A Passion for Intercessory Prayer:
The Historic Vocation of the Society of the Companions of the Holy Cross

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At a time when the “bonds of affection” might well be prayerfully strengthened within the Anglican Communion, a relatively unknown and certainly an unheralded group of Episcopal women may be an available resource. The Society of the Companions of the Holy Cross, with its long history, practical theology, structure, and practice of intercessory prayer, continues to embrace its passion for building a community of prayer. As this essay highlights, the Society’s history reveals a growing and evolving institution whose members, called Companions, exercise their theological authority and societal awareness in study and discussion of economic, social, industrial, and global concerns leading to informed intercessory prayer. The two founding pillars of the Society—Emily Malbone Morgan and Vida Dutton Scudder—shaped the conscience of the Society and insisted that prayer and action were religious obligations for meeting the social problems of their day. Responding to this vision, the Society was a lead planner and participant in the March 2014 conference “Anglican Women at Prayer: Weaving Our Bonds of Affection.” The success of this conference suggests that the Society, whose membership is located primarily in North America, might extend its vision and passion for intercessory prayer internationally and take on a more public presence within the Anglican Communion. Clearly, women’s practices of prayer and evolving practical theology are alive and well, and deserve the further attention this essay seeks to encourage.

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In March of 2014 over 150 women gathered to participate in a conference titled “Anglican Women at Prayer: Weaving Our Bonds of Affection.” A central planner and key sponsor for this event was a little known yet historic organization for women: the Society of the Companions of the Holy Cross (hereafter SCHC). That SCHC, an organization over 125 years old, was the perfect contemporary animator for this event would not surprise those few who know and value its vocation. Yet in the worldwide Anglican Communion, as in the Episcopal Church, it is also not surprising that so little is known, let alone appreciated, about SCHC. For much of its past SCHC has pursued an individual and collective ethic of not personally sharing or publicly disclosing information about its daily practices and vocation. The primary exception has been conferences open to the public which are typically held at Adelynrood, its home base and conference center in Byfield, Massachusetts. Additionally, Episcopal Church historians and church leaders have tended to ignore the achievements of devout women, particularly lay women. Indeed, the significance of lay women’s prayer lives and religious vocations has, with few exceptions, generally been discounted by Episcopal historians. Only recently has this become a topic of scholarly attention and then often as a prelude to the ordination of women.

In this brief article I will argue that the twenty-first century SCHC is aptly positioned by its history, structure, lived theology, and most of all by its particular charism for intercessory prayer to play an encouraging and inspiring role in connecting Anglican women at prayer. Could it be that SCHC is now called to share its gifts beyond the Companions and other conference participants? Stepping up to pursue international and other partners would lead SCHC to risk expanding its public face and function. Yet, as this brief history will note, SCHC has previously taken risks and embraced change. Whatever future SCHC chooses to engage, the impact of its vocation and its members’ contributions to American religious history deserve a more valued reception. What’s more, if the Episcopal Church and other provinces in the Anglican Communion wish to foster both lay and ordained women’s leadership, SCHC’s history presents theological,

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1 Two significant exceptions that do focus on Episcopal lay women are: Mary Sudman Donovan, A Different Call: Women’s Ministries in the Episcopal Church, 1850–1920 (Wilton, Conn.: Morehouse-Barlow, 1986); and Fredrica Harris Thompsett and Sheryl Kujawa-Holbrook, eds., Deeper Joy: Lay Women and Vocation in the 20th Century Episcopal Church (New York: Church Publishing, 2005).
practical, and vocational paradigms that could strengthen the participation of women and their allies from the ground up.

**Intercession: “The Greatest Power on Earth”**

In 1890 Emily Malbone Morgan wrote in her annual report to members of a newly founded and steadily growing Society of the Companions of the Holy Cross, “Let us realize that the greatest power on earth is ours through the precious ministry of intercession.”

Morgan (1862–1937) was a lifelong Episcopalian and the daughter of a prosperous New England merchant. Early in her life she displayed a strong religious conscience and the desire to pursue a simple Christian lifestyle. In her early twenties she had founded and funded, out of her own resources, vacation cottages in the Northeast for urban working women. By 1884 she was also the leading founder of the Society of the Companions of the Holy Cross. Initially SCHC was organized to provide spiritual support and a shared opportunity for outreach through intercessory prayer for Morgan’s bedridden friend, Adelyn Howard. Joanna B. Gillespie, herself a Companion and an energetic contemporary historian and chronicler of SCHC, has written that from the beginning of the new Society “intercessory prayer was both its cause and function—indeed, its calling.”

In the decades that followed, Morgan and other friends sought to incorporate new members into SCHC. The numbers of Companions grew steadily from seven members to 143 members in 1897, then to 252 members in 1908. By the 1960s there were five hundred members, and currently there are eight hundred. The fact that SCHC burst on the scene with sustained growth toward the end of the nineteenth century was not usual. The last three decades of the nineteenth century were replete with the development of women’s ministries and organizations throughout the United States. In England, Anglican women’s

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4 Recent information provided by a Companion who works with chapters. There are currently thirty-five chapters, including one in India, which provide local support for Companions; see the public SCHC website, www.adelynrood.org.
sisterhoods also proliferated, with most of these orders focusing on nursing, teaching, or social welfare work. Morgan was impressed by retreats she had attended that were offered by the Sisters of St. Margaret in Boston (founded in 1871). Yet Morgan had a different model in mind. She had visited Toynbee Hall, a pioneering social settlement in the East End of London, and was influenced by reformers’ concern about conditions faced by urban workers, especially women. The deepest vocational influence on Morgan came from American women founders of settlement houses, many of which were begun by Episcopal women. Several of these women, deeply involved in neighborhood social services, would later become Companions. Their numbers included Ellen Gates Starr of Hull House in Chicago, Helena Dudley of Denison House in Boston, Mary K. Simkhovitch of Greenwich House in New York City, and Vida Dutton Scudder, a Wellesley professor who led in organizing the College Settlement Association.

Morgan sculpted the SCHC in accord with settlement house values yet worked to avoid monastic images and terminology. The Companions would not be cloistered, although they would take a lifetime vow, participate in a daily discipline of intercessory prayer, be committed to sacramental worship and simple living, attend retreats and conferences, and be regularly informed by studying the “stark” realities of economic and industrial conditions, including concern for unfortunate and friendless women. In her 1897 Letter to the Companions, Morgan expressed her ideal model for SCHC: “women living in the world and having individual influence, social or otherwise, banded together to meet the serious religious, educational, and social problems of our age, first by prayer and then by battle.” For the next forty years Morgan would hospitably head SCHC, choosing for herself the emphatic title of “Companion in Charge.” She also significantly funded the Society out of her own resources.

As the Society’s name aptly indicates, SCHC’s worship and liturgical calendar were focused theologically on the Holy Cross. Morgan astutely noted in 1901 that this emphasis was offered “in times when many repudiate the Cross.” Thus the Society quietly affirmed high

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6 Morgan, *Letters to Her Companions*, 45.

7 Morgan, *Letters to Her Companions*, 60.
church affiliations, although members were eventually drawn from a wide range of Anglican religious persuasions. The daily prayer, set down for all Companions in the SCHC Manual of 1893, prescribed that Companions were to “strive to keep the way of the Cross, and carry in our hearts the image of Jesus crucified.”8 Although Companions were expected to participate in their local churches, SCHC offered more rigorous challenges, moving beyond what some experienced at best as bland parochial expectations. SCHC as an organization guarded its independence from official church structures. Episcopal and Anglican clergymen, however, particularly those with Anglo-Catholic sensibilities and missionary experience, would serve as chaplains, retreat and conference leaders, and guests. In its collective worship SCHC benefitted from Anglo-Catholic liturgical riches and practices. The list of clergy included such Episcopal Church luminaries as the missionary bishop Charles Brent and James O. S. Huntington, founder of the Order of the Holy Cross. Early in its life the Society also privately issued its own Manual with litanies and other services for corporate worship, as well as intercessions and prayers written by individual Companions. These lay women were creatively and securely in charge of shaping their own worship patterns. In the early years, when ordained leadership was canonically specified clergymen were politely invited to offer their services. Since the late 1970s ordained women, some of whom are Companions, also support SCHC’s life and worship. Overall, lay leadership continues to be expected and encouraged.

From the earliest days of the Society, the daily routine for Companions depended upon individual intercessory prayer as well as communal prayer when participating in a chapter or other meeting. Members exercised both theological authority and societal awareness by studying, learning about, naming, and discussing with one another “real” economic, social, and industrial conditions. Educationally self-motivated, Companions were counted on to offer informed intercessions and meditation. By 1889 their concerns were gathered together in a document called the Intercession Paper (hereafter IP) which was (and still is) mailed monthly to each Companion. In addition to submitting individual intercessory prayers for the IP, Companions were

to follow the daily schedule set in the IP, praying on common themes
and sending and receiving prayers from one another.

The classification of these petitions reveals the expanding social
and theological heartbeat of SCHC. Initial categories were deepening
spiritual life, personal troubles, the sick, temporal and spiritual bless-
ings, and different aspects of Episcopal Church work. Soon a “Mis-
sions” page was added. Although reticent and quiet about publicly
naming their own activities, Companions were explicit and direct in
naming and praying about “gritty” social realities. By 1916 the IP in-
cluded the heading “Reconciliation of Classes,” which in 1930 was re-
named “Social Justice.” As Joanna Gillespie details in her catalogue
of the monthly IP bulletins, topics were not only regularly attuned to
current events and local and global realities; IP topics included per-
sonal matters as well as petitions calling for systemic intervention. In
several instances they were culturally and analytically perspicacious.
This is evident in the early articulation of the complexities of class
and race tension and in the demanding series of vows that a candi-
date made when she joined the Society. It was far from a simple mat-
ter for each candidate to respond affirmatively to the question, “Wilt
thou seek to serve God day by day, in the ministry of intercession, in
thanksgiving, and in simplicity of life?”

Quickening the Conscience of the Society

Vida Dutton Scudder (1861–1954) has occasionally been de-
scribed as the co-founder, or the “second founding pillar,” of the
SCHC. Scudder’s practical influence was particularly strong dur-
ing the Society’s first seventy-five years, although her prolific writings
and letters were not (and are still not) studied as assiduously as those
of Emily Morgan. A social reformer, Christian socialist, and Anglo-
Catholic, Scudder joined SCHC in 1889. By profession she taught
English literature at Wellesley College, where she also made explicit
her primary passion for social reform. For over three decades at

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9 See Gillespie, *Vocation of Companionship*, 274–275, on the evolving history of
the Intercession Paper.

10 Gillespie, *Vocation of Companionship*, 271. Current categories, with each as-
signed for a weekday, are: “Mission in God’s World,” “Unity of All God’s People,”
“Social Justice, Peace and Reconciliation, Growth in Spiritual Life.” The category for
Saturday is “Needs Personal and General.”

11 From the Office of Admission, SCHC Manual, 28.

12 Gillespie, *Vocation of Companionship*, 47.
SCHC she served influentially as “Companion in Charge of Probationers.” In carrying out this responsibility and in her frequent presentations for Companions’ conferences and retreats, Scudder played a central role in shaping the conscience of the Society. Acclaimed as a social activist, she was the leading woman’s voice in the social gospel movement, which she advanced well before this emphasis was accredited to various male clergy. Scudder also introduced SCHC to early twentieth-century associations and key figures who pursued social reform, and in 1903 helped organize the Women’s Trade Union League. She worked as well to keep social justice issues in the forefront of the Episcopal Church’s life, helping to organize in 1911 the Episcopal Church Socialist League.

In these and other ways Scudder built upon Emily Malbone Morgan’s concern for improving the lives of poor women workers. Much has been made, perhaps too much, of different emphases that Morgan and Scudder brought to SCHC. In many ways they balanced one another. Certainly they both emphasized the need to join prayer with action. Companions, through their daily practice of intercessory prayer and action informed by one’s conscience, were putting to rest the notion that one must choose either action or prayer. This synthesis is commended in Morgan’s advice to move “first by prayer and then by battle.” In effect each embodied the Society’s “dual calling.” As Scudder wrote: “Our vocation is . . . the union of those interior disciplines we have known from [our] beginning, with wide social vision—issues racial, international, economic and political that call for our witness—the kind those who ‘carry in their hearts the image of Jesus Crucified’ can best offer.”

In their daily and corporate practices Companions were encouraged to overcome the false dichotomy between pastoral and prophetic intercession. They were supported in nourishing their spiritual lives through participation in a round of retreats, regular reading of

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14 Morgan, Letters to Her Companions, 45, written to the Companions in 1897.

spiritual classics, and conferences. Scudder offered in 1949 this arresting conclusion to the interdependence of prayer and action: “But it is from Interior Life that all . . . social change must proceed.” As early as the 1890s, Scudder, among others, persistently brought her concerns for race and class oppression to SCHC’s attention. Such attention was atypical for middle and upper class churchwomen, although not for the Companions. The pervasive and systemic character of racial injustice in America was further developed from the 1940s through the 1980s in conferences, retreats, and regular IP intercessions. In a 1944 conference address on “Christian Doctrine and Race Relations,” Scudder provocatively argued that the “so-called Negro Problem” was “the problem of the white race.” Other Companions, civil rights leaders, and churchmen who were directly involved in combating racial inequity addressed the Society. Shirley Chisholm, newly elected to the House of Representatives, addressed the 1969 Companion Conference on “Race, Revolution & Women.” African American Companions also led educational presentations on evolving aspects of Black history and identity. Pointed discussion followed these and other addresses, with Companions asking one another, “What can we do?”

These and other conversations gradually evoked tensions and disagreements among Companions as well as questions about whether public activism by SCHC as a whole was appropriate. In 1917 several Companions successfully petitioned the 1919 General Convention to act in preventing abuses of Labor. Yet the structural reorganization of the Episcopal Church by that same Convention in 1919 excluded women from all national and provincial church governance. For the next sixty-plus years increasing differences of opinion on social justice continued to divide Companions. A Companion’s paper to the 1959 Companion Conference put the matter this bluntly: “There is no subject that has caused more violent disagreement in our Society than

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16 Quoted in Gillespie, “The Companions of the Holy Cross,” in Thompsett and Kujawa-Holbrook, eds., Deeper Joy, 65. Emphasis is in the original, which was taken from Vida D. Scudder, Inward Light, no. 34 (Spring 1949).

17 Gillespie, Vocation of Companionship, 117.

18 Gillespie, Vocation of Companionship, 200–201 and 204–206.

Social Justice. And yet there is none during our 75 years of existence that has united Companions more often.”

In 1954 disagreements over SCHC’s internal needs, organizational structure, and finances led to further tensions. Companions were repeatedly urged to “honor each other’s individual conscience and path of action.”

Divisions over women’s ordination and Prayer Book revision, as well as continuing fiscal concerns, culminated in the summer of 1974 and led to closing the summer residence and program activities at Adelynrood. When a Companion Conference was held later in the year in Natick, Massachusetts, renewal and reorganization were central themes. By the end of the year the Executive Board reaffirmed a policy that “the SCHC is not by nature a body for the taking of public stands.” Historically the consciences of Companions might well have been quickened by Scudder and other Companions, and social issues were clearly expressed in the monthly IP. Yet taking action on various issues in response to a life of intercessory prayer was to be individually chosen and individually expressed.

A Historic American Hybrid

The history of SCHC is unique in several respects. SCHC’s evolving structure, theological and social responsiveness, pioneering commitment to lay women’s vocations, and passion for intercessory prayer are deserving of wider acclaim. Troubled by their church’s lack of response to world’s problems, these women were, from the first, determined to make a difference through an informed and disciplined life of prayer. At the onset their structure was not fully planned. Instead, SCHC evolved steadily yet quietly on the margins of the Episcopal Church’s life. The passions and personalities of two women with long tenures shaped the early years: Emily Malbone Morgan as Companion in Charge for forty years, and Vida Dutton Scudder as Companion in Charge of Probationers for thirty-five years. The number of Companions, originally drawn from New England, gradually extended across the United States, with membership clustered in over twenty local chapters. This flexible organization accommodated and supported the devout intentions and social justice concerns of lay women. From 1914 onward conferences, retreats, and other programs

20 Quoted in Gillespie, Vocation of Companionship, 142.
21 Quoted in Gillespie, Vocation of Companionship, 125.
22 Gillespie, Vocation of Companionship, 67.
at Adelynrood were generally well attended. From the 1960s onward, and with expressed structural clarity in 1984, the administration of SCHC was reshaped to reflect participatory democracy, modern financial business practices, and the evolving ministries of both lay and ordained women.

The historic greatness of SCHC can be measured in many ways. Theologically, long before proscribed sets of Prayer Book intercessions noted as Prayers of the People appeared in the 1976 Book of Common Prayer, and before many Episcopal laity were accustomed to or at all comfortable with extemporaneous prayer, Companions were writing, sharing, and collaborating in a vibrant life of intercessory prayer. Their practical theology reflected hospitable participation of all the baptized as well as an expansive diversity. In 1937 Scudder wrote that God “demands, but I dare say also, needs, our cooperation on the spiritual as well as the material plane. The Cross-bearer of the universe does not act for us . . . but in us.”23 It was not until the 1980s that well-known spiritual director and author Kenneth Leech would define intercessory prayer as the “releasing of God’s power through placing ourselves in a relationship of co-operation with God.”24 Companions’ practiced appreciation of the spiritual energy released in the giving and sending of intercessions has recently been studied by scientists and practitioners alike.25 In one other respect—the Companions’ insistence on the harmonization of prayer and action—SCHC reflects today’s emerging emphasis on public theology, “which conjoin[s] the work of imagination with critical social analysis and action.”26

For women leading public lives SCHC has provided valued opportunity for spiritual rest and renewal as well as provocative discussion of social and spiritual issues of the day. Another personal connection for some Companions, especially in SCHC’s early decades, was the hospitality and support it quietly yet firmly offered committed women couples. Florence Converse was Vida Dutton Scudder’s partner for

sixty years. The fact that SCHC affirmed such relationships at all is underscored in the “passionate commitments” to two Companions who met while attending Adelynrood and who experienced “love that kindles till it leaps beyond the self.”27 After 1919 wider cultural support for women’s intimate partnership waned. The topic of human sexuality was not openly addressed by SCHC until 1978, when biblical scholar Bill Doubleday presented a conference paper. This was a year before the Episcopal Church’s General Convention held open hearings on “human sexuality.”

From the perspective of women’s history SCHC met an essential need by providing a supportive community for lay women in which their gifts, talents, and passions for both prayer and social justice could be developed and expressed. At a time when neither social activism nor passionate religious observance was expected from genteel Episcopal women, SCHC offered a place where spiritual and social leadership could be pursued and deepened. SCHC also offered a welcoming base community for wives and family of clergymen and other dedicated volunteers. Furthermore, it attracted prominent lay women professionals. In addition to leaders and founders of the settlement house movement, other social workers, religious educators, missionaries, ecumenical leaders, and the earliest women seminary professors met, mingled, deliberated, and prayerfully considered courses of action at Adelynrood. In the 1950s directors of Christian education and those few women who held professional positions within the national Episcopal Church were admitted as Companions. Their conversations, commitments, and talents offered a rich environment for renewal. By simply meeting together SCHC must have softened the isolation experienced by women who were typically “the only” and/or “the first” to serve the church in various professional capacities. By its one hundredth anniversary in 1984 the list of Companions had become a veritable historical “Who’s Who” of Episcopal Church leaders. Contemporary Companions have noted that one of the reasons they were attracted to the Society was the greatness of the women members who had preceded them.

From the Society’s earliest days, Morgan urged generous hospitality and argued against any narrowness of spirit or perspective. Companions were occasionally from other parts of the Anglican Communion. Morgan noted “how the petitions of the faithful circle the earth, and have circled it in all ages.” Intercessions addressed global as well as personal and national realities, such as regularly offering much valued support and communion for far-flung missionaries. By the 1940s fifteen Companions were serving as missionaries in China alone. In 1957 the Companion in Charge encouraged Companions to submit a widened range of intercessions to the IP, noting that “the globe is our bailiwick.” A 1964 Conference paper, by a Companion who had served in China, addressed the impact of cultural anthropology and cross-cultural realities. In these and other ways Companions were invited to participate in emerging understandings that scholars of mission were themselves just beginning to address. With its emphasis on study, informed intercession, and a wide global perspective, SCHC has a history of building a community of prayer across distances.

From the end of the nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century, the history of women in the Episcopal Church has been significantly yet quietly shaped by members of SCHC. As historian Mary Donovan has documented, there are other women’s organizations and ministries founded in the last half of the nineteenth century which are better known, thanks to their official diocesan activities and extensive public presence. Yet in the same period women’s daily practice of intercessory prayer informed by a keen analysis of contemporary issues was steadily growing at SCHC. For those who might trivialize lay women’s conversations, it is important to acknowledge the depth of social critique advanced in SCHC conversations from the very outset, as well as the rigorous theological and practical attention Companions regularly paid to advancing the art of intercessory prayer. For those of us today who study Episcopal women’s history it

28 The public SCHC website, www.adelynrood.org, notes members from England, South Africa, Japan, Wales, Canada, and India.
29 Morgan, *Letters to Her Companions*, 43. This comment was offered during the first conference of SCHC held in 1896.
is difficult to imagine that the history of the Episcopal Church has not already been strongly influenced by SCHC.

It is even more intriguing to reflect upon the role SCHC might continue to play in fostering women’s leadership in the church more broadly. Not only do the gifts and habits maintained and still practiced by SCHC deserve further attention, these same gifts might also be more generously extended in the Anglican Communion. The March 2014 conference “ Anglican Women at Prayer: Weaving Our Bonds of Affection,” for which SCHC was an animating sponsor, has already provided evidence of widespread international interest in connecting women at prayer. Not only did more than 150 women participate in this event, but in the following year the conference website received almost eight thousand views from 113 different countries.

As part of their long-range planning and mission SCHC might build upon lessons learned and international contacts initiated in the March 2014 conference. Moving in this direction is consistent with the Society’s history and ethos. Playing a greater role in fostering international women at prayer furthers Emily Morgan’s early (1896) vision of “petitions of the faithful [that] circle the earth.” The opportunity to become more active internationally also reflects Vida Dutton Scudder’s emphasis upon wide social vision and joining prayer with action. Addressing the world’s needs in prayer with more public activity does suggest a slight shift in SCHC’s collective ethic of not personally sharing or widely advocating its expertise. Yet, as I have argued in this paper, SCHC has in the past taken risks and embraced societal, theological, and internal institutional challenges. In the future, privacy for individual consciences could continue to be maintained in local SCHC chapters, while extended international outreach could be facilitated through enhanced use of social media and other electronic resources.

Fortunately, a comprehensive report from SCHC’s working group for “ Anglican Women at Prayer” recommends that SCHC as a whole explore opportunities to expand its future ministries to global Anglican women. SCHC has, I believe, an inspiring role to pursue in connecting Anglican women at prayer. By fostering shared patterns

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33 See www.anglicanwomenatprayer.org.
34 I am grateful to Phoebe Griswold, chair of the “ Anglican Women at Prayer” committee, for sharing her reflections with me in 2015 correspondence.
of intercessory prayer among women, SCHC could assist the Anglican Communion in truly meeting its often stated goal of expressing “bonds of affection.”

SCHC now has the experience, talent, gifts, and opportunity not only to continue but also to extend its passion for intercessory prayer.

\[\text{35 The phrase “bonds of affection” has been named as a goal and signpost of Anglican identity for the last three decades. See, for example, texts cited at www.anglicancommunion.org.}\]