



# TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

*on the Branford Green*

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

## **Rite I, Samuel Seabury and the Scots**

**By The Rev. Sharon Gracen**

**November 9, 2014**

This morning we are strolling down Liturgical Memory Lane in this Morning Prayer and Eucharist taken from the old language of Rite I. For many of us, this was the prayer language of our youth and beyond. You may have discovered that it has a bicycle-riding feel to it. Old liturgical muscles remember and *thee* and *thou* seem almost normal on our tongues. This service was designed in response to requests from a good number of folks here - to have an opportunity to revisit the old familiar places. We decided to give it its historical context.

Connecticut played a central role in the founding of the American Episcopal Church. It's important to remember that our spiritual forebears were the Church of England planted here by colonists. We were the first off-shoot and began what would become the world-wide Anglican Communion. Wherever England colonized, there the church popped up. Of course, in the late 18th century, there was that rather public disagreement that we had with the king - the War of Independence. When you break away from the state, you find yourself in a complicated relationship with the state religion. During and after the Revolution, many British clergy, including all of the bishops, bugged out and went home to England. Others were Tory sympathizers which was not always healthy. When the war was finally over there was nation building to do. There was also a church to be built.

It was in Connecticut, where there were 40,000 church members in 40 congregations and all of 14 clergy, that concern for the future of the church was recognized. As part of a tradition that traces its roots back to the apostles, bishops are a necessary order to unite, confirm, and ordain new priests. If the church were going to survive, it would need more priests.

On March 25, 1783, 10 CT clergy met in Woodbury to elect a bishop. Samuel Seabury was the guy. He was an interesting choice. He had been a strong Tory--even a chaplain to the British forces--and at the time was receiving a royal pension. But the CT clergy, weren't looking for someone who would be popular, they wanted someone who could get the job done. For you see, you need bishops to make a new bishop, which would require going to England and lobbying the powers that were. I'm sure Seabury's response was, "Gee, thanks." But he went.

There were thoughts that they should have just waited until England got over it and Parliament allowed the British bishops to ordain for service elsewhere in the world. However, a wonderful article by Rev. Shirley Houghson for Project Canterbury, celebrates the choice that CT made in these words.

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*That Connecticut did not thus wait is to her lasting honour. She wanted no state-made Bishop. She desired, and expressly declared that she would have none but "a free, valid and purely ecclesiastical Episcopacy.*

In less pretentious language, CT wanted a bishop ordained by the faith, not by the state. Very noble of us. Not surprisingly, Seabury did not receive a warm welcome from the bishops of the Church of England who were not feeling particularly forgiving toward this American, or apparently very Christian. There was also a technical problem, bishops and priests of the CofE were required to swear an oath of allegiance to the crown. A bishop from this newly independent nation could not do that. Seabury gave it his all, but eventually accepted that the English bishops were not going to act before being given permission by the state, and he turned to the only other possibility - Scotland. The Scottish church had suffered mightily in the aftermath of the Jacobite Rebellion, 40 years earlier, and so it was no small thing that Samuel was asking of them. But the Scottish bishops actually sought and received the go-ahead, if not actual blessing, from the Archbishop of Canterbury to make this pushy American priest a bishop. Friday, November 14th, is the anniversary of Samuel Seabury's consecration as the first American bishop, 230 years ago.

We owe a debt of gratitude to the Scottish church. Some congregations, including the Washington National Cathedral, commemorate that debt by having special services called the Kirking of the Tartans, complete with kilts and bagpipes, sometime in November to coincide with Seabury's ordination anniversary and St. Andrew's Day, the patron saint of Scotland.

The Scottish bishops had one caveat for the new Rt. Rev. Seabury. They wanted him to study the Scottish Eucharistic liturgy and work for its adoption in the new church in America. One of the tasks facing the new Episcopal Church, was the development of worship materials. In 1789, the church approved its first official Book of Common Prayer. You will find notice of it on page 8 of our BCP. The Communion service was based on the Scottish Prayer Book. We will use a very similar rite today.

The use of the Scottish styled liturgy was a dramatic departure from the prayer book that people had been used to - which after all, had been British. There was a fairly strong opposition to this new thing. There is a description of the successful ratification in a small book called *The Prayer Book Through the Ages*.

"Here is a dramatic account of how that came about as told by Thomas W. Coit, who supposedly received it from Samuel Farmar Jarvis, who father, Abraham Jarvis, attended the Convention. Having explained that Dr. William Smith, president of the House of Deputies, was aware of the opposition to the proposed Prayer of Consecration, Jarvis reports that this is what Smith did:



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He rose in his place, and, exclaiming, "Hear--(Smith was born a Scotsman, pronouncing is Heyre)--before ye judge," began to read. Dr. Smith was a superb reader and withal had just enough of a Scotch brogue to make his tones more musical and his emphasis more thrilling. He soon caught attention, and read his paper through without a single interruption, his hearers becoming more and more absorbed and charmed. When he had finished, the new office was accepted with acclamations."

Seabury lived only 8 years after his consecration but he did good work in that short time. One of his most strongly held positions was that Christians should share communion regularly. He felt that the benefits were so great that we should avail ourselves of the holy meal every Sunday, not just once a month. His vision triumphed, but not until the 1979 Prayer Book. For many people, weekly communion was radical change, but as Bishop Seabury pointed out, it is more in keeping with Jesus call to us to meet him regularly in a meal flavored with holiness, remembering him and strengthening our bonds with one another.

May this day remind us and strengthen our understanding of our history, tradition and an appreciation for those who gave us such gifts. This is the collect for the commemoration of Samuel Seabury's consecration.

Eternal God, you blessed your servant Samuel Seabury with the gift of perseverance to renew the Anglican inheritance in North America: Grant that, joined together in unity with our bishops and nourished by your holy Sacraments, we may proclaim the Gospel of redemption with apostolic zeal; through Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.

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