



ARTHUR T. LYMAN AND THE INDENTURE OF 1907

Sermon preached in King's Chapel May 13, 2007

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This Thursday, May 17, marks the hundredth anniversary of what is almost certainly the most consequential single decision made by King's Chapel during the 20th century, the adoption of what is known as the Indenture of 1907. The Indenture was a trust agreement under which all the properties of King's Chapel, including this building and more than two centuries of accumulated endowments, were legally transferred to three Trustees and their successors, for the purpose of maintaining Christian worship in King's Chapel.

This may not sound like the most promising subject for a sermon. Worse, it may sound like the premise for a fairly boring sermon. But in their own way, the people and the events of 1907 were no less fascinating than the people and events involved in the founding of King's Chapel in the late 17th century, or the construction of this new building beginning in the middle of the 18th, or the re-formation of the church after the Revolution and its role during the period of the Unitarian Controversy in the early 19th century. And in terms of relative significance, the Indenture at least in retrospect was key to the modern development of King's Chapel as it adopted the initial form of a congregational structure in 1920 and eventually a full congregational polity in 1988. So the Indenture actually has more direct relevance to who we are today than those more famous markers from the centuries before.

Just fifteen persons, fifteen men, have served as our Trustees in the past hundred years, the most recent — Eugene Clapp — elected just a year ago. So their average tenure has been twenty years. Their faithful stewardship should be noted and honored, for by the terms of the Indenture, the ultimate responsibility for maintenance of Christian worship in this place rested solely with them before 1988, which included periods especially during the first half of the 20th century when a staggering number of Boston's churches, especially Unitarian churches, closed their doors forever. We should never take our continued existence for granted.

And in fact it was concern for the future that motivated the adoption of the Indenture in the first place. Prior to 1920, when the congregation was formally organized as the Society of King's Chapel, the church had no members such as we do today. Before that date, the legal owners of the church were the "Proprietors of the Pews," that is, the families who owned pews in the church and taxed themselves to meet church expenses. This was the state of affairs in 1895 when the Rev. Harold Nicholson Brown began his 28 year ministry here. In a memoir written some years later, Dr. Brown explained the situation at the turn of the new century: "Under the then existing form of organization, any one who bought a pew became one of the Proprietors and was entitled to vote in all its business meetings. The danger was that in a future time...some enterprising group of men might thus buy their way into the organization till they held control of it and could convert it to whatever uses...they saw fit. They might for example, carry it over to a religious faith quite different from that for which...the Church had come to stand. Or they might abolish the Church altogether, converting the land on which it stood to commercial uses, thus realizing for themselves a very handsome profit on their investment."¹

¹ All quoted material taken from the King's Chapel Archives.

This may seem fanciful now, but in fact several of the old established churches in Boston and elsewhere adopted Trustee arrangements around the same time, so however realistic or unrealistic this fear may seem in retrospect, it was not unique to King's Chapel. And the system proposed for King's Chapel was for the most part similar to that adopted by other parishes in eastern Massachusetts; the number of Trustees, just three, was unusually small and lifetime terms were rare elsewhere, but neither was unique. What was unique was the accountability of the Trustees to the faculty of the Harvard Divinity School, which was required to approve the election of each new Trustee and also given the authority to discharge the Trustees if in its judgment they were not performing their duties adequately. Our Archives contain the actual, individual ballots, signed by each member of the Harvard faculty whenever over the ensuing years a new Trustee of King's Chapel was chosen. "Until, therefore, the Harvard Divinity School goes to destruction," Dr. Brown would write, "it would seem that a sufficient and duly constituted authority is appointed to make sure that King's Chapel fulfills its own best traditions."

This remarkable arrangement, which was finally abandoned when the Indenture was amended in 1988, requires some comment and explanation. It harkens back to a time, which was already slowly coming to an end even in 1907, when Harvard in general and its Divinity School in particular were considered firmly and permanently part of what can be fairly called the "Unitarian Establishment". Like many things in Boston this was as much or more a personal and familial arrangement than it was institutional. For the better part of the 19th century Harvard, and its Divinity School in particular, had been to all extents and purposes a Unitarian institution. Its famous and dominating president, Charles W. Eliot, grew up in King's Chapel — in fact, he married the daughter of our Minister, Ephraim Peabody, whose bust is located here in front of the chancel. And President Eliot was but one of many Unitarians who served in that capacity. Furthermore, the Harvard Divinity School had been the central and primary school for the education and training of Unitarian ministers for well over a century beginning in 1805. And if that was not yet cozy enough, one of three original Trustees of King's Chapel was Francis Greenwood Peabody, a Professor in the Divinity School...and yes, he too was a child of our Ephraim Peabody. Do you begin to get the idea? Another of Ephraim's daughters married the Rev. Henry Whitney Bellows, who organized the Unitarians denominationally for the first time 1865. And one of his grandsons was Samuel A. Eliot, president of the American Unitarian Association.

Once you scratch the surface of the history of American Unitarianism, you discover that these close, familial connections are not only common but virtually endless. I have long said that you can understand the Unitarians better as a large family than as a small denomination, and until at least the mid-20th century this was almost literally true. (You could say it was the original "interdependent web.") Why would the Proprietors of King's Chapel, and the Trustees themselves, be comfortable to make themselves accountable to the Harvard Divinity faculty? Because they were *family*. And for a long period of time, literally so.

But at the center of the story we are telling, and indeed its primary author, was the layman who dominated the history of King's Chapel for a half century, and in influence much longer. Even today his likeness gazes out upon the Church from his prominent monument on the back wall, on which are engraved the remarkable statistics of his tenure: member of the Vestry for 52 years, 1863 to 1915; Senior Warden for 38 years, from 1877 to 1915. His name was Arthur T. Lyman. The list of his accomplishments as both a successful businessman and a philanthropist is a very long one, but, secondary only to his vocation and to the development of the family estate in Waltham known as "The Vale," his primary devotion was to King's Chapel. Mr. Lyman was equally committed both to its material welfare and to its spiritual mission and religious purposes. In their support he was as generous with his time as of his substance, which is saying a great deal.

It was said that in his attendance at the worship in this place, “He was as regular and faithful as the minister himself.” He was a student of the Prayer Book, which he loved. And it was clearly his commanding hand behind the direction that the primary and fundamental purpose of the Indenture of 1907 was and is “maintaining Christian worship in King’s Chapel.” Like many others in King’s Chapel then he held important positions in the American Unitarian Association. “King’s Chapel can help itself and the denomination by taking an active part in the Unitarian work — it’s a good and needed work,” he said. “At the same time it has a position of its own to maintain... A prominent position in the Unitarian body and a proper place in the Church Universal seem to me not only not inconsistent, but most appropriate and satisfactory.”

The Minister who knew him best, as his Senior Warden for two decades, Harold N. Brown, said of Mr. Lyman: “My experience with him has convinced me that if we could only be sure of a line, or unbroken succession of benevolent despots, then benevolent despotism would be the ideal means of ordering this world’s affairs. He was the gentlest of tyrants, but his will generally prevailed. He led only because he inspired and commanded confidence.”

The Indenture of 1907 was approved on May 17 by the Proprietors of the Pews, and it was approved unanimously. Unanimity on such a fundamental and substantial change by a church made up of cautious Yankees has to be considered remarkable if not miraculous. No doubt it was presented as a conservative and safe-guarding measure. But whatever else, to give unanimous consent to such a proposal was a tremendous and vivid demonstration of the trust the people had in their leadership, and in particular their Senior Warden, Arthur T. Lyman. He would continue in that role for the remaining eight years of his life, while at the same time, as you may already have noted, also serving as a Trustee under the Indenture. More than sixty years later our bylaws would be changed such as to forbid a Trustee from serving also as a Warden, but one imagines that Mr. Lyman wasn’t much concerned with creating any division of his power, benevolently as he may have wielded it. And apparently those voting for the change in 1907 saw no reason to object.

Actually, he wasn’t the only Trustee over time to hold dual positions of authority. Leadership roles in the church seem to have been treated much more casually (perhaps the right word is familiarly) in the past. For much of the century, several of the Trustees served regular terms on the Vestry and even on occasion as Warden, the last being Thaxter Spencer, who continued to serve as Junior Warden for a year or two following his election as Trustee in 1972. Thaxter’s service has now continued for a full 35 years, the second longest tenure of those who have served in this capacity over the last century. And our third present-day Trustee, Sam Perry, has now served for over 23 years.

One other quite surprising element of the original Indenture deserves comment, in that it belies the famous stereotype of Yankee frugality: the explicit power it grants the Trustees to expend not only the income from the accumulated endowments for the benefit of the church but also “such sums out of the principal of the trust funds as the Trustees see fit.” And based on his own personal generosity, here also may be seen the influence and guiding hand of the philanthropic Mr. Lyman in the drafting of the Indenture. His primary and central concern was the welfare of King’s Chapel and to provide liberally for its needs going forward.

Trust, generosity and devoted commitment — commitment which rises to the level of consecration — were the elements which combined in the character of Arthur T. Lyman and by his leadership, as it appears, came to be reflected in the congregation he served and led for so long. And these same elements - trust, generosity and commitment — are the qualities that virtually define stewardship.

We today are the beneficiaries of the good stewardship of the past, and ought to look to it as not only our responsibility but our privilege to follow the example of stewardship that has been set before us.

And since 1988, when not only an amendment to the original Indenture was made but significant changes in our governance were adopted, this stewardship became not only the sole or primary responsibility of our Trustees as it had been, but an obligation mutually and jointly shared by all of us. While the Trustees continue to have a unique and special role to play, the welfare of our church, as it should be in a church that is truly congregational in nature, depends on the commitment and generosity of each of us and all of us striving together to create a community based on mutual trust and a consecrated sense of shared stewardship.

In gratitude for what the past has given, by which we have been blessed, and in the spirit of those who have gone before, may we look forward in hope, that the future must and will have better things in store.

Let us pray.

We give thee unfeigned thanks, O God, for this church and for our part in its enduring and ongoing life. We pray in gratitude for all those who over many generations have given of themselves, their substance and spirit, to build and maintain this beloved sanctuary for our use and to thy glory. We remember all that it has meant to those who have worshipped here over the many years. Mindful of the generosity of those who have gone before us, may we as the present custodians and stewards of this treasure and the beneficiaries of their benevolence, contribute as generously as we are able to its support and do our part to maintain this church for the generations who will follow us in this place. Help us to know it, to cherish it, and to live in it as a beloved community of memory, hope and reverence, though Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*