

# *History of the American Church*

## **EARLY PERIOD**

Establishment of parishes on the North American continent began to spread steadily following the first recorded celebration of Holy Communion in New World in 1607 in Jamestown, Virginia. This conformed to the typical colonial expansion pattern of the English Church in other parts of the world at the time.

During the American Revolution, northern clergy tried to maintain ties with the English Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG) and to support England, while those in the South tended to be more sympathetic to the Revolution.

The "American Revolution left the Anglican parishes shattered, stripped of most of their financial support, weakened by the flight of many clergy and thousands of members, with a number of buildings destroyed and property lost," wrote Powell Mills Dawley in *Our Christian Heritage* (Morehouse-Gorham, 1959).

After the war, support for the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel was cut off, and public support of churches was withdrawn because of newly accepted principle of separation of church and state.

## **ESTABLISHMENT PERIOD**

By 1784, most states agreed on the need to (1) draft a binding constitution for the whole church; (2) revise the English Book of Common Prayer to make it appropriate for use in the American church; and (3) obtain consecration of bishops in Apostolic Succession to give the American Church proper episcopal oversight and ministry.

However, church leaders were split on the position that organization of the American Church could proceed without bishops in Apostolic Succession.

Charles Inglis of New York left for England to seek ordination and later returned as the first Bishop of Nova Scotia. Many New England Episcopalians agreed with Inglis' approach to the argument, but southerners balked.

On March 25, 1783, ten Connecticut clergy elected Samuel Seabury as their bishop. Seabury traveled to England, but English canon law prevented the consecration of any clergyman who would not take the Oath of Allegiance to the English Crown. Seabury then sought consecration in the Scottish Episcopal Church, where he was ordained on Nov. 14, 1784 in Aberdeen. Thus, Seabury became the first bishop of the American Episcopal Church.

By 1786, English churchmen had helped change the law so the Church of England could offer episcopal consecration to those churches outside England.

On Feb. 4, 1787, the Archbishop of Canterbury and three other English bishops consecrated William White as Bishop of Pennsylvania and Samuel Provoost as Bishop of New York. Soon after, James Madison was consecrated in England as the Bishop of Virginia and President of the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg.

When Seabury, White, Provoost, and Madison joined to consecrate Thomas Claggett in Trinity Church in New York in 1790, the episcopate in the American Church could declare its independence from Great Britain.

An assembly of the American Church met in Philadelphia in 1789 to unify all Episcopalians in the United States into a single national church. A constitution was adopted along with a set of canon

laws. The English Book of Common Prayer was revised (principally in removing the prayer for the English monarch). This first American Book of Common Prayer was based mostly on the English Book of Common Prayer of 1662. Its consecration prayer was based on the Scottish Book of Common Prayer of 1764.

The new constitution provided for annual diocesan conventions with the bishop of the diocese as presiding officer. A national General Convention was established, composed of two legislative houses, modeled after the United States Congress. A system of checks and balances similar to that of the new federal system was incorporated into the Church's constitution.

As the United States began its westward expansion, the church followed. Missionary bishops went into the new territories to minister to the far-flung and sparsely populated western parishes and congregations.

### **CIVIL WAR PERIOD**

When South Carolina seceded from the Union in 1860, she was followed by ten more southern states. In 1861, the Protestant Episcopal Church in the Confederate States of America was established, in every way the same as before except for its name change and its loyalty to the Confederacy. But the northern church declined to recognize any separation. Throughout the war, churchmen on both sides maintained their old friendships and bonds of Christian union with each other, according to Dawley (*Our Christian Heritage*, Morehouse-Gorham, 1959).

Seven months after the fall of Richmond in 1865, the Confederate group quietly disbanded following the national convention, which had been held a scant month before.

### **AMERICAN CHURCH POLITY**

Subsequent general conventions have added to, but not substantially changed a basic polity in which a democratic, lay-dominated parish structure exists in tension with an episcopally dominated central governance structure. Each self-supporting congregation (parish) elects its lay governing board (vestry) for temporal affairs and its rector as spiritual leader. Congregations that are not self-supporting (missions) are directed by the bishop of the area. In a given area, the parishes and missions make up a diocese, headed by a bishop. All clergy and lay representation from all congregations meet annually in convention to conduct the business of the diocese. The convention elects the bishop to serve until death or retirement.

### **GENERAL CONVENTION**

The dioceses and missionary districts in the United States meet triennially in General Convention. All bishops are members of the House of Bishops, and the House of Deputies is made up of equal numbers of clergy and laity. The Executive Council, the administrative agency of the General Convention, is headed by the Presiding Bishop (elected by the House of Bishops and confirmed by the House of Deputies). The Presiding Bishop also presides over the House of Bishops. Decisions at General Convention are made by joint-concurrence of the House of Deputies and the House of Bishops.

### **PROVINCES**

The 109 dioceses of the Episcopal Church and three regional areas are organized into nine provinces, each governed by a synod consisting of a House of Bishops and a House of Deputies. The Episcopal Church is a part of the Anglican Communion.

## **MODERN PERIOD**

Conventions of the 1950s and 1960s tended to ignore increasing pressure from women to demand ordination as deacons and priests in the church. The General Convention of 1970 allowed women ordination to the diaconate.

In 1974, eleven women presented themselves for ordination to the priesthood in Philadelphia. The House of Bishops declared the ordinations invalid, saying that the 11 women remained deacons.

After 1976, the eleven ordinations were regularized when the General Convention allowed women to be eligible for ordination to both the priesthood and the episcopate. Barbara Harris, the first woman bishop in the Anglican Communion, was elected as Bishop Suffragan of Massachusetts on Feb. 11, 1989.

A completely revised Book of Common Prayer was adopted in 1979, and an updated Hymnal was adopted in 1982.

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