“In Christ Now Meet Both East and West”: A History of the Diocese of Nebraska

In early September 1868, eastern Nebraska Episcopalians – some ordained clergy, some laymen – were preparing to make the long journey to New York City where they would serve as delegates to the upcoming General Convention of the Episcopal Church in the United States. The twelve day, triennial event was scheduled to begin on October 17. The delegates and the bishop would be representing the Missionary District of Nebraska and Dakota which had been headed by Rt. Rev. Robert Harper Clarkson since his 1865 arrival in the territory. The importance of attendance by Nebraska clergy and laity at that General Convention was intensified because Nebraska was no longer a territory and part of a missionary district. It had attained statehood on March 1, 1867, and was therefore eligible to become an independent diocese. In preparation for Nebraskans’ participation at the convention, Bishop Clarkson circulated a notice to all clergy and laity that read:

It appears to be the general opinion that the Church is strong enough in the State of Nebraska for a Diocesan organization. I concur in this opinion and do therefore hereby call a Primary Convention, to be held in Trinity Church, Omaha on Wednesday, September 9th, 1868, at 10 o’clock A.M.

The summoned clergy and laity gathered, and late in the afternoon of September 9, attendees approved the resolution that concluded:

We hereby organize a Diocese of the Church, whose bounds shall be co-terminus with those of the State of Nebraska, and apply for admission into union with the General Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church of the United States.

In New York City a month later, on October 9, 1868, the clergy and lay delegates attending the General Convention approved a similar resolution that admitted the Diocese of Nebraska “into full Canonical union” with the Church in the United States. The Diocese of Nebraska thus became an independent, self-governing unit.
The vote at the General Convention was hardly the beginning of the Diocese of Nebraska. Efforts by both laity and clergy to establish the Protestant Episcopal Church in Nebraska had begun well over a decade earlier, not long after the area was opened to non-native settlement in 1854. At that time, there were only tiny handfuls of known Episcopalians scattered throughout the sparsely settled region – and no clergy to minister to their spiritual needs. In fact, the Church had no official presence in the territory during the first two years of territorial existence. In early 1856, an Omaha resident wrote to Rev. Dr. Benjamin I. Haight, editor of the missionary journal of the Protestant Episcopal Church, *Spirit of Missions*, puzzled as to why no clergyman had come into the territory, noting that “Other Churches have sent Missionaries here.” Over the next dozen years, the efforts by Episcopal laity and missionaries who responded to that 1856 query built the foundation on which the Episcopal Diocese of Nebraska was established. Their efforts produced fifteen parishes, 701 communicants, and sixteen priests in the diocese, according to the first report made by Bishop Robert Harper Clarkson to the 1868 General Convention.

Nebraska Territory had been opened in June 1854, following the March 30, Congressional passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Legal permission to open the region to settlement also required the Omaha Indians to cede all rights to 4.9 million acres of land along and west of the Missouri River; that treaty was ratified by the Senate in June 1854. Because all land opened to settlement was required to have a territorial government that would impose federal statutes, in October 1854, a trio of temporary bureaucrats appointed in Washington D.C., arrived in the territory to govern it. Religious bodies arrived in the territory entirely at their own pace, and the Episcopal Church was not immediately among them. In early 1856, after the Omaha resident asked “why” the Episcopal Church was so tardy, Rev. Edward W. Peet from St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Des
Moines, Iowa, was summoned to Omaha in April to read the first services. Later that summer, Missionary Bishop Rt. Rev. Jackson Kemper, Diocese of Iowa Bishop Rt. Rev. Henry Lee, and Rev. William N. Irish of Christ Episcopal Church in St. Joseph, Missouri, arrived in Omaha City to survey the situation. Wrote Bishop Kemper at that time, “Tents are seen in every direction . . . . Already, in some respects, we are too late in the field. Missionaries should be in the Territory, . . .” However, another three years passed before the Church established a missionary district through which it could administer missionary activities. In the meantime, Presiding Bishop Thomas Church Brownell asked Bishop Henry Lee of Iowa to supervise Church activities in Nebraska; Bishop Kemper was to do the same in Kansas Territory.

The next General Convention which could approve creation of a missionary district was held in October 1859. There delegates proposed and ratified creation of the Missionary District of the Northwest. The area, which included Nebraska Territory, encompassed some 750,000 square miles. The convention elected Rev. Joseph Cruickshank Talbot of Christ Church, Indianapolis, Indiana to serve as the new Missionary Bishop. He was consecrated on February 15, 1860, and arrived in Nebraska City, Nebraska Territory on April 24, 1860. Because property was easier and cheaper to purchase in Nebraska City – whose population was then equal to that of Omaha City, on May 24, Bishop Talbot purchased forty acres of land from Peter and Elizabeth Lotte some three miles east and two miles south of the bustling community. Shortly thereafter, he brought his family to the sparsely settled region and settled into frontier life in Nebraska City. For the next five years, the bishop traveled almost constantly – north into the Dakotas, South to the Nebraska-Kansas border, west into the territorial regions of Colorado and Wyoming, and in 1863, west all the way to the Pacific Coast. That journey of seven months and 7,000 miles was the longest trip ever undertaken by a domestic
missionary.

It was on Bishop Talbot’s first trip north to Dakota Territory in June 1860, that the bishop noticed a virtually abandoned structure west of the trail north of Omaha. What he saw was the economically floundering Central House in the defunct settlement of Saratoga. It would, he believed, be an excellent structure in which to establish a school. In October 1860, the bishop wrote that he needed to act quickly because, “The Romanists, I learn, are looking toward it with eager eyes.” Over the next year, the bishop arranged financing to purchase the land and buildings that became Brownell Hall, a school for girls that continues today as the co-educational Brownell-Talbot School. Because some of the funding for the original purchase came from the family of Episcopal Church Presiding Bishop Rt. Rev. Thomas Church Brownell, Bishop Talbot named the school Brownell Hall. It opened in September 1863.

In 1865, Bishop Talbot returned to Indiana as Bishop Coadjutor. During the intervening five years, territorial organization of regions bordering on the Nebraska Territory had reduced the size of the missionary district to approximately that of the area which would become Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota. Rt. Rev. Robert Harper Clarkson of St. James’ in Chicago, Illinois, succeeded Bishop Talbot as Missionary Bishop; the new smaller district was called the Missionary District of Nebraska and Dakota. After the independent Episcopal Diocese of Nebraska was established, Bishop Clarkson continued to serve as Missionary Bishop of Dakota until the Missionary District of Niobrara was created in 1873, with Rt. Rev. William Hobart Hare as its head.

With establishment of the diocese, Bishop Clarkson’s work became more pastoral, reducing the amount of basic physical labor performed by all clergy, but still necessitating a great deal of travel. Construction of the transcontinental railroad after the Civil War altered his transportation
mode from that of horseback and horse-drawn wagons to rail cars. At his arrival in 1865, he and his wife Meliora had settled on the Nebraska City land acquired by Bishop Talbot; they purchased the Talbot farm in February 1866. On the same land, the Bishop also opened a boys’ school, called Talbot Hall. In 1868, the Clarksons moved to Omaha, and the curriculum of Talbot Hall was expanded to that of seminary status and renamed Nebraska College and Divinity School. Through the mid-1870s, Bishop Clarkson’s pastoral responsibilities extended west to St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Central City, Colorado, and north to St. Paul’s in Vermillion, Dakota Territory. The extensive and still arduous travel took their toll on Bishop Clarkson’s health, and after a lengthy and cold trip to Grand Island in early February 1884, the bishop died very suddenly on March 21, 1884.

After an arduous search and difficult election process, Rev. Dr. George Worthington of St. James’ in Detroit, Michigan, was elected to succeed Rt. Rev. Robert Harper Clarkson as Bishop of Nebraska. He was consecrated on February 24, 1885. A Social Gospel activist, Bishop Worthington sought to spread the Gospel among the marginalized urban populations, and to that end established the Associate Mission in Omaha. The Associate Mission was intended to establish mission churches in less affluent areas of Omaha, with young ordinands serving in pastoral roles. Of the multiple missions established in Omaha under the program, only St. Martin of Tours and St. Andrew’s remain. But Bishop Worthington found travel into the western part of Nebraska difficult and less imperative because the region was still sparsely settled and there were few communicants. Thus in 1889, he encouraged Nebraska delegates to petition the General Convention to create a Missionary District in the western part of the state, leaving only forty eastern counties under the administration of the Diocese of Nebraska. The General Convention ratified the proposal, and until 1946, the eastern and western parts of Nebraska remained administratively separate.
In the decades after creation of the Western Missionary District, two bishops successively ministered to the flock in the eastern part of the state. In the first decades of the twentieth century, Rt. Rev. Arthur Llewellyn Williams faced the societal encroachment of Bolshevik influences, especially in more urban areas. He contested those by encouraging churches to build more parish houses and parish centers, where congregational community could be enhanced. Needing a stable budget, Bishop Williams, a consummate record-keeper from his early non-clerical career, also initiated the parish assessment system in Nebraska. Bishop Williams died suddenly in 1919; he was succeeded by Rt. Rev. Ernest Vincent Shayer. Nationally, the post World War I era was one of unbridled spending at many levels and of wide-open mores brought on by post-war altitudes and prohibition under the Eighteenth Amendment. Eventually, Americans’ compulsion with buying stocks “on the margin” forced the market to crash. The resultant Depression that began in 1929 hit parish pocketbooks equally as hard as it did those of rank and file Americans, and most parishes stopped paying their assessments. The bishop believed some parishes were using the Depression as an excuse to avoid assessment payments, a perception that produced tension between his office and Nebraska parishes. Bishop Shayler’s health was negatively impacted, and he retired in 1939. He was succeeded by Rt. Rev. Howard Rasmus Brinker. Under Bishop Brinker, the Diocese of Nebraska and the Western Missionary District were reunited into one diocese.

The reunion was defined in March 1946. The reconciliation resolution was approved at the General Convention held in Philadelphia the following September, and in February 1947, the united diocese held its first annual council under the leadership of Bishop Brinker. Delighted by the success of the reunion and heady with post-World War II euphoria, Nebraska clergy moved ahead with growth-accommodation plans that reflected the positive mood of the populace – but glossed
over the dissonance that existed between the more progressive perspective of eastern Nebraskans and
the more conservative ideals held by residents in the western part of the state. These were some of
the same issues that had faced Episcopalians in 1890. The 1950s saw tremendous growth in church
attendance, and church schools across the state were “completely outgrown.” In his 1953 address,
Bishop Brinker reported at council that “almost every congregation has a building Program for the
future.”

But some of the thorny issues faced by diocesan leadership in subsequent years were coming
to the surface. A few congregations remained too small to support a clergyman, so Bishop Brinker
began to combine some parish communities, such as Trinity Memorial in Crete and St. Andrew’s in
Seward. The shortage of clergy led to his support for a Lay Vicar program through which young
men would serve in small parishes while they studied for ordination. The still-evident west vs. east
Nebraska tensions were exacerbated through the late 1950s by shrinking populations in western
Nebraska farm communities, while those in eastern Nebraska urban areas grew. Then came the
seismic shift in culture during the decades between the 1960s and the 1990s. Nebraska bishops Rt.
Krotz had to smooth the differences among members of their flock on issues of race and civil rights,
on America’s involvement in the Vietnam War, on revisions to the Book of Common Prayer, on
women’s right to seek ordination, and on homosexuals rights to equality as Christians and to seek
ordination. In the last two decades, Rt. Rev. Joe Burnett and our present bishop, Rt. Rev. J. Scott
Barker have faced very restrictive budgets while simultaneously conducting outreach programs to the
state’s marginalized.

Pastoral care for their far flung flock remains difficult; the vast physical distances between
western and eastern parishes have not been reduced. Yet just as in 1854, Nebraska Episcopalians remain committed to their faith. Cultural issues and technology have changed, but as Episcopalians did 162 years ago, we are grateful “for the right to use the riches of creation”; we “strive for justice and peace among all people”; we “respect the dignity of every human being.”