

# BEFORE STATEHOOD,

– 'IOLANI'S COMMITMENT TO –

# SOCIAL JUSTICE

By Russell Motter

In May of 1954, 'Iolani School had recently relocated to reclaimed swampland on the mauka side of the Ala Wai Canal. That spring, the modest and secluded campus suddenly found itself a part of an important chapter in the history of the Episcopal Church and the American Civil Rights movement. »»



Photos courtesy Episcopal Diocese of Hawai'i

**Above: Local general convention committee heads: (Seated left to right): Mrs. George Goss, Woman's Auxillary Triennial; Arthur C. Smith, Chairman; The Rt. Rev. Harry S. Kennedy, Bishop of Honolulu; The Rev. Paul R. Savanack, Convention Manager. (Standing left to right): Douherty, Shim, Morrett, Ozaki, Reed, McDonald, Thaanum, Challinor, Nakamura. Below: The convention shield.**

**It all began** with a 2 a.m. phone call from the Presiding Episcopal Bishop Henry Knox Sherrill to Hawai'i's Bishop Harry Sherbourne Kennedy. "Henry, do you know what time it is here in Hawai'i?" Bishop Kennedy sleepily asked. Without skipping a beat, Bishop Sherrill got straight to the point, "Harry, we want to move the Convention to Hawai'i." After a stunned silence, Bishop Kennedy replied that he would need several days before he could respond.

The 58th General Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church would be the largest convention ever held in Hawai'i, and there was precious little time to organize it. The largest gathering hosted in Honolulu had been a group of 700 Shriners in 1951. Before Bishop Kennedy could guarantee that Honolulu could accommodate the 3,500 conventioners who would arrive in September of 1955, he would have to tackle the transportation, lodging, and communications challenges that would test whether Hawai'i was capable of hosting what the Honolulu *Star-Bulletin* called Hawai'i's first "big time" convention.

Over the next few days, Kennedy pulled together clergy and lay leaders, state and city officials, the Hawai'i Visitors Bureau, hotels, the Armed Forces, and countless private citizens. These conversations produced a camaraderie that would animate the entire

planning process and carry over into the Convention itself. On June 9, Kennedy, who also served as chairman of the 'Iolani School Board of Governors, issued the formal invitation: "It is wonderful for us to have the Convention here, since it will be the first one held outside the continental United States and in a missionary district. I am sure none of us can begin to realize the



magnitude of the task. It will call upon all of our resources, but we feel it can be done."

The logistical challenges of hosting the Convention, however, were overshadowed by the circumstances surrounding the decision to move it to Honolulu. In 1952, the church had selected Houston, Texas, as the site of the convention. With the Sun Belt population booming, Houston was the center of an expanding Episcopal presence in

the Southwest. Houston's segregation laws, however, had made its selection controversial.

In the post-World War II period, the Episcopal Church and other Protestant denominations had taken a cautious stance on the issue of segregation, opposing it more with lip service than action. The selection of Houston as the Convention site had troubled some of the liberal leaders of church. Joining them was a small but influential group of African American Episcopalians, including Thurgood Marshall, chief counsel for the plaintiffs in the *Brown v. Board of Education* case and future Supreme Court Justice. Marshall and others petitioned Bishop Sherrill to move the Convention. (An additional local sidelight occurred in 1955 when Marshall married Cecilia Suyat of Kaua'i in St. Philip's Church in Harlem.)

From the start of the selection process, Bishop Clinton Quin of the Houston diocese assured the Convention committee that the Convention would be integrated, despite the city's segregation laws. He promised the construction of a new hotel to house the conventioners, which would also allow them to take their meals together. The church could not, however, guarantee a suspension of Jim Crow laws in the city's hotels and restaurants, or on public transportation.

On May 17, 1954, the Supreme Court issued its historic ruling in the *Brown* case



**Top: 1955 aerial view of 'Iolani School. Bottom left: The Right Reverend Henry Knox Sherrill and his wife. Bottom right: Bishop Quin and Puanani Hanchett.**

and struck down the separate-but-equal laws that formed the legal basis for segregation. Southern states responded swiftly and unequivocally, with some state legislatures declaring the Court's ruling to be "null, void and of no effect."

The *Brown* decision and the South's intransigence presented Bishop Sherrill with a decision that he would call "the most painful and difficult I have ever been called to make." He decided to use his power as Presiding Bishop to move the Convention outside the segregated South. In late May he informed Bishop Quin of his decision, and on June 8, 1954, three weeks after the historic Supreme Court decision, Bishop Sherrill made his decision public. "We live in a time of crisis," Sherrill said, "and I am certain that the witness of our Church must be so clear that it need not be explained."

By naming Honolulu as the site of the Convention, Sherrill underscored the church's stance on segregation. Hawai'i's multiethnic community presented a model that stood in stark contrast to events unfolding in the South.

**In May of 1955**, white gunmen murdered African American Baptist preacher and civil rights activist George Washington Lee of Belzoni, Mississippi. Local authorities determined that Lee died in a freak automobile accident and claimed that the buckshot found in Lee's face were shards of dental fillings. No one was ever charged.

In August, a month before the Convention, the murder of fourteen-year-old Emmitt Till made national headlines. Till was visiting relatives in Mississippi and committed the fatal sin of flirting with a white

woman. Her husband and brother-in-law abducted Till and murdered him. The men were arrested, but an all-white jury accepted the defense's claim that the body retrieved from the Tallahatchie River was so disfigured that it could not be positively identified as that of Emmitt Till. As conventioners arrived in Honolulu, Till's disfigured corpse was on display at his open casket funeral in Chicago, a vivid reminder of the brutality of the Jim Crow South. In the Convention's aftermath that December, Rosa Parks would be arrested for refusing to give up her seat on a segregated bus, and 26-year-old preacher Martin Luther King, Jr., would make his appearance on the national stage leading the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

These events demonstrated Sherrill's prescience and confirmed his view that the *Brown* decision was not an end to an era, but rather a seminal moment in a massive struggle for freedom. His decision to move the Convention from segregated Houston to the melting pot of Hawai'i was a bold statement in defense of liberty and Christianity.

The segregation issue loomed over the start of the Convention but ultimately receded in the friendly environs of Hawai'i. Church and civic leaders worked hard to welcome visitors, especially those from the South. As the SS *Lurline* steamed into Honolulu Harbor with 250 conventioners aboard, outrigger canoes festooned with the American, Hawaiian, and Confederate flags greeted the ships. Local women presented lei to Bishop Quin of Houston and to the Texas delegation. Everyone seemed determined to avoid controversy. "The church is one family," said Bishop Avery Mason of Dallas. "If there is any trouble, somebody else will have to start it." Bishop Mason echoed the scripture chosen for the official seal of the convention, Malachi 2:10: "Have we not all one Father? Hath not one God created us?"

The new facilities at 'Iolani School operated as ground zero for the Convention, delaying the opening of school for several weeks. The \$600,000 building program completed in 1954 included an 18-classroom high school, faculty apartments, and a boys' dormitory, all of which were commandeered for Convention use. Classrooms and school offices were transformed into Convention offices and a pressroom. The newly

consecrated St. Alban's Chapel housed the Women's Auxiliary meetings while the House of Deputies met in the Gym, and the House of Bishops convened at Club 100. Army engineers of the 65th Engineer Battalion, 25th Division, constructed a 255-foot temporary bridge across the Ala Wai Canal at University Avenue that allowed conventioners to walk from their Waikiki hotels to 'Iolani.

The most enduring change the Convention brought to 'Iolani was the planting of monkeypod and rainbow shower trees between St. Alban's Chapel and La'au Street. In a commemorative issue of the school newspaper, *Imua 'Iolani* reported that church notables from the mainland named the monkeypod trees, and 15 international Bishops, led by Presiding Bishop Sherrill, sanctified the rainbow shower trees. They formed an area that would be called Missionary Grove and that over time would bring life and shade to a once barren campus.

The Convention produced no pronouncements that equaled the magnitude of Bishop Sherrill's decision to move it to Honolulu. In many ways the work of the Convention reflected the cultural and social conservatism of its time, only hinting at the tensions and changes to which the coming decade would give birth. The laborious work of passing a budget proceeded smoothly. Miami was selected as the site of the 1958 Convention, a choice designed to soothe the wounded pride of the Southern dioceses. The church body condemned the "corrupting influence" of comic books on the nation's young people and defeated an amendment to the church's constitution that would have allowed women to sit as voting members of the General Convention. Women would remain second-class citizens in the church until 1964 when they finally won the right to vote.

With its multiethnic population living in relative harmony, Hawai'i provided a model for those committed to social change and an implicit challenge for those who resisted it. Conventioners glimpsed what an editorialist for the *Living Church* called a "living synthesis" of cultures. Honolulu "is a place where solemn Church officials are greeted as sweethearts with flowers, kisses, singing and dancing; a place where every five-man bowling team has two or three races represented on it; a place where it seems

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**Above: September 9, 1955 edition of *Imua 'Iolani*. Photos courtesy The Episcopal Diocese of Hawai'i.**

nobody can stay mad about anything." Such sentiments may today seem quaint and even fanciful. Hawai'i, as many local observers pointed out at the time, had its troubles, too. Yet when we think of the struggles that lay ahead, Charles Taft, influential lay leader and brother of Senator Robert A. Taft, may have been right when he observed that "Hawai'i, with its varied races, has taught us that all people can live and work and worship together in harmony and fellowship."

Ten years after the General Convention, Hawai'i would again make a cameo appearance in one of the most dramatic moments of Civil Rights movement. On March 25, 1965, at the Selma march, Hawai'i teacher and civil rights activist Charles Campbell,

acting on behalf of Reverend Abraham Akaka, presented lei to Martin Luther King, Jr., and other marchers. The symbol of aloha that was so prominent, at General Convention of 1955 would appear in one of the most moving photographs of the era. In the background, Hawai'i's contingent held a sign that read "Hawai'i Knows Integration Works." And as Keith Kamisugi of the Equal Justice Society notes, somewhere in Honolulu the future President Barack Obama was four years old.

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## » UPCOMING CONVENTION

'Iolani School and St. Alban's Chapel continue to serve as a resource for the Episcopal Diocese. The 47th Annual Meeting of the Convention of the Episcopal Diocese of Hawai'i, will take place on October 23 and 24, 2015 at 'Iolani School. For information, call the Diocese at (808) 536-7776 or visit [www.episcopalhawaii.org](http://www.episcopalhawaii.org).

# Convention XLVII

On October 23 and 24, 2015, members of the Episcopal Church in Hawai'i will gather at 'Iolani School for the annual meeting of the Diocesan Convention. The Convention is meeting at 'Iolani for two reasons.

First, the school was founded by the first bishop in Hawai'i (the Rt. Rev. Thomas Staley) at the request of King Kamehameha IV and Queen Emma. In fact, the school was first called the Bishop's School and then called St. Alban's College. The relationship between the Episcopal Church and 'Iolani School is very tight. For many years, the school was on the campus of the Cathedral of St. Andrew. Two bishops of the diocese graduated from 'Iolani (the Rt. Rev. Edwin Lani Hanchet '37 and the Rt. Rev. Richard S.O. Chang '59). My own sons graduated from 'Iolani (Edward '05 and James '07). We are one 'ohana.

Second, we will also celebrate the 60th anniversary of the consecration of St. Alban's Chapel as an Episcopal Church. The name of the chapel harkens back to one of the early names of the school itself. We will gather to celebrate the anniversary and honor our ongoing connection.

For some years before being elected bishop, I was Bishop Chang's assistant and the priest at St. Luke's Church on Judd Street. Father Thomas Yoshida '54 would help me out when I had to be away on diocesan business. The site of St. Luke's was originally the site of Father Kenneth Bray's house. Many of my parishioners had known Father Bray as a coach at 'Iolani (football, baseball and basketball) or as the chaplain at St. Andrew's Priory School for Girls. He arrived at the diocese in 1932 and served until his death in 1953. He was not only a coach and chaplain but also the parish priest in charge of the Hawaiian Congregation at the Cathedral and St. Mark's Church, Kapahulu (often all at the same time).

Through the years, I heard many stories about Father Bray. One day, a parishioner shared a tattered piece of paper with me. It was the chaplain's charge to the Priory graduating Class of 1940. Rose Choi (Priory '40) had kept

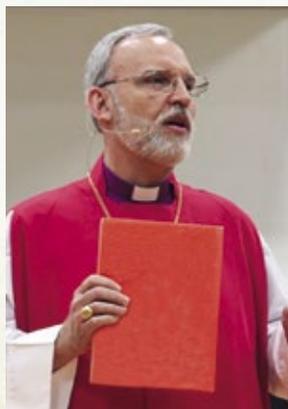
it all these years and told me that the principles have helped guide her life.

Father Bray writes, "It (the school) has educated you well only if it has made you an active force for Fellowship, Righteousness, and Love. . . . While others must lie helpless in war, you who are in peace must take up the burden of the Gospel of Incarnate Love in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost."

I pray that Father Bray's call to us to be "an active force for Fellowship, Righteousness, and Love" lives on at 'Iolani School with St. Alban's Chapel as the center of the community. As we celebrate the anniversary of the consecration of the chapel, I also hope we will pause to give thanks for the connection between the Episcopal Church and 'Iolani School as expressed through school worship; religious studies and formation; service and service-learning; equity and justice; and school life and culture. We are "One Team."

As the embodiment of the faith received from the Episcopal Church, 'Iolani School is called to be a community that honors, celebrates and worships God as the center of life with the chapel as the heart of the campus. 'Iolani School is called to be a community that models God's love, grace and inclusivity. The school was established to serve God in Christ in all persons, regardless of origin, background, ability, or religion. Its vocation is to form citizens of the world who "strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being" (from the "Baptismal Covenant." *Book of Common Prayer*).

'Iolani School has a very special place in the life of the Episcopal Church in Hawai'i. I am honored to be a part of the 'Iolani 'ohana.



+Bishop Bob

*The Right Reverend Robert L. Fitzpatrick,  
Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Hawai'i and member of the 'Iolani School Board of Governors*