

# Missionary Society 4.0

## Re-imagining for the 21st century

Ian T. Douglas



Seal of the SPG, 1701

Over the last year a new, urgent, and exciting conversation has emerged across the Episcopal Church in Connecticut inviting us to “re-imagine” our identity and relationships as Episcopalians serving God’s mission together. This

conversation is encouraged and coordinated by the Taskforce for Reimagining the Episcopal Church in Connecticut (which flies under the name “TREC-CT” borrowing its acronym from a similar venture in the wider Episcopal Church known as the Taskforce for Reimagining the Episcopal Church, or simply TREC.) Both TREC-CT, and the more general TREC, are committed to helping Episcopalians discern how God might be calling us to be a new kind of church in the 21st century.

One of the imperatives that led to the forming of TREC-CT was a call by the 2013 Diocesan Convention for a new constitution for the Missionary Society of the Episcopal Diocese of Connecticut. This call presupposes that Episcopalians in Connecticut know what our Missionary Society is, where it came from, and what its current and future function might be. Without such knowledge we cannot seriously engage in the work of re-imagining the Missionary Society.

### The advent of missionary societies

At the turn of the 18th century, individuals and groups in England began to come together in voluntary associations or organizations known as “societies” to advocate for particular religious and social concerns such as the abolition of slavery or missionary work in English colonies. In 1698 the Society for

Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK) was formed to communicate the Christian faith through education and the provision of Christian literature. And in 1701, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG) was founded to meet the needs of the Church of England and its missionary expansion in English colonies.

Connecticut was one of the earliest, if not the first, foreign mission field of the SPG, and Church of England congregations organized in colonial Connecticut villages were often served by a SPG missionary. These missionaries, usually born in the colonies, had to travel the perilous trip to London for ordination since there was no bishop in the Americas. With a meager salary from the SPG augmented by in-kind contributions from their Anglican farmer and village parishioners, missionary priests usually served more than one congregation. Many parishes in the Episcopal Church in Connecticut today can trace their roots to this pioneering work of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel missionaries.

### Missionary societies and The Episcopal Church

In the wake of United States independence and with the election and consecration of Samuel Seabury in 1784 as the first bishop in Connecticut and the first bishop

## WHERE WE'VE BEEN



for an Anglican/Episcopal Church outside of the British Isles, the Episcopal Church in Connecticut slowly began to organize itself. Given its SPG history, Connecticut Episcopalians considered the possibility of its own "missionary society" to extend the work of the new church. In 1813 the Diocesan Convention organized the Missionary Society of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the State of Connecticut as a voluntary society to support missionaries and new parishes.

In 1821 the General Convention of The Episcopal Church would similarly create the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America (DFMS) to extend the church's work on the Western frontier and in the Middle East, Africa, China and Japan.

The 19th century saw significant growth of The Episcopal Church in an increasingly urbanized and industrialized United States. In 1835, the constitution of the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society imagined a new missionary society in which every Episcopalian by virtue of baptism and not voluntary contribution would be a member of the missionary society. This change, augmented by the support of the Women's Auxiliary and their United Thank Offering, helped The Episcopal Church to grow significantly in the increasingly industrialized

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cities of the United States and in new American territories around the world added after the Spanish American War.

Bolstered by growing social, political, and economic power and privilege, Episcopalians increasingly saw themselves as a unified body possessing a national church ideal to spread the riches of American democracy and the richness of Anglican tradition at home and abroad.

The growth of the Episcopal Church in Connecticut in the 19th century paralleled the experience of the national Episcopal Church. With its many rivers providing transport and power, the state of Connecticut became a center of skilled manufacturing and a leader in the emerging industrialized United States. New parishes in the river mill towns and industrialized urban centers meant that the Episcopal Church in Connecticut followed the model of the growing vitality and unity of The Episcopal Church in the United States. Replicating the DFMS constitutional change of 1835, the constitution of Connecticut's missionary society was similarly changed in 1866 making all Episcopalians in Connecticut members of the newly reinvigorated "Missionary Society of the Diocese of Connecticut." The reinvigorated Missionary Society, with new membership and financial support, extended the church across state throughout the remainder of the 19th century.

### Missionary societies as holding companies

At the turn of the 20th century The Episcopal Church in the United States increasingly embraced a new unity as a national church with a corporate organizational model. The General Convention of 1919 passed sweeping canonical reforms that created a National Council to oversee the church's united work

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in missions, Christian education, and social service. The National Council and its work was to be led by the Presiding Bishop (who would now be elected) and a newly developed funding program that assessed dioceses for financial support of the church's programs.

With these changes, the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society became the legal entity of the National Council, functioning as the holding company for the church's financial and property assets. With this new corporate structure The Episcopal Church moved triumphantly into the 20th century as a "national church."

As was the case in the 19th century, the Episcopal Diocese of Connecticut followed the organizational changes and models of the broader national church. In 1921, the Diocesan Convention extensively revised the constitution and canons of the diocese creating a Bishop and Diocesan Executive Council with a growing centralized staff to oversee the work of the church in a variety of "departments" such as Missions and Church Extension, Christian Education, Christian Social Relations, Youth, Finance, etc. The Missionary Society, like the DFMS, was similarly reduced to being the holding company for diocesan financial and property assets.

For the majority of the twentieth century the affairs of the Diocese of Connecticut between the Diocesan Conventions were managed by the Bishop Diocesan and Bishops Suffragan(s) with a sizable, professional and dedicated staff. The many and various programs of the Bishop and Diocesan Executive Council were

## In this new missional age, a reinvigorated missionary society might just be the primary vehicle we need to foster our common identity and service in God's mission.

administered through fourteen deaneries.

The increasing centralization of diocesan program required a corporate center and in 1952, Miss Mable Johnson gave her stately home at 1335 Asylum Avenue in Hartford to become Diocesan House. For the remainder of the 20th century most of the affairs of the Diocese of Connecticut were organized and supported through this centralized structure while the Missionary Society increasingly receded into the background as a vehicle for service in God's mission.

### A new missionary society for the 21st century?

In today's church, many of the organizational models that we have historically relied upon in the 20th century have begun to lose their efficacy and meaning. In the 21st century, flatter, networked, collaborative ventures are replacing top-down, centralized, more authoritarian models of organization. The

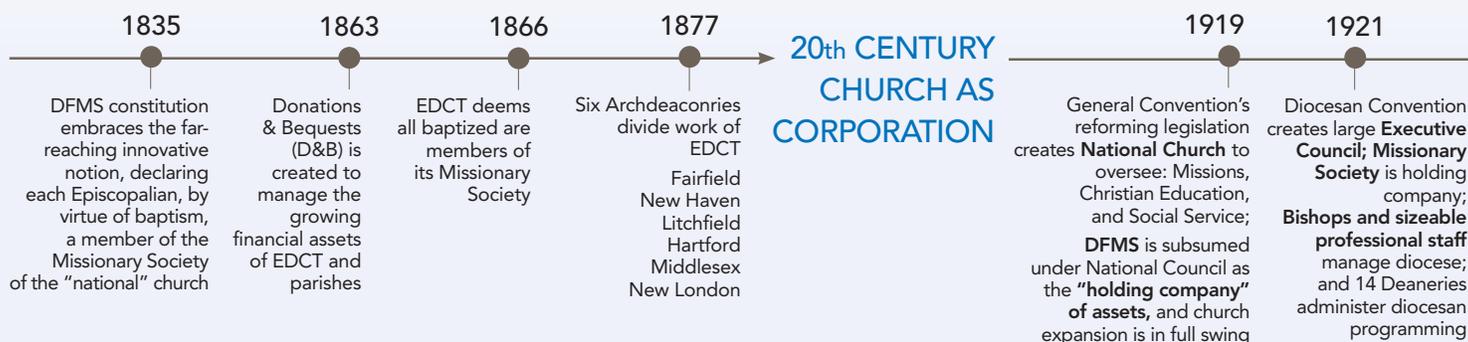
new imperative to be more focused on God's mission, more "missional," is increasingly replacing old preoccupations with keeping the church in business. It is an exciting, if not a bit scary, time of change.

And Connecticut Episcopalians are embracing change. In 2010 a significant downsizing of diocesan staff resulted in a move away from the delivery of centralized programs and the emergence of new forms of collaboration across the church in Connecticut. To foster collaboration and the development of new leadership capacity, in 2013 the previously disconnected diocesan boards or committees known as the Executive Council, Standing Committee, Commission on Ministry, and Trustees of Donations and Bequests began to meet together regularly as the Diocesan Leadership Gathering.

In 2014, Diocesan House in Hartford was sold and the bishops and staff moved into an open, flexible, and collaborative research and development loft in a former ball-bearing factory in Meriden. Called The Commons, this new space has quickly become a beehive of activity and innovation for Episcopalians across Connecticut. To underscore our common identity and collaboration in the 21st century, a rebranding effort has given us a new graphic image, a reclaimed moniker as the Episcopal Church in Connecticut, and a new watchword of "Participating in God's Mission."

In light of all these changes and new energy, we return to the question of how we Episcopalians in Connecticut can best participate in God's mission across our state

## WHERE WE'VE BEEN



Timeline courtesy of the Rev. Timothy L. Hodapp, Canon for Mission Leadership



and around the world in the 21st century. TREC-CT is helping to focus our discussions about who we are and how we want to come together to serve God's mission. Basic to TREC-CT's work are questions related to the nature and shape of the Missionary Society of the Episcopal Diocese of Connecticut. Such questions include but are not limited to: does a

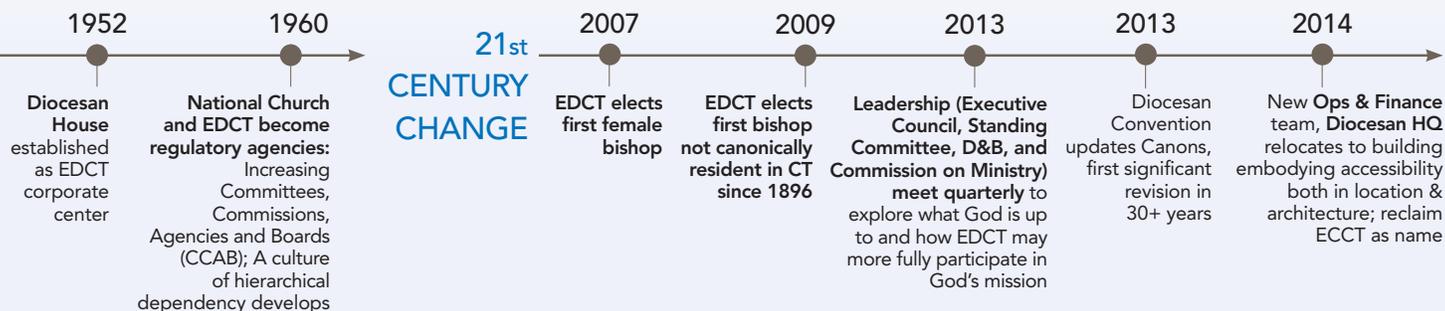
missionary society still make sense today? Should the Missionary Society of the Episcopal Diocese of Connecticut remain a holding company for diocesan financial assets and properties, or become something more? Can a reimagined missionary society really help all Episcopalians in Connecticut to participate in God's healing and restoring action in the world? If so, what would such a missionary

society look like? These are crucial questions that are at the heart of our common identity and relationships as the Episcopal Church in Connecticut today. Perhaps a reimagined, renewed, and reinvigorated Missionary Society just might be the voluntary organization we need to help each and every one of us participate more faithfully in God's mission in the 21st century.



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## WHERE WE ARE



*In 1784 Samuel Seabury was consecrated bishop for the Episcopal Church in Connecticut (ECCT). In 1818, "Episcopal Diocese of Connecticut" (EDCT) was used in the Missionary Society charter. In 2014 the ECCT name was reclaimed, although the legal name remains EDCT.*