

Glad Tidings

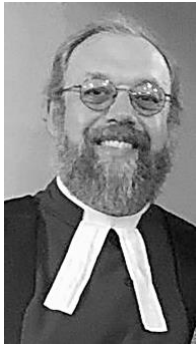


The Newsletter of the United Episcopal Church of North America

Lent 2021

FORTY YEARS OF THE UECNA

by The Most Revd Peter D. Robinson, Presiding Bishop



The year 2021 sees two anniversaries. The one that is the most significant for us is that 2021 marks forty years of the United Episcopal Church, which was brought into being in October 1981 as a Central-to-Low Church alternative to the Anglican Catholic Church. The other is that it represents forty-five years since the Minneapolis General Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church created what some folks have described as ‘the New Episcopal Religion’ which led to the creation of the mainstream continuum between 1976 and 1981.

If one goes back to the early to mid-twentieth century, the Protestant Episcopal Church was riding the wave of an expanding white, middle class, coupled with an Anglocentric American culture which honoured the British origins of the country. The national myth of an independently minded frontier people descended from the Puritans who settled in New England in the 1620s was intact, dutifully peddled even in Southern Schools. The Episcopal Church expanded rapidly from 742,569 communicants in 1900, to 1,261,167 in 1920, to 1,640,101 in 1950, topping out 2.1 million in 1963, with the number of adherents, folks loosely connected with the Church usually number an additional 50%. Today the presumptuously named ‘The Episcopal Church,’ which is the current DBA of the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society, has about 750,000 communicants, a return to 1900 levels of support in a country which now has population 4.3 times great than it was 120 years ago. Between 1900-1960 the Episcopal Church had built its growth on a policy which is perhaps best described as ‘tolerant orthodoxy.’ Inquiry into the history and origins of the Bible, including Higher Critical techniques was supported, but in public preaching and prayer the clergy were expected to preach the basic Biblical truths and to uphold Creedal orthodoxy, as well as maintain and build upon a rich liturgical tradition.

This all began to fall apart in the 1960s. When James Pike, the newly elected Bishop of California, started deconstructing Christianity in the early-60s, orthodox Episcopalians were alarmed, and then enraged when the House of Bishops dithered about taking disciplinary action. Eventually, twelve clergy from the Diocese of Arizona brought charges, but Pike was permitted to resign rather than face a heresy trial. During the 1960s, the Episcopal Church played with a variety of left wing causes and found itself financing the Black Panthers at one point under the leadership of the relative liberal John E. Hines who was Presiding Bishop from 1964 to 1975. It also slowly abandoned the traditional understanding of marriage, and toned down, and then abandoned its opposition to abortion. These years also saw a succession of trial liturgies – the Green Book, the Zebra Book, etc. – created instability in the Church’s worship, and a highly emotional and politicized campaign for the ordination of women started in the late 1960s. This storm of revolutionary movements came together at the Minneapolis General Convention in 1976 when both the first ‘performing edition’ of the 1979 BCP and the ordination of women to the priesthood were approved. In the eyes of many a New Episcopal Religion had been created.

The immediate response to the Minneapolis Convention, and similar moves in the Anglican Church of Canada, was the calling of a Congress of Concerned Churchmen, which met in St Louis in September 1977. The congress was highly successful in achieving its aims and managed to lay the foundations of a new Anglican body in North America which specifically rejected the changes in doctrine, morality, and practice that had occurred since the mid-1960s. The election of bishops was approved with the Revs. C. D. Dale Doren, James Mote, Peter Watterson, and Robert Morse being elected to the dioceses of the Midwest, Holy Trinity, Southeast, and Christ the King respectively. These men were consecrated January 28th, 1978 in Denver by A. Albert Chambers, former Bishop of Springfield, IL, the acting Presiding Bishop of the new body, assisted by Francisco Pagtakhan of the Philippine Independent Catholic Church, an Old Catholic body in communion with the Episcopal Church.

Sadly, after this encouraging start, things began to bog down quite badly. The attention of the House of Bishops was diverted into a protracted and complex revision of the Church’s Constitution and Canon Law, and tensions emerged between the bishops, some of whom favoured a Church dominated by Anglo-Catholicism, and others who were broader in outlook, and favoured a Church which was still very much the Protestant Episcopal Church, but *(Continued on Page 2.)*

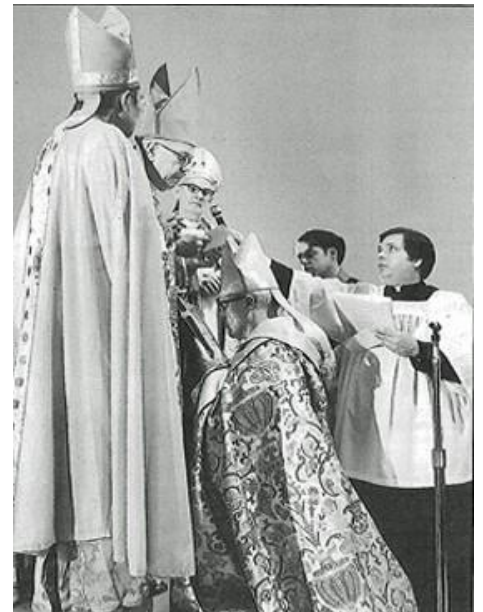


(Continued from front page.) without the heresy and goofiness. The New Constitution and Canons brought matters to a head, with three of the original bishops choosing not to appear at the meeting where ratification was to take place. However, with the helter-skelter creation of new dioceses there were sufficient votes to ratify the new Constitution. It was this event that led to the creation of the United Episcopal Church. Fearing that the new Constitution and Canons coupled with the Anglo-Catholic majority in the House of Bishops would make for a church that was inhospitable for middle-of-the-road and Low Church Episcopalians, several parishes withdrew from the Anglican Catholic Church to form the United Episcopal Church of North America, inviting the Rt. Rev. C. D. Dale Doren to be its first

bishop. (L to R: Bishops Peter Watterson, Robert S. Morse, James O. Mote, & C. Dale D. Doren.)

Bishop Doren and the organizing convention of the UECNA took as their model the 1958 Constitution and Canons of the PECUSA, with minor alterations such as the replacement of the term Presiding Bishop with Archbishop, the addition of the 39 Articles to the Declaration of Conformity, and some other minor provisions. The UECNA filled a niche, and soon attracted a following of 15 to 18 churches mainly in the traditionally Low Church dioceses east of the Mississippi. Latimer Seminary was founded in 1984 and was renamed Doren Seminary in 1987 to honor the retiring Archbishop. 1984 also saw Albion Knight consecrated as the first Bishop of the Missionary District of the East. He succeeded Doren as Archbishop in 1987, and under his leadership the denomination continued to grow so that there were some 40 congregations listed in 1991-92.

Bishop Knight retired in 1991 and was succeeded by Bishop Gramley, whose ill-health triggered a decline in the fortunes of the UECNA, so that by 1996 a decision had to be made whether to merge the denomination back in the ACC, or to elect a successor to Bishop Gramley. As the ACC was beginning to have internal difficulties of its own, it was decided to elect a Bishop Coadjutor. The Rev. Stephen Reber was chosen by the General Convention, and consecrated in September 1996. Only seven parishes had answered the call to convention in 1996, so Bishop Reber ended up driving many thousands of miles seeking out old congregations and helping to establish new. Between 1996 and 2006 the UECNA grew from 7 to 27 congregations. A further period of disruption (2008-2010) included the departure of three suffragan bishops in two years, reducing the number of congregations to 17. (L to R: Bishops Francisco Pagtakhan, Albert A. Chambers, & C. Dale Doren consecrated Bishop James Mote.)



The ten years that I have been Presiding Bishop have seen a period of consolidation, reform, and modest growth. The focus of these reforms has been to produce a church less wrapped up in paperwork, better able to respond to shifting congregational patterns, and more able to engage in meaningful church planting efforts. In 2014 both the Diocese of the Great Lakes under Bishop David Hustwick, and the Anglican Episcopal Church, US, under Bishop George Connor became part of the UECNA. There have been some unexpected developments such as an evolving relationship with some former German Reformed congregations in North Carolina, and an increasing number of ordinands with a solid academic background, all of which tend towards our church having a secure future.

One ongoing project is the establishment of Latimer Theological Institute, a revival in modern guise of the original UECNA seminary. A serious inadequacy of the denomination in the past has been the lack of any sort of long-term training program. Latimer was conceived as a long-distance learning program with the very practical aim of preparing men for the ministry. At present we offer a Certificate program for deacons, and a master's program for those entering the priesthood. It is hoped that the availability of these programs will enable the UECNA to grow its own, better educated clergy to carry forward the mission of the Church. The foci of Latimer are its emphasis on the principles of the English Reformation as being the foundation of the Anglican tradition, and on equipping future clergy for Church planting and evangelism.

So where does the UECNA stand after forty years? In one sense, where we have always stood – squarely on the doctrines of Scripture and of the English Reformation, and upon the rich tradition of worship and devotion enshrined in the Book of Common Prayer. I would also predict that as western society continues to disintegrate, the churches will be increasingly dependent on our own intellectual and cultural resources to preserve the great inheritance of Christian civilization. The future holds new challenges and new opportunities, and as part of the body of Christ we must embrace the future with optimism, relying on the grace that God supplies.

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