

★ PROFILE: CONGREGATION



THE GREAT
COMMISSION



Church Planting Goes Back to the Future

In addition to the Episcopal Health Foundation, the Diocese of Texas also gained the Great Commission Foundation (GCF) with the sale of St. Luke's Episcopal Health System. The GCF will eventually have a corpus of more than \$120 million that will focus on strategically growing the Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Texas.

As the first foundation in the Diocese of Texas with the exclusive purpose of planting churches, GCF hit the ground running when Bishop Andy Doyle announced his ambitious goal to plant 15 new churches by 2019.

"The next five years are pretty much planned out," said Bob Biehl, treasurer of the Diocese. "This isn't a foundation that is just going to think about it for very long. We are ready to go."

That journey starts in Manor, Texas, where St. Mary Magdalene Episcopal Church will soon leave the Manor High School cafeteria for one of the new mobile church buildings designed by renowned architect, Logic Tobola (see profile, page 22).

In previous years, church plants were exorbitantly expensive, approaching almost \$5 million of investment. But through Bishop Doyle's vision of a movable, simply constructed church model, the cost has been reduced to \$1.5 million.

"In my view one of the biggest challenges has always been that we had a no-fail strategy for church plants," Biehl said. "Because we were investing so much money, we had to put that much more pressure on it and could not let it fail because of the size of the investment. By changing the way

we do this, and being able to invest early in the real estate, we can [plant more churches] and not be afraid of failure."

The diocesan Director of Foundations, David Fisher, agrees. "The method of purchasing real estate and constructing permanent facilities is a very expensive route," he explained. "Under this plan, if we don't get the location right, we can move the mobile church and sell the property."

Facing a daunting challenge, Tobola took his design for the mobile church from traditional Episcopal churches like the Diocese's mother church in Matagorda, Christ Episcopal Church. With a pier and beam foundation, wooden finishings and removable transepts, the model church start will seat 120 people and be relatively easy to move across the Diocese. This replicable design will save more than \$3 million per church start. Additionally, when a congregation outgrows the starter church, they can pass it along to another site, further reducing costs.

"We've done the engineering, and we are only going to do that once," Biehl explained. "If we plant 15 churches, the architecture will only be done once. There is also a lot of savings in the materials we are using. This is a classic wooden church."

The future of the Episcopal Church in Texas has been discovered, quite appropriately, by reaching back into the past. Behind white-washed wooden walls and a bright red door, pioneer Episcopalians established a missionary tradition in Texas. In 2014 and beyond, that tradition lives on.

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