SPREADING the GOSPEL IN the NORTHERN PART OF NEBRASKA TERRITORY: THE CHURCH in DAKOTA

The Missionary District of the Northwest, as established by the 1859 General Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church, was a vast region, encompassing all or part of eight present-day states, including Nebraska, Colorado, North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana, Utah, Nevada, and Wyoming. The convention had defined its parameters as, “all those portions of our country, North of a line running along the Northern boundary of the Cherokee country and New Mexico, until it reaches the Diocese of California, not yet organized into Dioceses, or included within Missionary districts.” Missionary Bishop Joseph C. Talbot estimated that his district contained 750,000 square miles. The 1859 Triennial had also established the Missionary District of the Southwest. Its margins lay to the south of the same boundary line that identified the Northwest District; the northern line of Cherokee country and New Mexico Territory, extending to the eastern border of the Diocese of California. But this missionary district also included the state of Arkansas, which then lacked the requisite number of Episcopalians to constitute a diocese. Elected as that district’s Missionary Bishop was Rev. Henry C. Lay, then rector of the Church of the Nativity in Huntsville, Alabama. After his consecration, Bishop Lay moved his family to Fort Smith, Arkansas, the community in which he chose to headquarter his administration. But the coming of the Civil War not only tore asunder the nation, the Episcopal Church split as well, with the South establishing the Protestant Episcopal Church in the Confederate States of America. Living in Arkansas, Bishop Lay chose to side with the Confederacy, effectively leaving oversight of New Mexico Territory, which included the future states of New Mexico and Arizona and which remained allied with the Union, to Bishop Talbot, thereby adding even more square miles to the latter’s missionary district.

It was difficult for Easterners to comprehend the size of the Missionary District of the Northwest. At the 1865 General Convention, Bishop Talbot characterized his role thusly:

Every part of the field must be traversed, if at all, by horse-power... The Missionary Bishop
must ride 600 miles from Nebraska, over this wilderness, to reach the populated portions of Colorado; one thousand more to get to Montana; and thence another thousand, from Montana, through Utah into Nevada; and in every one of these, . . . , his personal presence is required if the church is to be established.

Nonetheless, he saw his role as “toilsome but glorious,” and for the next five years, Bishop Talbot was nearly always on the move. In late May 1863, he headed to the far western and southwestern portions of his missionary district. The bishop did not return until December 9, 1863. His 7,000 mile journey through New Mexico, Colorado, Utah, Nevada, Nebraska, and part of Montana, was the longest missionary trip ever undertaken by a domestic missionary.

Not all of the 750,000 square miles actually fell under his Episcopal authority. Some regions within the district lacked federally constituted governments and were not open to settlement. Other portions of the district were occupied by Native Americans with whom no land cession treaty had been negotiated. Such areas, likewise, were unavailable to settlers. Yet other regions, such as parts of Utah, were dominated by seemingly impenetrable religious beliefs. Writing about Utah Territory in August 1861, Bishop Talbot noted that the, “The Mormon population have exclusive control. . . . However, I am led to believe that there is already a wide-spread disaffection toward the corrupt leaders of that stupendous imposture.” However, one mostly unsettled area immediately to the north of Nebraska Territory fell under Bishop Talbot’s, and later Bishop Robert H. Clarkson’s, administration.

The northern part of Nebraska Territory had been given the name “Dakota” when it was still part of Minnesota Territory. Dakota was the common language group among the region’s dominant inhabitants, the Eastern Sioux peoples. The Middle Sioux are Nakota; the Western Sioux, or Teton, are the Lakota. Originally the Sioux peoples lived in the area of modern-day Minnesota, but they were pushed westward onto the Great Plains by colonial trading patterns. In Dakota, most of the land west of the Missouri River, and south to the North Platte River in Nebraska, had been included in the
Fort Laramie Treaty of 1851, by which eight northern Plains tribes – including the Sioux – agreed “to abstain in future from all hostilities whatever against each other, to maintain good faith and friendship in all their mutual intercourse, and to make an effective and lasting peace.” The constant skirmishes among the tribes had been endangering the travels of argonauts headed west through their lands. By the treaty, the tribes also agreed to permit construction of military posts and roads through their territories, and to accept the federally-drawn borders for each tribe’s claimed lands. In return, they were to receive protection from emigrants traveling into the West, as well as annual annuities provided by the government. These newly defined areas were, of course, off limits to white settlement. The region to the east of the Missouri River in Dakota was an unorganized territory that lay between the river and the western border of the newly established State of Minnesota. Because that area had once been part of the Territory of Minnesota, a few whites lived in the region, but that particular sector of the frontier had no government when the missionary district was established. Bishop Talbot’s Episcopal administration extended over those few Americans living in that area, as well as any American soldiers stationed at the military posts in the treaty regions.

Further confusing the history of the Nebraska diocese in that region, as well as the geographical definition of Dakota, is the fact that a small amount of land along the present northern Nebraska border had been mistakenly included in the 1851 land cession. This small area had been claimed by the Yankton bands of Sioux peoples – and they had not agreed to relinquish their land. To remedy the situation and to allow settlement in the area, another treaty had to be negotiated. By the Treaty of Washington in 1858, the Yankton ceded their contested lands, thereby opening them to white settlement, and simultaneously placing Bishop Talbot’s Episcopal supervision over the region. Official government for the region was not established until Congress approved creation of Dakota Territory on March 2, 1861.
Almost immediately after the Treaty of Washington was signed, a few small settlements had been established not far from the border with Nebraska, including Yankton, Vermillion, Elk Point, and Bon Homme. Bishop Talbot visited Yankton and Vermillion on his first trip into Dakota in the summer of 1860. And in April 1860, the Board of Missions officially appointed Rev. Melancthon Hoyt, already serving the Church in Iowa, as the “Missionary itinerant in Dakotah territory and in Nebraska.” The missionary joined Bishop Talbot on his travels, and the two men became fast friends, although Rev. Hoyt remained under the administrative jurisdiction of the Diocese of Iowa. It became the personal mission of Rev. Melancthon Hoyt to establish the Church in Dakota Territory.

Rev. Hoyt had served on the frontier since the 1830s. Born in South Norwalk, Connecticut, on February 13, 1809, he entered Yale College in 1826, finishing in June 1830 with a degree in law. He quickly decided that the field of law was too unethical for his personal palate, so he enrolled in New York’s General Theological Seminary, completing his studies in 1834. He was ordained deacon in October 1834, and priest on August 23, 1835. Both ordinations were officiated by Rt. Rev. Thomas Church Brownell, Bishop of Connecticut, and later Presiding Bishop of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States. Called immediately to the missionary field, in late-1835 Rev. Hoyt settled in Indianapolis, Indiana, as the resident missionary, arriving even before the Church’s first Missionary Bishop Jackson Kemper. Among his pastoral responsibilities there was the nurturing of a fledgling congregation in Crawfordsville which then worshiped in the courthouse. By late 1837, Rev. Hoyt had raised sufficient funds to construct a small frame building into which the small flock of Episcopaliens placed temporary seats for use until the structure could be fully completed – which could happen only as funds became available. The congregation became St. John’s Episcopal Church in Crawfordsville, and the church building remains in use (2016). Simultaneously Rev. Hoyt organized a parish called Trinity Church, in Montgomery County, Indiana. Under his leadership, a
building was also constructed there.

The missionary returned briefly to Connecticut in 1838, serving as rector of St. Andrew’s in Meriden. During this period he received his Doctor of Divinity from Yale Theological School. By late-1839, Rev. Hoyt was back in the missionary field, this time serving in the vicinity of Grand Rapids, Michigan. Rev. Hoyt remained in Michigan and Wisconsin for the next two decades, establishing parishes in Grand Rapids, Fox Lake, Watertown, and Manitowoc. The missionary left Manitowoc in July 1858, called to the wide-open frontier of Dakota. He and his family traveled in two covered wagons to Sioux City, Iowa, arriving in September 1858. Then still recovering from a severe bronchial condition, Rev. Hoyt absented himself from Sioux City for several months while he recovered. When he returned in August 1859, he began working to establish the parish of, and to construct a building for, St. Thomas Episcopal Church. In March 1860, Rev. Hoyt was appointed “itinerant” missionary in Dakota, which lay just across the Missouri River to the west.

At the time of his arrival in 1860, Rev. Hoyt speculated that the white population of Dakota numbered only about 125 families. Reaching his flock, and expanding his congregations were of tremendous concern to the missionary. Their numbers were so widely scattered that he could not, “on a weekday, collect them for public worship.” He believed he needed to visit frequently, and he had a plan. First he needed to acquire a large library of books “of a practical character“ for use as a circulating library. While he could use some from his own library, he needed about one hundred more volumes. He would visit a family, lend them a book, then call back in a respectable period of time to retrieve one book and leave another. He would use narratives in the books to create an analogy to Christ’s life and work in his discussions with emigrants in their homes. The work would be difficult, Rev. Hoyt acknowledged. Most of the population, he explained, had not attended any church for the past two or three years, in part because there were few churches of any denomination in the region, but
also because the population was not interested doing so. They were all simply waiting for the territorial lands, then occupied by Native Americans, to open to settlement. “The people attend worship more to pass away an idle hour . . . than to worship God. . . . Yet the power of the Gospel can reach them.” The missionary intended to visit the few towns once in every two weeks, while still residing in Sioux City.

Rev. Hoyt also immersed himself in local affairs. He led the “public” school in Sioux City in 1858 and 1859. After a government was organized at Yankton, he became its Chaplain. He was a member of the Dakota Historical and Library Association and the Historical Society of Dakota. In 1866, he served in the Sixth Session of the Dakota Legislature. Additionally, while working in Wisconsin in the 1850s, Rev. Hoyt had become a Mason, and he remained very active in the Dakota chapters throughout the rest of his life.

By early 1862, Rev. Hoyt was committing two of four Sundays each month to his work in Dakota, although he continued to reside in Sioux City. He estimated that he traveled fifteen to eighteen days each month, and traveled fifteen to thirty miles on each of those days to complete his visitations. The mission, he wrote, “is an arduous one; the recompense is also great.” By then, Yankton residents had finished a log church building, costing about $250, and there were plans to erect a parsonage near the church as well. It was his zest for mission in spring 1862, that motivated him to move his family from the relative comfort of life in Sioux City to the sparsely settled territory of Dakota, just across the river. He believed that Sioux City was on the cusp of economic expansion, but a desire to spread the Gospel beckoned him, and he left his home of several years “with feelings of great sadness.” Rev. Hoyt was the first clergyman to reside in Dakota Territory. The Civil War years brought tremendous unrest among Native Americans across the Great Plains, and Dakota Territory was not spared. Late in the summer of 1862, Rev. Hoyt felt compelled to move his family from the area
due to the unrest. However, later in the year, residents returned, but erected a blockhouse for protection.

Described as a “broad-minded, great-hearted, Christian gentleman,” Rev. Hoyt worked tirelessly over the next two decades establishing at least twenty-five churches. In August 1876, The Spirit of Missions noted that “Dakota may not have a Bishop of its own, [but] it has the next best thing to such a blessing in the Rev. Dr. Hoyt, the Dean of the Territory.” Nebraska’s Bishop Clarkson called him “the Champion Missionary at large of the American Church.” In his late 60s, he organized missions in Springfield, Swan Lake, Turner, and Lincoln Centre. He retired briefly in 1883, but soon returned to his missionary labors. In 1886, he convinced his clerical peers that he should – and could – establish a parish at Scotland, knowing that St. Andrew’s would be the “last church he would ever have a hand in building.” Bishop William Hobart Hare wrote eloquently:

With pride he saw it enclosed, and wrote me that it promised to be one of the prettiest churches in the jurisdiction. He lived to see the house of God covered in from the weather and almost completed, and then turned his eyes toward the Father’s house, where there are many mansions, and died.

Bishop Hare asked Dakotans to complete construction of St. Andrew’s as their memorial to Rev. Hoyt. He had fulfilled his original goal of spreading the Gospel. Noting his death on January 2, 1888, the Press and Daily Dakotian said “The reaper has gathered a full sheaf.”

Nebraska’s direct connection to mission activity in Dakota Territory ended with the 1873 consecration of Rt. Rev. William Hobart Hare as Missionary Bishop of Niobrara, since the boundaries of the Missionary District of Niobrara, as established by the General Convention in 1871, included Dakota Territory. However, the missionary biography of Rev. Melancthon Hoyt is emblematic of almost all missionary clergy in all denominations who labored across the Frontier during the era of nineteenth century settlement. Working in primitive and frequently dangerous conditions, they
shepherded a flock whose numbers fluctuated wildly as emigrants sought greener pastures for farming, more lucrative mineral veins for mining, and better opportunities for personal wealth. Believing strongly in America’s democratic foundation, missionaries established schools because, noted Rev. Joseph P. Thompson, “With free suffrage, ignorance is our first danger, and intelligence our first remedy.” Because the school children and their families might become parishioners, the clergy physically labored to build the facilities to conduct their religious and educational endeavors. Never to be overlooked, however, are the efforts of lay men and women who saw the Church as a normalizing and stabilizing force in village life, and the formal institution around which they could build community. Women especially knit their parish communities together by gathering to sew the altar linens, to undertake pie sales and harvest festivals, and to care for each other’s families in crisis. Such parish actions further united the religious community to that of the civic. This critical piece of Episcopal Church history must not be forgotten.