

Lex Mathews & Christian Social Ministries in North Carolina 1974-1984
Opening remarks at Lex Mathews Day
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At the 1976 Diocesan Convention, Lex Sterner Mathews, Director of Christian Social Ministries for the Diocese, delivered his own version of a “Declaration of Independence.” No longer would the initiative for addressing the social concerns of North Carolina come from outside our own communities. For too long, he declared, we have allowed others to tell us what is going on here and what to do about it. We have done so because the problems are unattractive and because we have lost confidence in our ability to help ourselves since we are not ‘experts’ or ‘professionals.’ But that, said Lex, is bad theology:

For good Christian theology tells us that man’s need *to* love is greater than his need to *be* loved. Now, change that so that it reads to *help* rather than *be helped*. When we ask the Atlantas, the Washingtons or whatever to be the helper, then we cut the light right out from under the would-be helpers in our own block.

This is the year of our Bicentennial. . . . We can’t take on courage by dressing up. The three corner hat is not going to cut it at the office on Monday morning. We take on greatness by re-claiming our courage which hopefully is laced with both compassion and grace. . . . We did not say to England tell us what is happening on our block and tell us what to do about it. Rather, we said, let us tell you what is happening on our block and indeed what *we* are going to do about it.

We said, “we have our own helpers and we have baptized them and we are going to become a community,” and so we did!

The Christian Social Ministries Committee is convinced that there is plenty of talent in every local situation to effectively deal with most social concerns. During this coming year, with your help, we are going to dedicate ourselves to that end.¹

To appreciate fully the significance of Lex’s declaration, we need to hear it against the backdrop of what had gone before. In 1967, the Episcopal Church had committed itself to a massive national undertaking to address the problems of racial and social unrest by appropriating three million dollars annually for what came to be called the General Convention Special Program (GCSP) fund. Administration of the fund rested with a national staff that intentionally bypassed

¹ *Journal of the 160th Annual Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the State of North Carolina* (1976): 166, 167. Hereinafter abbreviated *NCDJ*.

existing church structures in order to make grants directly to organizations committed to the economic, social, and political empowerment of poor black communities.²

The Diocese of North Carolina sought to align itself with this new initiative by resolving in 1968 to make addressing the Urban Crisis (as it was called) its chief mission imperative, which led ultimately to the creation of a diocesan Racial and Urban Affairs Committee, with its own full-time paid program director.³ But the Diocese still found itself in a reactive posture over two GCSP grants made in 1969 to the Malcolm X Liberation University in Durham. This created a firestorm of controversy within the diocese, leading some parishes to withhold funds for diocesan and national church support. Subsequent efforts to involve the diocese in GCSP grant review and recommendations were at best marginally successful in overcoming the sense of alienation between many of the churches in the diocese and the national church.⁴

By 1973 the national church was prepared to phase out the GCSP and transfer its remaining funds (now reduced to \$650,000/year) to a new Committee for Community Action and Human Development.⁵ But the grant-making process of the national church remained a source of continuing frustration for diocesan leadership in North Carolina, since it still meant involving local Episcopal churches in reviewing applications submitted by agencies located within their respective communities, but without a commensurate role in the ultimate decision-making, which remained the prerogative of the national church.⁶

Clearly there needed to be a way to address the concerns of the poor and the marginalized that put the initiative and investment back in the hands of the diocese and its parishes and missions. Two seemingly unrelated events in the summer of 1974 would prove highly significant in this regard. One was the precipitous resignation in June of the Program Director for Racial and Urban Affairs following a less-than-glowing evaluation of the program by Diocesan Council.⁷ The other was an exploratory dialogue between Lex Mathews and Diocesan Bishop Tom Fraser about Lex returning to work in the Diocese of North Carolina. Lex had previously worked here as the Chaplain at UNC—Chapel Hill for three years, but he had resigned that position in the

² See David E. Sumner, *The Episcopal Church's History 1945-1985* (Wilton, Ct. 1987), 46-59; Gardiner H. Shattuck, Jr., *Episcopalians & Race: Civil War to Civil Rights* (Lexington, Ky. 2000), 175-180.

³ *NCDJ*, 152nd (1968): 56, 57; *NCDJ*, 153rd (1969): 67, 68; *NCDJ*, 154th (1970): 152-158; *NCDJ*, 156th (1972): 133.

⁴ On grants to the Malcolm X Liberation University and the diocesan reaction and response, see Sumner (1987), 50; Shattuck (2000), 199,200; *NCDJ*, 154th (1970): 152-158.

⁵ Sumner (1987), 57.

⁶ *NCDJ*, 159th (1975): 78-80.

⁷ See papers of Thomas A. Fraser, 1974. Archives of the Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina, Raleigh, NC.

summer of 1973 to move to St. Petersburg, Florida and make his living in boat building and repair instead.

A year's sobering experience in the boat business convinced Lex that he should return to church work, and with Bishop Fraser's encouragement, he submitted a proposal for a new position he would like both to create and fill. In a six-page letter to the Bishop dated September 1, 1974, Lex spelled out his idea for a position he titled: "Community Consultant and Instigator for Disoriented Young People." The quirky title notwithstanding, Lex was making a serious proposal. He noted the rise of Crisis Centers as a way to address the problems of young people facing drug addiction, homelessness, and unwanted pregnancies, and offered a critical assessment: such places serve as a useful point of contact, but they do nothing to address the pressing goal of returning the young person to society in a healthier situation. What is needed for a teenage runaway, then, is a network of homes and employers and physicians and school counselors willing to engage actively with these individuals. Lex further explained his approach:

I have used as an example runaways but one can easily see that this *brokerage type of situation* [italics added] can fit any number of youth problems. Take for instance: general summer idleness among local youth. A young person could be interviewed to find out what kind of work he would really like to do. Work on a farm, in the police or fire department, in a hospital, in a garage, yard work. Again almost limitless possibilities. Coupled with the summer work, there could be offered summer courses in fun things like fishing, sailing, arts and crafts, etc.—all taught locally by local talent. . . .

I hope by now the overriding point is obvious, namely that the community addresses itself to its own problem utilizing its own resources on a very low budget instead of wringing its hands, cursing young people and waiting on some sort of overnight magic cure in the form of a government grant.

The local organization Lex envisioned would be a group of eight leading citizens willing to spend 15 to 20 hours a month working with the project. There would be a paid director, probably someone just out of college. As consultant and instigator, Lex's task would be to go into a community; seek the cooperation of the local Episcopal clergy; help to recruit and train the group of eight leaders; train the director, and support the project until it could run itself. Knowing that this was a new and untried position, Lex offered to come on a two-year trial basis.⁸

Bishop Fraser's response to this proposal was enigmatic but promising. He wrote back to Lex: "I think I am ready to talk to you. Maybe not exactly about what you have in mind; but when, where and how would you like to meet? . . . By the time we meet, we will be through our budget

⁸ Lex Mathews to Thomas A. Fraser, September 1, 1974. Fraser Papers, Raleigh, NC.

process and I will have an idea of the direction in which I can move financially. . . . I really do have something in mind.”⁹

Within two months, the enigma was solved. By the November 18 meeting of Diocesan Council, the Racial and Urban Affairs Committee had become the Committee for Christian Social Ministries, and Lex Mathews was put forward as the inaugural Director.¹⁰ In essence, Lex’s new job adopted his September proposal for community engagement and applied it more broadly to cover all aspects of social ministry: not just racial and urban issues (as had been the focus of attention for the previous six years), nor just youth issues (as Lex had proposed to the Bishop), but rather to “identify the causes of human suffering and human needs . . . and to bring to bear the resources of the diocese, its parishes and missions to help to alleviate this suffering and meet these needs.”¹¹

At the January, 1975 Diocesan Convention, Bishop Fraser looked back on the past year and encapsulated the change this way, appropriating Lex’s distinctive lexicon as his own:

At the last Diocesan Convention, the Diocesan Council was charged to review the future goals and effectiveness of all elements of the Diocesan Program This led to some changes in our Racial and Urban Affairs program, including the change of the name, the director, and a change in direction to a broader and more inclusive program than we had attempted in the past. At the November meeting of the Council, the Reverend Lex Mathews . . . was approved to be the director of the program Mr. Mathews will be linking needs with resources and people with interests. He will be involved in what we call a *brokerage ministry* [italics added]. He will be available to every congregation of the diocese as the Church tries to assume its rightful role in a day of change, uncertainty, and need. . . . He will try to guide congregations and the diocese in the establishment of priorities as we serve to be our brother’s keeper.¹²

The Committee on the Address of the Bishop added this endorsement: “The Committee . . . notes with pleasure the dispatch with which the Diocesan Council reviewed and renewed the program of Racial and Urban Affairs and has moved to call the Rev. Lex Mathews to direct the

⁹ Thomas A. Fraser to Lex Mathews, September 6, 1974. Fraser Papers, Raleigh, NC.

¹⁰ This was moving too fast for some members of Diocesan Council, and a third of them voted for a motion to refer the matter back to committee for further study. When that vote failed, Lex was duly approved by essentially the same 2 to 1 margin. See “Minutes of the Meeting of the Diocesan Council, Diocese of North Carolina, November 18, 1974.” Fraser Papers, Box 115, Raleigh, NC.

¹¹ Purpose statement of the Committee on Christian Social Ministries and the Director of Committee Job Description (undated). Mathews Papers, Raleigh, NC

¹² *NCDJ*, 159th (1975): 82, 83.

work of the new Committee on Christian Social Ministries. The ministry of social concern is one that can touch all parishes and there is great need for a coordinator who will help us weave together resources and special needs.”¹³

But where to begin? Lex came to the January, 1975 Convention prepared to engage the diocese around issues of poverty and hunger, and he put before Convention a bold resolution calling on all congregations to raise an amount equal to 10% of their local budgets for aid to the poor and hungry. When the resolution met with defeat, Lex admitted to being “down in my socks” about it. But Bishop Fraser sent a pastoral letter to all clergy and senior wardens, urging them to adopt the resolution locally, and Lex quickly followed up, offering to work with congregations individually.¹⁴ Within a year, Lex could report that 45 congregations had established hunger programs and another 15 had done some work in this area. He himself had preached in 27 different congregations in the diocese and met with 55 parish groups. As an outward and visible sign of all this activity, Lex produced two newsletters which he sent to every Senior Warden and congregational CSM director. This essentially consisted of compiling brief reports from 53 different congregations about what they were doing to address hunger. The efforts varied widely in approach and focus, but what counted was the sheer fact that the parishes were receiving public diocesan affirmation for their initiatives and everyone could now see what was possible on the local level when congregations took ownership of their own programs.¹⁵

This record of widespread achievement during his first year on the job makes abundantly clear that when Lex stood before Convention in 1976 to issue his “Declaration of Independence,” he was in fact reflecting his own deepest convictions about his own established way of doing community and congregation-based Christian Social Ministry and simply promising more of the same in the years to come. For the next decade, Lex continued to make good on that promise, repeatedly putting his methodology into practice with a potent combination of personal charm, passionate conviction, and principled determination.

¹³ *NCDJ*, 159th (1975): 170.

¹⁴ *NCDJ*, 159th (1975): 196, 197. Thomas A. Fraser, “Pastoral Letter to Clergy and Senior Wardens,” February 5, 1975, and Lex S. Mathews, “Memorandum to Clergy and Senior Wardens,” February 13, 1975. Mathews Papers, Raleigh, NC.

¹⁵ Newsletters of May 23, 1975 & September 11, 1975; “Highlights CSM Director: January 15, 1975 – January 15, 1976” in Mathews Papers, Raleigh, NC. Mathews also reported to Council that he had done work in at least nine other program areas: prison reform, racial issues, criminal justice, aging, drugs & alcohol, housing, handicapped accessibility, Vietnam refugee resettlement, and child advocacy.

The establishment of Hospice in North Carolina serves as a perfect example of how Lex operated. In 1983, the Rev. Peter Keese, first President of the organization, told the story to Bishop Estill this way:

In the summer of 1976, Lex Mathews sat on my porch in Durham, drank my scotch, and asked me what I knew about Hospice. [*Note: at this time Keese was serving as a Duke Hospital Chaplain*] The next thing I knew, he had me involved in meetings with a small group of people to discuss Hospice; then he found enough money to send me [and others] . . . to the Second National Hospice Symposium in early '77. By Spring, 1977 we had . . . gotten ourselves organized and incorporated as Hospice of North Carolina, Inc.

Our first Executive Director, Carl Whitney, like my friend Jack Moorhead, belonged to St. Paul's, Winston-Salem; Dudley Calhoun was very helpful to HNC in its early days; he provided us our first office space. Frank Vest was equally helpful in Charlotte In addition the Diocese has been very generous to HNC each year since its incorporation in 1977. For each of the last four or five years we have received a direct grant of at least \$10,000.00.

The point I mean to make, obviously, is that HNC and the Diocese have been closely intertwined since the beginning of our history. Local Episcopal churches, priests and lay people have been involved in almost every community where Hospice has become established. Without the Episcopal church we probably would not exist.¹⁶

Peter Keese's narrative highlights the role of Lex as instigator, using his personal charm to initiate a conversation about the Hospice movement that would draw Peter and other Episcopalians into investing themselves in this work. But that is only part of the story. The archival record also reveals Lex's persistent and careful cultivation of social, political, organizational and economic resources to enable Hospice to gain a foothold in our state. For example, Lex was in close communication with Bertha "B" Holt about writing and introducing enabling legislation into the General Assembly. Lex arranged for Peter Keese and Carl Whitney to have a meeting with Governor Hunt. Lex went to talk to Emmett Sebrell about using his influence to involve others in Charlotte. And in these matters, Lex was all business. So, it is mistake to think Lex just exercised charm; he involved himself directly in the organizational details.¹⁷

In this regard, Lex's formal departure from the Hospice Executive Board is every bit as telling as his early role in getting it started. Hospice was incorporated for less than a year when Lex

¹⁶ Peter Keese to the Rt. Rev. Robert W. Estill, May 31, 1983. Mathews Papers, Raleigh, NC.

¹⁷ See the Hospice folder in the Mathews Papers. Raleigh, NC.

determined that it was time to step down from the Board. He wrote to Peter Keese and Carl Whitney to explain his resignation:

- (1) My style of operation, as you both know, is to begin or broker projects and then to disengage myself once they are safely underway. I think this point has arrived and I may even be past due.
- (2) I feel that in resigning . . . a place can be opened up for a person of high visibility and with qualifications both in finance and management
- (3) The goals I had set for myself have now been accomplished – i.e., a sound organization with good leadership and a decent salary for the Executive Director. My premise is that if you get good people and pay them right, things will happen.
- (4) I intend for you to use me anytime you want for special projects like fund raising strategy, development of new interest, ideas on new leadership, etc. So, I don't really feel as if I'm abandoning the ship.

Having restated his core convictions about his own leadership role, Lex then went on to address the specific challenges he saw for the nascent organization. He wrote candidly of the need for new leadership in Charlotte and for the Board to redirect its efforts from cultivating interest state-wide to becoming operational in a single community. He lodged a pointed objection to increasing the size of the Board of Directors, and he was even more direct in his criticism of the decision to delay putting together a slide show presentation. “If we can't tell the Hospice story in basics (and that's what I mean by a slide show),” he exclaimed, “then what in hell have we been doing all along and, pray tell me, how can we crank up a speaker's bureau (training and all) if we don't know what they are to say. If I had any artistic talent, I could do it myself.” Lex concluded the letter by reporting that he was on his way that day to meet with Sandra Thomas about how to get Hospice “officially baptized by the State”—the meeting that would eventually yield the audience for Peter and Carl with Governor Hunt.¹⁸

Lex would continue to applaud from the sidelines as Hospice took root and grew. When 300 folk attended the North Carolina Hospice Conference in October, 1978, Lex sent Peter and Carl a warm letter of congratulation, and when Peter Keese announced his intention to step down as President in 1982, Lex wrote: “Peter Gaines Keese, you have done an incredibly competent and

¹⁸ Lex Mathews to Peter Keese and Carl Whitney, February 14, 1978. Mathews Papers. Raleigh, NC.

successful job with Hospice of North Carolina! Besides that, you are one of the best damn men I know, and I love you!!!”¹⁹

The space in Lex’s life and ministry freed up by his departure from the Hospice Board was quickly filled with other ministries, and just to highlight them takes both sides of a legal-sized piece of paper. A number of these we’ll be talking about this afternoon, so I won’t address them now. Let me close then by calling attention to a conference that Lex organized in 1984 at Kanuga on behalf of the Commission on Social and Specialized Ministries of the Episcopal Church, a conference titled “10 Parish Programs that Work: Helping the Poor in the ‘80s.” Early in the planning stages, Lex set forth his operational assumptions for the conference in a four-page memo. One was his insistence upon having the folk directly involved with running the ten model programs come and present them. Lex wrote: “What we have learned in the Diocese of North Carolina is that it is infinitely more effective to have the model present itself, rather than having someone not involved speak for it (i.e., people who *work in* a soup kitchen – not the Director of Christian Social Ministries). In this way *real* questions are answered by and from *real* situations, allowing the model to tell its *own* story.” The other was his insistence on cultivating interest and commitment from the attendees. Too often, Lex noted, national church conferences simply rely on a letter to diocesan bishops or staff as sole promoters. The result: “Oftentimes delegates are picked at the last minute and are usually people with little interest and less followup. . . . *It is essential that at least as much time, perhaps more, be spent on organizing the membership as is spent on the program itself.*” Lex thought every member of the conference planning task force should start working at least six months prior to the conference itself to assemble a diocesan team of three or four folk who would take the time to work the phones and write follow-up letters.²⁰ By all accounts the Conference was a great success, drawing about 170 Episcopalians from 37 states. As one of the presenters noted, the overriding message was simply this: “You can do it.” That is, any parish of any size can implement a program to serve poor people.²¹

Here, then, was the “Gospel According to Lex Mathews” writ large for all the Episcopal Church to see: Parishes and people from across the church demonstrating the truth of Lex’s 1976 declaration that “local talent” is often sufficient and certainly requisite if we are to meet our pressing social concerns. Of course, it helps to have a Lex Mathews at your back to cajole and charm and encourage. And it helps to have someone with Lex’s organizational savvy to offer

¹⁹ Lex Mathews to Peter Keese and Carl Whitney, November 2, 1978; Lex Mathews to Peter Keese October 14, 1982. Mathews Papers, Raleigh, NC.

²⁰ See the Conference Brochure and “Some Thoughts on a Proposed Models Fair” Mathews Papers, Raleigh, NC.

²¹ Sara L. Bingham, “Kanuga hosts Social Ministries Meeting” in *The Times-News, Hendersonville, North Carolina* (May 16, 1984). Photocopy in the Mathews Papers. Raleigh, NC

counsel. But Lex's legacy need not be written solely in the past. By all means, let's remember Lex today and share stories. But more than that, let's remember Lex and his methods and then go and do likewise.