



Founding of the Episcopal Church, Part IV

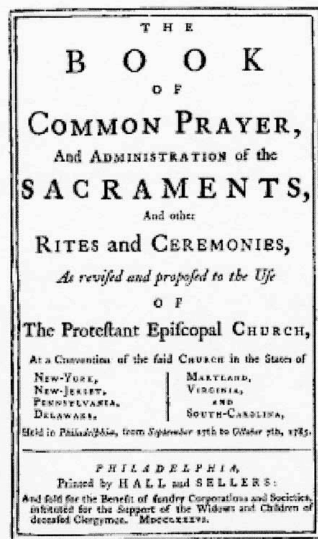
Previously in This Series

Although Episcopalians in all states wanted unity in the early 1780s, there were two opposing points of view on how to proceed. The First General Convention met in 1785 to address three principal issues, but with no representatives from the New England states in attendance. The issues were the problem of obtaining at least three bishops, the writing of an ecclesiastical constitution, and the modification of the *Book of Common Prayer*. The first step toward obtaining three bishops was to prepare a letter to the bishops and two archbishops of the Church of England, enlisting their help. A committee of correspondence was set up to handle details.

First General Convention: Other Business

The delegates to the First General Convention made up their minds that success at having bishops consecrated in England was to be assured in advance, or else the candidates would not make the trip. Mindful of the obstacles that Samuel Seabury had encountered in England, the convention decided that among the seven states represented, the ones in the best position to elect bishops were Maryland, New York, Pennsylvania, and Virginia, that the clergy in each of these states should promptly obtain a document from the "executive authority" of the state government assuring those in England that consecration of a bishop would interfere in no way with the governmental relations between the United States and Great Britain, that these documents should be given to the committee of correspondence for forwarding to England, and that the delegates of each state electing a bishop should assemble documentation of the candidate's election and of his good character, bringing that documentation to the 1786 convention.

As to the other two principal items of business (constitution and prayer book), William White says in his memoirs that there was considerable sentiment against proceeding with them until the bishops were in place, but that the eventual decision was to go ahead anyway. In White's view the putting of bishops in place without rules and without an organization ran the risk that some churches in a proposed diocese would not subscribe to a particular bishop and his prayer book, thus being tempted to form their own diocese with their own prayer book. Indeed, King's Chapel in Boston, which had opened in 1689 as the first Anglican church in Massachusetts, was turning Unitarian and writing its own prayer book in this period; thus it furnished a telling example of what could happen.



Proposed Book, 1786

To handle the details of the constitution and prayer book, a committee was formed with one clergyman and one layman from each state and with William Smith presiding. This committee divided into two subcommittees, one chaired by White to draft the constitution and the other chaired by Smith to deal with the prayer book. The resulting constitution, after an amendment from the floor, was essentially an elaboration of the principles recommended from the New York conference of October 1784. It was made explicit that the liturgy would consist of the *Book of Common Prayer* with certain specific modifications contained in a written instrument approved by the General Convention and that any state could join the Protestant Episcopal Church by agreeing to the constitution.

The outline of the revision of the prayer book was primarily the work of William Smith. The revisions were of two kinds---those that were necessary and were to be adopted by the General Convention and those that were desirable and were merely to be recommended to the state conventions for ratification.

The former consisted of the allusions to the king, to Parliament, and to special days commemorating British history. The latter were of many kinds. For them Smith's starting point was the list of revisions that produced in 1689 a proposed but unapproved revision of the 1662 prayer book. He was influenced greatly by trying to please the absent bishop, Samuel Seabury; to do so, he followed as much as possible the detailed recommendations that had been communicated by Seabury and Samuel Parker just before the convention, not knowing that these detailed recommendations had turned out to be unacceptable to the Connecticut laity. Smith's changes that attracted the greatest notice were recommendations to delete from the Apostles' Creed the words "He descended into hell" and to omit completely the Nicene Creed and a third creed called the Athanasian Creed (whose text appears on pp. 864-865 of the 1979 prayer book). The General Convention established a writing committee to prepare and publish the prayer book after adjournment. This committee consisted of Smith, White, and one other person, but it was given ambiguous instructions concerning how to handle the revisions of the second kind. It perhaps unwisely went ahead and included all the revisions of both kinds, and the result published in 1786 has been known ever since as the *Proposed Book*. Smith was the author of the preface.

Delivery of Mail and the Response

To ensure proper delivery and consideration of the convention's letter to the bishops and archbishops, the American ambassador to Great Britain, John Adams, delivered the letter to the Archbishop of Canterbury personally on January 3, 1786, along with a cover letter dated October 24, 1785, from Richard Henry Lee, who was the president of the Continental Congress, and a cover letter from John Jay, who was the secretary of state. The cover letters gave assurances that consecration of bishops in America was completely proper from the government's point of view. By letter dated January 4, 1786, Adams informed the committee of correspondence of his activities and of the initially favorable reaction from the archbishop. Other material detailing what had happened at the convention was sent by more ordinary means, and it took a long time to be delivered. The writing committee sent pages of the *Proposed Book* also, and those pages also took a long time to be delivered.

In a letter dated February 24, 1786, the bishops and archbishops responded warmly but cautiously to what they had received. Having thus far heard only rumors of particular actions of the First General Convention but not having yet received the acts of the convention or the pages of the *Proposed Book*, they asked to see the detailed changes to the liturgy and said for their part that they would seek "to acquire the legal capacity" to go ahead with the consecration without inclusion of the oath of allegiance to the king.

First Session of the Second General Convention

The Second General Convention met in Philadelphia from June 20 to June 26, 1786, to respond. David



**The Falls Church,
Fairfax Parish***

Griffith (1742-1789), rector of Fairfax Parish in Virginia, presided.* White's memoirs say, "The convention assembled under circumstances, which bore strong appearances of a dissolution of the union, in the early stage of it. The interfering instructions from the churches---the embarrassment that had arisen from the rejection of the [P]roposed [B]ook in some of the states, and the use of it in others---some dissatisfaction on account of the Scottish Episcopacy---and, added to these, the demur expressed in the letter from the English bishops, were what the most sanguine contemplated with apprehension."



**Christ Church, Fairfax
Parish***

White went on to say that the interfering instructions "were all silenced by the motion that stands on the journal, for referring them to the first convention, which should meet fully authorized to determine on a

Book of Common Prayer." The motion had the effect of amending the constitution. There was a lesson for the future here, White said, in that the instructions showed "the futility of taking measures, to be reviewed and authoritatively judged of, in the bodies of which we were the deputies. Such a system appeared so evidently fruitful of discord and disunion, that it was abandoned from this time."

The dissatisfaction with the Scottish Episcopacy surfaced over priests whom Bishop Seabury had ordained in the south. There were two problems, one that some people did not like Seabury because of his record as a loyalist and the other that English bishops and Scottish bishops had taken seemingly incompatible oaths at the time of their consecration. Both these issues were swept aside until 1789 by parliamentary maneuvers.

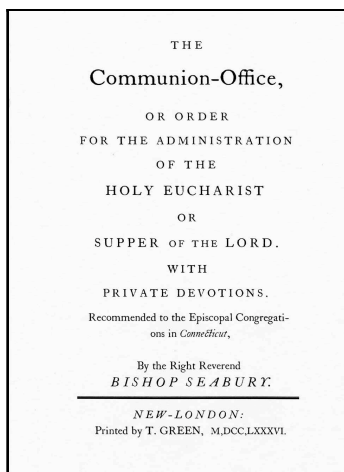


Samuel Provoost

of Virginia. Provoost was the rector of Trinity Church Wall Street. These names were not communicated to the archbishops in the June 26 letter, however.

Activities Between the Sessions

Between the sessions of the Second General Convention, the churches of Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and New Hampshire met in Boston in July 1786 and found themselves agreeing with most of the *Proposed Book* but



Seabury's Communion Office, 1786

The main business of the convention was the letter from the English bishops. In the reply the convention gave its assurances that the Episcopal Church was not departing from the doctrines of the Church of England. It said that the only changes to the prayer book were those calculated to remove objections so as to be "more conducive to union." The letter was signed by all the delegates and was dated June 26, it was accompanied by a copy of the amended constitution and the *Proposed Book*, it repeated the request of the previous letter, and it mentioned that the nominations of candidates from the states were now in hand. The meeting adjourned to a call from the committee of correspondence that a reply had been received.

During the convention it emerged that the people being nominated by the state conventions for bishop were Samuel Provoost (1742-1815) of New York, William White of Pennsylvania, William Smith of Maryland, and David Griffith



Trinity Church Wall Street

discouraged by the fact that the churches in the southern states, which had proposed many of the changes, did not like the book. The church in Connecticut met in September and largely disapproved of changes resulting in the *Proposed Book*. An even more important objection in the Connecticut view was that the book had been set forth without the authority of a bishop. At this time Bishop Seabury floated out a service of Holy Communion based on the Scottish prayer book, recommending it to the clergy of Connecticut, who embraced it wholeheartedly.

Not long after the adjournment of the Philadelphia session, the committee of correspondence received a letter from the Archbishops of Canterbury and York and a subsequent letter dated July 4 from the Archbishop of Canterbury alone. The first of these said in essence that the supplementary mailings had arrived and that the Church of England was prepared to go ahead with the consecrations except for the legal matter and for some concerns over the creeds and a technical detail in the constitution. The second letter said that a suitable act of Parliament had

been passed eliminating the need for an oath to British civil authority, hence that the legal matter had been resolved; with the letter was the text of the act. The first letter objected to the deletion of the line "He descended into hell" in the Apostles' Creed, and it expressed what seemed possibly to be a pro forma objection to the omission of the other two creeds. The letter was striking to the delegates for its moderation. Since the archbishops were not in a position to check on character references, the archbishops asked for particularly stringent care in choosing the candidates for bishop. Two suggested forms of letters were enclosed, one for testimonials from the members of the convention in the state recommending a candidate for consecration and the other from the members of the General Convention. The latter included an assurance that the candidate "hath led his life, for the three years just past, piously, soberly, and honestly."

--Tony Knapp

* A parish, even in 1786, typically had more than one church. Two churches already in existence in Fairfax Parish in 1786 were The Falls Church and Christ Church, the latter now called Christ Church, Alexandria. Both these churches are now many times their original size. Fairfax Parish originally cut into the part of Virginia that was later set aside for Washington, D.C., and it includes part of Mount Vernon.

Picture Credits

1. Title page of 1786 *Proposed Book*: accessed from justus.anglican.org/resources/bcp/bcp.htm.
2. Historical view, The Falls Church, Fairfax Parish, Virginia: www.thefallschurch.org/clientimages/29455/images/historicchurchbwphoto.jpg.
3. Historical view, Christ Church, Fairfax Parish, Virginia: www.historicchristchurch.org/images/ccetch.jpg.
4. Samuel Provoost, oil painting by Thomas Spence Duché, 1787, New York Historical Society: www.episcopalchurch.org/78716_ENG_HTM.htm.
5. Trinity Church Wall Street, about 1846: www.trinitywallstreet.org/history.
6. Title page of Seabury's Communion Office of 1786: justus.anglican.org/resources/bcp/Seabury.htm.