

The Reimagining Of The Episcopal Church in Connecticut (TREC-CT): Re-forming Our Identity and Structures for the 21st Century

I. Introduction:

From the way we communicate to the places in which we find community, the world is being reinvented. The advent of the digital world has radically altered how relationships are formed. Yet, our need to relate one to another and have a sense of belonging is as strong as ever.

The Church is not immune from changes in the ways by which we relate one to another. That the Church faces profound questions of identity in the 21st century should not be surprising or overly feared. The ways by which individual Episcopalians and parishes have shared in our common life as the Episcopal Diocese of Connecticut in the 20th century were rather clear-cut and understood. In recent times, particularly with the decline of Christendom, the efficacy of the received ways of relating one to another and sharing our common life as Christians has diminished. Inherited structures in the Episcopal Church in Connecticut, such as Deaneries, the Executive Council, and Diocesan Convention, have begun to be questioned. Yet God in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit is always making things new. We are thus invited to ask: What is God up to at this time in our common life? How does God want us to relate one to another so that we can better serve God's mission together as The Episcopal Church in Connecticut and beyond?

This paper seeks to outline some of the features that have bound our Church together from colonial times to the present day. It discusses various ways by which we have been related one to another as Episcopalians in our past. It then offers a few questions to facilitate discussion and discernment. Our goal is to offer this brief primer on our identity and structures so that we can reimagine together who we are and how best we can serve the mission of God in Connecticut and beyond in the 21st century.

II. Connecticut's Colonial Anglicanism

The Puritan (Congregational) Church was the established religion in Connecticut and the official state church from 1662 until 1818. Congregationalism was the order of the day governing much of Connecticut's cultural and institutional life. Connecticut Yankees primarily understood themselves as belonging to the local meeting house, and the village was the locus of identity and economic life.

Adherents of the Church of England were subject to their Puritan village leaders and were influenced by the realities of congregationalism. At the same time, as catholic Christians, Anglicans (later Episcopalians) also believed that their religious identity was always something greater than the local parish. The fact that Connecticut was one of the earliest, if not the first, foreign mission field of the Anglican Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG) reminded colonial Anglicans that they were connected to and part of the Church catholic. Priests in the colonial Anglican Church in Connecticut were often SPG missionaries and all, while usually born in the colonies, had to go to

London for ordination since there was no bishop in the Americas. The close connection with London through the SPG and affiliation with the Church of England meant that most Anglicans were Tory identified. The Revolutionary War thus caused a crisis for Connecticut Anglicans and their numerous colonial parishes. What were they to do?

III. The Birth of the Episcopal Church in Connecticut

Bereft Anglicans in Connecticut had to adapt or disappear, given the radically changed circumstances after the Revolution. They embraced the new cultural context of democratic America and elected Samuel Seabury as their bishop in 1784. This electoral process for bishops was a profound structural innovation by Connecticut Episcopalians. Seabury called the first clerical Convocation in Middletown in 1785. This marked the first meeting of what would become, with the addition of “laymen” in 1792, our Diocesan Convention.

A council of advice for the bishop was formed in 1790, when the Convocation of clergy in Connecticut established a College of Doctors of Divinity. At the 1796 Diocesan Convention, five of these senior clerics were named, thus laying the foundation for our current Standing Committee.

In the early 19th century, Connecticut Episcopalians organized their own missionary society to extend and support local churches and beyond. In 1813, the Diocesan Convention formed The Missionary Society of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the State of Connecticut as a voluntary society to support missionaries and new parishes.ⁱ The General Convention of 1821 would follow suit and organize the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America (DFMS).

IV. 19th Century Growth

The 19th century saw profound expansion of The Episcopal Church amid an increasingly industrialized United States. In 1835, the constitution of the DFMS embraced a far-reaching and innovative change that made every Episcopalian, by virtue of baptism and not voluntary subscription, a member of the Missionary Society of the “national” church, which thus grew nationwide. Similarly, the Constitution of the Missionary Society in Connecticut was changed in 1866 to accept all its baptized as members of its Missionary Society.

In 1863, our diocese secured a State charter for Donations and Bequests for Church Purposes (D&B) to help manage the growing financial assets of the diocese and parishes. In 1877, the work of the Missionary Society was divided into six archdeaconries that spanned across the state, including Fairfield, New Haven, Litchfield, Hartford, Middlesex, and New London regions.

V. The Big Church of the 20th Century

At the turn of the 20th century, the Episcopal Church sought unity as a national church. The General Convention of 1919 passed sweeping canonical reforms that created the

National Council to oversee the church's united work in missions, Christian education, and social service. The National Council was to be led by the Presiding Bishop (who would now be elected) and a newly developed funding program that collected regular support from the church's dioceses. The DFMS became subsumed under the National Council as the "holding company" of the church's assets. The Episcopal Church finally had a nationally centralized program to match its national church ideal. With this new corporate model, the Episcopal Church grew in the United States and in its overseas missionary districts.

Not surprisingly, Connecticut followed suit. In 1921, our Diocesan Convention created a large Executive Council with a Secretary to oversee a variety of departments. The Missionary Society, like the DFMS, became the holding company for the diocesan assets. The diocese was managed by the bishops with a sizable professional staff. The many programs of the diocese were administered through fourteen deaneries that replaced the six archdeaconries. This centralized structure required a corporate center, and in 1952, Miss Mable Johnson gave her stately home in Hartford to become Diocesan House. In the latter 20th century, the corporate-styled church would give way to a more regulatory church which witnessed a profound increase in such things as the number of "Committees, Commissions, Agencies and Boards" (CCAB) of the national church. This was the beginning of a turning tide.

VI. 21st Century Changes

Change is happening apace in the Episcopal Church in Connecticut. In 2009, the diocese elected its first ever bishop from outside of Connecticut in 225 years. Beginning in 2013, the four major boards (Executive Council, Standing Committee, D&B, and Commission on Ministry) have met together quarterly. The 2013 Diocesan Convention updated the Canons of the Diocese - the first significant revision in over three decades. The diocesan staff has been greatly reduced in size and changed in shape. A new operations and finance team seeks to better serve our 168 parishes. Diocesan headquarters have been moved from Hartford to Meriden. Above all, Episcopalians in Connecticut are embracing the concept of a missional church, prioritizing our common service in God's mission of restoration and reconciliation in Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit.

ⁱ Details of the organization of the Episcopal Church in Connecticut are taken from: Burr, Nelson Roland Burr, *The Story of the Diocese of Connecticut: A New Branch of the Vine*. (Hartford: The Church Missions Publishing Company, 1962) p. 170 ff.