

The Election of Henry Beard Delany as Bishop:
An Appreciation of its Significance

The Rev. Dr. Brooks Graebner, Historiographer of the Diocese of North Carolina
Diocesan History Day and Celebration of Delany's Feast Day
St. Luke's, Salisbury April 15, 2023

On May 15, 1918, at 3:45 in the afternoon, in this very church, St. Luke's, Salisbury, the Rev. Henry Beard Delany, D.D., then serving as Archdeacon for Black ministry in the Diocese of North Carolina, was elected Bishop Suffragan.

That much is widely known and acknowledged. But there are two aspects of this election that are not so widely known and appreciated, and I would like to highlight them for you this morning. The first concerns the leadership role which Delany and this diocese played in promoting the cause of a Black missionary bishop in the years prior to his election. The second concerns the manner in which the election itself was conducted.

Following the Civil War, the Episcopal Church sought to encourage the ordination of Black clergy and the organization of Black congregations. Inevitably the question would arise: Should the church consecrate Black bishops to provide Episcopal oversight of Black clergy and congregations?

Discussion of Black bishops to work in the South began as early as 1874, but the defining moment occurred in 1883, when a majority of southern white bishops, meeting at Sewanee, proposed the creation of special missionary organizations for Black Episcopalians and presented the matter to General Convention. A leading Black clergyman, Alexander Crummell, regarded this so-called "Sewanee Canon" as a violation of the catholicity of the church, arguing that the Episcopal Church should not enshrine racial distinctions in its polity. Crummell called together all the Black clergy of the church to meet in opposition to the proposed Sewanee Canon. Their view prevailed, and the 1883 General Convention rejected the Sewanee Canon. Once assembled, the Black clergy agreed to continue holding annual meetings of what they now called "The Conference of Church Workers Among Colored People" (known by the abbreviation "The Conference" or by the initials "CCW").

What Crummell and like-minded Black clergy did not anticipate, however, was the determination of most southern dioceses to proceed on their own with the creation of separate missionary organizations and to disfranchise Black clergy and

congregations on the basis of race. By the 1890s, Virginia, South Carolina, and Georgia had all passed diocesan canons which restricted union with convention to whites only. Blacks were organized into colored convocations and placed under the administration of an archdeacon, who in turn, answered to the bishop. The white bishop would continue to conduct parish visitations, hold confirmation services, and ordain Black clergy, but Blacks were excluded from any leadership or meaningful participation in diocesan conventions. General Convention declined to take up the matter, declaring that diocesan conventions had the authority to determine membership criteria for clergy and congregations within their jurisdictional boundaries.

By the early 1900s, Jim Crow was the enshrined law of the land in southern states, and Black leaders in the Episcopal Church saw no prospect for reversing the practices now in place across the south. And so, in 1904 the Conference of Church Workers asked General Convention to authorize the creation of racial missionary districts in the south, and appoint Black bishops to oversee them, on the same basis that General Convention created territorial missionary districts. In this way, a Black bishop would be entitled to membership in the House of Bishops and the Black missionary district would be entitled to send deputies to General Convention.

The leading spokesman for the CCW was the Rev. George Freeman Bragg, rector of St. James', Baltimore, and a native of Warrenton, North Carolina. Bragg was secretary and historiographer of the CCW, and the editor and publisher of the monthly newspaper, called *The Church Advocate*.

Bragg, of course, was well aware that the position the CCW was *now* advocating marked a reversal of the position taken in 1883. But Bragg argued that it wasn't the CCW that had changed; it was the Episcopal Church, which had jettisoned its claims to catholicity when it permitted southern dioceses to disfranchise and segregate Black Episcopalians on the basis of race. Under current conditions, it was no longer possible to achieve the catholic ideal of a church for all peoples. And so, the only just and proper response was to permit Black Episcopalians to manage their own affairs, under the leadership of a bishop who answered to the entire House of Bishops, and not just to a white southern bishop and a whites-only convention.

Here in North Carolina, Bishop Joseph Blount Cheshire, Jr. and the convocation of Black clergy initially opposed what Bragg was proposing. They did so because

this diocese had not followed the practice of neighboring states. Here in North Carolina, Black clergy and congregations remained in union with convention, even after a separate “colored convocation” was formed in 1901. So, Cheshire and his Archdeacon, John Pollard, declared that they were happy with the status quo. Cheshire declared that he thought it was a wonderful witness of our church to the people of North Carolina to uphold the practice of having White and Black members sitting in one deliberative body at annual convention.

By 1907, however, Cheshire and the diocesan Black clergy had a change of heart. Cheshire could see that sentiment for a separation of races was growing within the diocese, and he could see that Black clergy were increasingly receptive to the prospect of having a bishop of their own. And so, at the 1907 General Convention, Cheshire co-authored a resolution in favor of creating racial missionary districts on the same basis as territorial missionary districts. In this way, Blacks who were being denied participation in diocesan conventions, would at least have a place in the legislative bodies of the national church.

But Cheshire’s was the minority view. The majority of bishops and clergy at General Convention favored what was called the Suffragan Bishop plan, authorizing dioceses to elect Black assisting bishops without right of succession and with seat, but not vote, in the House of Bishops. Ostensibly, this plan would uphold the “ancient ideal” of “undivided territorial jurisdiction over all the races.”

No definitive action was taken at the 1907 convention, and for the next 3 General Conventions, the issue would remain contested. At all three of those conventions—1910, 1913, and 1916—the Diocese of North Carolina would be in the forefront of those supporting the Missionary District Plan, and no one was more prominent in championing that cause than Henry Beard Delany, Archdeacon for the Colored Convocation since 1908.

In preparation for the 1910 General Convention, the diocesan colored convocation, under Delany’s leadership, met and passed the following resolution:

Whereas, the subject of Negro bishops for church work among colored people is now being widely discussed through the several church papers, and
....

Whereas, the time of meeting of the General Convention is near at hand, when this great question will again come up for consideration; therefore, be it

Resolved, That we, the colored Convocation of the Diocese of North Carolina, duly assembled in annual session, in the church of St. Michael and All Angels, Charlotte, N.C., do declare that we are unequivocally in favor of a Missionary Jurisdiction or District for the Negro race, with a Negro Bishop; and that we do not, in any sense, favor a Suffragan Bishop for the work among the Negroes.

Resolved, That we will patiently bide the time, but we do earnestly appeal to the General Convention, particularly to our Right Reverend Fathers in God, that they will give this subject the prayerful and godly consideration which it deserves; as we are all well assured that this plan will meet the existing conditions of our people. [*1910 Minutes of the Colored Convocation: 20-21*]

The response of the 1910 General Convention was heartening. The vote in favor of the Missionary District Plan failed by only four votes in the House of Bishops. And so, the effort was redoubled for 1913.

This time, members of the diocesan colored convocation prepared a detailed resolution which was ratified not only by the convocation but also by diocesan convention. The resolution not only advocated for the Missionary District plan but also urged the General Convention to set aside the 4th Missionary Department [now Province IV] as the most suitable place to implement the plan. Following diocesan convention in May, Delany went to East Carolina, and in June he gained unanimous endorsement of the resolution among the Black clergy of that diocese.

By now Delany had been Archdeacon in this diocese for five years. More importantly, he was also serving as the current President of the CCW. The Conference, too, met in preparation for the General Convention and passed a resolution in support of the Missionary District Plan. The Conference then unanimously elected Delany and Bragg to represent their resolution at General Convention.

The ground-work seemingly paid off. For the first time, the Missionary District Plan passed in the House of Bishops, and both Cheshire and Delany reported that it was only the lack of time for deliberation that kept the House of Deputies from taking up—and likely passing—the measure. Bragg, however, was concerned that the committee charged with making recommendations to the 1916 convention included prominent supporters of the Suffragan Bishop plan, including South Carolina Bishop William A. Guerry. Bragg's forebodings proved correct, as the Suffragan Bishop plan carried both houses. Bishop Guerry argued that the

Suffragan Bishop plan should be tried first, since it was in keeping with the traditions of the church regarding territorial episcopacy, and recourse to the Missionary District plan should be regarded an extreme measure of last resort. Cheshire, Delany, and Bragg were outspoken in registering their disappointment at the outcome.

In the aftermath of the 1916 General Convention, there was only one way forward, and Cheshire, Delany, and diocesan proponents of the Missionary District plan had a hard choice to make: either implement the Suffragan Bishop plan or forego any effort to secure a Black bishop for work in North Carolina. In 1917 Bishop Cheshire placed the matter before both the diocesan convention and the colored convocation. Convention voted to proceed, and the colored convocation concurred. Cheshire explained that implementation would be conditional upon formalizing an agreement with East and South Carolina to share in the expense—something the diocese of North Carolina could not bear on its own. Exploratory conversations were conducted with neighboring dioceses and a cost-sharing agreement adopted.

This brings us to the election itself. Here it is important to remember that North Carolina was implementing the Suffragan Bishop plan, but it was doing so in the spirit of the Missionary District plan. This election would not reflect a lily-white convention deciding what was best for Black Episcopalians. Rather, Bishop Cheshire left the nomination in the hands of the Black delegates. At the afternoon session on Wednesday, May 15, Delany's name was placed in nomination by the Rev. James K. Satterwhite, rector of St. Ambrose', Raleigh, and seconded by Mr. Charles H. Boyer of the St. Augustine's faculty. No other names were put forward, and when Bishop Cheshire called for the vote, Delany was elected unanimously in both orders on the first ballot.

Delany's election met with enthusiastic support from Bragg and the Conference of Church Workers. They had opposed the suffragan bishop plan and worked for its defeat at five successive General Conventions. But this did not mean they opposed the election of Bishop Delany. They knew him as a fellow comrade in the fight for the Missionary District plan, and they were deeply mindful of the fact that Bishop Cheshire was attentive to the wishes of his Black clergy.

George Freeman Bragg made a glowing announcement of Delany's election in the June 1918 issue of the *Church Advocate*:

“Bishop Suffragan-Elect of North Carolina”

During the session of the late Diocesan Council of North Carolina, on the 17th [sic] of May, the Rev. Henry Beard Delany, D.D., Archdeacon of the Colored Work of that diocese, was unanimously elected Bishop Suffragan of North Carolina.

Dr. Delany is a true child and product of St. Augustine's. It is significant that such an election should take place during the year of the semi-centennial of that institution. Many years ago Dr. Delany entered St. Augustine's, for literary, as well as theological training. Practically he has remained there ever since. He fell in love with one of the loveliest of women at the same institution, who afterwards became Matron of the school, the wife of Dr. Delany, and the mother of a very large family, born and raised on the campus of St. Augustine's School. When the late Dr. Sutton departed this life, Rev. Dr. A.B. Hunter became the Principal of the School, and Dr. Delany was elected assistant principal. He served most efficiently and acceptably until he became the Archdeacon of the Colored Work in that diocese. For a while, until the Commission for work among Colored People was abolished, he gave splendid service thereon and earnestly pleaded for his people. When good Bishop Cheshire "was converted" to the Missionary Episcopate idea, shortly thereafter the colored clergy of that diocese espoused the same cause. From that time to the present no man has been more zealous and untiring in the matter than Archdeacon Delany.

Dr. Delany is a man of incorruptible character and honesty, passionately devoted to his race and absolutely reliable. So great is our own affection for the man that we would certainly find it almost impossible to oppose him for anything. His friendship and devotion to us have been most sacred and with all our heart we warmly congratulate him on his election as Bishop Suffragan in the dear old State where we [Bragg] first saw the light of day and by baptism became a member of the Catholic Church.

Dr. Delany is greatly beloved by the people of North Carolina, black and white, and held in the very highest estimation by all his brethren of the Conference of Church Workers with whom he has so intimately fellow-shipped for many years, and we know we speak the sentiments of them all when in their name we express the earnest wish that the Church, without delay, will heartily ratify and confirm so wise a choice. [*The Church Advocate*, vol. XXVI no. 8 (June, 1918): [p. 2]

Bragg got his wish. Delany's election was duly ratified, and in tribute to the close bond between Delany and the CCW, he arranged for his consecration to occur at St. Augustine's Chapel during their annual meeting. Indeed, when the Conference had to be postponed because of the 1918 influenza outbreak, Delany put off his consecration for another month, from October to November, just so the Black clergy of our church could gather with him.

And so, I invite us to see in Delany's election as bishop a two-fold tribute. First and foremost, it is the affirmation of a man whose service to God and the Church, whose unflinching devotion and dignity, engendered confidence and trust, and made him a fitting recipient of this high office. Moreover, it is something we can celebrate in this diocese, that in this important moment, the will of our Black clergy and laity were respected and ratified by our entire convention.

To be sure, Delany's election and consecration didn't make our church and society less racist. But it did elevate Black leadership and underscore Black capacity to fulfill the office of bishop. Blacks and whites could both see in Delany someone worthy of this office. The people who knew him best supported him without reservation.

The long fight that Delany, Bragg, and others made on behalf of the Missionary District Plan was not about dismantling racism; but it was about demanding a just and fair accommodation, given the Church's deep complicity in the practices of the Jim Crow era. White supremacy was on full display on both sides of the racial episcopate issue in 1916. But Bragg and the CCW insisted on truth-telling about that racism, and placed the need for racial accommodation squarely on those who had disfranchised Black Episcopalians. As Bragg caustically observed, "while a black man can, with reasonable assurance entertain the hope of entering Heaven, there is more hope of such a person being President of the United States than of his ever entering the diocesan convention of South Carolina, save in the capacity of janitor." [*The Church Advocate* XXIV #2 (December 1915) [p.2]]

Albeit the Suffragan Bishop plan made provision for Black bishops, it did nothing to further Black empowerment and to respect Black leadership ability. And that's what makes the election of Henry Beard Delany especially noteworthy: it was done with the consent and approval of the whole diocesan convention, Black and White. One might say, it was the closest the Church could come, given the prevailing conditions in 1918 America, to realizing the dream of beloved community.