

Who was Bishop Samuel Seabury?

By The Rev. Jay Cayanyang



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 proclaim the Gospel of redemption with apostolic zeal; through Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Samuel Seabury was born on November 30, 1729, in North Groton, Connecticut (present day Ledyard and near Gales Ferry where Bishop Seabury Anglican Church is located). His father, also known by the same name, was the local Congregational minister. Shortly after Seabury was born, his father resigned his pastorate to pursue Holy Orders in the Church of England. While his father was away, Seabury's mother, Abigail died. After ordination, his father returned to minister in New London, Connecticut under the banner of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts. Later, the elder Seabury remarried and moved to an assignment in Hempstead, Long Island where under his father's tutelage as young boy, Samuel Seabury and his brother Caleb prepared for college. As such, Samuel Seabury grew up in home a life that was greatly shaped church life and the Book of Common Prayer.

Samuel Seabury studied at Yale College and afterwards returned home to Long Island to study medicine and assist his father in a nearby town as a catechist. **Eventually, through the encouragement and support of his father, he went on for further study in Edinburgh, Scotland. He was later then presented for ordination to the Bishop of London for ordination as a deacon**

and presbyter in 1753. He returned to the colonies in 1754 and began his ministry as a presbyter in New Brunswick, New Jersey. During this time, he would meet and marry his wife Mary Hicks of Staten Island. Eventually, Seabury would serve at Grace Church Parish in Jamaica, Long Island and then eventually as rector of St. Peter's in Westchester, New York.

It was during these Westchester years, on the eve of the American Revolution, that Seabury would show forth his loyalty to the crown. He wrote pamphlets opposing revolutionary rhetoric under the pen name, A.W. Farmer (A Westchester Farmer) and sparred in a war of pamphlets with Alexander Hamilton.

During the American Revolution, Seabury would be imprisoned, serve as a chaplain to Loyalist forces, and practice medicine. At the end of the American Revolution, rather than fleeing to Canada or going to England, he chose to remain in the country and returned to Connecticut. Historian Edward Hardy writes of Seabury, "Loyalty seems to be the keynote of his character – loyalty to the ancient church and its faith, loyalty to his vocation and ministry, loyalty to his King as a conscientious British subject, and then after Great Britain had renounced it's rights over the thirteen colonies, loyalty to the new state and nation with which he gladly threw in his lot."

With a new nation born, Seabury now saw his mission to take part of rebuilding of the church in North America. To date, no Bishop had ever been consecrated to shepherd the souls of Anglican Christians in the colonies. During the Colonial Era, Church of England parishes and missions in the Americas came under the Bishop of London. Leadership was needed if the church was to survive in the days ahead.

In March of 1783, a handful of clergy gathered in Woodbury, Connecticut to select amongst themselves someone to present for consecration as a Bishop. Samuel Seabury was

selected and in July of 1783 and sailed to England to seek consecration. When he arrived, he was denied. There were many and varied reasons, but significantly no one was willing to consecrate him because he could not take an oath of allegiance to the King. In light of these circumstances, Seabury turned to the north and the Non-Juror Bishops of the Scottish Episcopal Church.

Thus on November 14, 1784 Samuel Seabury was consecrated in Aberdeen, Scotland by Robert Kilgour, Bishop of Aberdeen and Primus of Scotland; Arthur Petrie, Bishop of Ross and Moray; and John Skinner, coadjutor bishop of Aberdeen. This is significant in Anglican history, since no other person had been consecrated Anglican bishop for outside of Great Britain and any work in the New World, and many mark this moment as the birth of the Anglican Communion.

As a part of his agreement with the Scottish bishops, Seabury promised to introduce the Scottish liturgy when he returned to Connecticut. The Scottish liturgy made use of the epiclesis or invocation of the Holy Spirit in the Prayer of Consecration during Holy Communion. Upon returning to Connecticut, Seabury introduced a liturgy that closely followed the Scottish form. As he took part in the coming together of the Anglican Church in the United States through the formation of the Episcopal Church, Seabury was an open advocate for ensuring that the epiclesis be included in the American Prayer Book. Seabury's Communion Office was in use in Connecticut until the acceptance of the first American Prayer Book of 1789, which included the epiclesis. Thus, from the beginning, the American Prayer Book tradition took on a Scottish trajectory and is one of Seabury's lasting legacies to the history of Anglicanism in North America.

I close this segment with words written by a parishioner at Bishop Seabury Anglican Church. He writes that, "Seabury served the church in Connecticut in a time when it was stronger

in number and spirit than in any other part of the country, but needed the leadership of Bishops for its continuance. In an age already tainted by Deism and denials of the divinity of Christ, he is remembered for shepherding souls *"to the means of reconciliation with God, through Christ."* His was an early voice leading Protestantism toward the weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper. He quotes the words of Seabury *"let me beseech you to make good use of the opportunities you have; and let nothing but real necessity keep you from the heavenly banquet when you have it in your power to partake of it."*

Why is remembering Bishop Samuel Seabury important? Because in this present era we are living in, Seabury's times were not different from ours. There is much upheaval in the Anglican world and it is important that we remain steadfast in articulating the truth of the Gospel. Consider these words of his second charge to the clergy of Connecticut in September 1786:

"Deism, with its necessary consequence--no religion at all, or rather adverseness to all religion, if I am rightly informed, has within a few years, made great advances in the United States . . . People of sober reason and common sense may hence be tempted to think, that Reason and Religion can never be reconciled . . . The next step is to become proselytes to the opinion that all religions are equal, and no religion as good as any."

Seabury further states, *"Error often becomes popular and contagious, and then no one can tell how far it will spread, nor where it ends. We must in such cases, recur to first principles, and there take our stand. **The Bible must be the ground of our faith.** And the doctrines,*

practices and old Liturgies of the primitive Church will be of great use to lead us to the true meaning of the Holy Books.”

About the Author

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Father Jay was ordained a deacon and a priest in 1996. He has served churches in California, Virginia, and Florida. As a chaplain in the United States Navy Reserve, he has had numerous active-duty and reserve assignments including mobilization with Marines in Iraq.

