

The General Convention Special Committee on *The Episcopalian*

The Special (Ad Hoc) Committee on *The Episcopalian* was called into being by Resolution B045 of the 1985 General Convention. The resolution was introduced by the Board of *The Episcopalian*. The Committee's charge was

Resolved, the House of Deputies concurring, That this 68th General Convention direct the President of each House to appoint two of their members to work with the Board of *The Episcopalian* in delineating the present and future relationship of *The Episcopalian* to the General Convention and the role of the publication in the mission of the Church. These appointees will bring a report and recommendation to the 69th General Convention.

The committee of six persons (two delegates to the 1985 Triennial were added) brought to its work a broad variety of experience in communication, both in the Church and in secular life. (A roster of committee members appears at the end of this report.) It met over a two-year period with the Board of *The Episcopalian*, with the Board's planning committee, and independently. It consulted with, among others, the Presiding Bishop, the President of the House of Deputies, and the present and two former Executives for Communication at the Church Center. It sought the opinions of 100 Episcopal communicators, editors and publishers in a survey, and received detailed critiques of *The Episcopalian* from selected editors and officers of the Episcopal Communicators. We are grateful for the cooperation of these individuals and of members of the Board and staff of *The Episcopalian*.

The Episcopalian was called into being by the 1958 General Convention. It was first published in April of 1960, as the direct descendant of *Forth* and *The Spirit of Missions*, which date back to 1835. It was clearly the desire of the 1958 Convention that *The Episcopalian* should reach every Episcopal household. Obviously, that goal has not been reached, but we assume it is still the will of the General Convention. (*The Episcopalian* currently has a circulation of about 240,000. There are 1,200,000 Episcopal households, 700,000 of which are pledging households of record.) Early in our deliberations we endorsed this goal, and we urge that all efforts be made to achieve it.

To accomplish the task, the 1961 General Convention allocated \$200,000 per year to *The Episcopalian*. A subsidy (gradually diminishing) continued through 1974 (it was \$150,000 that year). Since 1974, there has been no subsidy as such, but the Executive Council has reimbursed *The Episcopalian* for various services; the Episcopal Church, however, is alone among major denominations in not underwriting in some major way its national publication. To put it bluntly, *The Episcopalian* is seriously underfinanced. Staff salaries range from 17 to 40 percent below those of its counterparts in other denominations. *The Canadian Churchman* (which many cited as a model church publication) receives a subsidy ranging from 42 to 60 percent of operating budget from the Anglican Church in Canada. (The rates for various services to Executive Council were set in 1975 and most of them were not increased until 1987, when this committee encouraged *The Episcopalian* Board to approach the Council on the matter. *The Episcopalian* also sends complimentary subscriptions to 14,000 clergy, with the Executive Council now contributing \$65,000 for that service.)

The elimination of unrestricted support from the national Church forced some

creative, and sometimes desperate, rethinking by the Board, and in 1975 the format was changed from a slick magazine to a tabloid on newsprint, with dioceses invited into partnership with four- or eight-page inserts of the diocesan newspapers. By 1979, 26 dioceses were in this partnership plan. Today, however, only 20 dioceses are participating. And it is significant that the total circulation of *The Episcopalian* has declined from the 1979 high of 288,929 (12-month average) to about 240,000. (Sixty-seven dioceses distribute their own independent publications to approximately 700,000 Episcopal homes. They are published from six to twelve times a year and range in format from simple newsletter to professional tabloid. The Diocesan Press Service, of the Communication Office of the Episcopal Church Center in New York supplies them with news items of national and international scope.) The Church is certainly not moving closer to the goal of *The Episcopalian* in every Episcopal household; it has been, in fact, traveling in the other direction.

Today the publication is supported by advertising revenue, by diocesan subscriptions (which have only been raised once since 1974), by income from special projects, by payment (although minimal) for services rendered Executive Council, by contributions, and by grants. It is also, in effect, subsidized by a hard-working, badly underpaid staff that spends long hours and much energy just keeping the publication afloat. Equipment is below standard. Quality and morale have suffered. We marvel that *The Episcopalian*, for all its admitted weaknesses, is as good a publication as it is—thanks to a dedicated staff.

So we found *The Episcopalian* in a Catch-22 situation. Many persons we talked to are frankly unhappy with the quality of the publication, although many recognize that it has improved in recent years. But *The Episcopalian* must increase circulation (and thus, advertising) to survive financially, and it must improve quality (which takes money) to attract new readers. Upgrading the quality of coverage and writing and improvement in format were frequently cited as needs in our survey, and clearly the Publisher and Board share that opinion.

In our survey of more than 100 Episcopal communicators, there was great support (80 percent) for financial assistance from the national Church to *The Episcopalian*. In other words, diocesan and other Church communicators are in favor of improving and expanding *The Episcopalian*. There is a clear need and demand for such a national publication.

Before we cite our specific recommendations, a word about communication in the Church. We believe that there is really only *one* ministry: the ministry of Jesus Christ. We all participate in that ministry from the moment of baptism, as laypersons and clergy, as church professionals and volunteers, as men, women, and children in the pews. We are *all* ministers of one Gospel.

The communication task is to enhance, inform, enable, and encourage the whole Church in that *one* ministry. Even with the new technologies of communication, this remains a difficult task. The printed word, as represented by *The Episcopalian*, is one tool of communication, even as communication is but one aspect of ministry.

The Church is fortunate to have a number of good independent publications, such as *The Living Church*, *The Witness*, and *The Anglican Digest*, to assist in communication. Most, of course, represent a specific point of view in their policy. Nor does their existence diminish the need for a general publication such as *The Episcopalian*. The Episcopal Radio and TV Foundation, Trinity Parish in New York, and the Washington Cathedral, among other institutions, contribute significantly to electronic communication and are to be praised.

As we surveyed church publications, we were amazed to discover the proliferating

number of publications issued by the Church Center, each reaching a different and specific constituency. While each serves a purpose, it occurred to us that the place of many of them in the information delivery system might be taken by *The Episcopalian*, working with the Communication Office at 815 Second Avenue. The annual cost of these publications, as far as we could determine, is staggering. Like Topsy, they seem just to have grown.

The importance of communication to the Church has also grown, even as the Church has become more diverse in many ways. This diversity is a fact of life and, obviously, it complicates the problem of communication. Sad to say, we find no overall plan for communication, for coordinating the various efforts. We believe there should be one. We were, however, pleased to note the Presiding Bishop's emphasis on the importance of communication in the ministry of Jesus Christ.

Our awareness of the need for, and the problems of, communication led us to certain conclusions and a series of recommendations which appear at the end of this report. We realize that to state some of these conclusions is to state the obvious. But we commend them to the serious consideration of General Convention.

We are not interested in just seeing *The Episcopalian* "keep on keeping on." Through no fault of its Board or management, it has been the victim of a survival mentality, which must end. We had the impression that management by crisis has been unavoidable because of financial problems, and that is neither healthy nor productive. A quality product must be produced consistently, and *The Episcopalian* Board, we suggest, should restate the mission statement of the publication. Subscription rates must be raised to cover current operations. (We have recommended that this action be taken by the Board, and steps in this direction are being taken by the Board.) Executive Council must pay full freight for the services it receives and consider other ways in which it could use *The Episcopalian* in communication. Above all, *The Episcopalian*, in its new vision, must be of interest to the average church member. As one person on this committee put it, "It must encourage the average Episcopal Church member to lead a better Christian life."

Inasmuch as General Convention brought *The Episcopalian* into being, it has full responsibility for the publication and must take action to live up to that responsibility. It must be more directly involved in the selection of Board members. It must develop a "sense of ownership." Certainly, it must be aware of, and react to, the near-crisis state of financing that the present Board and staff constantly live with.

For Convention to live up to that responsibility, money will be needed. The Long-Range Planning Committee and Board of the publication have submitted a proposal to increase subscriptions by 50,000 per year and at the same time to increase subscription rates, advertising rates and other income. According to their figures and projections, they can attain self-support by the end of the coming triennium. They are asking for assistance from General Convention over the next triennium to improve the quality of the publication and to increase its circulation. Since we heard the Board's original proposal, it has been changed somewhat by subsequent Board action. However, we endorse the original request. In essence we are asking the Board of *The Episcopalian* and its diocesan partners to pay for what they now have. We are asking the General Convention to underwrite the needed improvements. We recommend the following subsidy:

In 1989 - \$275,000;
In 1990 - \$200,000;
In 1991 - \$125,000.

It is not our intention that this recommendation should preclude further subsidies in the future, although we believe that the publication *can and should work toward self-*

support. But we believe the matter of continuing subsidy should be left to future Conventions and Executive Council. Both bodies, we believe, should closely monitor the progress of *The Episcopalian* during the forthcoming triennium, in which the above sums would be provided, and determine future actions in financial support of the publication.

Executive Council should pay current market value for all services it receives from *The Episcopalian*. (We were pleased to learn that, during the course of our study, *The Episcopalian* and Council renegotiated fees paid for various services.) No action is necessary on the part of the General Convention. (We mention this here because we earnestly hope that Council and the Church Center will not fall back into a mentality of "getting it wholesale" from *The Episcopalian*.)

On a related matter, we believe Council and Church Center staff should make a careful study of current information services and mailings, and where possible use *The Episcopalian* for the dissemination of such information. In this study, it is obvious that the Church Center staff needs to play a large role. In the long run, we suggest, this would prove more effective and less expensive—produce a bigger bang for the communication buck, as it were.

Executive Council, we believe, should develop a long-range communication plan for the whole Church, taking into account not only the continued use of the printed word (which, in spite of all technological marvels, is still the principal means of communication), but also the new technologies, including video. We were somewhat dismayed to learn what we had feared: that this committee is the *only* official body of the Church commissioned to examine the communication ministry, and it will go out of existence when this report is received. We believe that the vast resources for communication within the body of the Church are not being used efficiently and effectively. And we wonder why Executive Council has no committee whose primary purpose is to develop and enable communication. (This was particularly surprising, since the Presiding Bishop and Council have properly set communication as a high priority.)

We further believe that General Convention is itself ill-equipped to deal with matters of communication (including reports such as this). We recommend that in order to deal effectively with future communication matters, each House should be requested to amend its rules of order (at least for the 1991 Convention, when the long-range communication plan we propose would be received) to create a legislative committee on communication.

We believe that the Board of *The Episcopalian*, while making every effort to improve the publication within its limited capability, has been remiss in raising subscription rates only once in more than 15 years. (As we have noted, the Board is now taking steps in that direction, and is to be praised for that action.) In saying this, we once again commend the many volunteers who have served so conscientiously and well on the Board.

Some members of our committee have serious reservations about the policy of free subscriptions to all clergy. We realize this cannot be changed overnight. But we commend to the Board a campaign to urge all clergy persons to pay for their own subscriptions. And we would hope that eventually this program would be phased out and all circulation would be placed on a pay-as-you-receive basis. That will, no doubt, require education and promotion and will take time.

We believe further that the present manner of appointment and ratification of the Board is not satisfactory. It tends to downplay, even minimize, General Convention's sense of ownership of, participation in, and loyalty to *The Episcopalian*. Moreover, we believe the Board (while it has in the last year or so reduced itself in size) is nevertheless

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too large and does not always have adequate representation of all geographical areas of the Church. Again, this is *not* a criticism of the present Board; rather, it is to say that the present financial crisis dictates drastic measures, and reorganization of the Board and its relationship to General Convention is one of those measures.

Most of these conclusions are fleshed out in the various resolutions we are submitting. In support of those resolutions, we offer one broad observation which, we hope, Convention will keep in mind:

The Church needs *The Episcopalian*. If it did not exist, we would have to invent it. We heartily reaffirm the 1961 resolution of General Convention which called for placing *The Episcopalian* in every home. We believe that General Convention, which brought *The Episcopalian* into being, is now being called on to rescue it, to move it from a survival mode to one of new creation and new vision. We are therefore introducing a resolution that calls for underwriting by General Convention, from the Church budget, the necessary quality improvements requested by *The Episcopalian* planning committee and Board, including funds to help cushion the shock that may result from temporary circulation losses as a result of subscription increases.

The Episcopalian is only a part of the communication aspect of ministry. But it is an essential part, one which the Episcopal Church cannot afford to lose through inattention and underfinancing. The Church through General Convention needs, in our opinion, to act and act *now*. The alternative is to see *The Episcopalian*, with its great potential for communication and ministry in the service of our Lord Jesus Christ, die a slow and painful death.

Respectfully submitted,

Robert M. G. Libby, *chair*

The Committee: (all concurring)

For the House of Bishops:

The Rt. Rev. Robert W. Estill, Bishop of North Carolina.

The Rt. Rev. David E. Johnson, Bishop of Massachusetts.

For the House of Deputies:

W. W. Baker, Diocese of Kansas, *Secretary*.

The Rev. Robert M. G. Libby, Diocese of Florida, *Chair*.

For the Episcopal Church Women (Triennial):

Marjorie A. Burke, Diocese of Massachusetts.

Jeanette W. Self, Diocese of Alabama.

Representatives of the Commission at General Convention:

The Rt. Rev. Robert W. Estill, House of Bishops, is authorized by the committee to receive non-substantive amendments to the report.

The Rev. Robert M. G. Libby, Diocese of Florida, House of Deputies, is authorized by the committee to receive non-substantive amendments to the report.

RESOLUTIONS

Resolution #A050

Resolved, the House of _____ concurring, **That this 69th General Convention hereby commend the Board and staff of *The Episcopalian* for their service to the Church; and be it further**

Resolved, That this 69th General Convention hereby reaffirm the goal of previous Conventions to place *The Episcopalian* in every Episcopal household.

Resolution #A051

Resolved, the House of _____ concurring, That this 69th General Convention commend and encourage the Executive Council and Church Center staff to use *The Episcopalian* whenever possible and practicable as a major tool of information dissemination to the Church.

Resolution #A052

Resolved, the House of _____ concurring, That this 69th General Convention reaffirm the financial responsibility of the Board of *The Episcopalian* for present operations and to cover current operating deficits, and that this Convention further reaffirm its intention to undertake financing of needed improvements and strengthening of *The Episcopalian*, in order that it may live up to its vision as the principal means of communication in the Episcopal Church.

Resolution #A053

Resolved, the House of _____ concurring, That in order to strengthen and improve *The Episcopalian*, that it may more effectively meet the needs of a changing and increasingly diverse Church, this 69th General Convention hereby appropriate from budget the following sums for *The Episcopalian*:

In 1989 - \$275,000;

In 1990 - \$200,000;

In 1991 - \$125,000;

said sums to be utilized by the Board of *The Episcopalian* in studying and improving the content and format of the publication; to encourage self-support; to increase and upgrade staff; to provide adequate compensation for the same; to add necessary equipment; and to plan for the future needs of a 21st century Church publication.

Resolution #A054

Resolved, the House of _____ concurring, That the Board of *The Episcopalian* be hereby requested to amend its by-laws relative to election of the Board, as follows, effective at the General Convention in 1991:

A. There shall be a Board of 15 persons, nine elected by General Convention, one person to be from each of the nine provinces but elected by the entire Convention; and six elected by the Board of *The Episcopalian* and ratified by Convention.

B. In order to provide continuity on the Board, five of the nine persons elected by Convention in 1991 (the five with the highest number of votes) shall serve a term of six years, and the remaining four shall serve a term of three years; and of those elected by the Board of *The Episcopalian* and ratified by Convention, three shall serve a term of six years and three a term of three years.

C. At elections subsequent to 1991, all elections shall be for a term of three years.

D. No persons elected either by General Convention or the Board of *The Episcopalian* shall serve more than six years on the Board.

Resolution #A055

Resolved, the House of _____ concurring, That this 69th General Convention hereby request the Presiding Bishop to appoint a Special Executive

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Council Task Force on Communication Planning, and that this task force enlist the vast talent, experience and resources for communication within the Episcopal Church, including, but not limited to, the Episcopal Communicators; and be it further

Resolved, That this task force be charged with developing a long-range plan for communication in the Church, and to report its findings and recommendations to the 70th General Convention in 1991; and be it further

Resolved, That funding for this special task force shall be provided in the Executive Council budget.

Resolution #A056

Resolved, the House of _____ concurring, That the President of the House of Bishops and the President of the House of Deputies be requested to appoint a legislative committee on communication in each House for the 1991 convention, to receive the report of the Special Executive Council Task Force on Communication Planning, and such other matters of communication as may be referred to it.