

How does the Church work? (Outline) 4/12/2015

Biblical origins (see Acts 6, 14, 15, 1 Timothy 3 & 4, 1 Peter 5, and Titus 1)

- Episcopos-Bishop, overseer
- Presbyterios-priest, presbyter, elder
- Diaconos- deacon [server]

Early church concepts important to Anglicans:

- Apostolic succession of bishops, and decision making in councils.

Anglican Communion: an affiliation of related national churches comprised of dioceses.

Four “Instruments of Unity” help to influence decisions world-wide and maintain unity:

- Archbishop of Canterbury
- Lambeth conference of Bishops
- Primates Meeting (Primates are chief bishops of a national church)
- Anglican Consultative Council

Episcopal Church: dioceses linked by General Convention & national Constitution and Canons

General Convention (meets every three years; Executive Council in between)

House of Bishops (with Presiding Bishop)

House of Deputies: Clergy and Lay orders of representation

Diocese: region overseen by a Bishop; has its own Canons and convention (annual)

Bishop & Standing Committee: spiritual leadership and oversight of clergy & mission

Standing Committee is Bishop’s council of advice,

elected by Diocesan Council (three priests, three lay)

acts as the Ecclesiastical Authority during a bishop’s vacancy

Executive Board (in some dioceses “Diocesan Council”) (Clergy & Laity):

oversight of “temporal affairs:” program budget & property

Representative elected by each convocation (local district): one clergy, one lay

Plus four appointed by the bishop (=24 total).

Chaired by the Bishop, responds to budget & resolutions of Convention

Diocesan Council (or “convention” in many dioceses):

All Clergy, and three deputies from each parish

Sets Program Budget & elects Standing Committee, other offices,

Maintains canons; Elects new bishop & General Convention deputies

Parish: led by Rector & Vestry

Rector:

Spiritual life of parish

Liturgy, music, use of property

Oversight of staff, presides at meetings; tenured

Vestry:

“Temporal affairs,” Raising & spending money, Care of property

BUT!: leadership works best with mutual ministry, leadership, expectations & accountability and raising & developing leadership in the parish.

How does the Church work?

Origins:

Any group of people, however small, develops norms of how they work together to pursue their mission. In large bodies, especially, this often means well developed norms or rules about governance and decision making. Churches approach this task both practically and theologically. The Episcopal church inherits from our history both clerical and democratic forms of governance. The early church probably had various roles for leadership—in some places evangelists were key leaders, in other places teachers. In most cities in the Roman Empire, there was a leader who had oversight of the church in that city. The Greek word for “overseer” used in the Bible is “episcopos,” the word for “bishop.” This is where we get our name—“episcopal” signifies a church with bishops. Elders in the church were important to its ministry, as were servants to the bishops, who followed in the tradition of the first servants, found in Acts of the Apostles, chapter 6. The word for “server” in Greek is “diaconos,” from which we get the word “Deacon.” “Elder” in Greek is “presbyteros,” from which we get the words “presbyter” and “priest.” Some churches in the reformed tradition use the words “presbyter” or “elder,” thereby avoiding the more catholic connotations of “priest.” See also Acts 14 & 15, 1 Timothy 3 (office of a bishop), 4:14 (laying on of hands to ordain elders), 1 Peter 5, and Titus 1:7 (qualifications for a bishop).

Early on, the church developed these offices into a system of three orders of ministry: bishops, priests and deacons, still in use in Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, the Anglican Communion, and to some extent with Lutherans and Methodists. The practice of bishops ordaining other bishops with the laying on of hands came to signify the proper vesting of Episcopal authority. This practice is known as “apostolic succession” and is seen as a way to pass along the faith entrusted to the church by the apostles and the Lord himself. Thus “apostolic succession” is a concept of some importance to Roman Catholics, Anglicans and Eastern Orthodox churches.

Bishops then ordain deacons as personal emissaries for various purposes (though they were originally set apart to serve the poor and needy). Priests were given authority to celebrate the sacraments under the authority of the bishop. The region of oversight of the bishop eventually followed the Roman political boundaries called the “diocese.” Councils of bishops met to deal with problems confronting the whole church, especially heresy, doctrine and policy, generating such important statements as the Nicene Creed (see also p.864 in the Book of Common Prayer). The bishop of Rome, especially after the fall of the Roman Empire in the West, gained in stature and was a valuable source of reform and unity. This authority, however, eventually became codified in the West until the Pope had absolute authority in the church.

In the break from Rome, the Church of England removed the requirement for celibacy from their clergy (though monastic orders eventually re-started), and returned to a more conciliar framework of decision making, in contrast to the centralized authority of the papacy. Thus, the Archbishop of Canterbury is simply a diocesan bishop, yet he is “first among equals” as a leader, but with less authority outside his archdiocese (some parts of the Anglican Communion use “archdiocese” and “archbishop”). We retained the orders of ministry (though the diaconate, in practice, had been for centuries only an intermediate step to priesthood, until recently), and the apostolic succession of bishops.

The Anglican Communion

The “Anglican Communion” is a term that came about after British colonies gained independence, leaving behind churches independent from Britain, but retaining the heritage of the church in England. These churches are “in communion” with the Archbishop of Canterbury. These include the Anglican Church in Canada, the Episcopal Church, and numerous Anglican churches in Africa, South America Australia and Asia. Gradually, the “bonds of affection” that kept kinship among these churches grew into loose affiliations for the purpose of our common mission. In the late 1800s, bishops met at a conference in Chicago, and passed resolutions called the “Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilaterals” which outlined an approach to seeking unity among denominations. These resolutions (found on page 876 in the BCP) asserted four things as essential to the church: the Bible, the Nicene Creed, the two sacraments and the historic episcopate (bishops). The second resolution further emphasized the Bible and the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds.

As the churches in the “Anglican Communion” continued to work together, there came to be four institutions that helped to bring these churches together, recently called “Instruments of Unity:”

- The Archbishop of Canterbury
- The Lambeth Conference of Bishops (from around the world, called by the Archbishop every 10 years)
- The Primates Meeting (meeting of the chief bishop of each national or regional church)
- The Anglican Consultative Council (bishops and laity that work on theological issues facing the whole communion).

Each national or regional church is a self-governing system of dioceses, but we see ourselves as interdependent, using these instruments of unity as significant influences in our decisions at home. This tension has become an issue in recent years as some churches have made decisions strongly opposed by other member churches (and in the case of moves toward normalizing gay sex in the US & Canada, decisions that were opposed by all four instruments of unity).

The Episcopal Church

The Episcopal Church, then, is made up of dioceses, linked together by a Constitution and Canons (church laws) and a legislative body called General Convention. The governance of the Episcopal Church arose as several methods of local governance in the colonies were brought together after the American Revolution. William White, Bishop of Pennsylvania, brought bishops and representatives of the colonial dioceses together for a General Convention, which later was organized as a central structure for linking the dioceses together. William White was also the Chaplain to the Constitutional Congress, so, not surprisingly, the structure of the General Convention bears striking similarities to Congress. There are two houses: the House of Bishops and the House of Deputies. The House of Deputies, in turn, is made up of clergy and lay representatives from each diocese (four each). All legislation must pass in both houses, and in both the clergy and lay order in the house of deputies. To vote “yes” on any measure, three of the four deputies must vote yes—a divided vote is a “no” vote. This system that includes non-bishops and laity is in some contrast to other Anglican churches whose authority rests predominantly with bishops only. General Convention meets every three years.

The Diocese:

Each Diocese is led by a bishop. Bishops ordain clergy and regulate the spiritual life and direction of the diocese. In the American system, parishes usually choose their clergy (though in some cases, the bishop has more direct authority, such as in parishes receiving financial aid). Thus Bishops do not usually place clergy, though they might influence the process. The parishes in the diocese are linked together by their bishop and by the Diocesan Convention, again made up of all the clergy in the diocese and lay representatives from each parish. These conventions meet each year and maintain their own Constitution and Canons (that operate in concert with the National Canons). The central authority in the diocese is in the bishop, with a Standing committee of clergy and laity as a council of advice, and an Executive Council (or Diocesan Council) that oversees the financial and programmatic affairs charged to it by Convention.

The Parish:

The parish makes decisions through the Rector (chief priest) and the Vestry (board of lay leaders). The Rector is elected by the vestry, but serves in a tenured position. The vestry cannot technically “fire” a rector (though they can apply substantial pressure). A rector, duly elected and approved by the bishop, can only be removed with cause and by due process. The rector is charged with oversight of the spiritual affairs of the parish. In particular, the rector has sole authority over liturgy and music and the use of property & use of the buildings. The rector has day to day oversight of all staff, and hiring & firing authority (but the vestry allocates money for compensation).

The vestry is elected by a meeting of the members of the parish, according to the parish by-laws. Parishes typically elect three or four members each year to serve for three years, thus rotating a third of the vestry each year. This election (and sometimes amending the by-laws) is the sole authority of the parish at-large. All other temporal authority is vested in the vestry. The vestry is charged with raising and spending money (including staff compensation), and the care of the property.

HOWEVER! Many Diocesan Canons make explicit the wisdom that the rector and vestry must work together to pursue the mission of the church. The rector and vestry share spiritual leadership of the parish while recognizing their specific roles, and work best when they establish mutual expectations & accountability, and raise and develop leadership in the parish at large. This wider leadership can lead in implementing the mission, vision & goals set by the rector and vestry.

The way we best work together is with healthy relationships, clear communication, mutual trust and accountability, and above all, our relationships in Christ that bind us together. Our obligation to each other is a theological imperative, even when (and perhaps especially when) we disagree. This unity in Christ will help us to build up the Church (see Ephesians 4), and carry out our mission to make disciples of our Lord.