

The Archives of the Episcopal Church
Research Report: The DFMS and The Episcopal Church
Prepared For: President of the House of Deputies, Gay Jennings
Date: September 14, 2012

What is the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society?

In 1820, the General Convention adopted a constitution for “The Protestant Episcopal Missionary Society in the United States for Foreign and Domestic Missions” in order to provide a means -- by raising and distributing funds -- to support missionaries in states and territories in which the Church was not yet organized. This first constitution, however, was deeply flawed. Right from the beginning the governance of the DFMS was at issue in terms of the rights of laity and bishops and who would have seat and vote on the board of directors. The 1821 Special General Convention looked at this salient concern along with one relating to GTS. Acting on the Presiding Bishop’s request, General Convention adopted a new constitution and a new name: The Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America.

The actual organization of these early societies occurred outside the General Convention (which had no administrative layer) by clergy and laymen for the most part. The Society met for its first 14 years in Philadelphia. The antebellum Church was quite small and it took many years for the DFMS to raise sufficient funds to carry out their work. As it began to conduct business more seriously, it made sense for the Society to organize itself more rigorously. The Society revised its constitution in 1835 with two committees: foreign and domestic. A Board of Missions was created within the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society as an attempt to broaden participation and involvement and oversee the general missionary operations of the Church. Membership of the DFMS was expanded to include all baptized members of The Episcopal Church. The committees each decided separately to meet in New York City and space was rented on Franklin St. The new organization was more intimately tied to General Convention at this point.

The development of a number of missionary outposts in foreign countries led the DFMS's Board to look at a recommendation to incorporate in 1843. Legal incorporation was pursued by the Board and completed in 1846 under New York State law without much fanfare. Much before 1846 while the Society was focused on domestic missions, the Society would not have felt compelled to incorporate as it was not required under the separation clause and because their assets were fairly small.

It was not until well after the Civil War that the Church required a more resilient mission support structure to meet the potential for growth. In 1871, the DFMS constitution was amended to give the Board of Missions control of the corporate powers of the Society. In 1877, three important events happened: (1) General Convention added the Board of Missions to the Church’s Canons and, interestingly, made the whole General Convention (a smaller group than today) the

constituent membership of the Board of Missions;¹ (2) inserted the constitution of the DFMS as a canon, making it an official mission arm of the Church; and (3) established a new executive group, the Board of Managers. These changes sealed the connection between the DFMS and the General Convention, with the former being an operational agency of the latter for purposes of executing the day-to-day mission work of the Church. The House of Deputies' committee on the DFMS reported that the idea was to separate the business from the mission aspects of the Church and bring efficiency to the two.

It is important to note, however, that General Convention had reserved other important mission work in the "home field" (as distinct from the expanding "domestic" field) to canonical agencies other than the DFMS, which was the agency that conducted mission in foreign lands and the domestic rural areas, but chiefly territories of the American west. By 1910 General Convention had authorized three quasi-independent boards to advance mission concerns of the Church. In addition to the lead organization of the (DFMS) Board of Missions, General Convention had also established and funded the General Board of Religious Education and the Social Service Commission, which carried out the Church's domestic social ministries. These three entities were all administered separately with each receiving its own budget from the General Convention.

Historians have noted the effect on American institutions of centralization in corporate bureaucracies at the turn of the century. The multi-agency configuration for the program of the General Convention was soon seen to be too disconnected and ineffective for a modern and world-wide missionary effort. A Joint Commission on Missionary Organization and Administration recommended several fundamental changes to the organization of the national church at the 1916 General Convention. Convention responded positively and requested that the DFMS Board of Missions take the lead in creating a comprehensive budget for the Episcopal Church.

This proved to be a transformative request that led the Board of Missions, under Bishop Lloyd, to invite the General Board of Religious Education and the Social Service Commission to collaborate and present one program to the General Convention. That program later became known as the "Nation Wide Campaign" of 1919. The success of this combined initiative encouraged support for the passage of the canon that centralized governance for the Episcopal Church in a National Council with a more prominent role for the Presiding Bishop. The three independent boards were replaced on December 31, 1919 by the new entity called, "the Presiding Bishop and Council" (today known as Executive Council) that would be responsible for directing the missionary evangelism, educational, and social work of the Church.²

¹ General Convention served as the Board of Missions until 1904. General Convention simply convened as the Board of Missions while in session, on the third day, to conduct whatever corporate business was required of the whole board. This practice continued in another form and until quite recently the Executive Council would occasionally convene as the Board of Directors to record an important vote of the Council in its corporate, DFMS capacity, rather than as a body of General Convention.

²This phrase articulating clearly the three areas of mission stood in the Church's canons until 1997 when it was replaced by the less precise phrase "ministry and mission."

According to legal counsel in 1919, “the only corporation to survive the formation of the Presiding Bishop and Council...was the incorporated society of the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society and that therefore this Society is the only agency properly entitled to hold such funds as may come under the control of the Presiding Bishop and Council.”³

Recognizing the reality of a post-colonial international membership, the National Council in 1964 proposed renaming itself the "Executive Council." Since 1920, Council had maintained a unified and tightly controlled executive relationship to General Convention. That relationship was tested, however, in the tumultuous 1960s, when external social changes created a groundswell for reforming institutions that were run largely by and for white males.

Dramatic changes in the composition and expectations of the Church’s polity led to considerable tension between General Convention and Executive Council during the transitional years. Executive Council’s membership was greatly expanded and its membership was broadened to more accurately reflect the Church’s demographics. The result was a more representative governance structure, but it perhaps also opened those structures to a series of less disciplined and experienced leaders, especially in both Convention and Council. At the same time, the relationship between Council and the staff was dramatically altered with the centralization of executive authority in the DFMS under the office of the Presiding Bishop. The General Convention was kept at arms length from the DFMS staff realignment by the designation of an Executive Officer.

What is the relationship between the DFMS, Executive Council, and General Convention?

Religious institutions enjoy a privileged position in American society. Protected under the First Amendment, they are not classified by the same rubrics or evaluated by the same criteria as other non-profits under law. According to a brief but excellent article on Church governance by Perry Dane, the Church is best conceived as a separate sovereign, a government, or a corporation, rather than a club or charity. The first amendment offers religious institutions a striking degree of autonomy. No other type of organization can make its own rules and be immune from laws governing such areas as labor relations and civil rights.⁴

As a religious society, the General Convention can not be sued and The Episcopal Church can not go out of business except by an action of General Convention. The religious corporation (the DFMS) is the form a religious society (the General Convention) takes to meet the everyday business obligations of the Church and protect its reputation and assets while acting within secular law and society. Its incorporated name – the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America – establishes it as the corporation responsible for the missionary work of the Church. Engaging in missionary work, especially in hazardous areas, exposes the Church to liability and risk. It is the DFMS that offers

³ Minutes of the Presiding Bishop and Council, December 11, 1919.

⁴Dane, Perry. “The Corporation Sole,” in N. J. Damerath and Peter Dobkin Hall et al. *Sacred Companies: Organizational Aspects of Religion and Religious Aspects of Organizations*, p. 51.

legal protection to agencies and officers. In addition, of course, the DFMS as a corporation can hold property, enter into contracts, sue for relief, file for tax exemptions and other such activities of business operations.

The advantage gained by having the DFMS handle day-to-day management of Church business is that it allows the General Convention to concentrate on policymaking and the Executive Council to implement those policies. To prevent redundancy and confusion, the Executive Council as the executive body of the corporation connects the General Convention and the DFMS. The simple fact that the constitution of the DFMS is included in the Canons clearly demonstrates, however, that it operates under specific rules, budgets and policies that are adopted by the Church in its privileged capacity as a religious society, in this case, the General Convention.

It may be helpful to think of the Executive Council as the linchpin between the DFMS and the General Convention. As the Board of Directors of the Society, the Executive Council legally controls the finances and property of the Episcopal Church to carry out the missionary endeavors of the Church. The Executive Council acts under the authority of the General Convention but it may, and has, acted beyond their authority and incurred the Convention's opposition for doing so.⁵

Nonetheless, the formation of Council in 1920 provided the Church with a fairly creative mechanism to effectively carry out the programs and policies adopted by General Convention without turning over authority for basic doctrine, social policy, or mission priorities to a corporation. Recognizing the importance of this new entity, at the last meeting of the Board of Missions, the president remarked, "...you want to be grateful...that the Church has finally found out that a headless body cannot have intelligence, and it has really and indeed created an organization with intelligence and authority to act."⁶

What is the origin of the name "The Episcopal Church?"

At the 1964 General Convention, memorials were received from the dioceses of Chicago, Montana, New Jersey, and South Florida petitioning for a change in the name of the Church by expunging the word "Protestant" from its title. This occurred at the height of the ecumenical period, when it no longer seemed necessary for the Church to assert its Protestant heritage, but it

⁵As illustration, many felt the Presiding Bishop and Council traveled too far ahead of General Convention and the local church in the 1967 General Convention Special Program (GCSP) Convention responded with a dramatic funding pullback. Tensions between Council and Convention also appeared during the VIM campaign.

⁶ Address of Bishop Arthur Selden Lloyd. Minutes of the Presiding Bishop and Council, December 10, 1919. Note that The Presiding Bishop's role in this relationship is reflected in her titles: Presiding Bishop (an administrative officer with specific oversight duties as president of the House of Bishops, the presiding officer of joint Convention sessions, and president or presiding officer of the Executive Council and DFMS), and her role as Primate and Chief Pastor in her leadership capacity for the Episcopal Church as a religious society nationally and internationally.

was a desire of the Anglo-Catholic wing of the Church since the end of the 19th century. Others were concerned not to lose the Church's ties to Reformation theology and worried about the potential legal ramifications of altering the name.

In response to the resolution, Dr. Clifford P. Morehouse, President of the House of Deputies, offered an amendment that satisfied all parties. The amendment provided a previously absent Preamble to the Constitution. The amendment, finally acted upon at the 1967 General Convention, reads the same today, declaring, "The Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America, otherwise known as The Episcopal Church (which name is hereby recognized as also designating the Church) is a constituent member of the Anglican Communion..." Note that the official name of the Church was not shortened, but given an alternate expression. It is not a trivial difference to keep in mind that "The DFMS of the PECUSA" is not interchangeable with "The PECUSA". "The Episcopal Church" is a canonically approved alternative name for the latter entity and not for the former.

A Note With Regard to the Budget of The Episcopal Church

In 1994, General Convention approved the first unified budget, but it was not until 1997 that General Convention revised Canon I.4.6 to combine the program and canonical askings. The revision echoed the earlier (1919) change that asked the DFMS as the operational arm of the Church (and Council acting in that capacity) to bring a comprehensive budget to the General Convention. The 1997 revision reinforced this relationship by explicitly using the name "the Budget for the Episcopal Church," organized in such a way as to fund three categories: mission (program), operations (corporate), and the General Convention (canonical).

The use of the DFMS in the language of the budget principles may be confusing because of Executive Council's dual structural role. Regardless of that role, the Executive Council does not submit a budget *for* the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society. Council charge is to submit a budget for the whole Episcopal Church (PECUSA). Thus, the Budget of The Episcopal Church often funds entities and programs that are not strictly speaking part of the DFMS.