

TOWARD THE FORMATION
OF AN
EPISCOPAL URBAN CAUCUS

For years people have tried to identify the obstacles to the Episcopal Church's full participation in urban mission. Yet urban mission remains an essential ingredient in the identity of the Church which through city parishes and diocesan and national headquarters remains a city resident.

John T. Walker, Bishop of Washington, D. C. and chairman of the Urban Bishops Coalition, reminded that group what urban mission means: it is response to those who ". . . are crippled by the horrible consequences of joblessness and hunger; by alcoholism and drug addiction; by social and economic injustice and by racist policies; by classism and sexism; by homelessness and despair." The model for that response should be Jesus: "The main ingredients for a strategy for mission are (his) kind of compassion and self-giving," he said.

The Urban Bishops Coalition and the Church and City Conference of urban clergy and laity are two groups working on an urban mission strategy that will vitalize the Episcopal Church in the cities. Part of that strategy is the formation of an Episcopal Urban Caucus to work toward redirecting the Church's resources in the struggle for justice, equality and peace.

Such an Urban Caucus will bring together concerned clergy, laity and bishops and will seek to widen that circle of concern to others. The Caucus will develop and implement strategies that attack the causes of the degeneration of the cities, working as often as possible in cooperation with other religious bodies and secular institutions which share its concerns.

Within the next two years the Caucus hopes to enlist hundreds of people from parishes in dioceses which are working to vitalize church life in their own urban areas.

To form such an Episcopal Urban Caucus, the Church and City Conference and the Urban Bishops Coalition are undertaking a major educational and organizing effort during 1979.

History

The beginnings of this effort can be found in the birth and re-birth of the two organizations.

In the late summer of 1976, the energies of the Episcopal Church were focused on ordination of women and revision of the Book of Common Prayer. At that time, Franklin Turner, from his vantage point as

national officer for black ministries, was seeing at first hand the plight of urban parishes and the turmoil that surrounds them. He felt the issue should be brought before the Church and turned to Paul Moore of New York and John Walker of Washington, D. C. Out of these conversations came the plan that the bishops would convene a meeting of "urban bishops" during the September, 1976, General Convention in Minneapolis. In meeting together they hoped to find a way to call the Church's attention to the urban issues which seemed likely to pass unnoticed during the Convention.

When the bishops met in Minneapolis, they found a vehicle ready made for expressing their concern--Venture in Mission. As the Church was turning to support of a wider vision of mission, the urban bishops called upon it to use at least 50% of the money it would raise on urban programs. This goal has had wide acceptance as the Venture effort moves throughout the Church. The original group of bishops left Minneapolis committed to forming a coalition and to educating themselves. They wanted to understand better the issues confronting them and to avoid the errors of the Church's past effort to address these issues. John Walker became the Coalition's chairman and John Burt, Bishop of Ohio, became the treasurer.

The bishops committed themselves to conduct a series of public hearings across the country and to sponsor three institutes on social and economic issues. The North-South Institutes sponsored by the new Urban Bishops Coalition and the Washington-based Institute for Policy Studies attracted nearly 200 people. The public hearings gave the opportunity for a broad spectrum of individuals and groups to present their concerns to church leaders and provided authentic information for further study and action. A report of data from these hearings was later published as the booklet "To Hear and To Heed."

One of the people who testified during the seven hearings was Michael Kendall, chairman of the Church and City Conference. This group was also moving towards action. Founded in the 1950s, Church and City had for many years confined itself to a yearly meeting of urban clergy--and later laity--for support and the sharing of the problems of urban work. Painfully aware of the degeneration of the cities, they became convinced that an action agenda was required. Kendall's testimony at the National Hearing in Washington called for formation of a network of committed people, a national newsletter and the establishment of regional centers for urban ministry.

In addition to Kendall some 155 other people came forward to testify at the hearings in Chicago, Newark, Seattle, Birmingham, Colon (Panama), and both locally and nationally in Washington. They spoke to panels of church and community leaders about the role of the church in the problems that they faced. From their mouths came a plea not for money, but for involvement. They didn't want a handout, they wanted the church to be with them in their struggles.

Testifying in Washington, Gibson Winter spoke in medical terms. He said that the cities were not so much in crisis as they were victims of

a wasting, degenerative disease. He warned that urban mission today should not be just another program but must be seen as a long, long pilgrimage. Renewal of urban congregations and the solving of urban problems call for sophisticated involvement over a long period of time, he said.

Information from the seven hearings was compiled by Joseph Pelham and reported to a special meeting of the Urban Bishops Coalition in the spring of 1978. Pelham presented the basic issues under the following headings: Energy/inflation/ecology; jobs; housing; education; and income security. The report also suggested the need for national organization, the need for partners and coalitions, and the need to strengthen the role of the local urban parish.

In discussing possible action, Pelham wrote: "Careful reflection on the testimony. . . indicates that to a degree that may not have previously been acknowledged, many of the resources needed to address the crisis already exist. What needs to occur, however, is a tough-minded, careful, honest analysis which can lead to a redeployment of (Church) programs, properties, personnel, energies and resources to the right task." The bishops debated the report, accepted its findings and voted to move ahead.

Their recommendations for action are also included in "To Hear and To Heed." Among those given a high priority was the formation of an urban coalition of laity, clergy and bishops.

The plan for such a coalition came into being in the winter and spring of 1979 through discussions between the Urban Bishops Coalition and the Church and City Conference. The organization of the Episcopal Urban Caucus is being planned and funded by both groups. Their steering committees are meeting together to supervise the effort and the groups have pledged both personnel and funds. To provide an opportunity for education, issue identification and involvement, the two organizations will sponsor a series of regional institutes during 1979 where action plans for the proposed Caucus will be drafted. The final plan of action will be approved at an organizing assembly tentatively scheduled for February, 1980.

In the proposed Caucus, Episcopal bishops, clergy and laity will find an instrument for expressing the church's concern for the plight of the cities and their residents. The continuing commitment of all concerned Episcopalians can lead to realization of the planners' goal for the Caucus: "Vitalization of the Episcopal churches in the cities through involvement, reflection, advocacy and action on the issues of justice, equality and peace in our cities, nation and world."

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