

A Brief History of the United Thank Offering

The history of the United Thank Offering (UTO) reflects the role and place of women in the governance and outreach of The Episcopal Church in the 19th and 20th centuries. The history reveals that women were a prime source of missionary support and funding that undergirded the general church budget while at the same time women were consistently excluded from positions of authority and decision-making in the broader church. Reviewing this history gives insights to the emotional, financial and organizational challenges before the United Thank Offering as it heads into the 21st century.

Throughout the 19th century, Episcopal women organized, promoted, and funded much of the missionary outreach of the Episcopal Church. The voluntary affiliation of Episcopal women in the work of the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society (DFMS) was often the single most important source of support for the official missionary society of the church. Women were also well represented as missionaries in the domestic and foreign missions of The Episcopal Church. With the support of the Woman's Auxiliary to the DFMS more women than men would eventually serve The Episcopal Church as missionaries. For example, two of the first foreign missionaries sent to Greece were women. Frances Marion Hill taught young women of Greece from 1830-1884 and Emma Willard founded the Troy Society for the Advancement of Female Education in Greece.

At the founding of the DFMS by the General Convention in 1821 and throughout the 19th century and early 20th century women were excluded from serving on the Board of the Missionary Society or any of its Committees. This was consistent with the wider exclusion of women in the governance of The Episcopal Church, as women were not seated as Deputies to General Convention until 1970. Episcopalian women, however, were key to the local, national and worldwide outreach of the church through parish and diocesan women's "auxiliary bodies" that supported the official and exclusively male committees, commissions, agencies and boards. Recognizing the increasingly important role of women in the work of the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society, Bishop Horatio Potter of New York suggested in 1850 that the women of the church become more organized to support the work of the church's missions.

The General Convention of 1871 thus created the Woman's Auxiliary to the Board of Missions of the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society bringing together many of the parish and diocesan women's auxiliaries. Mary Abbott Emery served as the first National Secretary from 1872-76. She asked every rector of The Episcopal Church to appoint a secretary who would correspond with the National Secretary about the work of the women in each parish, perhaps creating the first centralized data base. During Emery's short tenure over three hundred and fifty local secretaries were appointed, and diocesan groups formed in nine dioceses. Julia Chester Emery then succeeded her older sister Mary as the National Secretary. Eventually two other sisters, Susan Lavinia Emery and Margaret Theresa Emery, joined Mary and Julia as staff of the Auxiliary. No other family contributed more to the Women's Auxiliary and the missionary work of the Episcopal Church than the Emery's. We would be remiss if we did not also remember, Mrs. Ida Soule, for whom the trust fund for pensions for women workers is named, who worked behind the scenes for many years to make sure that the offering increased and did not flounder.

By 1882, the Episcopal Church was supporting twenty-nine missionary bishops – seven foreign and twenty-two domestic. These missionary bishops increasingly looked to the Women's Auxiliary to the Board of Missions of the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society for support; and the women of The Episcopal Church responded generously. Through direct contributions called "specials," the Women's Auxiliary became a primary funder for the work of the missionary bishops. Through their missioner supply box program they provided lay resources for missionaries in the domestic and foreign field. In 1883 a collection was taken at the worship service during the Auxiliary's meeting. \$371.21 was collected and divided among the domestic and foreign mission fields. In 1886, the collection dropped to just \$82.71, to benefit the Diocese of Florida "for work among colored people", so the women decided to change the offering in the hopes of funding more mission work.

At the 1889 Triennial Meeting in New York, the Women's Auxiliary instituted the United Offering for the support of specific mission projects and individual missionaries with the first United Offering totaling \$2,188.64, which built a church in Anvik, Alaska and sent a woman missionary to Japan. The United Offering eventually became known as the United Thank Offering (UTO) collecting the prayers and grateful offerings of the women of The Episcopal Church in thanksgiving for the many blessings of this life. Blue mite boxes, known affectionately as "The Blue Box" that collected the offerings of the women of The Episcopal Church would eventually achieve almost iconic status as the symbol of the UTO.

In time, the UTO through its Blue Boxes became the single most important extra-budgetary source for funding of specific missionary projects, growing from just over \$2,000.00 in 1889 to \$107,207.83 by the turn of the twentieth century. It was at the Triennial Meetings of the Woman's Auxiliary, which ran concurrently with the exclusively male General Convention, where the women of The Episcopal Church came together to promote and extend the missionary outreach of the church, particularly women missionaries, through their United Thank Offering.

The General Convention of 1919 radically reorganized the missionary, educational and social service work of The Episcopal Church by combining the Board of Missions of the DFMS, the Board of Religious Education and the Commission on Social Service into one national body under the auspices of a National Council (later to become known as the Executive Council.) This National Council, along with canonical changes calling for an elected Presiding Bishop and a financial plan that provided funds from dioceses to support the church-wide program effectively created what would later be known as "The National Church." Recognizing the key role that the Auxiliary played in supporting the church's missionary outreach and not wanting to jeopardize the funding provided by the women of the church, especially through the UTO, the decision was made that the Woman's Auxiliary would remain a separate organization and become "auxiliary" to the male-dominated National Council.

The work of the Woman's Auxiliary and the United Thank Offering continued to grow in the early decades of the 20th century. Although seemingly "separate but equal" the work of the women of church on behalf of women, particularly women missionaries, expanded such that at the 1937 Triennial a United Thank Offering Committee was created to oversee the UTO. Under the auspices of the UTO Committee the United Thank Offering would continue to grow in influence and amount of money ingathered. Increasingly the National Council began to look to the Woman's Auxiliary and the UTO to help underwrite the church-wide budget. This support for the work of the women for the work of the wider church provided by the women of the church called into question how "auxiliary" the Woman's Auxiliary really was.

The growing role of women in the programs of the National Council in the mid-20th century resulted in a significant organizational change and in 1958 the Woman's Auxiliary became the General Division of Women's Work within the official general church structures. Ostensibly women would no longer be seen as auxiliary in the life of The Episcopal Church. With the creation of the General Division of Woman's Work, a debate arose as to the nature and purpose of the United Thank Offering. At the same time, and much to the worry of many of the leaders of the former Woman's Auxiliary, the Presiding Bishop and National Council would increasingly look to the women to help underwrite the program budget of the "National Church." Particularly noteworthy was the UTO support for initial funding of the 1967 General Convention Special Program called for by Presiding Bishop John Hines to address the strife of urban unrest and civil rights in the United States. It was the same convention that passed a canonical change allowing for women to be seated as Deputies to General Convention beginning in 1970.

The 1960's and 1970's were times of significant challenge to the established programs and structures of mainline American Protestantism. In The Episcopal Church the role of women in the governance and sacramental leadership of the church was hotly debated. In 1970 women were seated for the first time as deputies to General Convention and in 1974 eleven women deacons were irregularly ordained priests in

Philadelphia. Two years later the General Convention changed the church's canons allowing for recognized ordination of women to all three holy orders. Responding to these changing circumstances, the Executive Council (successor to the National Council) in 1968 established a Standing Committee for Women to replace the General Division of Women's Work. This change signaled the end of a distinct entity of the church charged to coordinate and direct the work of women in The Episcopal Church. In the politically charged atmosphere of the 1960's and 1970's the particular historic vocation of the Woman's Auxiliary with its specific focus on the missionary work of and for women had gave way to the much more diffuse Episcopal Church Women.

With the loss of the Woman's Auxiliary as well as the General Division of Women's Work, a new UTO Committee was organized in 1971 as an entity unto itself to oversee and direct the work of the United Thank Offering. The new UTO Committee was made up of one representative from each of the church's nine provinces, two members of the then new Committee for Women, one member of the Executive Council, and one member from a new Standing Committee on Lay Ministries. The United Thank Offering continued to have professional staff as a part of the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society; the Committee oversaw the ingathering and granting of funds raised by the ingathering each year. While internal adjustments to the governance of the Episcopal Church in the last decades of the 20th century resulted in changes to both the Committee on Women and the Standing Committee on Lay Ministries, the structure of the UTO Committee continued to draw its membership from churchwomen from the nine Provinces of the Episcopal Church with Executive Council representation.

In 2007 the offices of The Presiding Bishop began a comprehensive study of all agencies of The Episcopal Church that fell under the auspices of The Executive Council as to their governance, fiscal and liability responsibilities. The policies and procedures of The United Thank Offering Committee were included in this broad based study of agencies related to The Executive Council. The study discovered the accountability gap that had developed with the loss of a liaison from The Executive Council and the UTO Committee. To address this governance question, an Advisory Committee on the United Thank Offering was appointed by Presiding Bishop Jefferts Schori in 2008. At its October 2008 meeting the Executive Council received a preliminary report from the Presiding Bishop's Advisory Committee on the United Thank Offering. Some of the recommendations of the preliminary report of the Advisory Council were not well received by the UTO Committee and so the Committee began to pursue other options. The Executive Council responded by calling for "a serious and extensive study of the current and future of the United Thank Offering as to its roles, purposes, function, operational procedures and vision for faithfulness to God's mission in the 21st century." (See resolution INC-055, attached.) In response to resolution INC-055, The Presiding Bishop and President of the House of Deputies appointed a Working Group to make recommendations to the 2012 General Convention as to how the United Thank Offering can go forward in this new century as a dynamic and reinvigorated response of The Episcopal Church to God's mission in the world.

The recommendations coming out of the 2012 General Convention saw the transformation of the UTO Committee into the UTO Board and an increase in the ingathering since the late 1970s. It is not to say that that 2012-2015 was an easy three years. Change is difficult and learning new ways of behaving often causes growing pains. The Board struggled and grew into new bylaws and a Memorandum of Understanding that governs the relationships and work of the Board. A wonderful document, The Theology of Thankfulness, was produced to guide and better define the spiritual discipline side of the ministry. While undergoing structural changes to abide by audit guidelines and best practices, the Board also internally worked to review the process by which funds were granted and developed new special awards leading up to the 125th Anniversary of the United Thank Offering as well as new processes for evaluating applications. With the help of the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society, the Board has created new educational materials and found ways to reach out to different populations of the church who were not apart of the United Thank Offering in the past.

As we approach the 125th Anniversary of this great ministry, there is still much work to be done to strengthen and grow participation. Through the use of technology, the staff and Board are able to engage with more of the

grassroots network that make up the United Thank Offering and offer help, support and encouragement for its' leaders. The Board, with the help and support of the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society, has taken great steps to ensure that the ministry will continue among new generations and in new ways. The ministry of the United Thank Offering has remained the same since its founding, recognize your blessings, make a thank offering into your Blue Box and it will go to support mission and ministry around the world. In a time of dwindling resources and growing anxiety and cynicism, the United Thank Offering is a much needed ministry, not only in our church, but in our world.