

History of the National Episcopal Church Women

From the Spirit of Missions, Volume XXXVII for 1872:

It is our desire as speedily as possible to bind together the various Parochial Missionary Societies already existing, to organize new ones wherever they may be desired, and, by every means within our power, to awaken deeper and more permanent interest and zeal in the Missionary work among the women of the Church.

We long to have each one feel that she, individually, has something to do for Christ and for the coming of His Kingdom, while, at the same time, we long no less to have her realize that she is working, not alone, nor simply as a member of a single parish, but as one of a great company wherein all, in their own special stations, wait and watch and labor for their Lord.

We do not seek to control or direct the labor of the Society or the offering of the individuals.

What we do seek is to quicken the Missionary spirit, and then to urge it to prompt and generous action. We want your gifts of time, of strength, of intellect, not for ourselves, but for our Master. Lastly, there are hundreds more, earnest, faithful, devoted women, who would be cheered and whose hands would be strengthened, if they could only know what is being done by their sisters in the Church, and could see their offerings, small and insignificant as they seem, increased and multiplied by union with the gifts of others.

We wish all to draw closer to each other, labor more unitedly, to give more nobly, to pray more fervently, and to follow Christ's example.

We shall be glad to hear, not only from Rectors of parishes, but any and all earnest Christian women, who are willing to give their hearts to this work, and who seek further information and direction with regard to it.

(Paraphrased from the original text.)

At the 30th General Convention, held in Baltimore in 1871, the Board of Missions was authorized to organize a Women's Society. The Emery sisters, Mary Abbott, Julia Chester, Susan Lavinia, and Margaret Theresa, were instrumental in the early organization of the Women's Auxiliary. Mary wrote to every rector asking for cooperation in appointing a correspondent from that parish to help organize an Auxiliary Missionary Society, or form a relationship with a society already active in that parish. Thus, began a continuing communication link to encourage, inform, recruit, and guide.

How to Start or Participate in a National Episcopal Church Women Group

The first Triennial Meeting was held in 1874 at the same time and place as the 31st General Convention. Sixty-six women from five states gathered. By the second Triennial Meeting in 1877, 48 dioceses had formally organized groups. Much of the early work of the Women's Auxiliary was to address the problem of funding women who dedicated their lives to mission work. (Thus, our reputation as fundraisers goes back to our beginnings!) From the beginning collections were taken up which led to the formation of The United Thank Offering. This effort, as well as the number of participants, grew at each Triennial Meeting. In preparation for the 1898 Triennial Meeting, 25,000 collection boxes were sent out which gathered in \$82,818.56. The increasing number of participants, almost 2000, prompted a change in 1907 in which only the officers of diocesan organizations could attend the Triennial Meeting in order to seat everyone and have manageable groups in small mission studies.

The Triennial Meeting in 1922 reflected the new concept in program and organization. A National Board had been formed to oversee the direction of the work of the women, in not only supporting missionaries, but in social service, religious education, and prayer and worship.

Prior to the 1958 Triennial Meeting, the Women's Auxiliary Executive Board became the General Division of Women's Work. The Triennial Meeting adopted the necessary bylaws which included a designation that diocesan groups would be known as Episcopal Church Women and parish groups would be known as the Women of _____. Between 1958 and 1985, the role of women in the Church went through numerous and significant changes. As women were accepted into seminaries and ordained, elected to vestries and as deputies to General Convention, and otherwise mainstreamed, the Episcopal Church Women struggled with their position in the Church. Over time, the national structure changed from being a part of the National Church structure to an independent group culminating in the creation of the National Board of the Episcopal Church Women in 1985. This Board, with minor changes, continues to function.