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## TOWARDS FORMATION OF AN EPISCOPAL URBAN CAUCUS

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### WHAT WE ARE ABOUT

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.

The Urban Bishops Coalition and the Church and City Conference of urban clergy and laity are working together on an urban mission strategy to 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.

Bishop John Walker of Washington, D.C. calls urban mission "a 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." He adds that the model for the response is Jesus: "The main ingredients for a strategy for mission are (his) kind of compassion and self-giving."

Within the next two years the sponsors hope the Caucus will bring together hundreds of interested laity, clergy, and bishops from parishes and 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.

### HOW DID IT BEGIN?

In 1975 and 1976 the energies of the Episcopal Church were focused on

ordination of women and revision of the Prayer Book. Members of Church and City were worried by the Church's apparent lack of attention to the urban situation. In years past the group had been active in developing the Joint Urban Program and at the 1973 General Convention lobbied successfully for the establishment of the Joint Commission on Metropolitan Affairs. Now little was happening.

Church and City leadership began working on an action agenda, which the membership heartily endorsed. It called for establishment of urban training centers, a program of regional conferences, and the re-building of an active urban-oriented network.

In the late summer of 1976, Franklin Turner, from his vantage point as national officer for black ministries, was seeing first hand the plight of urban parishes and the turmoil growing around them. He felt the urban issue should be brought before the Church and turned to Bishop Paul Moore of New York and Bishop John Walker of Washington, D.C. Out of these conversations came the plan that these bishops would convene a meeting of "urban bishops" during the 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, they found a vehicle ready made for expressing their concern—Venture in Mission. As the Church was turning to support a wider vision of mission, the urban bishops called upon it to use at least 50% of the money it would raise for 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 educating themselves on the issues confronting them. They wanted to avoid the errors of the Church's past efforts to address these issues. John Walker became Coalition chairman and Bishop John Burt of Ohio became the treasurer.

## THE BISHOPS START TO LEARN

After a few meetings the bishops decided to sponsor a series of public hearings across the country and to present three institutes for Church leaders on social and economic issues. The North-South Institutes sponsored in cooperation with the Washington-based Institute for Policy Studies attracted nearly 200 registrants. The public hearings gave the opportunity for a variety 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.”**

During this same time, the Church and City Conference under the leadership of Chairman Michael Kendall of Scarsdale, N.Y. had been at work on its action agenda. Kendall presented the agenda during his testimony at one of the public hearings in Washington, D.C. His call for organizing a network of committed people received a high priority in future deliberations.

## **LISTENING TO THE VOICES OF THE CITY**

In addition to Kendall, some 155 other people came forward to testify in Chicago, Newark, Seattle, Birmingham, Colon [Panama], and both locally and nationally, in Washington, D.C. They spoke to panels of Church and community leaders about the role of the Church in the problems that they faced. In their testimonies 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 struggle.

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

## **STARTING TO MOVE AHEAD**

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, 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, and other invited participants including members of Church and City, debated

the report. The bishops accepted its findings and voted to move ahead. Their recommendations for action are included in "To Hear and To Heed." High on the list of priorities was the formation of a coalition of laity, clergy, and bishops.

## **THE TASK IS UNDERWAY**

Final plans for such a coalition came into being during 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 under the guidance of a joint steering committee. This committee has hired a small staff augmented by part-time staff and consultants with special skills. Several dioceses have released their own staff members to this work. A central office is located in the Diocese of Michigan.

During the latter part of 1979, the two organizations will jointly sponsor a series of regional institutes to provide an opportunity for education, issue identification, and involvement. From these regional meetings will come proposed action plans for the Episcopal Urban Caucus.

The chairmen of the two organizations, John Walker and Michael Kendall, have scheduled the organizing assembly for February 13-19, 1980 in Indianapolis, Indiana. Participants in that assembly will give final approval to the Caucus' plan of action for the future.

In the 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 commitment of all concerned Episcopalians will lead to a 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."

## **YOU HAVE A PART**

The regional institutes, the Caucus, and organizing assembly are open to all interested persons. For further information contact The Rev. Hugh White, Urban Bishops Coalition, 4800 Woodward Avenue, Detroit, MI 48201.