

DIOCESAN PRESS SERVICE/Episcopal Church Center 212/867-8400

'JUBILEE MINISTRY' FOR POOR
PROPOSED BY METROPOLITAN GROUP

DPS 82175

by Donald E. Becker

NEW YORK (DPS, July 29) -- The General Convention of the Episcopal Church will be asked this fall to affirm "that a ministry of joint discipleship in Christ with poor and oppressed people, to meet basic human needs and to build a just society, is the mission of the Church."

The Convention's Standing Commission on the Church in Metropolitan Areas, in its report to the Church's triennial Convention which meets in New Orleans, Sept. 5-15, calls on the Church to turn its attention to the poor and oppressed.

"We are mindful that it was such people with whom our Lord Jesus Christ chose to walk and with whom he lived and died," the Commission's report, which appears in the Convention's Blue Book, says.

"It is important to understand that we are guided by biblical and theological principles and not by philosophies which hold that such concerns belong ONLY either to the voluntary or to the public, sectors of society. We reject all such reasoning because we know that the needs of the poor can never be met by the Churches and other voluntary agencies acting alone, and because it does violence to the theory of government on which our country is based -- which affirms that government is not only of and by the people but also for the people...."

Further, the Standing Commission proposal to the General Convention will ask that there be made a "major new commitment to a ministry of joint-discipleship with poor and oppressed people in the United States and abroad, to meet basic human needs and to build a just and peaceful global society. It is proposed that the new ministry commitment be called THE JUBILEE MINISTRY (which) will be a celebrative ministry based on our belief that by affirming the biblical priorities of God ... we discover our own humanity in Christ, our own freedom.... The Jubilee Ministry draws no distinction between 'domestic' and 'overseas' or 'world' mission, or between rural, suburban, or urban mission.... Those distinctions no longer matter on a small planet which has become one neighborhood...."

The Executive Council is charged to "implement" a series of functions, which will include consciousness raising; Jubilee Centers to be focal points of the ministry; training for specific skills required for the Jubilee Ministry; research and evaluation; publications; evangelism and congregational development; a human resources bank; and a system of awarding grants for all of the mentioned functions. To this end, resolutions and budget requests will be

presented to implement the plan and proposal. Grants to be asked for each of the years of the new triennium will be \$2,000,000 to carry out the work.

The Commission will meet with the Coalition of Human Needs, the Episcopal Urban Caucus, and other urban groups, concerned with ministry to the poor and oppressed and various other agencies in the Church who share the goals described, and to monitor the functions of the Jubilee Ministry in Jubilee Centers that are selected and identified.

The Metropolitan Areas Commission is an heir of the old Joint Commission organized after the General Convention of 1973, renewed in 1976, and created a Standing Commission at the 1979 Convention.

The long-range goal that was established by the Convention of 1979 for the Commission was to "develop recommendations and strategies which will be of concrete assistance to the Church in metropolitan areas, in shaping new patterns of mission and ministry." The immediate goal the Convention charged was to "devise an action strategy for consideration by the 1982 General Convention in regard to the role of the General Convention and the Executive Council in the implementation of a program of urban mission and evangelism in urban and other deprived areas, with primary focus on local congregations."

In undertaking its work, the Standing Commission had been conscious of the complex history of the Episcopal Church's participation in metropolitan ministries, and in its report, summarizes the recent experience of the Church in this area.

IN THE FIFTIES, urban migration, which has accelerated during World War II, continued. As the migrants of all backgrounds settled in the cities, affluent and middle-class white neighborhoods rapidly changed with residents moving to the suburbs. And their congregations followed them. The religious boom of the decade had little effect on Episcopal Churches in the inner city. Some congregations survived but many others were closed. Some served black and/or Hispanic congregations; a few became multi-racial.

The rapid social change which the Episcopal Church experienced was largely unnoticed, the Commission observed. Successes in the suburbs and predominantly white middle class membership determined priorities, with little awareness of the needs of the urban or rural poor. Some innovative clergy with supportive bishops did begin work in desperate inner-city

parishes, some such work being successors of earlier institutions such as city mission societies and settlement houses. The Church as a whole was only beginning to hear the imperative to become involved in the battle for justice and against racism.

THE SIXTIES marked a move from idealism to chaos for Americans and it was reflected in the life of the Church, the report said. The call by John F. Kennedy, "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country" found a response in many movements. In the Episcopal Church, there were efforts to raise members' consciousness about urban realities (with "Metabagdad" conferences a major tool); there was selection of twelve dioceses as pilots for the rest of the church; and training programs for urban ministry were undertaken. In 1964, General Convention elected John E. Hines, Presiding Bishop. The Churchwomen voted to help fund urban programs with significant allocations from United Thank Offering monies. At the height of the several crises of the mid-sixties and against the background of burning cities in the summer of 1967, Hines convened a special task force to design a suitable response by the Episcopal Church.

The Seattle Convention in 1967 provided what he called the means "by which this Church can take its place humbly and boldly alongside of and in support of the dispossessed and oppressed people of this country for the healing of our national life." That venture was the General Convention Special Program (GCSP) which had as its aims bringing people of the ghettos into areas of decision making and their using political and economic power to support justice and self-determination for all, with skilled assistance and financial assistance for community organisations involved in betterment of depressed urban areas.

GCSP was again the central order of business at the Special General Convention at Notre Dame in 1969 when once again the Church voted to place its support behind the program of empowerment which GCSP represented. However, strains and tensions were heightened between supporters and opponents of the actions. One acknowledged shortcoming of GCSP, the report said, was that it was structured to function apart from parish and diocesan structures so that it was primarily a program of Executive Council. Another weakness was found in the fact that the conversion experienced by the delegates was impossible to communicate to constituencies back home and a backlash resulted.

THE SEVENTIES. The Sixties ended with a Church divided, the Commission said, reflecting in its own life the deep schisms in American society, between the races, and between those who supported the Vietnam involvement and those who opposed it. And the changes in racial, economic, social, and sexual justice were being seen by many in their relationship to challenges of the institutional life of the Church. In the 1970 Convention in Houston, there was a drastic limiting of GCSP and the curtailed resources mandated a cutback of over 50 percent of the Episcopal Church Center staff. The 1973 Convention in Louisville brought GCSP to an end.

The Church's engagement with racism, led by Hines, was ultimately overshadowed by other concerns: Global justice needs; the Vietnam war; sexual justice; the ordination of women; the peculiarly internal issue of the Prayer Book revision. For several years the Church seemed immobilized by its internal strife. Nevertheless, the hopes which had so stirred the Church earlier survived on the national level in the Coalition for Human Needs and "desks" responsive to the ethnic ministries with black, Asian, Hispanic, and Native American people.

Under the new Presiding Bishop, John M. Allin, a massive campaign for renewal and capital funds, Venture in Mission, took shape. In 1976, General Convention approved the ordination of women and the first reading of the revised Book of Common Prayer. In 1979, the new Prayer Book was formally ratified, and the Coalition for Human Needs was continued.

Towards the end of the decade of the 1970s, a group of bishops whose dioceses included large metropolitan areas formed the Urban Bishops Coalition and sponsored a series of hearings to call the Church's attention to the realities of contemporary urban life. From this there came the Episcopal Urban Caucus, which, meeting in annual Assembly, undertook to lead the Episcopal Church towards increasing its attention to poor and oppressed people and to wide range of other issues related to the urbanized society. By the end of 1981, the Episcopal Urban Caucus had developed a structure, and incorporated, to take its place as a significant force in the Church. Its role placed it in a lengthy tradition of unofficial Church groups which both challenge the Church and also undertake their own programs. (Historically, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, a voluntary organization, did much to bring the Episcopal Church to the American colonies. And in recent years, the Episcopal Society for Cultural and Racial Unity (ESCRU) undertook its own witness for racial justice early in the 1960s.)

The Joint Commission on the Church in Metropolitan Areas, created after the 1973 Convention, was reconstituted in 1976 and at the 1979 Convention became a Standing Commission. Its first report will be made to the 1982 Convention.

The Standing Commission on the Church in Metropolitan Areas is one of 27 boards, committees and commissions which plan work in their several spheres of responsibility between meetings of General Convention and make action proposals to that legislative body every three years. The Commission's report will be studied and discussed and recommended resolutions will be reported out by appropriate legislative committees of the House of Bishops and the House of Deputies for concurrence. The Rev. Michael S. Kendall of Scarsdale, N.Y., is chairman of the 12-member Commission.

#