

History of the Episcopal Diocese of Maryland

Kingsley Smith, historiographer

The Origins

"O Lord, you will defend them as with a shield." --Psalm 5:15

This motto on the great seal of Maryland could apply also to our Diocese, because from its beginning in the 17th Century the Church has put its trust in God through hardships, temptations and divisions.



This robust faith in God as our defender has assured the survival of the heirs of the English Reformation and at the same time has made Maryland a shining example of toleration for a diversity of religions, cultures, politics and nationalities. As the Episcopal Church has received from this tradition, so also has it contributed to it.

The first Christian worship in Maryland was in 1608, when Captain John Smith of Virginia explored the Chesapeake Bay and saw to it that each day his crew assembled for a psalm and devotions from the Book of Common Prayer.

Virginia planted a trading post with a chaplain, the Rev. Richard James, on Kent Island in 1632. Then the proprietary colony, granted by charter from Charles I to the Calvert family (the Lords Baltimore, who were Roman Catholics) began in 1634 at St. Mary's City and provided for both Roman Catholics and Protestants -- a sensible and charitable arrangement far ahead of its time. In 1650 the first permanent Anglican ministry began with the Rev. William Wilkinson at St. George's in St. Mary's County.



The English Civil War, which led to the beheading of the Archbishop of Canterbury and of King Charles, and to the Commonwealth under Oliver Cromwell, had a remarkable result in the colony. In 1649, Lord Baltimore persuaded the Maryland Assembly to pass the Act of Toleration, affirming the legal rights of all Christians.

The Anglican population continued to grow, with churches founded in southern Maryland, the Eastern Shore, and in 1671, another St. Georges' at Perryman on the upper Western Shore, the first house of worship in what is now the Diocese of Maryland.

The 18th Century

The next political upheaval in Britain, the "Glorious Revolution" of 1688, led to the deposition of James II because he threatened to turn England back to Roman Catholicism (he lost his crown but, unlike his father, not his head).

The Assembly deprived Catholics of their public freedom and, beginning in 1692, began to establish the Anglican Church by dividing the colony into 30 parishes, each with a vestry sworn to enforce laws against treason, blasphemy, and certain forms of immorality like drunkenness, Sabbath-breaking, dueling and unlawful cohabitation. In exchange for this duty each parish received a tithing of forty pounds of tobacco (or its equivalent) from each free adult male and for all slaves; the tax was levied regardless of religious affiliation but was used solely for Anglican churches and their clergy. (This led to such resentment that one of the first acts of the new State Assembly in 1776 was to end the Establishment and to keep churches and government separate thereafter.)

In spite of their role as allies of the government, the colonial Anglican churches effectively spread the Gospel. In 1700, the Rev. Thomas Bray became the first commissary sent by the Church of England to the new world; as representative of the Bishop of London he supervised the clergy, encouraged new congregations, and procured libraries for each parish. By 1776, the 30 parishes established in 1692 grew to 44 and the clergy from eight to 53. The quality of pastoral care, preaching and teaching was generally high, though not perfect; with no resident bishop the few commissaries who served after Bray were not effective.



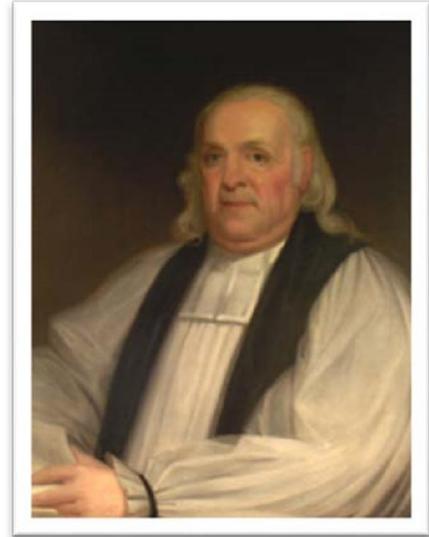
The clergy were agents of the crown and the proprietor, their ordination vows including fealty to the king and their livings dependent on the Calverts.

The Revolution posed a crisis of conscience for them; of the 53 parsons in Maryland in 1776, only 15 remained in 1780. Yet most Anglicans supported the patriot cause, among them three of the four signers of the Declaration of Independence, Samuel Chase, William Paca and Thomas Stone. (The fourth was Charles Carroll, the only Roman Catholic signer.)

In 1779, the Assembly passed the Vestry Act, which allowed the churches to retain title to lands and buildings, instead (as happened in Virginia) having them forfeited to the state.

The most pressing need was to draw the parishes together into a continuing body. From 1780 on, a series of conferences of both laymen and clerics, led by the Rev. William Smith of Chestertown, began the process of creating the Diocese of Maryland, adopting the name "The Protestant Episcopal Church," and uniting with churchmen in eight other states.

Four of these dioceses elected bishops who were consecrated in Great Britain. The new church revised the *Book of Common Prayer* and Canon Law, and was incorporated as the first non-British Anglican Church. In 1792, Thomas John Claggett of Maryland was the first bishop to be consecrated in America. The transition from a daughter established church to a sister independent church was complete.



The 19th Century

But challenges remained: how to overcome the stigma of being "the English church" and how to survive without the forty pounds of tobacco per poll. Bishop Claggett was a tireless pastor who did not put on pontifical airs (though he did have a mitre made from a top hat), shepherding his small flock and showing their fellow American Christians that the reformed catholic style of worship and doctrine was a valid and persuasive means of grace, quite compatible with republican values. By the War of 1812, no one doubted the Episcopal Church's loyalty. Maryland's patriotism was celebrated in the poem of Francis Scott Key, an Episcopalian.

When Claggett died in 1816, he was succeeded by James Kemp, who worked to strengthen the church's organization (in spite of resistance by many who thought Kemp was too "high church") and to promote the first African-American congregation in the South, St. James' Church, Baltimore. When he died in a carriage accident in 1827, such was the tension between high- and low-churchmen that the Diocese took two years to elect his successor, William Stone, and again, after Stone died in 1838, it was two years before the Convention could agree on a new one.

But that man was William Rollinson Whittingham, a young professor at the General Seminary in New York, who was to make a deep impression on the Diocese, on the Episcopal Church, and, especially during the Civil War, on the nation- for he was a staunch Union man in a diocese with, he estimated, " two-thirds of the clergy and three quarters of the lay people" sympathetic to the Confederacy.

During his long episcopate, from 1840 to 1879, Whittingham was a vigorous advocate for church growth. Membership increased from 3,381 in 1839 to 12,267 in 1868 (when the Eastern Shore parishes were set apart to become the Diocese of Easton).

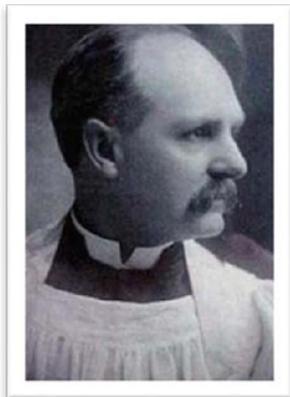


He consecrated 70 churches in just fifteen years. The other focus of his energy, piety and learning was on doctrine and worship; in true Anglican fashion he taught the authority of Jesus Christ, based on the Bible, expressed in the *Book of Common Prayer*, and mediated through the Office of Bishop. There was resistance from many evangelicals, but also some from AngloCatholics, for Whittingham was as much against the obscure ritualism of the Tractarians as he was against the undisciplined enthusiasms of the Evangelicals.

As his health failed, he called for an assistant bishop in 1870. The man elected, William Pinkney, had opposed many of his policies during the War, but the two men respected one another and helped heal the divisions in Maryland.

Pinkney served until his death in 1883, overseeing yet more growth in people and parishes to the point where another division of the Diocese was called for. This was done by his successor, William Paret, when the Diocese of Washington was founded in 1895. At the turn of the century the Episcopal Church in Maryland had weathered the storms of political conflict, doctrinal hostility, and social divisions--even, thanks in large part to Bishop Paret, many racial problems.

The 20th Century



The next bishop, John Gardner Murray, coadjutor in 1909 and diocesan from 1911 to 1929, was in 1925, the first to be elected to the office of Presiding Bishop of the national church (rather than inheriting the position by seniority).

His successor, Edward Helfenstein, served until 1943, guiding the Diocese through the hard times of the Depression and the start of World War II. When Noble Cilley Powell took the reins, he was able to lead the church into a period of growth as great as in the days of Whittingham, with increases in membership, congregations and clergy, and, most important, in the impact of the faith upon individuals, families and communities.

The episcopate of Harry Lee Doll, from 1963 to 1971, was taken up with consolidating the growth but also with new ministries in social service in a time of tumults, especially facing the divisions between races on civil rights and between generations on the Vietnam war. To David Leighton, bishop from 1971 to 1985, fell the tasks of leading his diocese into the contemporary culture through revisions of the Prayer Book and Hymnal and the ordination of women. William Cox was his suffragan from 1972 to 1980.

In 1992 the Diocese of Maryland, along with the Dioceses of Easton and Washington marked the 300th anniversary of the Establishment of the Anglican Church in the colony. In addition to being a celebration, the events became an observance of how the role of the church had changed over the centuries, from its beginnings as a branch of the civil authority. The church began to look at how it had profited from the labor of enslaved persons, who had, for the most part, been responsible for the profitable tobacco crop which served as currency for the church in the 17th. century.

At the retirement of Bp. Eastman in 1994, Charles Longest, who had been elected as Suffragan in 1989, became bishop-in-charge until the consecration of Robert W. Ihloff as 13th Bishop of Maryland in 1995. John Rabb was elected Bishop Suffragan in 1998.

As we entered the 21st century with high hopes and energy, we faced a new series of crises: the turmoil from terrorist attacks on 9/11/2001 and later; increased racial tensions, in Maryland and elsewhere; a marked decline in church attendance and membership; and controversy over the roles of gays and lesbian people, especially in relation to ordination and matrimony.

Bishop Robert Ihloff supported and enlarged the ministries of the diocesan camp, the Bishop Claggett Center, established a companion relationship with the Diocese of Accra, and led the diocese through changing attitudes about sexuality and the church. Bishop John Rabb encouraged the diocese to embrace the leadership concept of mutual ministry and championed the work of anti-racism. When Bp. Ihloff retired in 2007, Bp. Rabb acted as bishop-in-charge until the fourteenth bishop, Eugene T. Sutton was elected in 2008, the first bishop to be chosen on the first ballot since Thomas Claggett in 1792. Bp. Sutton continues to be a leader in the local and national efforts to curb the scourge of gun violence in our country and our cities. At John Rabb's retired in 2011, The Rt. Rev. Joe Burnett, retired bishop of Nebraska, came to the diocese as Assistant Bishop.

At the 2014 Diocesan Convention, five candidates for Suffragan Bishop were presented for consideration. After several rounds of voting, the Rev, Canon Heather Cook was elected. She was consecrated in September and had barely begun her episcopate when she caused a terrible traffic accident, killing a bicyclist in Baltimore. Criminal charges of driving while impaired, texting while driving and leaving the scene of the accident led to a prison sentence, and canonical discipline led to her being deposed from the ministry of the Episcopal Church. From this crisis, through the leadership of Bp. Sutton, a heightened vigilance has emerged in our diocese, and throughout the church as a whole, to address the problems of alcoholism. In September, 2016, the Rt. Rev. Chilton Knudsen, retired Bishop of Maine, a national leader in alcohol awareness, and experienced diocesan leader became the Assistant Bishop.