

THE DOMESTIC AND FOREIGN
MISSIONARY PAPERS

THE PUERTO RICO PAPERS, 1870-1952
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In 1869 a decree from Spain granted freedom of religious worship to residents in Spanish territory. This prompted Protestant residents of Ponce, P.R. to adopt measures for the formation of a church to be organized along Episcopal lines. The earliest letters in the Puerto Rico Papers of the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society are those of Mr. Charles Daly to the Foreign Secretary asking for a Spanish-speaking clergyman and funds to support him. American support, however, was not forthcoming and the newly organized mission, Holy Trinity, was initially served in 1873 by an Anglican priest from St. Croix, working under the counsel and oversight of the Bishop of Antigua.

Twenty-five years later, territorial settlements after the Spanish-American War transferred Puerto Rico to American jurisdiction. The General Convention of 1898 set up the Joint Committee on the Increased Responsibilities of the Church to direct the growth of missionary action in the recently acquired areas. After several years of discussion, arrangements were made to transfer the Puerto Rican ministry and church buildings (at Ponce and Vieques) of the Diocese of Antigua to the Protestant Episcopal Church of the United States, effective October 5, 1901. The first American missionary to Puerto Rico, the Rev. George Pratt, had been appointed to San Juan in the spring of 1899. The Rev. James H. Van Buren succeeded him in the spring of 1901. In October of that year action of the General Convention opened the way for the election of a missionary bishop. After the Rev. William C. Brown declined, Van Buren was elected in April and consecrated in June, 1902. The following fall he launched the first of his annual campaigns in the States to raise funds for the work in his see.

Denominational rivalry proved to be a goad to the early missionaries. Using it as a basis for his plea for additional support, Pratt writes (Nov. 7, 1899):

Four of the leading denominations of the States have sent to Porto Rico strong men understanding both languages. . . . The Methodists are putting \$50,000 on the island.

He estimates the minimum Episcopal need as \$20,000. Writing from

Ponce (May 31, 1902), the Rev. E. Sterling Gunn also chooses comparison to make his point:

Both the Baptists and United Brethren are now erecting brick Church buildings at a cost of about \$10,000 each, while the work of our church is just where it was three or four years ago save the expenditure of a little more than \$1000 on repairs just after the cyclone.

Bishop Van Buren, too, occasionally brought up the rivalry to justify a cause. He opened St. Luke's Hospital, Ponce, in the fall of 1907 and writes on Jan. 29, 1908:

The honor of the Church is involved in our success; the Presbyterians have a far larger Hospital in San Juan than we have in Ponce. I would hate to have to admit that we could not pay when they do.

Though financial problems continued to dog the hospital, it remained open.

The episcopates of both Bishop Van Buren (1902-1912) and his successor, the Rt. Rev. Charles B. Colmore (1913-1947), are marked by a relatively rapid turnover in missionary personnel. Five reasons emerge from the papers as the chief causes of this dilemma, aside from the difficulty of finding Spanish-speaking Americans interested in the work. First, the Puerto Rican climate and its attendant tropical diseases proved to be rapidly disillusioning. Pratt describes the climate as one which "depraves and discourages" (Nov. 7, 1899). Secondly, so much of the English-speaking population was transient, especially in the early years, that building a nucleus of parishioners was extremely difficult. The Rev. F. A. Warden compares the ministry to his San Juan congregation to "a man standing on the bank of a fast flowing river, shooting at logs as they floated by" (Oct. 13, 1909). Thirdly, Puerto Rico was the site of several natural disasters. There was a cyclone in 1902, an earthquake in 1918 and a hurricane in 1928. Buildings that represented years of sacrifice and months' of appeals to friends in the States were destroyed in minutes, while the islanders were bereft of shelter, belongings, and food. A fourth reason for the turnover of personnel was that the mission stations of Puerto Rico, unlike some of the missions of the Far East, had no formal social activities. Miss Ellen T. Hicks, Superintendent of St. Luke's Hospital from 1918 to 1938, had served in the Philippines before going to Ponce. Rather bitterly she warns prospective missionaries that "there is no society, and nothing to do, and nowhere to go, outside of the hospital" (Jan. 3, 1920). She asks the Secretary for Latin America to warn a new candidate that "her

chief amusement will have to be *work* of a very unsatisfactory kind and under very unsatisfactory conditions" (Oct. 19, 1921). Finally, inflation steadily increased due to the American occupation and the First World War. More than a few missionaries left because they could not live on their salaries.

In spite of these drawbacks, the number and strength of the mission stations increased, particularly as the ministry to the Spanish-speaking islanders widened. In addition to the hospital and its program of nurses' training, other church institutions were established. Most of the churches had an elementary school associated with them. The New World School at El Coto de Manati, begun by the Rev. and Mrs. John F. Droste, was taken over by the missionary district of Puerto Rico in 1917 and both industrial and academic skills were taught. The school also cared for homeless children. St. Andrew's Craft Shop, Mayaguez, employed girls and women to make embroidered goods and drawn work on a communal basis for their profit and to help raise funds for the church. Also at Mayaguez, the Rev. Frank A. Saylor directed a woodworking shop for the instruction of boys. Native clergy were trained in a Postulant School begun in 1922. A diocesan rest home in the mountains was built by the end of the 1920's so that missionaries working in the coastal areas could receive a recuperative climatic change without leaving the island. St. Catherine's School near San Juan trained young women for church work.

An agricultural and communal missionary experiment at Quebrada Limon, near Ponce, was amalgamated into the district's work when the Church of Jesus, headed by Bishop Manuel Ferrando, was received into the Protestant Episcopal Church in 1923. Bishop Ferrando had begun the settlement in 1900 after leaving the Roman Catholic Church. He was consecrated a Bishop of the Reformed Episcopal Church, but received no support from it. After a "supplemental" consecration in 1923, he became the Suffragan Bishop of Puerto Rico, in which office he remained until his death in 1934. The merger added fourteen preaching stations, six ministers and 1,800 communicants to the district.

The Puerto Rico Papers, 1870-1952, are contained in forty-eight document boxes, housing approximately 7,166 items. These have not been microfilmed and researchers must therefore use them in the archives search room. An index to the papers lists each correspondent alphabetically, giving the inclusive dates of his manuscripts and the approximate number of his letters, articles or reports; copies of this index and a short list of related materials in the archives are available upon request.