Anderson. "To think that we couldn't decide ways to restructure the church is a bit naive," she said.

At the same time, Anderson agrees that the Episcopal Church needs to change. "I believe that we need more resources and authority at the local level," she said. "The days of the big corporate front office, if not gone already, are dwindling pretty fast." —RNS