



Convocation of American Churches in Europe

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CONVOCATION

After the Revolution, American Episcopalians began worshipping from time to time at the American embassy in Paris. This worshipping community became our first congregation. As American interests developed in the nineteenth century, Episcopalians in various cities started congregations. Finally the Paris congregation petitioned the General Convention to find a way for them to become congregations of The Episcopal Church and, in 1859, the Convention passed the canon under which we continue to operate (I.15).

The canon prescribes how congregations “in foreign lands” can join The Episcopal Church. As long as they are not in an existing Anglican jurisdiction, they may form under a priest and be admitted to the General Convention under the jurisdiction of the Presiding Bishop (who was of course a sitting diocesan until 1940). The Presiding Bishop could appoint a “Bishop in charge” to oversee congregations on his behalf. The first, William Andrew Leonard, then Bishop of Ohio, was appointed in 1897 by Bishop John Williams, XI Presiding Bishop, himself also Bishop of Connecticut at the time. I am the twenty-fifth and the first elected Bishop in charge. Two others were full-time besides myself: Edmond Browning (1971-74) and Jeffery Rowthorn (1994-2001). With a few other exceptions most of my predecessors were retired bishops.

Besides the Bishop in charge the canon also calls for a “Council of Advice” elected by an annual Convention, which functions mostly like both a standing committee and diocesan council. The Convocation is not however a diocese, although it does send a full deputation to General Convention.

By 1870 there were four Episcopal congregations: Holy Trinity, Paris; St. Paul’s-Within-the Walls, Rome; Holy Spirit, Nice, France; and St. James, Florence. As The Episcopal Church developed strongly after the Civil War thanks to the new capitalists like J. P. Morgan, the European congregations became the beneficiaries of their largesse in terms of buildings. Of course, they liked to build structures but not endow them...

To allow The Episcopal Church to own land in Europe, the Board of Foreign Parishes, the Board of St. James and the Board of St. Paul’s were founded in the late nineteenth century by act of the New York State legislature. Their constitutions put them fully under the authority of the Church and especially the Presiding Bishop. Over the years they have not only held properties for various congregations but also managed endowments. The Board of Foreign Parishes, besides owning the Cathedral buildings in Paris and the parish hall in Frankfurt, also manages the Nice Fund, created from the sale of the American church in Nice in 1970, which helps support the ministry of the Convocation.

It is from these days of the Morgans, the Vanderbilts, and the founders of the Boards that we still have the image of being, as one clergy wag here put it, “rich expats playing at church waiting for the next steamer to New York.” If there ever was

some truth to this image, however, it went down with the Titanic. As Americans fought wars in Europe, congregations sprang up around Europe, some of which have since closed, but many of which have survived. Church of the Ascension, Munich, is 103 years old, for instance, and Emmanuel Church, Geneva, which started out as a Presbyterian church, became Episcopalian in 1877. All Saints, Waterloo, Belgium, and St. Augustine of Canterbury, Wiesbaden, Germany, began as chaplaincies of the Church of England. None of these were ever chapels of ease for wealthy New York magnates.

World War II and after

The congregations shared the losses suffered by their communities during the two world wars fought on European soil. During World War II the property in Munich was confiscated and most of the other church buildings were closed. After the war, the congregations of the American churches in Europe had changed. They were rebuilt by different groups from those wealthy few who founded them years before. And other Episcopal locations were established. An Episcopal congregation in Frankfurt held services in a Quonset hut after the original Church of England building was destroyed, continuing an Anglican presence of several hundred years in the city. An English church, St Augustine of Canterbury in Wiesbaden, severely damaged during an air raid in the war, was restored by the United States Air Force a few years later. Episcopal services have been held there ever since. The congregation in Munich found other facilities for worship.

More changes were to come. The Church of the Holy Spirit in Nice was sold during the 1970s in order to form a joint Church of England-Episcopal ministry on the Riviera. All Saints' Church, Waterloo, was formed in 1980 as an outreach from the Church of England to the American community, but later was welcomed under the Convocation umbrella.

The longest serving Bishop in charge to date was Stephen Bayne, from 1960 to 1968. At that time there were only seven parishes in the Convocation. He was also put in charge of military chaplains in Europe. (These two appointments provided an income so he could function as the Executive Officer of the Communion.) He found this work more taxing than it appeared at first. Bishop Bayne worried, according to his biographer, John Booty, that the seven congregations were always in danger of becoming "Episcopalian Clubs." He noted the beginning of a shift from retired Episcopalians who were "settled members" to a more transient population. As this trend has accelerated, the resulting mixtures of nationalities, languages, and cultures that characterize the Convocation today have eliminated the "Club" mentality almost completely.

Bayne, the driving force behind "Mutual Responsibility and Interdependence" which revolutionized the Anglican Communion, was a man of great missionary zeal and energy. His leadership began to energize congregations, especially since he could attract good clergy to a ministry that was considered for a long time a dead-end or the last stop before retirement.

The 1990s: the Convocation leaps forward

When Edmond Browning became Presiding Bishop, he remembered his sense of the Convocation's potential he had when he was Bishop in charge. And he challenged the Convocation to find the additional resources to support an expanded

episcopate, offering financial assistance from his own budget. As a result of this challenge, the Convocation has had a full-time Bishop in Charge, since January 1994. The Right Reverend Jeffery Rowthorn's episcopate included the Pilgrimage of the Canterbury Cross in 1997, when the Cross from Canterbury Cathedral journeyed to each of our churches and mission congregations and over 2,000 people renewed their baptismal vows; care of the clergy through annual clergy retreats; the formation of a 14-member Commission on the Ministry of the Baptized which focuses on mission, ministry in daily life, and Youth Across Europe; the creation of five mission congregations; the introduction of four other-language ministries; and the Mission 2000 consultation. Bishop Rowthorn also spearheaded cooperation with the other Anglican jurisdictions in continental Europe, with the formation of the College of Anglican Bishops in Continental Europe (COABICE) and the subsequent consultations to discuss a possible Anglican province in continental Europe.

In 2001, with the permission of Presiding Bishop Frank Griswold, the Convocation proceeded to elect, for the first time, its very own bishop, the Right Reverend Pierre Welté Whalon.

The Convocation has almost tripled in size since Bishop Bayne's days, with eight parishes and a fully independent organized mission in Clermont-Ferrand, France, plus nine other congregations (two francophone and one hispanophone), and two military congregations. Our four thousand members make us larger than a number of Episcopal dioceses in the US. We are also partners with the Diocese of Gibraltar in Europe to help establish a congregation in Zagreb, Croatia. We are examining the possibility to launch a mission with Chinese people in Budapest. And we oversee a small house church of Episcopalians in Almaty, Kazakhstan.

As provided for by the 1859 General Convention, this jurisdiction is wherever there are people who ask for it – a true non-geographical jurisdiction, and one of only two in the Communion, the other being the Diocese in Europe. It is worth noting that congregations in the Presiding Bishop's jurisdiction could in theory be located anywhere in the world where there is not an existing Anglican jurisdiction, or one with which TEC is not in communion...

This jurisdiction is a rich mixture of nationalities, languages, and cultures, as well as religious backgrounds. A survey by our Strategic Planning Committee in fall 2006 found that at best only 25% of our members are Episcopalians or Anglicans originally. And we have several ministries of outreach which we think do the whole Church proud: the refugee center in Rome, the deportee ministry in Frankfurt, the NGO work in Geneva (which conceived the UN program for AIDS in Africa), homeless ministry in Paris, college ministry in Florence, among many others. Since 2003 the Convocation has worked to support the Millennium Development Goals.

One project that has also enriched the wider Church is the creation of our four bilingual Prayer Books in Italian, French, Spanish and German.

In October 2006 the Convention of the Convocation passed a strategic plan named "Mission 2006." It seeks to tap the resources of the Convocation itself, as well as The Episcopal Church, to meet those needs of our congregations that they cannot meet for themselves. Despite the many difficulties of being a true non-geographical jurisdiction, the Convocation of American Churches in Europe is a vibrant, exciting part of The Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion.

The Rt. Rev. Pierre W. Whalon, D.D. February 2007