

# A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE EPISCOPATE OF THE EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF WESTERN MICHIGAN

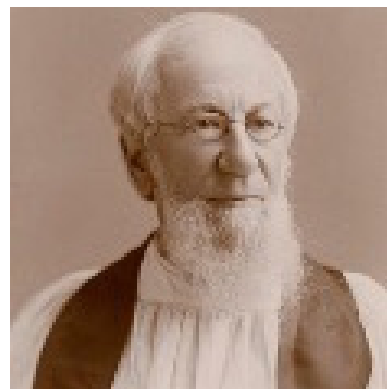
## WITH NOTES ON CHALLENGES AND MISCONDUCT



### 1874-1909

### THE RT. REV. GEORGE DE NORMANDIE GILLESPIE

The Bishop of the Diocese of Michigan, the Rt. Rev. Samuel A. McCroskey, convened the first Convention of the Diocese of Western Michigan at St. Mark's Church in Grand Rapids in December 1874. That Convention named and incorporated the new diocese and elected its first bishop, George De Normandie Gillespie from Ann Arbor. He served as our first bishop from 1875 until his death in office, 1909. Of our current fifty-seven parishes, twenty-three were already incorporated, functioning, and ministering before 1874. Twelve more of our present congregations were founded before World War I, meaning that by 1911 thirty-five of our current fifty-seven parishes were already in existence.



### 1909-1937

### THE RT. REV. JOHN N. McCORMICK

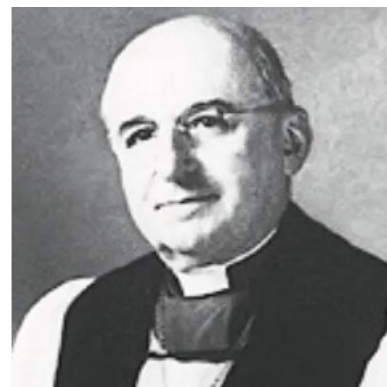
The Rt. Rev. John N. McCormick was elected as the second bishop of Western Michigan and served as such from 1909 to 1937. Before his election he had been rector of St. Mark's, Grand Rapids; in this role he established a hospital and a kindergarten system which became foundational institutions for the community. During World War I, Bishop McCormick was known as the "Bishop of the Trenches" for serving as a chaplain on the front lines in France. None of our present congregations was founded between 1911 and 1939, but Bishop McCormick confirmed 11,454 candidates during his thirty-year tenure.



### 1937-1953

### THE RT. REV. LEWIS B. WHITTEMORE

The Rt. Rev. Lewis B. Whittemore served as the third bishop of our diocese from 1937 to 1953. Before his election he had been rector of Grace Church, Grand Rapids. The article "100 Years of Christian Witness (1874-1974)" states: "Bishop Whittemore was an able and competent administrator, and his episcopate brought the diocese out of financial depression, consolidating and reorganizing the mission



expansion...” During his tenure, the diocese named St. Mark’s, Grand Rapids, as our cathedral church. Upon his retirement, the diocese organized the Bishop Whittemore Foundation as an independent ecclesiastical corporation managing a revolving building fund and endowment.

## **1953-1959**

## **THE RT. REV. DUDLEY B. McNEIL**

The Rt. Rev. Dudley B. McNeil was consecrated the fourth bishop of our diocese in 1953. He had most recently been serving as rector of St. James’ Church in Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan. During his tenure Bishop McNeil sought to spread the presence of our church and the availability of the sacraments to more of Western Michigan, especially reaching into more rural parts of the diocese. With his leadership the percentage of growth in the diocese exceeded the national church average during the religious boom years of the 1950s. But in the summer of 1959, after only six years, he resigned due to ill health. This ill health either was or was caused by his alcoholism. This was widely known but never officially acknowledged.



## **1960-1984**

## **THE RT. REV. CHARLES E. BENNISON**

The rector of St. Luke’s Church, Kalamazoo, The Rt. Rev. Charles E. Bennison, became our fifth bishop, serving from 1960 until 1984. Bishop Bennison was a strong leader who did not readily accept “no” as an answer. With the consent of two consecutive diocesan conventions, Bishop Bennison moved the seat of the diocesan bishop from St. Mark’s Church, Grand Rapids. Bishop Bennison was in conflict with the Dean of the Cathedral. He had property donated at the crossroads of I-94 and US 131 in Portage on the south side of Kalamazoo, breaking ground for the Cathedral of Christ the King in 1967. The design had to be cut back because enough money could not be raised. This architecturally unique brick building served as Diocesan Center for the next forty years. Its construction and the move to Kalamazoo were not without controversy; the cathedral was known around the diocese, fondly and not so fondly, as “Fort Bennison.” During the 1950s and ‘60s nineteen of our parishes were founded and built, many of them at Bishop Bennison’s direct or indirect initiative.



Bishop Bennison’s father was a builder and in some ways, Bishop Bennison understood himself as helping to build the City of God. It seems that this was truly his sense of mission, but it also meant that he had corresponding moments of grandiosity along the way.

## 1984-1988

## THE RT. REV. HOWARD S. MEEKS

The Rt. Rev. Howard S. Meeks, then rector of St. Andrew's Episcopal Church in Ft. Pierce, Florida, was elected our sixth bishop on the seventh ballot in 1984. He was consecrated bishop in the cathedral later that year after Bishop Bennison's retirement. During his tenure the first woman priest was called to a parish, and congregations were encouraged to study and use inclusive language in worship. Bishop Meeks emphasized spiritual renewal programs during his tenure.



The Standing Committee became aware that Bishop Meeks had an extra-marital affair with a woman in the northern region of the diocese. Upon investigation they found that he had a history of such misconduct extending all the way back to his seminary days. There was also an attempted seduction, or actual affair, with the wife of a clergy person in the diocese. In early January of 1988 Bishop Meeks resigned. The Standing Committee was told to keep the details of these events "quiet." The following diocesan convention, Presiding Bishop Edmund Browning was in attendance and shared the misconduct story, much to the surprise of the Standing Committee.

## 1989-2002

## THE RT. REV. EDWARD L. LEE

After a healing interim of about twenty months, led by the President of the Standing Committee, the Rev. D. Edward Emenheiser, The Rt. Rev. Edward L. Lee of St. John's Episcopal Church in Washington, D. C. was elected as the seventh bishop of the diocese and was consecrated in the fall of 1989 in Kalamazoo. With his leadership, the diocese engaged in long-range planning and gave seat, voice and vote to youth delegates at convention. Bishop Lee supported and consolidated the Diocesan Consulting Team, authorizing members of the diocese to work in parishes for healing and growth. During his tenure the first openly gay and lesbian clergy in our diocese were ordained. Bishop Lee remained diocesan leader until 2002 and lives in retirement now in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.



## 2002-2012

## THE RT. REV. ROBERT GEPERT

The Rt. Rev. Robert Gepert, then Dean of Trinity Cathedral in Easton, Maryland, was elected bishop coadjutor. In April of 2002 he was consecrated as the eighth bishop of Western Michigan in Grand Rapids. Early in his tenure it became evident that the diocese was in financial trouble. Under Bishop Gepert's leadership, the diocese has updated its canons and is intentionally financially transparent. The decision in 2005 to sell the Cathedral and

Diocesan Center at the end of that year demonstrates this fiscal accountability.

In addition, our diocesan canons now include a provision to “address the exceptional case of a Parish whose continued viability as a self-sustaining entity appears to be in jeopardy, such that a degree of episcopal intervention or oversight is needed as a means of restoring the health of the congregation...” (Title II Canon 31). This provision authorizes the bishop, with the consent of the Standing Committee, to dissolve a parish’s vestry, to authorize a Bishop’s Advisory Committee in its stead and to lay out for the parish a plan for restoration of health and autonomy.



Bishop Gepert was, like Bishop Whittemore, faced with significant financial challenges and also like Bishop Whittemore helped our diocese overcome those challenges. Like Bishop Meeks, Bishop Gepert had a keen interest in spirituality. He was an excellent preacher and liturgist. He encouraged every meeting start with Bible study and initiated the regular gathering of deanery clergy. Bishop Gepert was also very open about coming from an alcoholic family system, and this meant that when things became problematic, Bishop Gepert would become very stern, often seeing things in sharply contrasting terms. Thus, the development of Title II Canon 31 was both an appropriate tool for intervention on behalf of congregational health and an occasional catalyst for overreach or controlling behavior. Like Bishop Bennison, Bishop Gepert had a tendency to reach a decision and then proceed regardless of whether or not others had caught up with him.

## **2013 to 2021**

## **THE RT. REV. WHAYNE M. HOUGLAND, JR.**

The Rt. Rev. Wayne M. Houglan, Jr. was the ninth bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Western Michigan. He was consecrated by the Most Rev. Katharine Jefferts Schori on September 28, 2013. Bishop Houglan led the diocese through a significant restructuring. Rather than five deaneries, a Canon to the Ordinary, and a bishop, in 2018 we switched to three regions, three Canons Missioner, and a bishop. This has proven to be very successful, increasing the contact between diocesan staff, parishes, and clergy. In 2019, diocesan offices also moved from Kalamazoo to the more centrally located Wyoming, a suburb of Grand Rapids.



Conversations also began in 2018 about the possibility of the Dioceses of Eastern and Western Michigan “dancing together,” as Bishop Houglan put it. In 2018, the Diocese of Eastern Michigan voted to extend the invitation to the Diocese of Western Michigan to walk together for 3-5 years. In early 2019, the Diocese of Western Michigan responded with an enthusiastic yes! In October 2019, the Diocese of Eastern Michigan voted to elect Bishop Houglan, to serve both dioceses concurrently as Bishop Provisional of Eastern Michigan and Bishop Diocesan of Western Michigan as part of the exploration of relationship we

committed to for 3-5 years of conversation, relationship building, and deepening of cooperation.

Sometime in 2020, the husband of a woman with whom Bishop Hougland had an affair called the Presiding Bishop's office to report the same. When contacted by the Presiding Bishop's office, Bishop Hougland freely admitted to his misconduct and asked for help. The Standing Committees were notified in June 2020. Bishop Hougland was placed on a one-year suspension. The joint Standing Committees engaged our two dioceses in a process of discernment about our future. Bishop Hougland also engaged in his own discernment about his future. Over the course of the suspension both parties, dioceses and Bishop, came to the decision that Bishop Whayne Hougland should not return. His resignation as Bishop Diocesan of Western and Bishop Provisional of Eastern became official on July 1, 2021.