



EPGM

Episcopal Partnership for Global Mission

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE EPISCOPAL PARTNERSHIP FOR GLOBAL MISSION by Titus Presler, November 2009

Understanding the context in which the Episcopal Council on Global Mission was established in 1990, and its successor network, the Episcopal Partnership for Global Mission in 2000, requires an understanding of the longer history of world mission in the Episcopal Church. In 1835 the General Convention put the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society (DFMS) on a church-wide footing, making mission a church-wide responsibility. Every member of the Episcopal Church was designated as being a member of the missionary society as well as a member of the Episcopal Church. Thus, DFMS was created to be a centralized mission sending society on behalf of the whole church, and mission, both global and domestic, was a mandate in which every member was to be concerned.

This centralized structure for mission work contrasted with the voluntary society principle in the Church of England, which, as a whole, never sent any missionaries internationally. Instead, mission, whether foreign or domestic, was the province of voluntary societies of committed people who banded together to promote and implement it. A number of such groups were founded for world mission: the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge in 1698, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in 1701, the Church Missionary Society in 1799, the South American Missionary Society in 1844, and a number of other organizations. It should be noted, however, that the voluntary principle also had two major expressions in ECUSA in the 19th century: the American Missionary Society, which did not survive, and the Episcopal Church Women and their United Thank Offering, which flourish to this day.

Thus, with some exceptions, Anglicanism in the UK and the USA had two different ecclesiologies for how to carry out mission: a church-wide, centralized and somewhat top-down ecclesiology in ECUSA, where world mission was considered to be the responsibility of the whole church; and a grass-roots, voluntary ecclesiology in the Church of England, which implied that world mission, while important, was better left to particularly passionate advocates. Both approaches ultimately carried mission out on a worldwide basis, initially focusing on areas where the respective national governments had influence through colonial and imperial expansion.

We now fast-forward to the late 1960s, when the General Convention Special Program's focus on the urban and racial crises in the USA resulted in drastically reduced funding for international missionaries, with numbers sinking from about 260 in 1968 to about 70 in 1974. This upset Episcopalians who continued to be committed to world mission, and they wondered whether the DFMS would ultimately abandon missionary-sending altogether.

During the 1970s and beyond, evangelically-oriented Episcopalians founded a number of mission societies on the voluntary principle common in the Church of England, some of them named as USAmerican versions of their British counterparts: the Episcopal Church Missionary Community with the Rev. Walter and Louise Hannum in 1974; the South American Missionary Society-USA with the Rev. Richard Kew and others in 1976; Episcopal World Mission in 1982; SPCK-USA in 1983; Sharing of Ministries Abroad-USA with Ms. Edwina Thomas in 1985; Anglican Frontier Missions with the Rev. Tad DeBordenave in 1993; and other groups.

This development prompted tension and even animosity between the new groups and agencies of the Episcopal Church Center. The new groups felt DFMS had abandoned the DFMS's historic commitment to genuine mission and missionaries in favor of a liberal development agenda. DFMS units felt the new groups were alien to the mission ethos of the Episcopal Church, that they were not qualified to manage world mission, and that they were intruding on work long assigned to the DFMS.

Partly to mitigate the tension, Mr. Robert M. Ayers, Jr., at the time vice chancellor and president of the University of the South in Sewanee, sponsored annual mission conferences between 1980 and 1988, to which all were invited. Arising out of those conferences, a number of mission activists met to resolve relationships and explore cooperation. The result of difficult and important conversations was the founding in 1990 of the Episcopal Council on Global Mission (ECGM). Apart from simply meeting to take counsel together, "council" was always a misnomer, for the group never sought to direct or legislate or adjudicate. Instead, from the beginning it was a network through which mission organizations were to consult and collaborate, not compete. Initially it embraced about 25 agencies that included voluntary societies, parishes, dioceses, and DFMS units.

The network was structured to foreclose the politics of personal ambition and party competition. Decisions could be made only by consensus, and the steering committee was chosen by drawing names literally from a hat – measures intended to maintain openness to the Holy Spirit's guidance. For similar reasons the network deliberately has never had an executive director, preferring instead an administrator who implements decisions of the annual meeting and the steering committee.

Through ECGM, trust increased to a remarkable extent between individuals and groups who previously had viewed each other with suspicion. Evangelicals and liberals, traditionalists and progressives, began to consult, learn from one another, and recognize shared commitments in mission. Moreover, ECGM undertook several major initiatives: conferences on unreached peoples, persecuted Christians, and suffering children; and a mission exposure program in central America.

In 1994, Executive Council proposed that General Convention authorize the DFMS to cease sending missionaries as a normative practice. A single-page document, "A New Vision," from the Episcopal Church Center and authored by the Rev. Canon Patrick Mauney, then director of the Anglican and Global Relations Cluster, stated:

Specifically, the Executive Council will no longer fund appointments of longer-term Missionaries and shorter-term Volunteers for Mission on a regular, normative basis. Instead, national staff will collaborate with interested dioceses, congregations and institutions – especially those gathered under the umbrellas of the Episcopal Council on Global Mission – to see that qualified persons continue to participate in cross-cultural and overseas mission. Funding for such mission

will come from local sources, with the Executive Council using certain monies restricted to the Volunteers for mission program to assist, in ways yet to be determined.

The rationale for the proposal was stated as follows:

Why this change in direction from a national program to one more broadly based? One of the results of the Executive Council's conversations with the Church is a conscious decision not to carry out on a purely national level program and activities that can better be delegated to other interested sectors of the community.

The proposal thus was based on what has since become familiar as the principle of subsidiarity in organizational theory, which states that matters ought to be handled by the smallest, lowest or least centralized competent authority, central authority thereby being subsidiary to local sources of initiative. Further, the proposal expressed a whole-hearted endorsement by DFMS of the newer missionary-sending organizations and, implicitly, the voluntary principle on which they had been founded, even to the extent of handing over to them and to dioceses the task of missionary-sending in its entirety.

The proposal prompted consternation in many parts of the church, including virtually all the organizations of ECGM. Many felt that the DFMS would be abandoning the function for which it was established and that missionary work was so integral to the church's nature that missionaries should continue to be sent on a churchwide basis. At its 1994 annual meeting at Ridgecrest, N.C., ECGM crafted a contrary resolution, that DFMS continue to send missionaries and that a study be undertaken about how to strengthen this work of DFMS. A companion resolution was drafted to ensure the continuity of the Volunteers for Mission program, which was funded by an endowment established by Venture in Mission, the churchwide capital campaign of the 1970s.

As ECGM lobbied for support of its General Convention initiatives, other mission activists pursued a different route in the crisis in order to ensure that missionaries continue to go forth from the Episcopal Church. This group included the Rev. Mark Harris, the Ven. Michael Kendall and the Rev. Bill Wood, working with Bp. Richard Grein of New York and Bp. Herbert Thompson of Southern Ohio. They reasoned that if the DFMS would not send missionaries, it was ecclesially logical to turn to the next canonical structure of the church, namely, the dioceses and their bishops. Thus the Global Episcopal Mission Network (GEMN) was formed as a network of dioceses that would support world mission, possibly to the extent of sending missionaries on the kind of collaborative model suggested by the Executive Council proposal.

As events unfolded, ECGM was successful in galvanizing support for continuing the DFMS's work of sending missionaries, and its resolutions passed convention. Meanwhile, GEMN had made substantial progress in establishing itself by the time of convention. Although its initial impetus, the threatened termination of DFMS missionary-sending, was now moot, a network of dioceses committed to mission still seemed an important contribution to the mission scene, so GEMN continued to organize and grow, at one point including more than 50 dioceses.

Ecclesiological irony abounded in these developments. Voluntary societies initially at odds with DFMS were among the most vocal in advocating for the continuation of missionary-sending by DFMS, the centralized mission structure. ECGM, which celebrated all types of mission work, including the voluntary societies whose existence had precipitated the need for such a network, crafted the resolutions that ensured that DFMS continued to send missionaries. In relying on canonical

structures, GEMN was aligned more with the mission ecclesiology of DFMS, but it continued in existence alongside DFMS beyond the crisis of 1994.

Meanwhile on the ECGM side, there was a “hanging chad” left over from its founding: all societies worked together in ECGM, but only the missionaries sent by DFMS were considered to be “official” missionaries of the Episcopal Church in the sense of being formally recognized by name by Executive Council and being listed in the Episcopal Church Annual. So it was that the continuation resolution from the 1994 General Convention cited as an agenda the advisability of convening a group to work on reconfiguring ECGM and its relation to the church in some way that would facilitate the affirmation of all missionaries sent by Episcopal groups and their work in the wider world.

A group worked from 1994 to present a plan to the 1997 General Convention. While progress was made – for instance, the drafting of a theological basis – the organizational plan did not satisfy all concerns, and the 1997 General Convention asked more specifically that a planning group be convened that would represent Executive Council, ECGM, the Standing Commission on World Mission, and the Episcopal Church Center staff. The new so-called EPGM Planners worked throughout that triennium in consultation with all parties, including all ECGM organizations at two ECGM annual meetings, and presented a plan that the 2000 General Convention approved. An especially sensitive point in the planning process was the issue of how the network could be affiliated enough with General Convention through Executive Council to secure recognition of the missionaries of voluntary societies, yet provide enough distance from Executive Council to preserve the voluntary societies’ autonomy. Behind the sensitivity was residual tension from the 1980s that prompted some in the mission community to wonder whether Executive Council could be trusted to promote the church’s world mission.

The network developed by the EPGM Planners resembled ECGM in most ways. Differences were that it was to report to General Convention through Executive Council, which would approve the missionaries sent by non-DFMS groups, provided they fulfilled a commonly agreed set of sending standards. The tension between connection and distance was resolved by the network, not the member organizations, reporting to Executive Council. The organizations retained unchanged their autonomy, including scope of activity, fundraising, bylaws and boards of directors. An EPGM drafting group compiled a set of sending standards, unique in the Anglican Communion, a peer review process was implemented among sending agencies, and Executive Council began recognizing missionaries sent by SAMS, AFM and others, as well as those sent by DFMS.

Alongside Church Center units, dioceses and provinces around the Anglican Communion, and various Anglican mission societies, EPGM was very active in the consultations that resulted in the Standing Commission on World Mission’s 2003 vision statement for the church’s world mission in a new century, *Companions in Transformation*. In contrast to earlier ad hoc grants from Anglican and Global Relations, EPGM received DFMS funding in the General Convention budget to supplement its membership dues. In the late 90s and early 00s, EPGM grew to include more than 60 organizations.

Some in the mission community were disturbed profoundly, however, by the 2003 General Convention’s confirmation of the election of Gene Robinson, an openly gay priest, to be bishop of New Hampshire, and this prompted a number of the traditionalist EPGM organizations to reconsider collaboration within the network. Ironically, reconsideration was prompted partly by the very

recognition by Executive Council that the voluntary societies had sought, but which was now viewed as tainted by General Convention's sexuality decisions. Practically, they were concerned lest their work with Anglican dioceses and provinces disturbed by the 2006 General Convention decisions would be jeopardized by association with General Convention and Executive Council. More basically, concerned organizations questioned whether they could work any longer alongside organizations that affirmed the sexuality decisions. Beginning with a public break at the 2004 EPGM annual meeting at Camp Allen in Texas, traditionalist groups began to withdraw from EPGM and form a second mission network, Anglican Global Mission Partners (AGMP), under the auspices of the American Anglican Council.

This was a major blow to the international mission work of the Episcopal Church. Engaging difference within the mission community had enhanced the vision of mission organizations for engaging difference abroad. Participants learned both from kindred spirits and from those who differed with them theologically and strategically. There is now comparatively little contact between organizations on opposite sides of the theological divide about sexuality. The church's mission vision and work are poorer for the split.

Each network now has about 25-30 member organizations. However, some in AGMP no longer describe themselves as affiliated with the Episcopal Church. One historical ramification of the fracture of EPGM is that if Executive Council's 1994 plan had been approved by General Convention, the Episcopal Church today would have few, if any, missionaries who could be said to represent the whole church, for the new agencies that actually sent missionaries – the point at issue in 1994 – are all now affiliated with AGMP.

GEMN has continued to network among dioceses, each represented at annual meetings by two official representatives appointed by the respective diocesan bishop. In an effective terminological move, GEMN has designated these representatives as "diocesan agents," thereby stressing that they are to catalyze mission awareness and initiative in their dioceses. During the 1990s GEMN joined EPGM as a member organization, which prompted a number of dioceses to retain membership and pay dues only in GEMN rather than in both networks, for now they were indirectly part of EPGM through GEMN. GEMN has an elected board, and at various times has had an executive director, a position that is currently difficult to fund. A major contribution of GEMN has been the establishment of the GEMN Mission Institute, which holds an annual educational seminar that leads to public recognition of those completing the program. From time to time, the Mission Personnel Office of DFMS assisted GEMN with funding.

EPGM has recently updated its organizational guidelines and established a new website. It is currently seeking to increase and diversify its membership even as it considers its vocation in a changed and more fractured mission environment. It looks forward to collaborating in planning the 2011 Everyone Everywhere churchwide mission conference, having been active in planning the first such conference held in 2008 in Baltimore, Maryland. The network is actively exploring closer collaboration with GEMN. The two networks held their 2009 annual gatherings together and plan to do the same for June 2010 at Virginia Seminary.