

Bishop West's Opening Sermon at the Primary Convention in 1970

The Lord said to Moses, "Tell the people of Israel to go forward." Exodus 14:15

We are gathered together here in historic Christ Church, Pensacola, in Primary Convention, to form a new diocese out of the Southern part of Alabama and the Northwestern part of Florida, to be a new unit in the on-going life of the Kingdom of God. To the Rector, Church-wardens and Vestrymen, and all members of this host parish go our thanks for this warm welcome.

Sentiments are strong and ties of love and affection in old loyalties are real. Many a one of us, baptized, trained, confirmed, and married in the present dioceses of Alabama and Florida are aware of the call of the future, but give a longing and yearning look backward at the "good ole days." We see the possibility of pitfalls and dangers and struggles in the unknown years ahead.

The children of Israel were being led by Moses towards the Promised Land. The Red Sea was ahead; the pursuing Chariots of the Egyptians were behind. The people of Israel cried out to Moses, "What have you done to us, in bringing us out of Egypt? --- Would it not have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness." The Lord, who knew what he had in store for them, and for the world, said, "Tell the people of Israel to go forward." So we here today in these proceedings hear the unmistakable Call of God to "go forward".

We are called of God to be true to our beginnings. Like the beginnings of everything in this Country, our beginnings were modest and meagre. On January 25, 1830 three clergymen and ten or twelve laymen met in Christ Church, Mobile, in Primary Convention to form the Diocese of Alabama. They were -from Mobile, Greensboro and Tuscaloosa. On January 17, 1838, three 'clergymen and twelve laymen met in St. John's, Tallahassee, to organize the Diocese of Florida. They were from Pensacola, Apalachicola, St. Joseph, Key West, St.. Augustine, and Tallahassee. Today we meet in primary Convention with 46 clergymen and 125 laymen entitled to vote.

Fourteen years after the Diocese of Alabama was organized they got their first Bishop, The Right Reverend Nicholas Hamner Cobbs, in 1844. Thirteen years after the Diocese of Florida was organized they got their first Bishop, the Right Reverend Francis Huger Rutledge, in 1851, the Bishop of Alabama being one of the Consecrators.

Those early church pioneers endured all sorts of hardships. The laymen from Demopolis or Montgomery, attending the first convention in Mobile took more than a month navigating the rivers to get there and back. Bishop Cobbs during his Episcopal travels was laid up with a shoulder separation sustained when his stagecoach overturned. In its first ten years Christ Church, Pensacola, lost two of its rectors in Yellow Fever epidemics. The parish and the entire town of St. Joseph, the then capital of Florida, was wiped out by a hurricane from which it never recovered. Indians were a constant menace, and some of our clergy died at their hands.

Numbers were small. In all of Alabama communicants numbered scarcely more than one hundred; and the same for Florida. Confirmations were about 100 a year in each Diocese. Money was scarce, and hard to come by. The first building for Christ Church, Pensacola, was about to be put up for sale because the congregation needed \$2,363.00 for its completion. An act was entered in the Florida legislature, entitled "An Act for the relief of Christ Church in the City of Pensacola." It was never brought to a vote because the new rector, the Reverend Ashbel Steele, arrived with \$2,000.00, gifts from the Church people of Connecticut. Clergy salaries were either all the money in the offering plate, or approximately \$300.00 per year. Later, the Bishop's salary was set at \$1,500.00 per year, and in addition \$60.00 per year for travel. Quite frequently neither one was paid.

Through all these hardships of meagre resources, small numbers, Indian raids, civil wars, fledgling organization, the Church taught patience, endurance, the faith as we have received it, and centered its work in persons, the care of its communicants, the training of its ministry, and the securing of the Episcopate.

We are called of God to be true to our Anglican heritage. In the Preface to the Book of Common Prayer we state, "This Church is far from intending to depart from the Church of England in any essential point of doctrine, discipline, or worship; or further than local circumstances require." There are some things that we hold in union with all Christians; for example, belief that the Church is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. But there are some things that characterize us in our Anglican heritage that give us somewhat of an individual flavor which we hope to hold in trust for the Church universal.

One of these characteristics is our ability to hold tradition and experiment within the operating framework of the life of the Church. We have traditional forms of liturgy which most Episcopalians have learned by heart, fairly traditional forms of ceremonial of standing for praise, kneeling for praying, and sitting to be instructed. We have the traditional services of the Solemnization of Holy Matrimony and the Order for the Burial of the Dead which are the envy of a large section of Christendom.

Because we have inculcated in our people a love of tradition, we have inspired some bits of humor pointed our way. "The 'trouble with you Episcopalians,'" said a prominent Presbyterian minister, "is that you are always reading the minutes of the last meeting - the service the same this Sunday as it was last Sunday." An old ship captain, a Congregationalist, was asked how he got along in the Episcopal service with all its standing, sitting, and kneeling. He replied, "Oh I just sail in real easy - like, drop anchor, and rise and settle with the tide."

But for all our love for and adherence to tradition we have always been willing to experiment. If a thing is not true, we want to find the truth and adhere to it. If there is a better way, we want to find that way and do it. When Christ Church, Mobile, and Christ Church, Pensacola, were built, neither had Sunday School buildings. We needed to train our children, so most every Church now has some sort of Sunday School facility. When the Diocese of Alabama and Florida began functioning it was obvious that we had to raise up and train our own ministry. So we helped to establish a secondary school, a college, and a seminary, at the University of the South. When parishes changed from being geographical areas to being groups of functioning persons it became evident that we needed a place where they might be bound together in fellowship. And now, most congregations have parish halls. When the English language changed, we changed the Prayer Book in 1892, again in 1928, and even now it is undergoing another change. We have kept tradition and experiment in balance.

We have combined authority and freedom. The authority of the Church is in General Convention and the Bishops are the centers of the faith. In our ordination vows we place ourselves under authority and promise to follow godly admonitions. Rectors of Churches are "rulers" and very little goes on in any parish without the rector's knowledge and consent. And yet with all the machinery for running a tight ship, we are marvelously democratic and free.

Every vote counts. In General Convention we reduce the size of the Executive Council, elect a new type personnel, set new guidelines, and give a practical veto to dioceses. In the Church it is all three, Bishops, Priests, and Laymen, working together to set policy. We have authority; but with it we have freedom of thought, freedom of expression, freedom of action. We are called to be true to our Anglican heritage.

We are Called to be true to our Lord. We know that you are acutely aware of this for one of your major committees, last summer, working on this convention, suggested that the name you choose be "The Diocese of the Holy Spirit." For at our Baptism we were signed with "the sign of the Cross, in token that we shall not be ashamed to confess the faith of Christ Crucified, and manfully to fight under his banner against sin, the world, and the devil." At our Confirmation we promise to "follow Jesus Christ as Lord -and Savior."

Under His Lordship, we are called to build this nation. Whatever you do, in all your life, you are building this nation. America is made up of each of us who is born here, or wants to join with those who are born here. The life you live, the good (or evil) deeds you do, the products you make, the work you do, the games you play, all go into making America what it is. In our pledge of allegiance to the flag we say, "One Nation, under God." One of the tasks of this new diocese is to keep it that way.

Under His Lordship we are called to build the Church. In the very struggle and travail of going through all the necessary work of creating this new unit in God's Kingdom you are building the Church. In the General Convention one group after another said, we are criticizing, we are debating, we are arguing, we are voting, but we are not leaving, we are here to stay. That is building the Church. In your home towns, say to yourselves, "How can we make our parish a force for good in this community." That is building the Church.

Under His Lordship we are called to build individual character and integrity. For the next two decades the Church is going to place increasing emphasis on individual religion, how you say your prayers, how you sing His praises, how you read His Holy Word, and what those things do to the quality and texture of your life, the decisions you make, the people you love, the leaders you follow, the hope that you nurture. You, the Primary Convention, are Called of God to be true to your beginnings, true to your Anglican heritage, true to your Lord.

What does it take to succeed?

It takes Hustle. Some people call it hard work. Most Americans call it hustle. I drove in to a familiar filling station one day. As I arrived at the proper pump, one man was sitting on the fender beginning the cleaning of the windshield, another was taking off the gas cap, another was preparing the hose for pumping the gas. I said to my friend the manager, "I really don't need all that service!" His reply was, "You see that station across the street. He sells gas too. If I don't hustle, you'll be over there." When someone comes into your parish Church, hustle!

It takes Determination. Football coaches call it "desire". You have got to want to play and to give it all you have got. Upset victories every Saturday afternoon come to those who have the "desire", the determination to win. Success comes with determination. Never give up.

It takes a Disciplined Organization. In football we call it teamwork. Everyone knows his assignment, plays his part, works not for his own glory, but the good of the team. If a man cannot abide by the discipline, the team plays without him and life goes on. There are open times for comments, for discussions, for arguments. Once the decision is made, the team expects every man to play as a team.

It takes Prayers and Hope. A football play starts down on your knees. Your part may be to run backward and pass, or lean into a man and block, but it starts on your knees. Your part in the new diocese may require you to backpedal a few steps, or run quickly down field, or open the way for someone else, but it starts on your knees. There comes your strength to move forward. There comes your power to resist and thwart the enemy. There your hope, your desire, your determination to win pays off.

The Lord said, "Tell the people of Israel to go forward."

The Rt. Rev. Edward Hamilton West