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The Spirit of Missions: In the 1830s, an Era of Change and Flux, the Episcopal Church was Revived Through Missionary Efforts

Robert B. Slocum
Marquette University

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By Robert B. Slocum

In 1835, the General Convention of the Episcopal Church began a radically new approach to the work of mission. In many ways, the church began to move from a passive to an active stance with respect to mission work, especially in the growing territories of the American West. The convention declared the whole Episcopal Church to be a missionary society, the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society, with missionary work directed by a Board of Missions which consisted of 30 members. Separate committees were appointed to oversee domestic and foreign missions. This new approach to missions replaced a voluntary missionary society that had been disappointing.

That 1835 convention also provided for the election of missionary bishops by the House of Bishops, and Jackson Kemper became the first domestic missionary bishop. His jurisdiction

1837. He served as Missionary Bishop of China.

The Board of Missions began publication of a monthly journal, *The Spirit of Missions*, with the first issue published in January 1836. It continued in publication until December 1939.

The first issue expressed the church's understanding that "it is the church herself that undertakes the conversion of the world." *The Spirit of Missions* provided reports from the church's domestic and foreign missionaries, including details of their achievements, frustrations, and needs. Reports from the domestic mission field in 1836 have some relevance to the mission of the Episcopal Church today.

A layman in Lower Alton, Ill., lamented the church's sluggishness to do mission work in his area. He noted "what the zeal of other denominations

growth of the West, than among any other set of Christians."

Frustration is also expressed by the Rev. A. H. Lamon, missionary to Madison, Ind., who states that "Had there been a pious and zealous Episcopal minister settled in this place 10 years ago, it is thought by some of our most judicious citizens, that he would have collected by this time the largest and most influential congregation in Madison. Many who were once partial to our church have connected themselves with other denominations, and have thus deprived us of the hope that their early impressions and preferences might be revived."

The great missionary opportunity is made clear relative to the significant population growth that is taking place in many parts of the country. The Rt. Rev. Philander Chase, Bishop of Illinois, recalled preaching in "the village of Juliet," which he believed to be "destined to be among the most important places in the Western country." After noting the village's proximity to the planned site of a major canal, Bishop Chase asks, "Where so many people will, for their secular interests,

"Where so many people will, for their secular interests, congregate, ought not something to be done for their immortal souls?" — *The Rt. Rev. Philander Chase, Bishop of Illinois*

eventually included Indiana, Missouri, Wisconsin, Iowa, Minnesota, Kansas and Nebraska. His work extended mission initiatives and episcopal oversight to these territories as they developed. William Jones Boone became the first foreign missionary bishop of the Episcopal Church in

has done towards propagating their doctrines," and stated, "when I see all this, and listen, but in vain, for even the sounds of a voice of a herald of our beloved church, I am constrained to believe there is less of that ardent desire to make their labors and doctrines co-extensive with the rapid

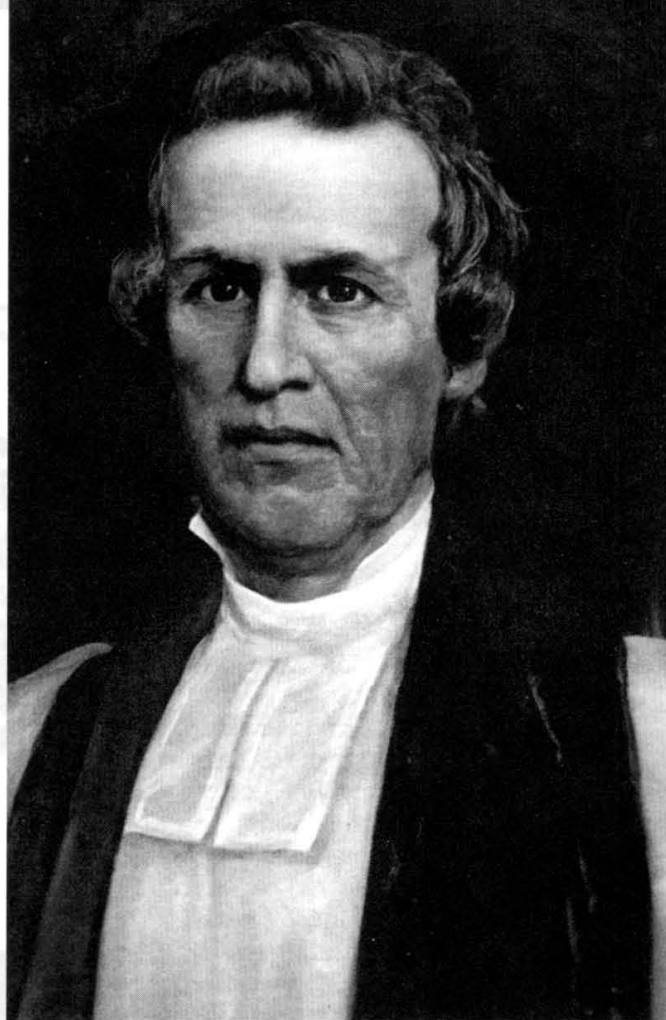


Photo courtesy of the Archives, University of the South, Sewanee, Tenn.
Bishop James Hervey Otey

congregate, ought not something to be done for their immortal souls?"

A sense of missionary urgency is found in the reports from the field. For example, the Rev. James De Pui, missionary to Alton, Ill., writes in 1836 that "We have fitted up a small room as a place of worship, the only one that could be obtained. It is not capable of holding half the number who would be willing to attend the services of our church, and it is with regret that we have sometimes to witness many of those who come to attend these services obliged to depart for want of accommodation ..."

Physical hardships and dangers are also part of the story of mission work. The Rev. Thomas A. Cook, missionary to Florence, Ala., writes from Lagrange, Ga., on the way to Florence that "it is feared that a rupture is about to commence with the Creek Indians, who lie across my path." The Rev. D. H. Deacon, missionary to Henderson, Ky., states that their church building "is without ceiling, unplastered, the walls cracked so as to admit the wind very freely," and that he "had to preach with a thick overcoat on me" during the past winter. In some cases, existing churches had been neglected. The Rev. Nathan W. Munroe, missionary to St. Francisville, La., stated that "When I first came, I found the church wide open; the windows broken; the organ gone; the few prayer books torn

Unionville and Painesville, Ohio, stated with some discouragement that "I would not advise my brethren as far in the West as Ohio, to engage in like enterprises. They will do better, in my judgment, to remain in their cures, and persuade their peo-



Photo courtesy of Nashotah House Library
Bishop Jackson Kemper

ple to furnish themselves with such churches as they can."

The Spirit of Missions reported in September 1836 that the issue of salaries for the missionaries was considered at the annual meeting of the Committee for Domestic Missions, and "the subject was found to be one by no means free from difficulties."

"Prejudice which exists everywhere against the church, when first established, has, in many instances, been nearly, if not altogether, obliterated."

—The Rev. Samuel G. Litton, missionary at Lagrange, Somerville, and Oakland, Tenn., on the reception and impact of Episcopal missionary efforts

in pieces; playing cards strewed about; and every thing looking like sin and desolation itself."

Fund raising for the work of missions was another missionary task. After making a tour of New York, Massachusetts and Connecticut to solicit funds to aid his three parishes to erect church buildings, the Rev. John Hall, missionary to Rome,

The committee was concerned "to inspire in missionaries a reasonable confidence that they should not be left to want, and to afford evidence to the church that no portion of the missionary funds, entrusted to their care, should be unnecessarily or inappropriately expended." The committee decided to reject "any regular scale of missionary salaries" and "to decide

each case upon its particular merits," considering the circumstances of each station, the expenses of living in that place, and other sources of contributions for the missionary's support.

The reception and impact of Episcopal missionary efforts is often mentioned. For example, the Rev. Samuel G. Litton, missionary at Lagrange, Somerville, and Oakland, Tenn., states, "That prejudice which exists everywhere against the church, when first established, has, in many instances, been nearly, if not altogether, obliterated." He is obviously gratified that his communicants include those whose eyes were opened "by a candid examination of the truth," and who are "now bright ornaments of that church which they not long since looked upon as holding principles inconsonant with true charity, and having the form without the power of godliness." Similarly, the Rev. A. A. Willis, missionary to Smithland, Ky., writes that "perhaps there is not another community in the West, numbering the same population, which has so little acquaintance with our church as this."

The Rev. E. G. Gear, missionary to Galena, Ill., emphasized the opportunity presented by the prevailing attitudes concerning religion. He states, "The people through the whole of this country are remarkable for their shrewdness and intelligence, and a vast majority of them are without any fixed religious principles; and could the doctrines and services of our church be brought to their view, they might, by God's grace, be brought to the true fold and thus saved from the horrors of impiety and unbelief."

There were certainly moments of gladness and celebration for the Episcopal missionaries. The Rev. Solomon Davis, missionary to the Oneidas at Duck Creek, Wis., states that his congregation of Oneidas "listened to the word with attention, and manifested much joy at the commencement of my labors among them."

Despite the obstacles and frustrations, a clear sense of missionary calling emerges from these records. There

(Continued on page 18)

(Continued from page 10)

was resolve and boldness. The Rt. Rev. James H. Otey, Bishop of Tennessee, urges that the church "calls upon her children everywhere, high or low as they may be in temporal offices — rich or poor as they may be in worldly goods, to help her in the blessed work of extending the knowledge of God's saving counsel and truth, till there be found no erring or sorrowing creature that doth not feel his tenderness and compassion."

By way of conclusion, it is fair to say that the reports from the domestic mission work of the Episcopal Church in 1836 provide considerably more

than sentimental or antiquarian interest. The 1830s were a time of radical change for the country, the economy, the specifics of where and how people lived. In the years preceding, the Episcopal Church had lapsed into a passive stance relative to the work of mission. The church needed to adapt to the changing situation in the developing country. It needed to take initiative, experiment with new structures and organizations, and to risk valuable resources leadership, money and time. The church needed to recognize the value of its own distinctive witness and uphold the truths of faith. It also

needed to adjust gracefully and flexibly to a variety of new and very different situations in the mission fields of America. An era of change and flux became an opportunity for church growth and revitalization.

It is striking that so many of the same fundamental issues and needs are present today. If the church is not prepared to face today's needs for faithfulness, initiative, risk, commitment, and sacrifice, "it is time that it was." □

The Rev. Robert B. Slocum is the rector of the Church of the Holy Communion, Lake Geneva, Wis.

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KEY — Light face type denotes AM, bold face PM; add, address; anno, announced; A-C, Ante-Communion; appt., appointment; B, Benediction; C, Confessions; Cho, Choral; Ch S, Church School; c, curate; d, deacon, d.r.e., director of religious education; EP, Evening Prayer; Eu, Eucharist; Ev, Evensong; ex, except; 1S, 1st Sunday; hol, holiday; HC, Holy Communion; HD, Holy Days; HS, Healing Service; HU, Holy Unction; Instr, Instructions; Int, Intercessions; LOH, Laying On of Hands; Lit, Litany; Mat, Matins; MP, Morning Prayer; P, Penance; r, rector; r-em, rector emeritus; Ser, Sermon; Sol, Solemn; Sta, Stations; V, Vespers; v, vicar; YPF, Young People's Fellowship. A/C, air-conditioned; H/A, handicapped accessible.

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