

The Archives of the Episcopal Church
The Special General Convention II
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Two strands of reform fed into the call for the 1969 Special General Convention -- both coming out of the 1967 session.

The first was the Mutual Responsibility Commission, which submitted a resolution in their triennial report requesting the Convention, “not adjourn *sine die* as planned; but, rather, that it recess and resume its session in the Summer of 1969.” Established first in 1963 by the Presiding Bishop as an advisory committee and commissioned by General Convention in 1964, the Commission was created to respond to the MRI initiative issued by the Anglican Congress. Its mandate, “was of an unprecedented scope...and included...virtually everything comprehended in the Summary of the Law.” Faced with the enormous responsibility of reforming the “antiquated structures” of the church, the Commission proposed a second session in order for the General Convention to focus on restructuring, “primarily for the purpose of continuing the review of Constitution and Canons...”, without the distraction of other concerns facing the church.

Meanwhile, a second strand of societal events unfolded in the weeks leading up to the 1967 General Convention that eventually overshadowed the 1969 special session. After race riots erupted in several cities, Presiding Bishop John Hines toured Brooklyn, Newark and Detroit and, deeply moved by his visits, met with a panel of advice about how the Church could help the plight of the inner cities. The Presiding Bishop was motivated to dramatically alter the agenda of the meeting. Only one week before the General Convention met in Seattle, Hines refocused the Convention away from internal concerns by proposing a radical shift in priorities that would focus the church on poverty and injustice in seating of women deputies and liturgical reform.

On the seventh day of the 1967 Convention, the House of Deputies Committee on Structure presented its report on the Mutual Responsibility Commission’s resolution stating, “It is the view of your Committee that there will remain, after the conclusion of this session of the General Convention, many items of importance to this Church which will not have received the attention to which they are entitled; but that constitutional, canonical, and practical questions are such that a Special Meeting would be more appropriate than a recessed meeting.” The resolution, asking for the Presiding Bishop and Bishops to call a special meeting, was approved.

The following day, the House of Bishops approved a resolution calling for the meeting, citing in the whereas clause, “...the realm of tenure, consideration of the Council of Renewal, the Office of Deacon, adequate study of the Report of Theological Education,...the place of the laity,” and matters raised at Lambeth 1968, as reasons to justify a Special General Convention in the summer of 1969. The specific date and place was to be determined by the Presiding Bishop.

Between 1967 and 1969, disapproval of the General Convention Special Program (GCSP), the *Black Manifesto* and the volatile crises facing society outside of the church, such as equal rights for women and the Vietnam War, combined to reshape the agenda of the Special General Convention away from its original stated purpose. To answer the demand for diversity, both Hines and the President of the House of Deputies, John B. Coburn, sought to keep an open dialogue that represented the many voices of the church. Dioceses were asked to send a special delegation of three people, with voice but no vote, consisting of a minority, a woman, and a young person under the age of 25. This decision coupled with the fear and anger generated by the *Black Manifesto* encouraged opponents of the Special General Convention to ask the meeting be canceled, but after a poll of Bishops showed the majority supported the meeting, Executive Council voted to proceed.

The agenda for the shortened meeting, held on the campus of Notre Dame from August 31 to September 5, 1969 was intentionally kept flexible in order to accommodate a wide-range of issues and opinions. In keeping with this spirit, in his opening address, Hines called for open-mindedness. The decision to keep the Convention open and loosely controlled contributed to now famous incidents in which attendees took control of the microphone in order to force the Convention to address the issue of racism and reparations. The essential point is that once in session, the General Convention adopts its own agenda and that the 1969 Special Convention made no attempt to narrow the discussion or exclude voices or topics. The structural issues called for in the Mutual Responsibility Commission and Structure Committee's 1967 resolutions did not dominate the proceedings as originally planned.