

## **CHRISTIAN LIFE AND FAITH: PART III MINISTERS OF THE CHURCH**

### **OUTLINE**

#### ***Introduction***

*The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.*  
Ephesians 4: 11-13

#### **I. The Ministry**

The call to each of us as Christians is to engage ourselves in the mission and ministry of the Church. As our catechism states:

Q. What is the mission of the Church?

A. The mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.

Q. Who are the ministers of the Church?

A. The ministers of the Church are lay persons, bishops, priests and deacons.

Q. What is the ministry of the bishop?

A. The ministry of the bishop is to represent Christ and his Church, particularly as apostle, chief priest, and pastor of a diocese; to guard the faith, unity, and discipline of the whole Church; to proclaim the Word of God; to act in Christ's name for the reconciliation of the world and the building up of the Church; and to ordain others to continue Christ's ministry.

Q. What is the ministry of a priest or presbyter?

A. The ministry of a priest is to represent Christ and his Church, particularly as pastor to the people; to share with the bishop in the overseeing of the Church; to proclaim the Gospel; to administer the sacraments; and to bless and declare pardon in the name of God.

Q. What is the ministry of a deacon?

A. The ministry of a deacon is to represent Christ and his Church, particularly as a servant to those in need; and to assist bishops and priests in the proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments.

Q. What is the ministry of the laity?

A. The ministry of the laity is to represent Christ and his Church; to bear witness to him wherever they may be; and according to the gifts given them, to carry on Christ's work of reconciliation in the world; and to take their place in the life, worship, and governance of the Church.

#### **II. Conclusion**

It is essential that we find ways to assist every person in his or her personal journey of discernment and then provide ways to nurture, equip, and support the ministry of each. After all, no one is useless or unusable.

## **CHRISTIAN LIFE AND FAITH : PART III THE MINISTERS OF THE CHURCH**

### **I. Gathering**

#### **Hymns**

- Lord, you give the great commission, *The Hymnal 1982* #528
- Come, labor on, *The Hymnal 1982* #541

#### **Collect of the Day**

Almighty and everlasting God, by whose Spirit the whole body of your faithful people is governed and sanctified: Receive our supplications and prayers, which we offer before you for all members of your holy Church, that in their vocation and ministry they may truly and devoutly serve you; through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. *Amen.*

### **II. Illumination**

*The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.*  
Ephesians 4:11-13

It is clear from scripture that God has equipped each of us with various gifts and abilities which are best used for the glory of God and the welfare of God's people. Examine the classic passages of Romans 12: 4-8; I Corinthians 12: 4-11, and Ephesians 4: 11-13, and you will find confirmation that God intends us to understand ourselves as gifted people with the responsibility of using those gifts to "build up the Church" into its full potential. The church is a community of diverse persons who are called to discern their own unique contributions, to grow in love and unity with each other, and to serve each other and the needs of the community with humility and honor.

The call to each of us as Christians is to engage ourselves in the mission and ministry of the Church. As our catechism states:

Q. What is the mission of the Church?

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We are Christ's ambassadors (II Corinthians 5:20) and in general our work is to respond both to God's claim on our lives and God's call to mission.

•Our common life as a community of faith begins at baptism. The Baptismal Covenant which is repeated at baptisms, confirmations and at the Easter Vigil reminds us of our role as ambassadors for Christ and outlines the shared responsibility we hold. Although many dispute the assertion that baptism can be viewed as the "ordination" of the laity, without question the statement of faith and promises made are formative in the lives of each individual and of utmost importance to the body. In Welcome to the Episcopal Church, Christopher Webber has said that the church finds itself again a missionary community in a basically pagan society and works hard to prepare its members for their role as witnesses to the risen Christ. We are ambassadors to the world, not just to a select group. Each week we are sent out into that world with a dismissal reminding us of this privilege and duty. But our ministry may take many forms as we live out the mission of the Church and it is to that we turn now.

• Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Life Together says, “A community which allows unemployed members to exist within it will perish because of them. It is well, therefore, if every member receives a definite task to perform for the community, that he may know in hours of doubt that he, too, is not useless and unusable.” This is as true for bishops as it is for all other members of the body of Christ. All of us are useful to God and usable in the life of the community. Our catechism is clear that while some are called to specific orders within the Church all share equally in our primary role.

Q. Who are the ministers of the Church?

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Q. What is the ministry of the laity?

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As an old rhyme goes:

*Men’s faces, voices, differ much;  
Saints are not all one size;  
Flow’rs in a garden various grow;  
Let none monopolize.*

Indeed “saints are not all one size.” Each of us is called according to our specific gifts to ministry and all are needed. It may be well to examine the Baptismal Covenant (BCP, p. 304), the Ordination of a Bishop (BCP, p. 517-518); the Ordination of a Priest (BCP, p.531-532) and the Ordination of a Deacon (BCP, p.543-544) to see the specific duties and responsibilities called upon by each order. While the various orders are designed to carry out particular functions, all are mutually dependant on the other for support and encouragement. Webber asserts that it is clear in *The Book of Common Prayer* that lay ministry comes first and that the other three orders are there to support the laity in their work (Webber, 100). Whether you agree with this view or not, it must be acknowledged that the tasks of maintaining the body as well as equipping the members for mission are upheld together.

Each order has some peculiarities of interest which include but are not limited to these notes. Here are some things to know:

**Bishops** are selected by the diocese in which they preside. The man or woman chosen is elected by both clergy and laity to serve as “chief priest and pastor.” We say that the bishop is in “apostolic succession”

by which we mean they carry on the teaching and work of the twelve appointed by Jesus himself. They represent the continuity of the Church's understanding and authority as handed down generation to generation from the beginning. When chosen, a bishop must also be ratified by a majority of the other dioceses. When consecrated, at least three bishops are present to lay hands on the new bishop.

A bishop who is the head of a diocese is called a *Diocesan*. There may be one or more other bishops who share the ministry of episcopal oversight in a given diocese. They may be either a *Coadjutor* who succeeds the current bishop upon retirement or a *Suffragan* who does not or an *Assistant bishop* who is selected by the bishop and not elected by the body of lay persons and clergy in the diocese. All share fully in the duties and responsibilities of a bishop but may vary in the specific tasks assigned to them. All bishops share the overall governance of the Church alongside the clergy and laity elected to be representatives at General Convention every three years.

**Priests** generally serve the Church on a parish level although there are specialized ministries in which priests engage. Priests preside at the eucharist, baptize, preach, teach, bless, and support lay persons in their daily lives and ministry. Chosen by the Church at large in a number of diverse ways, normally educated in a three year seminary experience and called to ministry through the processes outlined in each diocese, priests are ordained by the bishop who is their pastor and to whom they are accountable for the up-building of the Church. They share in the governance of a diocese at annual conventions and may be elected to represent the diocese at General Convention.

Priests who serve a parish have a variety of roles and titles. The rector of a parish is responsible for the spiritual life of the faith community and works in conjunction with the vestry to secure the proper maintenance and growth of the parish. The rector may choose also to call other priests to serve the parish. Unlike the selection of a rector which involves the input and discernment of the leaders in the parish, assisting clergy may be chosen by the rector alone. The bishop has the authority to screen potential candidates for any role in ministry and all clergy are under episcopal supervision. Sometimes assisting clergy are named as Associates, or as Assistants to the rector or as *Curates* (see glossary). The head of a mission is called *vicar* not rector. Another name for priests in specialized fields such as college or school ministry or hospital work is *chaplains*.

**Deacons** are ordained ministers within the church. Their role is to represent the world to the Church and to represent the Church in the world. Their involvement among the "least of these" does not relieve the laity of their responsibility for seeing that justice prevails, but deacons remain vigilant in advocating for those who have no voice in the world or in the Church. Although each priest is ordained a deacon prior to ordination as a priest, this is a transitional role and should not be confused with the vocational ministry of the diaconate.

Selection, training, and deployment for deacons varies from diocese to diocese. In addition to the functions of servant ministry and advocacy, deacons have liturgical duties designed to remind the worshipping committee of its own responsibility in the world. Deacons typically read the gospel, lead the prayers of the people, set the table, and dismiss the congregation. They take their place in the ministry of a parish but are there by the specific assignment of the bishop to whom they report. These assignments are periodically evaluated and may be altered by the bishop's authority.

**Laity** of the Church provide invaluable resources for all ministry both to the Church and in the world. Lay persons are needed for "Church work" and the "work of the Church." A variety of tasks—from altar guild to teaching to pastoral care to fellowship to gardening to choir to cooking to cleaning to fund raising and on and on—depend entirely on the labor and skills of the members of the church. Both formally through election to the vestry and informally, the life and growth of the Church is maintained by the laity. The gifts of time, talent, and money are essential to keep the Church alive and are freely given by the lay members of every congregation, parish, diocese, and province. All give to the mission

and ministry of the Church which, as it has been said, is the only institution that exists primarily for those who do not belong to it!

The laity also contributes to the governance of the body. On the parish level, persons are elected at an annual meeting to serve on the vestry. The various duties of the vestry include the maintenance and management of the temporal matters of the parish as well as the calling of the rector. On the diocesan level, representatives chosen by the parish attend the annual convention of the diocese. The number of delegates will vary according to the size of the parish. All share in the legislative responsibilities of diocesan work.

The work of the diocese is coordinated by an annual convention that elects clergy and lay people to serve on Diocesan Council. The convention adopts a budget and program each year and the Council administers them. In addition, a bishop has a body called a Standing Committee that is elected in a similar fashion to serve as an executive advisory council. In these ways, the clergy of a diocese work with the bishop and the laity to insure the proper functioning of the mission and ministry of the Church on this level.

Every three years representatives will be chosen and sent to the General Convention of the Episcopal Church and will perform the same function on a national level. Clergy and lay representatives make up the House of Deputies and the bishops of the Church comprise the House of Bishops. They adopt a budget, choose the majority of the members of the Executive Council to administer the budget between conventions, adopt resolutions on matters of concern to church members, and take action on other matters ranging from the adoption of Prayer Book and Hymnal revisions to ecumenical relationships. Just as the convention on the diocesan level elects the bishop of each diocese, the delegates to General Convention elect the Presiding Bishop who serves in this capacity for twelve years. His duties include being the chief pastor and chief executive of the Church and speaking “God’s words to the Church and to the world, as the representative of this Church and its episcopate in its corporate capacity” (Canon I:2.4[a]).

It is clear that the Episcopal Church is a church supportive of and dependant on the full range of ministry. We call upon all the gifts of all the orders to build up the Body to its maturity and potential. Episcopal priest Lloyd Edwards points out in his book, Discerning Your Spiritual Gifts,

*There is a major gap in Christian teaching. We have helped people to learn the lore of the faith. We have helped them practice moral living. We have helped them solve their problems of living, to pray, to nurture loving relationships. And yet we have not helped them find precisely what it is that God made them for, what it is that will give them the most profound joy imaginable. (Edwards, 3)*

*This is the challenge for all of us in the Church. It is essential that we find ways to assist every person in his or her personal journey of discernment and then provide ways to nurture, equip and support the ministry of each. After all, no one is useless or unusable.*

## **CHRISTIAN LIFE AND FAITH: PART III MINISTERS OF THE CHURCH**

### **III. Engagement**

1. Have your priest or deacon come to the class and talk about her/his call to ordained ministry. How did she experience it? What process did it take? How does he feel about ministry now? What has been surprising? What has been most rewarding? Most challenging?
2. Invite leaders of different ministries of the parish to speak about the variety of needs and opportunities in the parish. Try to encourage specific information about skills, training, expectations, etc.
3. Host a Ministries Fair: Invite outreach and pastoral groups to set up booths with information displays regarding ministry opportunities in the community as well as in the parish.
4. Using a simplified Myers/Briggs inventory, engage the class in discovering their personality types. Talk about the implications for ministry. (For further exploration, you may use God's Gifted People: Discovering Your Personality as a Gift by Gary Harbaugh.)
5. Offer a Discovering Your Gifts For Ministry seminar for the parish. A format has been developed by The Reverend Deacon Mark LaGory at St. Luke's in Birmingham which can be done for several Sundays or a one-two day retreat. Also The Church at Willow Creek has a non-denominational program called *Network* which can be used in a similar fashion with small groups.

### **IV. Reflection**

What have we learned? What remains to be examined?

# CHRISTIAN LIFE AND FAITH: PART IV

## THE STRUCTURE AND POLITY OF THE CHURCH

### OUTLINE

#### **Introduction**

*The word “polity” when used in reference to a church has to do with its structure. Although it sounds like “politics” because it comes from the same root, the Greek word for city, we will be concerned in this section not with the politics of the church but with its organization and structure. There are some who say that they want to be Christian but not belong to an organized church. But the church, being incarnational, is made up of people and whenever two or more people join together, some sort of organization exists, even if it is just that one person is the listener while the other is the talker. When Christians join together to be the body of Christ in the world, they require organization, just as our bodies require organization of cells in order to function. All churches are in fact organized in some manner or another. We can classify the different kinds of church polities or structures.*

#### **I. Illumination**

- A. Polity
- B. Different Types of Church Polity
- C. Diocese is Major Unit of Episcopal Church Organization
- D. Parishes are the Worshipping Communities
- E. National Level of the Church
- F. International Level of the Church

#### **II. Engagement**

- A. Role Play
- B. Episcopal Dictionary
- C. Parish Property
- D. Church Annual

#### **III. Summary Handout**



## CHRISTIAN LIFE AND FAITH: PART IV THE STRUCTURE AND POLITY OF THE CHURCH

### I. Gathering

#### Hymn

- Christ is made the sure foundation, *The Hymnal 1982* #518
- The Church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord, *The Hymnal 1982* #525

#### Collect of the Day (*A collect for a Church Convention, BCP. 255*)

Almighty and everlasting Father, you have given the Holy Spirit to abide with us for ever: Bless, we pray, with his grace and presence, the bishops and the other clergy and the laity here (*or now or soon to be*) assembled in your Name, that your Church, being preserved in true faith and godly discipline, may fulfill all the mind of him who loved it and gave himself for it, you Son Jesus Christ your Savior; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God now and for ever. *Amen.*

or

(*A collect for a Church Convention or meeting BCP p. 818*)

Almighty and everlasting God, source of all wisdom and understanding, be present with those who take counsel [in \_\_\_\_\_] for the renewal and mission of your Church. Teach us in all things to seek first your honor and glory. Guide us to perceive what is right, and grant us both the courage to pursue it and the grace to accomplish it; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

### II. Illumination:

#### *Introduction*

*The word "polity" when used in reference to a church has to do with its structure. Although it sounds like "politics" because it comes from the same root, the Greek word for city, we will be concerned in this section not with the politics of the church but with its organization and structure. There are some who say that they want to be Christian but not belong to an organized church. But the church, being incarnational, is made up of people and whenever two or more people join together, some sort of organization exists, even if it is just that one person is the listener while the other is the talker. When Christians join together to be the body of Christ in the world, they require organization, just as our bodies require organization of cells in order to function. All churches are in fact organized in some manner or another. We can classify the different kinds of church polities or structures.*

#### **DIFFERENT TYPES OF CHURCH POLITY**

There are several ways that churches are organized. Perhaps the most familiar organization for Protestant churches is "congregational." In congregational churches, decisions are made about the life of the church in each particular congregation. Each congregation may call its own ministers to be ordained, may buy property and erect buildings, may decide the requirements of membership and how decisions will be made among the members. The Episcopal Church is not a congregational church.

Another kind of church structure is "presbyterian." This word comes from the Greek word for priest. Presbyters meeting together constitute the main unit of organization and decision making in this structure.

Since we are known as the Episcopal Church it stands to reason that our polity is "episcopal," that is that we are governed by bishops, the Greek word for which is *episcopoi*. And that is a true statement, up to a point. A purely



episcopal polity would mean that bishops alone govern and administer the Church, as is the case in the Eastern Orthodox Churches. In the Episcopal Church tradition, diocesan bishops are the chief priests and pastors of their respective dioceses, and as such hold considerable authority and responsibility. Lay persons, priests, and deacons also share in the governance of the Church, each taking a rightful place in councils of the Church. This means that in addition to being episcopal in polity we are also *synodical*. Both clergy and lay persons come together in church councils called synods to chart the forward course of the Church. Bringing together these two types of Church polity allows for a healthy balance between purely episcopal polity and purely democratic polity.

It is worth noting that each member Church in the Anglican Communion is free to have her own polity structure. What is true for the American Episcopal Church might not necessarily be true for other Communion members' churches.

## **THE DIOCESE**

The central unit of organization in the Episcopal Church is the diocese. The diocese is a geographic area in which one Bishop, the Diocesan, is charged with being the chief pastor, priest, church authority and executive officer. Each diocese elects its own bishop(s) and after the other dioceses have consented to that person's ordination, three bishops are required to lay hands upon the new bishop at the new bishop's ordination. The Diocesan Bishop, also called the Ordinary, may work with other bishops. A diocese may elect a Bishop Coadjutor who will become the Diocesan bishop when that position is vacated. A diocese may also elect a Bishop Suffragan, who works with a Diocesan Bishop but does not automatically become the Diocesan when that position is vacated. An Assisting Bishop is the only kind of bishop who is selected from outside the diocese to assist a Diocesan Bishop and frequently is retired from another diocese.

Only bishops confirm members of the Episcopal Church or receive members from another church that has an historic episcopacy (e.g. the Roman Catholic Church). The bishops of a diocese visit each parish, worshipping community, and mission usually at least once a year. At these visits they confirm, receive and baptize new members, preside at the Eucharist, preach, meet with the vestries and rectors, visit with the people of the parish and inspect the parish books. The annual Episcopal visit is a special celebratory occasion in the life of a parish.

The Diocese is made up of all the Episcopal parish churches, missions, ministries, and worshipping communities in a given geographical area. Sometimes the geographical area is a state, the Diocese of Maine, the Diocese of Colorado for example. Or the diocese may be part of the state, the Diocese of Atlanta, the Diocese of West Texas. Even when the diocese bears a state name, it does not necessarily encompass the whole state: the Diocese of Alabama, the Diocese of Texas for example. A diocese may also be composed of parts of more than one state: the Diocese of the Central Gulf Coast. But in each of these areas the parishes, worshipping communities, and missions of the Episcopal Church are the members of the diocese, much like branch offices of a corporation. Dioceses are grouped into nine provinces of the Episcopal Church USA. These are cooperative geographical units but they do not have the governmental function of the individual dioceses or of our national church. It is helpful at this point to look at a map of dioceses and provinces in the Episcopal Church such as one found in the Episcopal Church Annual.

Every year a diocese meets in a convention to conduct the business of the church and to direct its mission. All the clergy of the diocese (priests, deacons and bishops) participate in this meeting. The laity of the congregations in the diocese participate by representation. Each individual parish sends representatives in proportion to its size. The diocese is a corporation under state law and the Diocesan Convention is its governing legislative body. In between annual Diocesan Conventions the Bishop is the diocese's chief executive officer and various bodies consisting of lay and ordained members of the Church provide the ongoing governing structure. This diocesan structure facilitates the work of the Church that takes place in the parishes, missions, and worshipping communities that make up the diocese.

If we think back to how congregational churches work, it is easy to see that a diocese in an Episcopal church does many of the things that a congregation does in a congregational structure. The diocese makes overall decisions about the mission and ministry of the church in a given area. The diocese, working with individuals, discerns calls to ordained ministry, fosters the growth and training of those individuals and orders them as deacons, priests and bishops. The diocese purchases or approves the purchase of land, approves mortgages by parishes, provides oversight and approval for the work of parishes in constructing new church buildings. The Diocese of Alabama holds legal title to land and church buildings in trust for its local parishes. Election of local parish vestry members is a matter of diocesan canon (church law). While local parishes call their new priests, they only do so in cooperation with the diocese, following a procedure put in place by the diocese and with the approval of the Diocesan Bishop.

At the diocesan level, the Episcopal Church looks much like governing organizations with which we are familiar. There are Departments, Committees, Task Forces, and Commissions. There is even a court called the Ecclesiastical Court to which the Diocesan Convention elects lay and ordained members who serve as judges. The Ecclesiastical Court uses procedures that are common in our civil courts and even uses an abbreviated version of the Federal Rules of Evidence! As you would expect when you see this kind of structure, each diocese has its own body of law that consists of a Diocesan Charter (or Constitution) and some Canons (church laws). (You can find the charter and canons for the Diocese of Alabama, as well as the actions for the last convention, including the Bishop's annual address, at the back of the annual diocesan journal.)

There are two very important interim bodies that help keep the Diocese functioning between conventions. The Diocesan Council does the work of convention between conventions. The Standing Committee serves to advise the Diocesan Bishop. The Standing Committee also must approve any purchases of land, mortgages or sales of land. And it must approve of all ordinations that take place in the diocese and consent to the ordination of a bishop in any other diocese of the Episcopal Church. In the absence of a bishop, the Standing Committee acts as the church authority for the diocese until a new bishop is installed.

All of these committees, task forces, commissions, and departments are peopled by laity and clergy throughout the diocese, many of whom have other primary employment. But the diocese also has a staff of lay people and clergy who carry out mission in various areas. For example, in Alabama diocesan staff members work in the areas of ministry development and clergy deployment, finance and administration, youth and Christian formation. There are chaplains for college campuses and staff for Hispanic ministry, for bookkeeping, for diaconate ministry, for the deaf, and there is a director and a whole staff for the diocesan camp, Wonderful, Wonderful Camp McDowell.

## **THE PARISH**

This diocesan structure exists to unify and promote the work of the church that takes place primarily in parishes, worshipping communities, and missions of the Episcopal Church that are the members of a given diocese. (Some dioceses have missions. Missions are usually start-up churches that require special diocesan support. In Alabama there are no missions. A congregation is a "worshipping community" until it becomes a parish.) The parish church is the place where Episcopalians come together to worship, work, and give to the support of the Kingdom of God.

The members of the parish are all baptized persons whose baptisms are recorded in the record books of that parish. As a practical matter these baptisms are recorded for one of three reasons. One is that a baptism has taken place in the parish. The second is that while the baptism did not take place at the parish, a person has been confirmed or received at the parish. When the confirmation occurs, the baptism is also recorded. Finally there are occasions when a person has been both baptized and confirmed elsewhere and is attending a new parish. In that event the person is transferred from one Episcopal parish to another and recording of the transfer becomes the occasion for recording a baptism in the record books. This can get a bit confusing. The Episcopal Church

invites all baptized persons to participate in communion in any of its parishes. However, attending church and even taking communion does not make a person a member of that particular parish. It is necessary to have the baptism recorded in the records of the parish to be considered a member.

Infants who are baptized become members of Episcopal parish churches. But, obviously they can not cast a vote in a parish election. If you will, then, we have voting members and non-voting members. In the Diocese of Alabama, to vote in a parish election or to serve on a vestry (the governing body for the parish) a member must be age 16 or over, must have been confirmed by or received by a bishop of the Episcopal Church, must have received communion at that parish at least three times in the previous year and must be known to the rector (or priest-in-charge) and the parish treasurer as someone who has worked, prayed, and given for the mission of the church in that place. These requirements, a combination of diocesan and national canons, are designed to assure that those who govern the parish are committed to the Episcopal Church and the ministry of that particular parish.

The selection of vestry members is important because the vestry works with the clergy to govern the local parish and pursue the mission and ministry of that parish. Vestries in the Diocese of Alabama have at least 3 but not more than 30 members. Vestry members serve for no more than three years and the terms are staggered so that about 1/3 of the vestry will change every year. When there is no clergy person at the church, the vestry is the local church authority. And when the church is between clergy, the vestry works with the bishop, or a member of the bishop's staff, to select new clergy for the parish. Often when parishes are in transition, an interim priest will be called to help keep the parish functioning while the vestry does the work of selecting a new rector. During this time, the vestry appoints a search committee who then presents a name to the vestry for consideration. The final selection of a new rector is done by the vestry.

From its membership the vestry selects a Senior Warden and a Junior Warden. The Senior Warden works most closely with the clergy and the Junior Warden represents the needs of the church members. In many parishes the Junior Warden is also in charge of "buildings and grounds," but this is by tradition and is not necessarily always a Junior Warden's task. A clerk of the vestry will record its actions and the parish will have a treasurer, though it is not a requirement for either the clerk or the treasurer to be a vestry member.

The priest called by the vestry to be in charge of a local parish and installed by the bishop for that purpose is called a "rector." The rector has a double role because although he or she has been selected by that parish to serve there and to represent the parish to the diocese, this priest is also the representative of the bishop in the local parish. When a person is being ordained priest or deacon, the first question asked has to do with willingness to abide by the doctrine, discipline, and worship of the Episcopal Church and willingness to be obedient to one's bishop. Because the bishop is the ecclesiastical authority in the diocese, parish priests may only take actions that their bishops permit. In troubled times, therefore, the role of the bishop serves to promote unity by providing clear boundaries. Episcopal clergy are not "free agents" who answer only to their own conscience or the demands of their local congregations.

In addition to the rector, there may be other clergy on staff in larger churches who serve under the immediate supervision of the rector. Although a rector may engage a committee for advice, the hiring and terms of employment for staff clergy is set by the rector, consistent with any guidelines set by the diocese, such as Alabama's minimum compensation guidelines. Unlike staff clergy, however, the rector serves indefinitely until such time as the rector and vestry decide together that it is appropriate to terminate the pastoral relationship. As a practical matter this usually happens when the rector is ready to retire, has become disabled, or has received a call to a new parish that the rector wishes to take. The unusual thing about this rector-vestry relationship is that there is no such thing as a rector "quitting" and no such thing as a vestry "firing" a rector. If there is serious difficulty between a rector and vestry, the diocese should be notified so that the bishop or the bishop's representative can work with the parish. When there are differences, parishes are expected to work toward reconciliation. If these efforts are unavailing, however, there is a procedure under the church canons for the bishop to decide whether and under what conditions the pastoral relationship between a vestry and its rector will continue or be terminated.

At an annual meeting of the parish, the vestry reports to the members about what it has done and its plans for the coming year. But between annual meetings the vestry makes decisions without seeking prior approval from the membership of the parish. Good vestries stay in close contact with the membership of the parish and communicate regularly by newsletters and other means. While parish vestries and clergy guide the work of the local church, the work is carried out by the parish members who are organized for these functions in a variety of ways. Small parishes may operate very informally and lay people may wear several different hats. In larger parishes there will be more committee structure and more concentration of effort. Lay members of the parish teach Sunday School, sing in the choir, engage in outreach for the parish, plan and prepare parish events, provide pastoral care to other members of the parish, engage in various liturgical ministries like reading the lessons, serving as an acolyte, assisting with administration of communion, and caring for the altar and all that must be prepared for the altar. The nature of this ministry and how it is organized varies from parish to parish. Typically individual members of a vestry assume responsibility for an area of the church's ministry and report to the vestry regarding that ministry. The rector and vestry identify, commission, and train lay leaders within the parish, who in turn may call upon others in the parish to assist. However, in Alabama, when a lay person serves as a Chalice Bearer or Lay Eucharistic Minister, a license is required from the bishop.

While the diocese has a set of canons (church laws) as does our church at the national level, at the parish level no more laws are needed. The canons of the church are sufficient to deal with most issues. Some parishes have enacted bylaws that may be needed to cover areas specific to a particular parish but these bylaws must be written in such a way as not to conflict with the canons of the diocese, and since diocesan canons can change, there are times when local church bylaws may create more problems than they solve.

The diocesan canons are a product of the diocese meeting in convention. Each parish is represented at convention by its rector and staff clergy and by a number of lay people who have been selected at the annual parish meeting (or by the vestry if the parish membership delegates that task). In turn, when the diocese meets in convention, the diocese selects representatives, both lay and clergy, who along with their bishops, will attend the General Convention of the Episcopal Church USA.

### **OUR CHURCH AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL**

Once every three years lay and clergy representatives and the bishops of the Episcopal Church USA meet in a General Convention. Like the Diocesan Convention at the diocesan level, this is the legislative body of the church at the national level. The first General Convention was held in 1789 and some of the same persons who participated in the founding of our country also helped to draft our church's constitution. Not surprisingly our church structure bears a strong resemblance to that of our country. Like the Congress of the United States, the General Convention meets in two houses: the House of Bishops (composed of all living bishops) and the House of Deputies (composed of lay and clergy representatives elected by their local dioceses). General Conventions have adopted our national canons and authorized the various editions of our *Book of Common Prayer*, our hymnals, *Book of Occasional Services* and *Lesser Feasts and Fasts*.

Once every 9 (formerly 12) years the General Convention selects a new "Presiding Bishop" who will "preside" at meetings of the House of Bishops and at meetings of the Executive Council, and who will be the Chief Pastor and the "Primate" of the Episcopal Church. The House of Bishops elects the Presiding Bishop and the House of Deputies confirms this election. The Presiding Bishop speaks God's word both to the church and to the world. He or she is responsible for initiating and developing strategies for carrying out the church's mission at a national level. The House of Deputies elects a President who presides in meetings of that house. The President of the House of Deputies can be a lay person or a clergy person, but not a bishop. The President of the House of Deputies and the Presiding Bishop appoint an Executive Officer.

The General Convention chooses members of an Executive Council that meets regularly and is responsible for program and policy between conventions. And as with the diocese, there is a national church staff and a structure at the national level to carry out the work of the church. (There are charts in the *Episcopal Church*

*Annual* that show this structure.) The headquarters of our church at the national level is located in New York City at a place many Episcopalians call “815” for the street number of the church’s offices, where the Presiding Bishop both works and lives.

Through its many commissions and committees, and with the work of the national Church staff, the church carries out its ministries in a variety of areas, for example: education (including theological education), peace, evangelism, justice, stewardship, global ministry relationships, support of congregations, ecumenical relations, development of our liturgy and music, discussion of theology. As with the diocese, the national church also has a court system, but these are trial and review courts for matters involving a bishop. The Standing Liturgical Commission considers changes to liturgy, including even the introduction of a new *Book of Common Prayer*. This commission consists of bishops appointed by the Presiding Bishop and lay and clergy members appointed by the President of the House of Deputies. Because Episcopalians pray what they believe and are united by their liturgy, two sessions of General Convention are required to approve any change to the *Book of Common Prayer* and *Hymnal*. Two sessions are also required to make any changes to the constitution.

The Episcopal Church USA is a province in the world wide Anglican Communion. We turn now to that organization to learn about our church at the international level.

### **OUR CHURCH AT THE INTERNATIONAL LEVEL**

The Anglican Communion is a world wide organization made up of over 70 million members in every continent. The “provinces” in the Communion are the Anglican churches in a given country. These provinces share two characteristics: (1) They are recognized by the Archbishop of Canterbury to be the church province in communion with the see of Canterbury and (2) they worship according to a *Book of Common Prayer*. Early on the Anglican communion developed in countries that were once part of the British Empire, but today the communion is more widespread.

Note that at the national level, provinces are groups of dioceses. At the international level, however, a province is a national church, for example: The Philippine Episcopal Church, The Church of the Province of South Africa, The Anglican Church of Australia. Although there may be churches in the United States that use the name Episcopal, the Episcopal Church USA is the only province of the Anglican Communion in the United States. Each province has a “primate,” sometimes called an Archbishop. Our primate is the Presiding Bishop. Nobel Peace Prize winner, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, is the retired primate of The Church of the Province of South Africa.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, who is primate of the Church of England and successor to Augustine of Canterbury, is the recognized spiritual head of the Communion. He is considered “first among equals.” The Church of England is still an “established” church. The Archbishop is chosen by the ruling monarch of England and the Prime Minister from a very short list compiled through an elaborate nominating process in the Church of England. Archbishops of Canterbury are chosen from the most respected of church leaders.

Anglicans adhere to ordered worship using some form of a common prayer book, one of which is our own *Book of Common Prayer, 1979*. Prayer books include for example: South Africa’s *An Anglican Prayer Book 1989*, *The New Zealand Prayer Book*, the official English *Book of Common Prayer, 1662* and the English *Alternative Service Book 1980*. Each province decides through its own processes which prayer books are authorized for general use in the province. The *Book of Common Prayer, 1979* is the only prayer book authorized for regular use at the primary service on Sunday mornings in the ECUSA. Use of other prayer books, for example the new alternative books that General Convention has authorized or the *Book of Common Prayer, 1928* requires permission from the bishop of the diocese where the books will be used.

With the exception of wartime, every ten years since 1867, the Archbishop of Canterbury has invited the Bishops of the Anglican Communion to meet together in England. The last of these gatherings occurred in



1998. Seventy-six bishops attended the first Lambeth Conference. Now there are about ten times that many bishops. Even though not all provinces ordain women to Holy Orders, the first women bishops were received at Lambeth 1998.

The Lambeth Conference was started to promote understanding among bishops from around the world and to cement communion. While the bishops meeting together do not constitute a decision making body and lack binding legal authority, they have considerable persuasive power with one another because of the strong desire to remain in community and the desire for unity. These bishops seek to preserve this unity that Archbishop Tutu referred to as “totally untidy, but very, very lovable” by respecting each other, being open to the experience of the other, worshipping and studying the scriptures together. When the Lambeth Conference passes resolutions, these resolutions may be adopted by the governing authority in the provinces, or they may not.

Unlike our church at the diocesan level and the national level, the Anglican Communion is not a governing body. It is instead a group of provincial churches in communion with each other. But the member provinces have no governing authority in each others’ jurisdictions, either individually or collectively.

There is no centralized authority in the Anglican Communion and the Archbishop of Canterbury is no pope. Between Lambeth Conferences, a body composed of both lay and clergy members, the Anglican Consultative Council, meets to carry on the work of the communion. Like our church at the diocesan and national levels, there is a staff that does the ongoing work of the communion at the Anglican Communion Office. Primates of the provinces also come together in the time between Lambeth Conferences. From time to time the Archbishop of Canterbury appoints a special commission to deal with issues before the whole communion. One such commission was originally established to study the relationship among the provinces and recommend ways to strengthen that relationship as women bishops emerged in some provinces, when most of the member provinces do not ordain women. Another commission released what is known as the Windsor Report to addresses differences among the provinces that had arisen around issues of human sexuality and ordination, specifically the blessing of same gender unions and the ordination of a bishop who is in a committed same gender relationship.

The Windsor report identifies four “instruments of unity” for the communion. They are the Anglican Consultative Council, the Lambeth Conference, the Primates Meeting, and the Anglican Communion Office. When His Grace Robert Runcie, a former Archbishop of Canterbury, addressed the Lambeth Conference of 1988, he noted some characteristics of Anglican unity: that Anglican unity “is opposed to centralism”; that Anglicans “speak of dispersed authority” and “have no intention of developing an alternative papacy”; and that “Anglican unity itself is most characteristically expressed in terms of worship.” Archbishop Runcie quoted T. S. Elliot who had spoken to the 1948 Lambeth Conference and said, “The Anglican Church washes its dirty linen in public; but at least it gets washed.” Summarizing his thoughts, Archbishop Runcie asked, “Do we actually need a world-wide communion?” and answered: “I believe we do, because Anglicans believe in the one holy catholic and apostolic Church of the creed. I believe we do, because we live in one world created and redeemed by God. I believe we do, because it is only by being in communion *together* that diversity and difference have value. Without relationship difference divides.” (Quotes are from Robert Runcie, The Unity We Seek, pages 3-10.)

## CHRISTIAN LIFE AND FAITH: PART IV THE STRUCTURE AND POLITY OF THE CHURCH

### II. Engagement

1. **Role Play:** You are a vestry of a local parish. We will call it St. Swithens by the Swamp because that is the name used in seminary tests! St. Swithens has had a serious difficulty with its priest and has called the bishop's office for help. The bishop comes to visit and meets with the vestry. After listening respectfully as each vestry member speaks about the problem, the bishop says, "Here is what we will do to begin reconciling your relationship with your parish priest . . ." No sooner has the bishop begun speaking than one confused member of the vestry speaks up, respectfully but with genuine perplexity. He wonders, "Who are you to come here to our parish and tell us what to do about our problem with our priest?" Try role playing this situation. What answer might the bishop give? How might the other vestry members respond? With what assumptions might the questioning vestry member have come to this meeting?

2. Look up some words that confuse you in Armentrout and Slocum's An Episcopal Dictionary of the Church: A User-Friendly Reference for Episcopalians

3. What steps would you think might be necessary for a local parish to buy, sell or mortgage land?

4. Spend some time browsing though The Episcopal Church Annual. For example, notice the map of dioceses and provinces; look at the organizational charts; see some of the agencies, publications and organizations of the church; look up some information about a diocese; find out the names of bishops who have died; locate the Episcopal Religious Order for women nearest you, and then the one for men.



**CHRISTIAN LIFE AND FAITH: PART IV**  
**THE STRUCTURE AND POLITY OF THE CHURCH**  
**(a handout)**

**III. Summary of the Structure and Polity of the Church**

1. The word polity refers to the structure of a church and how it is organized.
2. Examples of different kinds of polity are congregational, presbyterian, episcopal.
3. The polity of the Episcopal Church USA is Anglican, a unique blend of representative government and the unity achieved through our common worship and the role of the historic episcopacy.
4. The major unit of organization in the Episcopal Church is the diocese. It is a geographical unit under the leadership of a bishop.
5. Some dioceses have more than one bishop. The Diocesan Bishop is the chief priest, pastor, ecclesiastical authority and executive officer.
6. Only bishops confirm members of the Episcopal Church (or receive members from another church that has an historic episcopacy).
7. The Diocese is made up of all the Episcopal parish churches, mission, ministries and worshipping communities in a given geographical area. A province is a group of dioceses. A map of the Episcopal Church, showing its dioceses and its nine provinces can be found in the most recent Episcopal Church Annual.
8. The annual Diocesan Convention is the governing legislative body for the diocese. There bishops, priests, deacons and lay people meet together to plan the work of the diocese.
9. Between Diocesan Conventions, the work of the diocese goes on in departments, committees, task forces and commissions and with the help of the diocesan staff.
10. Two important interim bodies are the Diocesan Council, which carries out the work of convention, and the Standing Committee, which advises the bishop and acts as ecclesiastical authority in the absence of a bishop.
11. The diocese has other ministries including college and other chaplaincies, Hispanic ministry, ministry to the deaf, and the diocesan camp.
12. The work of the diocesan structure unifies and promotes the work of the church that takes place primarily in parishes.
13. Members of parishes are all baptized persons whose baptisms are included in the record books of the church. This includes infants.
14. Adult (over 16) confirmed members in good standing, who are known to the rector and treasurer to regularly support the mission and ministry of a parish vote in parish elections and serve on vestries.

15. Vestries work with the rector to govern a local parish and pursue the mission and ministry of that parish. In the Diocese of Alabama vestries are composed of 3 to 30 members. When there is no clergy person at a parish church, the vestry serves as the local church authority.
16. Vestries select a Senior Warden and a Junior Warden, a clerk and a treasurer.
17. Vestries report to the members of the church on their work and plans for the future at least once a year at a meeting of the parish.
18. When the parish is between rectors, the vestry works with the diocese and calls a new priest to be rector.
19. The priest called by the vestry to be in charge of a local parish and installed by the bishop for that purpose is called a “rector.” In addition to the rector there may be other priests and deacons on staff at a parish.
20. Staff clergy may serve according to terms and conditions set by the rector. The rector and vestry enter a pastoral relationship on behalf of the parish that may not be terminated except by mutual agreement, or at the instruction of the bishop.
21. Parish vestries and clergy guide the work of the local church and parish members are organized in different size churches in different ways to accomplish the work of the church.
22. The diocese has a set of church laws (canons) and a charter or constitution under which the diocese and its parishes function. Our church also has a constitution and canons at the national level. Although some parishes have bylaws, it is not necessary for parishes to have another set of laws.
23. The diocese selects clergy and lay people to send with its bishops to the General Convention of the Episcopal Church USA.
24. The General Convention meets every 3 years and conducts the business of the church at the national level.
25. There are two houses at General Convention, the House of Deputies and the House of Bishops. The House of Deputies is presided over by a President and the House of Bishops by the Presiding Bishop.
26. The Presiding Bishop also presides over the Executive Council, which meets during the time between General Conventions. The Presiding Bishop is the Chief Pastor and the Primate of the Episcopal Church.
27. Our church at the national level does its work through committees and commissions and a national church staff in New York City.
28. The Standing Liturgical Commission is an example of a commission of the ECUSA. Among other things, this commission considers changes to the *Book of Common Prayer*. As with the church’s constitution, it takes two meetings of General Convention to make changes to the *Book of Common Prayer*.
29. The Episcopal Church USA is a province in the world wide Anglican Communion, which has over 70 million members.

30. Provinces of the Anglican Communion are recognized by the Archbishop of Canterbury as in communion with the see of Canterbury and use a Book of Common Prayer for worship.
31. The Episcopal Church USA is the only province of the Anglican Communion in the United States.
32. The Archbishop of Canterbury is the spiritual leader of the Anglican Communion but he is not a pope.
33. Every 10 years the Archbishop of Canterbury invites bishops throughout the Anglican Communion to his home at Lambeth Palace for a conference.
34. This conference seeks to promote understanding and unity in the communion.
35. Sometimes the conference passes resolutions but these are not binding upon the provinces.
36. Between Lambeth Conferences the “primates” (chief pastors in a province like our Presiding Bishop) meet together; the Anglican Consultative Council carries on the work of the communion, and the staff at the Anglican Communion Office work with the Archbishop of Canterbury to continue the work of the communion.
37. From time to time the Archbishop of Canterbury appoints a commission to address particular areas of concern. One such commission is the Lambeth Commission. Most recently the Lambeth Commission released a report called the Windsor Report.
38. Anglicans value staying together in relationship even when they disagree, and are united primarily by worship.