

The Rev. Uzal Ogden, Jr.
First Elected Bishop of New Jersey

This is the story of an Anglican preacher whose life and labors apparently prepared him for the role of a bishop in the infant Episcopal Church. He was born in 1744, the son of a merchant in Newark and one of the founders of Trinity Church, Newark, Uzal Ogden. His mother, Elizabeth Charlotte Thebaut, was the daughter of a native of Antiqua, BWI.

The Ogden family was large and settled in both Newark and Elizabeth Town. Young Uzal surely was familiar with both Newark and Elizabeth Town where his family was a prominent one. Young Ogden never had a formal education but he fell under the attention and tutelage of the Rev. Dr. Thomas B. Chandler of St. John's, Elizabeth Town, who saw in him the makings of a fit minister. As was the custom of the day the lad was taught theology by a prominent cleric, in this instance, Dr. Chandler. There was logic in this process for the trip to England was dangerous and study at a seminary was expensive. When Uzal was 26, Chandler sent him into a missionary area both huge and lonely -Sussex County, which then included Warren County. His religious duties there were to be a layreader for Morning and Evening Prayer services and to be a catechist, a trainer or teacher in the ways of the Church, for children and adults.

It is evident that Ogden worked long and hard for he established congregations that grew and prospered albeit very slowly. The reports back to Chandler must have assured him that his belief in Ogden was not misplaced. Ogden left for England in the summer of 1773 and, in September, was ordained deacon and priest with a license to minister in the colonies.

On his return, Ogden was made the apostle of an area that included Bergen County to the Delaware Water Gap where he threw himself into ministry with characteristic zeal and energy. Nelson Burr, historian, writes that Ogden was the leading religious tract and pamphlet writer in the American Church. His tracts were focused on the unconverted, family worship, and the youth and were distributed liberally in his large mission area.

He was one of a few priests who stayed in New Jersey during the Revolution, the others fleeing to England or to Canada or closing the doors of their churches. He was called to several Southern parishes but declined them all. His heart and mind were in New Jersey and it was here he stayed.

In 1784, Ogden accepted an invitation to become the assistant at Trinity Church, Wall Street. Because both Newark and Elizabeth Town wanted his services, Trinity Church, Wall Street, granted him a two-thirds time leave of absence. This time was spent in ministering to Elizabeth Town, Newark, and in Sussex and Hunterdon Counties! He could be accused of some deviation from the strict Anglican norm but in no way could he be accused of laziness or lack of zeal!

Uzal Ogden's Church Problems

Ogden's many years of ministry in northern New Jersey, particularly in the lonely wilds of Sussex and Warren counties, afforded him friendships with clergy of other denominations and few with his own. This evidently came to the ear of the Rev. Abraham Beach through the S.P.G., the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, for he reports back on a discussion that he had with Ogden a few days earlier. Ogden admitted that he had often preached to congregations of non-Anglicans and, lacking Prayer Books, they were unable to follow. In the spirit of decency, therefore, he resorted to extemporaneous prayers. In addition, Ogden said that he had written a letter to Dr. Chandler outlining the causes and actions. Beach goes on to say that he did not dispute with Ogden, whether he was or was not justifiable, at times, in abandoning the Liturgy, even under the circumstances he mentioned.

It isn't difficult to imagine the dilemma in which Ogden found himself. Evidently a highly motivated missionary of the Gospel, he ran into other Anglican clergy who followed the new enthusiastic Method and who appeared to reach people and their life situations with prayers and hymns that lifted up their souls and hearts. Even in recent years one heard the old saw that Episcopalians take more time to find the proper prayer in a book than it takes to say it from the heart. Appreciating it and being drawn into it are two different things and it is the former stance that Ogden appears to have taken. In a time when Episcopal clergy could be counted on one hand in New Jersey, Ogden would have been quite distinctive and suspect. Religious sharing, Bible study, spontaneous prayer, and emphasis on conversion, assurance, and sanctification were not the normal marks of Episcopalians. Some, including Ogden, were comfortable borrowing from it.

Professor Suzanne Geissler has done excellent work on Ogden's relationships with other clergy, especially the Methodists. The lines between Anglicanism and Methodism had not yet been drawn at all sharply. The Methodist clergy, including the Wesley brothers, included many Anglican clergy who were drawn to this new expression of the faith in the context of the Episcopal liturgy for, in reality, the "Method" sprang from the womb of the Church of England. It is known that Ogden corresponded with Francis Asbury as early as 1783 and actually visited with him in Newton and Newark. It was Asbury who reported that Ogden attended a Methodist Quarterly Meeting and who referred to Ogden as "a man of piety, who, I trust, will be of great service to the Methodist societies, and the cause of God in general."

It is inconceivable that this camaraderie with the Methodists would go unnoticed and, I believe, would be viewed more as a threat to the infant Episcopal Church still reeling from the effects of the Revolution than as an attempt to join the ranks of the Methodists. Ogden's correspondence with Methodist ministers and laypeople was extensive. One might say that this early attempt at ecumenism came back to

haunt Ogden in his bid for the Office of Bishop of New Jersey.

How all this played out is shown in the attempt of the Episcopal Church in New Jersey to elect its first bishop.

Uzal Ogden's Political Problems

The roots of Ogden's church political troubles go back a decade or more. In 1786 he and Patrick Dennis, a delegate from St. John's, Elizabeth, co-authored a letter to the Rev. Dr. White, dated May 25, 1786, stating that they both had opposed the New Jersey Convention's *Memorial to General Convention* that objected to the altered (Proposed) Book of Common Prayer and the general ecclesiastical constitution. It was New Jersey's vote to defeat the Proposed Book of Common Prayer that sealed its fate for, joining with the New England dioceses as a block solidly for bishops as leaders of the Church, the anti-bishop forces of the southern dioceses were defeated. According to Ogden and Dennis their only objection to the adoption of the proposals of the General Convention was based on the technical point that Article 9 of the General Constitution required the approval of the Proposed Book of Common Prayer before the Constitution could be approved, an all-or-nothing situation. You could like the Constitution and hate the Proposed Book of Common Prayer but you either voted for or against both proposals as though they were one. They also informed White that Ogden had proposed a paper objecting to the book's alterations solely because of the short time the material had been available for study and that the New Jersey Convention had rejected it.

This letter, as some do, had far-reaching consequences. It could not help but irritate that Convention since most of the clergy and lay delegates found parts of the Proposed Book totally objectionable and were not afraid to speak their minds. It also generated some correspondence by and between two men, James Parker of Perth Amboy and John DeHart of Elizabeth Town. The Rev. Dr. Abraham Beach, in a letter to Parker dated June 30, 1786, offers the opinion that Ogden was fearful that the New Jersey delegates to General Convention would not be received well due to their audacious rejection of the New Book. Indeed, this was the tenor of the Ogden-Dennis letter. Parker responded to Beach and informed him that Ogden was spreading the rumor that Parker and DeHart were tools of Dr. Chandler, a charge he denied. Parker repeated this in a letter to DeHart of June 11, 1786, adding that he blames Ogden for trying to discredit him politically in the state.

Rather than pacifying anyone Ogden appears to have succeeded in offending everyone; The Rev. Dr. White, the Rev. William Smith, whose duty it was to write the Proposed Book, both of whom sided with the south, the Northern pro-bishop conservatives who could interpret this as a possible defection, and some powerful colleagues in the New Jersey Convention.

The Election

The fifteenth convention of the Episcopal Church in New Jersey was held June 6-7, 1798, in Trinity Church, Newark. There were four clergymen and twenty laymen present representing ten congregations. A motion was presented by General Matthias Williamson, a delegate from St. John's, Elizabeth Town, that they go into the election of a bishop for the Church in New Jersey. Discussion was postponed to the following day. On June 7th there was a thorough discussion of the motion. An amendment to postpone until the 1799 convention was defeated. Finally it was unanimously resolved that the present meeting be adjourned until the 3rd Wednesday of August next for the express purpose of deliberating on the expedience of electing a bishop.

When the adjourned meeting began on August 15th at 4 o'clock, there were six clergymen and 30 laity representing 22 congregations, by far the largest meeting of the Church in New Jersey. It is interesting to note that five congregations had never before been represented and an additional three had been missing since 1792. The first day was taken up in accepting a new clergyman and granting permission for another man to study for Orders. On Thursday, August 16th, the convention unanimously agreed to go into the election of a bishop. The votes were cast and the clergy were unanimous in voting for Uzal Ogden, Jr. and in the laity Ogden received 17 votes, Henry Waddell three votes, and John Croes received one. The Certificate of Election was duly signed and the meeting stood adjourned. The Rev. Uzal Ogden, Jr., would be consecrated bishop the following month in the General Convention in Philadelphia, as was the custom.

What followed is a plot worthy of a P.D. James mystery. It is a terribly long and convoluted story and will be written in my book about Ogden. However, I will attempt to give you the Readers Digest version without losing the strength of the story.

As stated above, it is almost certain the Ogden would have been consecrated in Philadelphia the following month except for an epidemic of Yellow Fever that caused a year's postponement of the General Convention. This allowed his opponents the time they needed to mount a campaign to thwart Ogden's consecration. It is important to review the process that elected Ogden a bishop. There were seven clergy who voted and, since it was unanimous, we know that Ogden voted for himself, a common practice of that time. The Canon Law that governed all elections of bishops stated that there must be at least six presbyters residing and officiating in the State prior to the election and that a majority concurring was needed.

When the Rev. John Croes (later to be the first Bishop of New Jersey) presented Ogden's testimonials to the General Convention on June 13, 1799, the subject was immediately tabled. On June 18th, after five days of attempting to take the motion off the table, the proceedings concerning Ogden's election were suspended. However, at this same meeting, an Explanatory of part of the 1st Canon of 1795

was passed! This Explanatory was fashioned even while Ogden's testimonials were being tabled. What the Explanatory did was to add a definition of what was meant by "residing and officiating". The following restriction was inserted into the Canon 1: "No clergyman, employed by the year, or for any limited time, shall be considered as a regularly officiating and resident minister of the Church in any State..." In other words, if you had a contract that specified your years of employment or had an agreement for any limited time, you could not take the action of voting for a bishop. This Explanatory Canon was passed by both Houses of the Convention at its last sitting on June 18th and after Ogden's election was sent back to New Jersey for reconsideration. Evidently the ancient Anglican belief that "The end does not justify the means," was not considered applicable!

There is extensive correspondence in the Diocese of Maryland Archives from New Jersey clergy to friends in Maryland remarking on the underhanded ways used to ruin Ogden's reputation in the year before the next General Convention. Even though the Convention of New Jersey refused to buckle under and stood by its actions of 1798, Ogden's cause was doomed. Bishop White, the Presiding Bishop of the Church had a hand in the development of the Explanatory and admits that Ogden was too Methodistical for him and that there were some from New Jersey who doubted his orthodoxy.

The futile attempt to elect a bishop, in particular the Rev. Uzal Ogden, Jr., is a story much different from the story accepted as true for two centuries. The evidence of the letters in the Maryland Diocesan archive point to the likelihood of a two man race (Waddell being the other) that turned into a bitter war in which Waddell, initially the unsuccessful candidate, went to great pains to see to it that there was no winner.

There is much more to the story but this covers it well. Ogden stayed in the Church and was present for several conventions in New Jersey, In 1803, he was forced to leave Trinity Church, Newark, and he took Presbyterian orders although he did not make use of them. He died an old, deaf, tired, and bitter man.

My research, originally for an historian's report to the diocese, led me deeper and deeper into the mystery of what really made Ogden unfit for the office of a bishop. I've become rather fond of Uzal and I am convinced he was "done wrong". This, and the larger work, is meant to be a vindication of the Rev. Uzal Ogden, Jr..