

A New Spirit of Mission

*An article by the Rev. David Klutterman of the Diocese of Fond du Lac written in January 2022.
The Trialogue Steering Committee is sharing his article with his permission.*

In recent months, the three Episcopal dioceses of Wisconsin (Eau Claire, Fond du Lac and Milwaukee) have embarked on a journey together. The work has been named the “Triologue” and its intention is to explore ways the three dioceses might work together in the future, including the potential for unifying the three dioceses into one, creating a new Diocese of Wisconsin.

The history of the Episcopal Church in Wisconsin begins with a mission to the Oneida Indians, who were forced from New York in the early 19th century to what would become the Green Bay area. The Bishop of New York, John Hobart, would send missionaries with the Oneidas, and in 1825 Bishop Hobart himself would travel to the new settlement to make a visitation.

By the 1830’s the Oneida people were included in the work of the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society of the Protestant Episcopal Church. The Rev Richard Cadle would be assigned to this mission, and in 1834 Jackson Kemper, then a priest, would be commissioned to go to Wisconsin and report on the work of Fr Cadle among the Oneidas.

As America moved west, so did missionaries. The Baptist and Methodist churches led the way, establishing missions throughout the new territory. The Episcopal Church lagged behind in this effort, in part due to the struggle of recovering from the Revolutionary War, and transitioning from being part of the Church of England to becoming a church for a new nation. By the 1830’s the Episcopal Church was prepared to look west with the other churches. Unlike the other denominations, their mission would begin with the call of two men to be bishops, who would be entrusted with the organization of missionary work west of the Alleghenies. One would ultimately refuse the assignment, the other, Jackson Kemper, would become the Bishop of the Northwest, and ultimately the Bishop of the diocese of Wisconsin.

In the words of Bishop George Washington Doane who preached at Kemper’s ordination, Kemper would be

a bishop sent forth by the Church, not sought for of the Church; going before to organize the Church, not waiting til the Church has been partially organized; a leader, not a follower who is sent by the Church even as the Church is sent by Christ.ⁱ

Jackson Kemper might well have defined what a missionary is for the Episcopal Church. In a sermon on the duty of the Church in respect to Missions he said,

And what is this most sacred and most imperative duty? It is to proclaim glad tidings – the glad tidings of mercy, pardon and eternal life to the guilty, the ruined and the lost.... The Gospel is to be preached to EVERY CREATURE. This is the clear, the express requirement, - in injunction given under the most impressive circumstances, and given to those who were the representatives of the whole Church upon earthⁱⁱ

Kemper was in a unique position of creating a new model for the missionary Church. His missionary spirit would be founded on membership in a Church that possessed traits of the early Church: a liturgy based in Scripture, evangelical doctrine, apostolic succession. His passion would be fed by a love for all people. His work would reach out to the isolated settlers, immigrants in a new home, the Native Americans. He longed to have colleagues in this work and helped create schools of all kinds, including Nashotah House. Kemper knew the mission field needed more clergy, especially those familiar with the territory.

Bishop Kemper traveled from the Gulf of Mexico to Lake Superior in his role as the Bishop of the Northwest. He organized six dioceses, including Wisconsin, Iowa, Minnesota, Kansas, Nebraska and Illinois. He would be elected as bishop of the new diocese of Wisconsin twice. He declined the first time, wanting to continue his work in the larger mission field. In 1859 he retired from that work and was immediately elected again as Bishop of Wisconsin. This time he accepted the call. He remained in that position until his death in 1870.

The author of this paper is from the diocese of Fond du Lac. One of the resources available to him is the *Inventory of Church Archives of Wisconsin*, 1941. This edition contains information from the diocese of Fond du Lac. What follows includes data from that book related to the period from the beginning of the diocese of Wisconsin to 1875 when the diocese of Fond du Lac was created out of the diocese of Wisconsin.

Kemper would make his home in Wisconsin near Nashotah and the seminary he had helped found. While Milwaukee was showing signs of becoming the city it would one day be, Kemper felt it important to live in the rural country. He would be closer to most of the people who called Wisconsin home. He would remain a missionary, traveling throughout the state, visiting the parishes and missions already established. He would also visit the unorganized missions, or stations located throughout the diocese. In the area that would become the diocese of Fond du Lac alone that meant some 32 parishes or missions, and 30 unorganized missions. Multiply that by the area covered by the rest of the state, and it is easy to see that Kemper was traveling more than at home.

In looking at the records provided in the *Inventory*, it is apparent that over time, Kemper drew clergy to this new diocese. His missionary spirit was shared with them and the many of the congregations of the new diocese. If one examines the short stories of the unorganized missions during Kemper's episcopate, several themes emerge. The first is that some congregations would become the centers from which missionary work was done in the areas surrounding the community. This would be especially true in Waupaca, Stevens Point, Manitowoc, Green Bay, Sheboygan and Fond du Lac. The clergy from these congregations would often be named in the history of unorganized missions. They would be the ones who would travel to a station and offer the services of the Church. This leads to the second theme from the stories of the unorganized missions: there were clergy who would serve not only their own parish or mission, but also in the surrounding area. These clergy might move to another parish or mission in the diocese, but their commitment to the small unorganized mission in the area would go with them. They would find those people searching for the Church's support wherever they called home. These are the people Kemper must have been looking for when seeking new clergy for the diocese, and been most proud of when reflecting on the life of the diocese.

In his life as a missionary bishop for the larger territory, Bishop Kemper was famous for “traveling light.” He might never know whether he was visiting someplace by foot, horseback, stagecoach, train, or boat. He needed to be prepared for anything, and therefore carried as little as possible. Generally, these included vestments, bible, prayer book, chalice and paten, and personal items. And it had to all fit in his saddlebags. This might help explain his counsel to churches in the diocese regarding building churches:

He adamantly opposed the practice of going into debt to build or improve a church building. Kemper urged...” I must here lift up my voice in solemn warning against the ruinous practice of erecting and adorning churches before funds have been secured. What anxiety has been experienced during the past twelve months, in several of our parishes, in consequence of heavy debts which were pressing upon them and they were unable to meet! The plea that a handsome church, a good organ, etc. are necessary to attract attention should never be urged by a Christian – and in my estimation it is valueless and false. Our object is to bring souls to Christ through the riches of his grace, to raise up a spiritual kingdom of humble and sanctified worshippers – the Cross therefore – is the point of attraction; while our own personal conformity to the precepts of the Saviour.... will be of greater use than the most splendid decorations.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Jackson Kemper, though by nature a high churchman who would carry with him a chalice and paten together with some vestments in his travels, was not bound to building ornate churches if it meant going into debt and distracting people from their mission and ministry.

The first great missionary of the Episcopal Church represented the institution of the Church, including its teachings, doctrines and history. Yet, he did not let it define his mission. Like the first apostles, It guided him into places of wilderness where he met Native Americans, immigrants from other nations who did not know the English language, and pioneers from the first colonies of the United States, together with those people coming from places like Ohio, Illinois and Indiana. He embodied a spirit of mission characterized by Incarnation. He entered into the world and the lives of the people he met and lived among them. He also brought with him the Good News of Jesus Christ, and invited people to know God’s grace and mercy through his person, his life and the teachings.

Now, as the three Episcopal dioceses of Wisconsin contemplate their future, we have this common heritage. We share the story of a time we were one diocese, with a Bishop who was first and foremost a missionary. He had a missionary spirit that drove him into new places to meet new people, but always with a singular objective – to build God’s kingdom, one person at a time.

What will our story be? In the period of the last two years, our lives have been shaped by a pandemic. It has forced us to close our churches at times, keep us from the fellowship and community we long for. We are anxious for our future and the future of our children for we do not what kind of mark this will leave upon us as individuals or as a society.

Yet we also live in a world very different from any other that has known a pandemic. Since the 1990’s we have been the stewards of something called the internet, and through the various platforms available to us, we have learned how to communicate with each other. Even when we are physically separated. In fact, since the beginning of the pandemic, the internet and its means of communication have been used more often and by more people. Many who thought they would never learn or have

to learn about the internet have discovered the power to open emails, text with others, go on Facebook or share a story on YouTube. The pandemic may have shaped the events of life, but it cannot change who we are. We long to be in relationships, and we have found new ways to be with one another, even as we long for the time we are together again. The internet has fed us when we might otherwise be starving from our isolation.

Against this backdrop, we consider the future of the Episcopal Church in Wisconsin. We might well want to reflect on Bishop Jackson Kemper and recall our baptismal covenant. We are called to go forth into the world, to be missionaries. That longing to be with one another is part of God's image planted within us when God created us. We don't just long to be with one another, we long to be family, to know the power of loving and being loved, forgiven and forgiving. We long to be with one another and create out of love, rejoice in our creations. We long to do all this using the gifts God has given us, being God's children and building the Kingdom in the world. It shouldn't matter where we live, or where we have come from, we are called to reconcile ourselves with God and each other so we can be together.

We may be living in the midst of a pandemic, but we also live in a time of new opportunities to share with one another, be with one another, and meet new people through the internet. Maybe this work we do as the Episcopal Church in the state of Wisconsin in the midst of a pandemic is more than coincidence. Maybe we are invited to consider what it means to be a mission church once more when the world seems like a wilderness once more.

Bishop Kemper was certain about his faith, and it fed his sense of urgency to share that faith. He carried little with him, trusting that what he had was enough. He never confined his mission to a certain group of people, or even a certain geographical area. He understood that he was a missionary who ultimately would need other missionaries in the work ahead. But he did not let the lack of immediate help deter him from starting out and preparing the fields for others. In his time, he would see missions and stations open and close. There was no indication the closing of a mission would be considered a failure. The mission did not end but would continue. If not there, elsewhere.

We have tools Jackson Kemper never imagined. We have the internet. Possibly the simplest way imaginable for us to bring the Good News into the lives of people. And not just a few people, but potentially all the people within the boundaries of our diocese(s). Imagine for a moment combining the Kemper's spirit of mission that saw all people as worthy of receiving the Gospel with a tool such as the internet.

We have people in our diocese(s) who long to be local missionaries. Not everyone, but some. Like those first clergy working out of the parishes and missions in Kemper's diocese of Wisconsin, we have people who would go to people where they were. Kemper found those people and we, in our day, need to find those people, lay and ordained, to do the same. We can build small stations where people gather to pray, and offer them virtual services from neighboring churches, and invite them on occasion to join us for services. We can find ways to bring Christ into the homes and lives not only of our members but of people who long to know God in their lives.

We have a system of transportation Kemper never dreamed of as he walked, or rode a horse or in coach to his destination. When the pandemic is finally behind us, we will have opportunities to close the distances between us, both in our families and as a Church.

What if we think of a diocese in terms of the people within its borders, all the people? If we are honest with ourselves, we would probably agree that most of our attention and energy has focused on present members, buildings and the community the church resides in. What about all those other people, regardless of where they lived? We now live in an age when it is easier to reach them than ever before. Would they not have been part of the missionary spirit of Jackson Kemper? Should they not be part of the missionary spirit we foster today?

There must be a way to imagine a missionary spirit brings together the spirit of Jackson Kemper and the resources we have available today. A spirit that is incarnational and meets people where they are while offering to lift them into a new life in God's love. There must be a way to meet people both physically and support them through virtual services and presence.

In the spirit of the Church that Kemper brought to Wisconsin, maybe we ask our parishes and missions to become centers of mission to the surrounding area, and our clergy to offer services to the people in stations around their cures. In the spirit of Jackson Kemper, maybe we create networks of prayer and support among members of those parishes and missions that include people in outlying areas.

Jackson Kemper defined his life by his missionary spirit. Maybe this is our moment, as three dioceses, as potentially one diocese, to define ourselves by our spirit of mission. God is sending us out into the world, the whole world.

ⁱ George Washington Doane, DD, *The Missionary Bishop: The Sermon at the Consecration of the Right Reverend Jackson Kemper DD* in St Peter's Church, Philadelphia, September 25, 1835.

ⁱⁱ Jackson Kemper, DD, *The Duty of the Church With Respect to Missions*, Preached in St Paul's Chapel, New York, October 7, 1841.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jackson Kemper, *Indiana Journal*, 1841, 26-27, found in *The Anglican Imagination*, Robert Boak Slocum, Routledge, London and New York, 2015, p. 111