

A Primer on the government of The Episcopal Church and its underlying theology

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The following is an introduction to how and why The Episcopal Church came to be, beginning in the United States of America, and how it seeks to continue in “the faith once delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). Rooted in the original expansion of the Christian faith, the Church developed a distinctive character in England, and further adapted that way of being Church for a new context in America after the Revolution. The Episcopal Church has long since grown beyond the borders of the United States, with dioceses in Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador (Central and Litoral), Haiti, Honduras, Micronesia, Puerto Rico, Taiwan, Venezuela and Curacao, and the Virgin Islands, along with a Convocation of churches in six countries in Europe. In all these places, Episcopalians have adapted for their local contexts the special heritage and mission passed down through the centuries in this particular part of the Body of Christ.

“Ecclesiology,” the study of the Church in the light of the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ, is the Church’s thinking and speaking about itself. It involves reflection upon several sources: New Testament images of the Church (of which there are several dozens); the history of the Church in general and that of particular branches within it; various creeds and confessional formulations; the structure of authority; the witness of saints; and the thoughts of theologians. Our understanding of the Church’s identity and purpose invariably intersects with and influences to a large extent how we speak about God, Christ, the Spirit, and ourselves in God’s work of redemption.

The study of the Church begins with history and governance: how it came to be and how it makes decisions. To understand how and why The Episcopal Church functions the way it does today, we must start with its origins in the Church of England. Many people continue to believe quite erroneously that King Henry VIII started his own church in order to get a divorce. The reality, however, is far richer and more complex.

In the Beginning...

Our Episcopal roots extend back a long way. Indeed, one could say that the Episcopal ethos can be found at the very beginning of Christianity, in a city called Antioch. There, an “encouraging” newcomer-turned-church leader named Barnabas and his bold apprentice, Saul of Tarsus, helped form something connected to, but distinct from, the church in Jerusalem. In the latter, Peter and the other apostles preached and healed, but did so always in the shadow of the Jewish temple. Their group, “the Way,” as it was known, was an inspiring, Spirit-filled community, but it was still a Jewish sect and its leaders still went daily to the temple where sacrifices were made.

Antioch was something else entirely, where Greeks as well as Jews heard the Good News proclaimed and formed a faith community entirely separate from temple and sacrifices, an intentionally diverse yet unified community. It was in Antioch, not in Jerusalem, that the disciples were first called Christians (Acts 11). And it was from Antioch that Barnabas and

Saul (now Paul), a new breed of apostolic missionaries, were sent forth to plant communities of faith, love, and hope wherever they went. Again, these churches would be marked by diversity as well as unity: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, but all are one in Christ.” (Gal. 3:28) It was rarely an easy task, for diversity is a nice word to say but a hard reality to appreciate. In places like Corinth, for example, the wealthier church members did not want to wait for those field workers and others on the lower socio-economic level before having their communal meal. The battle over recognizing the uncircumcised may now seem quaint, but then was quite grim.

Still, often despite its own infighting, the movement flourished. And what began there in one small part of the Mediterranean region soon spread throughout the Roman Empire, eventually reaching even the British Isles. Legend has it that no less a figure than Joseph of Arimathea, the follower of Jesus who donated his own tomb for the Crucified One’s burial, traveled to those Isles and planted the gospel, where it took root and grew. However they came, certainly by the year 325 there were Christians in Britain, as representatives from there attended the Council of Nicaea that year, from which emerged the Nicene Creed that is still proclaimed week after week in our churches.

Over two hundred and fifty years later, those same isles witnessed the arrival of a somewhat reluctant missionary-monk from Rome named Augustine, sent by Pope Gregory I (“the Great”). This Benedictine monk was to bring the faith to the land of the Angles, or “angels” as Gregory called them. Augustine set up his base in the southeastern region known as Kent, where Æthelbert was king, for there the faith was already in existence, his queen, Berthe, herself being a believer. But the faith he encountered there looked and felt different than that which was familiar to Augustine. It was a Celtic form of Christianity, not Roman. Augustine wrote to Gregory, sharing his concerns, asking how he might show those Celtic Christians the error of their ways and help them to be more Roman. Gregory’s reply evidences great wisdom as well as patience, urging Augustine to take the best of what he found, along with the best of what he brought with him, and worry less about the rest. Eventually, Roman ways would indeed win out, as prescribed at a synod or meeting in 664 in a northeastern town called Whitby, but Celtic ways and Celtic leaders would continue to influence Christianity in the Isles even as the Benedictine tradition that Augustine brought with him was also a strong formational factor of the character of the English Church. It is markedly hierarchical. Broadly participatory, yes, but ultimately, the Abbot makes the decisions. The Benedictine ethos certainly was a factor in how authority, discipline, and order were conceived and exercised in the Church of England.

Augustine thus became the first Archbishop of Canterbury. Bishop Justin Welby’s enthronement on March 21, 2013, marks him the 105th Archbishop. Since the re-founding of the Christian Church in England, there has always been an Archbishop of Canterbury.

This fact, among other things, shows that the Church of England today is the direct heir of the Church in Britain, as it has existed more or less for 1900 years. What happened in the sixteenth century was not the founding of something new. In fact, Henry VIII’s assertion of his authority over his church stands in a long history of contention of European monarchs for control of the Church in their realms. (The idea that the Pope has universal ordinary jurisdiction over the Catholic Church in all the world is an idea that the Roman Catholic Church itself did not officially make its own until 1870.) The matter for Henry was not religious, theological, or ecclesiastical. It was purely a matter of governance and political power. Henry never rejected his designation as “Defender of the Faith” given him by Pope Leo X in 1521, and it remains to this day one of the titles of the Crown. Nor did Henry (or

any of his successors) repudiate the hierarchy of the Church or its liturgical practices including the use of the Creeds and ordaining bishops in the historical succession.

After his death, the first Book of Common Prayer was published in 1549, and a second Book in 1552, while Henry's son Edward was king, reflecting the growing importance of doctrinal concerns to the Church. After Edward's early death, Henry's daughter Mary restored England to the Roman Catholic Church. Meanwhile, the Protestant Reformation and its wars were raging across the Continent, and this could not fail but influence events in England. When Henry's last child to take the throne, Elizabeth, became queen in 1558, conflict raged between returning Protestants exiled under Mary and Roman Catholics. After Pope Pius V excommunicated her in 1570, having failed to have her dislodged from the throne by force, Elizabeth laid the foundation of the modern Church of England, with the Archbishop of Canterbury as spiritual head and the Crown as the governor of the church's temporal existence. This "Elizabethan Settlement" no longer has a monarch by divine right in charge, but has endured to this day.

It should, however, be noted that the conflicts on the European continent and that in England were different, though clearly not unrelated. Oliver Cromwell and the Commonwealth mark the zenith of the Presbyterian experiment in the Church of England as well as in the realm. The experiment ultimately failed after much turmoil and bloodshed. The ecclesial and civil decision was for the Church of England to be a reformed *catholic* church as manifested in, and defined by, its liturgical and sacramental life. Its historical episcopal polity was restored. This restoration constitutes nothing other than a rejection of the Presbyterian model of polity and a permanent embracing of the catholic, hierarchical polity within the Church of England and, by extension, for the worldwide Anglican Communion, including The Episcopal Church. "Anglicanism" (a nineteenth-century word) includes these basic concepts, which are markers of this distinctive way of being Christian, alongside Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Reformed streams of Christianity.

An Episcopal priest named William Reed Huntington proposed in an 1870 essay a potential path toward reuniting churches especially divided after the American Civil War. He set forth four points that he called a "quadrilateral." These would form the basis on which the Episcopal Church could consider reuniting with other Christian bodies. In 1886, the House of Bishops meeting in Chicago approved Huntington's Quadrilateral, and two years later the Lambeth Conference endorsed it with minor changes. Remarkably, the "Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral" has become the touchstone of Anglican identity around the world, summing up as it does the essential features of an Anglican Church:

- (a) The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as "containing all things necessary to salvation," and as being the rule and ultimate standard of faith.
- (b) The Apostles' Creed, as the Baptismal Symbol; and the Nicene Creed, as the sufficient statement of the Christian faith.
- (c) The two Sacraments ordained by Christ Himself — Baptism and the Supper of the Lord — ministered with unfailing use of Christ's words of Institution, and of the elements ordained by Him.
- (d) The Historic Episcopate, locally adapted in the methods of its administration to the varying needs of the nations and peoples called of God into the Unity of His Church.

As the first extension of the Church of England beyond the British Isles, the development of The Episcopal Church clearly shows the importance of each of these points to 18-century Americans.

English Colonies become the United States of America

Toward the end of Elizabeth's reign, English colonies in the Americas began to grow after several tentative starts. As people who rejected her "settlement", as it is known, began to cross the Atlantic in order to found what they hoped would be different churches, the Church of England colonists also started their own congregations. These congregations were deemed to be under the episcopal authority of the Bishop of London. With the help of missionary organizations founded at the beginning of the eighteenth century, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG) and the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge (SPCK), the faithful in America significantly increased in numbers. Other colonists named them "Protestant Episcopalians" — Protestant because they did not recognize the authority of the Pope, Episcopalian because they were under the episcopal authority of a bishop.¹

In some of the colonies, congregations sent representatives to occasional "conventions" in order to discuss matters of common concern. They were not legislative (today we might use the term "networking" to refer to these gatherings). London occasionally sent "commissaries" to oversee the life of the congregations in the colonies, or sometimes appointed the colonial governors to act as them, although these rarely intervened directly. Colonists could not be confirmed unless they traveled to England, for that Church never named a bishop of the American colonies. The SPG sent clergy to many colonies, and colonial churches recruited other clergy in England or found local men to send to England for ordination. By the time of the American Revolution, about half of the clergy were either born in the colonies or recruited for ordination there. Throughout most of the colonial period, the Bishop of London had nominal oversight of the colonial churches, but distance and the role colonial governments played in ordering church life made that oversight very different from that exercised by a Bishop in an English diocese.

As they were left to their own devices in terms of their local life, the American congregations enjoyed some leeway in ordering their own local affairs, including calling of clergy, erection of buildings, and so forth. Despite the often *ad hoc* development of these congregations over time and in different parts of the country, there was never any question that they all belonged to one Church, indeed, one diocese, under the jurisdiction and authority of the Church of England.

In 1781, the American Revolution was successful in throwing off the rule of the English Crown with the shocking defeats of the British Army and Navy at Yorktown and Chesapeake Bay. The war ended officially in 1783 with the Treaty of Paris. For many Episcopalians, this was a disaster. Many of the clergy left for Canada or England, along with some laity, and those left behind were no longer part of the established Church. Many church buildings, formerly property of the Crown,² lay in ruins. The situation was somewhat different in Virginia, where many of its Church of England clergy had taken the American side. Death and dislocation, however, further reduced the ranks of the clergy. Some left the ministry for

¹ The first use of the term seems to be in a polemic by M. de la Milletiere in 1651, to which Bishop John Bramhall replied. See *The Works of the Most Reverend Father in God, John Bramhall, D.D.*, vol.1 (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1842), p. cxxviii (accessed July 26, 2013 at <http://archive.org/stream/bramhallsworks01bramuoft#page/n169/mode/2up>)

² Even today, the properties of the Church of England belong in the final analysis to the Crown, that is to say, not just the monarch but also Parliament.

secular employment, and for nine years Americans had no way to ordain new clergy. The loss of support from the SPG left Episcopal congregations struggling to find new sources of funding.

On the other hand, those remaining were also proud to be now “Americans.” A new nation had been born from the struggle. No longer were the laity and clergy part of an official church of the land. Now they needed to adapt the church structure and polity to fit an ethnically and religiously diverse nation that had embraced representative government.

Keeping the Faith... and Order

Just as the Church of England became “Anglican” principally by political developments as well as doctrinal struggles, so too The Episcopal Church developed after a political revolution. As new leaders emerged to address the situation, they realized immediately the need to adapt the Church they had inherited to the new realities. In meetings between 1782 and 1785, when the first Convention met, it became clear that there was agreement on some basic points.

The first was that the Episcopalians wanted as much continuity as possible with the Church of England. There were to be no innovations in doctrine, and there needed to be uniformity across the board in discipline and worship as well. They wanted and chose episcopal government, by bishops ordained in the historic succession (just as there have been 105 Archbishops of Canterbury). In 1782, William White, who later became the first Presiding Bishop, had even suggested that the priests ordain other priests if they could not get their own bishop consecrated by three bishops in the succession (he withdrew that suggestion three years later). The congregations were used to settling their own local affairs, voting at the congregational level, and now the former American colonies were now creating a secular government based on suffrage. Therefore the Church’s government also had to rest upon the votes of clergy and laity.

In other words, the first Episcopalians translated Queen Elizabeth’s settlement, as they had come to know it, into democratic, parliamentary terms: the clergy still in charge of spiritual matters, the laity still in charge of temporal matters, and always working together. The intention of catholic polity remained the same. The adaptation concerned how these structures and their work were to be done in a democratic context. Final authority in matters concerning all was vested in General Convention and, in due course, Executive Council between Conventions, to a lesser extent. The democratic process was woven into a system of shared leadership and responsibility that included the whole Church, lay and ordained.

In 1783, the clergy of Connecticut elected and sent Samuel Seabury to be consecrated in England. Since English law required, then as now, that bishops swear allegiance to the Crown at their consecration, Seabury had to go to Scotland, to a smaller Church independent of England, the Scottish Episcopal Church. Their bishops agreed to ordain Seabury to the episcopate, and did so on November 14, 1784.

Also in 1784, three congregations in Pennsylvania met and asked all the churches in that state to meet together. When this statewide group met, it called upon all Episcopalians to come together to form an ecclesiastical government. Shortly thereafter, a second meeting was held at Christ Church, New Brunswick, New Jersey, with wider representation. Finally, a meeting in New York from 8 states came together in October 1784 and decided to attempt to call a “General Convention.” This meeting asked that all Episcopalians organize in order to

send deputies to this first Convention, which would hopefully serve them as the ancient councils of the Church had done in the first centuries.

That 1785 Convention marked the first time Episcopalians had met nationally to decide their own future apart from the Church of England, its canon law, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, and the Bishop of London. The colonial conventions had never had any power to make decisions (though some colonial governments did). The Convention decided to write a constitution and canon laws, create a Book of Common Prayer, and negotiate with England for the consecration of bishops for the American church. The Convention also made official the name of the “Protestant Episcopal Church,” thereby validating what had already developed, formally and informally, in the former colonies.

By 1789 all these were in place. In 1786 a proposed Book of Common Prayer that would succeed the 1662 English Book in use then, was completed and began to be circulated. Negotiations between the General Convention and the Church of England bishops cleared several objections and concerns raised by the English bishops. In the same year, Parliament allowed for overseas bishops to be consecrated without the oath of allegiance. Finally, on February 14, 1787, William White and another Episcopal priest, Samuel Provoost, were consecrated bishops by the archbishops of Canterbury and York, and two other bishops. (A third, David Griffith, was prevented from making the journey.)

That third Convention³ met and adopted the first Constitution and Canons (unlike the United States Constitution, which was ratified by the individual states). It called for each official decision to be made by agreement of a House of Deputies (clergy and lay delegates from each state) and a House of Bishops. From the beginning, the first Constitution made it clear in its second Article that

... if ... no deputies either lay or clerical, should attend at any General Convention, the Church in such state shall nevertheless be bound by the acts of such Convention.⁴

Article VII (now Article VIII) required all members of the clergy to “conform” to the “doctrines and worship” of the Church — which are decided by the General Convention. The 1789 Book of Common Prayer became the standard for worship for all parishes throughout the Church. There is no record of any congregation in the United States that did not accede unconditionally and irrevocably to the authority of the General Convention of the Episcopal Church. They had always been part of one Church, and never had the desire to belong to another. What changes they made were those made necessary by the American Revolution.⁵

³ September, 1785 and June 1786 (reconvened October 1786), both in Philadelphia, were the two previous.

⁴ *Journal of a Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the States of New-York, New-Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, and South Carolina, Held in Christ-Church in the City of Philadelphia, From July 28th to August 8th, 1789*, Philadelphia: 1789, pp. 23, 25. Already, the 1785 meeting had passed Article XI which stated, “This general Ecclesiastical Constitution, when ratified by the Church in the different states, shall be considered as fundamental; and shall be unalterable by the Convention of the Church in any state.” See *Journals of the General Conventions, 1785 to 1814*; accessed July 26, 2013, at <http://bit.ly/1aNub1L>. Emphasis added. Note that the term “General Convention” formally belongs to the 1789 convention.

⁵ “We are unanimous and explicit in assuring your Lordships, that we neither have departed nor propose to depart from the doctrines of your Church. We have retained the same discipline and forms of worship, as far as was consistent with our civil constitutions; and we have made no alterations or omissions in the Book of Common Prayer, but such as that consideration prescribed, and such as were calculated to remove objections,

Success at last!

In 1781, Episcopalians worshipped in scattered congregations across the eastern seaboard. They were all, nominally at least, part of the Diocese of London. Most had never seen a bishop, and many of them, as well as non-Episcopalians, were leery of the office.

General Convention created the means by which these congregations could live into the basic idea of the Church as the Church of England from which they came had developed it...but now in a new context. In order to participate in the life of the Church across the country, they were now required to organize into dioceses (although that term was not officially used until the 1830s. Before then they were “the Church in the State of...”). This meant that the Episcopalians could have bishops ordained in the ancient succession. These would be elected by their diocesan conventions, and approved for consecration by the General Convention (as was the rule at first).

If you look at the official seal of The Episcopal Church, you will see the red Cross of St. George from the English church. In the upper left-hand corner, there is a Cross of St. Andrew representing Scotland. This cross is itself made up of nine small plain crosses, representing the original “state conventions” (which we now called “dioceses”) present at the 1789 General Convention. That seal represents the extraordinary achievement of the first Episcopalians of the United States.

While it may be said that this Church’s governance, at first glance, does not look quite like that of the Church of England, it is important to note that *no* other province of the Anglican Communion has a governing structure quite like that of England. It is unique, and exists in its peculiar shape because of the unique history of that country. But note the balance of the powers of the bishops and clergy on the one hand, and the powers of the laity on the other, at the congregational, diocesan and national levels. While the present monarch, Queen Elizabeth II, has only a formal role in governing her Church, she symbolizes the considerable power that the laity exercise across England. This original balance of her great ancestor’s Settlement has been a key element of Anglican provinces around the world, including the Episcopal Church, the first Anglican Church outside the British Isles.

With some modifications — for example, prayers for the Monarch now became prayers for the President of the United States — the 1662 Book of Common Prayer continued to order the corporate liturgical life of Episcopal parishes. The 1789 Book began to steer a somewhat different course, incorporating materials from the 1764 Scottish Holy Communion rite (the Church that ordained Seabury). Throughout its revisions, the Prayer Book has faithfully continued to embody the essential understanding of Christian faith as prayed by the faithful: Episcopalians are a biblical people gathered by Word and Sacrament. We are a people of catholic order and polity as reflected in the Ordinal and in the conduct of our various liturgies. We are a people whose prayer shapes our lives and whose lives are a fundamental part of our prayer. We are a people who continue in the traditions of the ancient Church, reflected in our liturgies of the Daily Offices and Sacraments, the Outline of the Faith (Catechism) as well as our polity, and our commitment to how we live in the world each day. In this way, The Episcopal Church not only has staked its identity in the historic church and faith, but also clearly and intentionally has done so in a manner that remains explicitly linked

which it appeared to us more conducive to union and general content to obviate, than to dispute.” Reply of Convention to the Archbishops of Canterbury and York, June 26, 1786. See *Journals of the General Conventions, 1785 to 1814*; accessed July 26, 2013, at <http://bit.ly/1aNub1L>

to the Church of England (and Scotland) and the Anglican tradition of being both “reformed and catholic”.

The particular commitment to the Orders of Deacon, Priest and Bishop is also part of remaining loyal to the faith and order of the Church of England. Participation in General Convention led to the creation of dioceses, the traditional regional communions of congregations, that could send authorized deputies to vote for them. Within a few years, bishops were in charge of all the original dioceses. And after 1835, missionary bishops, elected by the House of Bishops, held jurisdiction over all areas where no diocese had yet been organized.

Comparing and contrasting

The Episcopal Church succeeded in faithfully translating the four elements of the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral into American life, indeed, eventually articulating them in the form accepted around the world today. One should not overlook the similarities between the English and the American churches, therefore. In their daily life, both look almost identical, in fact. The English Church is more democratic than American Episcopalians tend to think, and the Episcopal Church is more hierarchical than English Anglicans often believe.

The basic dissimilarity lies in the adaptations made by the first Episcopalians. These were necessary for a suddenly disestablished group of congregations without any American diocesan or national church structures, transitioning from a monarchical state government to a republican one. Its founders were concerned to keep a certain local autonomy along with the tradition of the English church. Not only was this part of the colonial inheritance, with its relative congregational freedom, it was also part of the political theories of the day.

This point needs developing. It is often asserted that the same people wrote both The Episcopal Church’s Constitution and the federal Constitution of the United States. It is not so. Although Church members were prominent in government, there is only one person (Charles Pinckney) who served both at the convention drafting the U.S. Constitution and any of the General Conventions between 1785 and 1789. No members of the 1789 Congress served as a deputy to any of these Conventions. While many of the Founding Fathers were indeed Episcopalians, like George Washington, for example, there are very significant differences in the founding documents of the Episcopal Church and the United States. They may share a common commitment to ideals of broad participation in governance, but leading a nation and overseeing the Church of Jesus Christ are very different things!

So the General Convention created and adopted the Constitution, without referring it first to the several state conventions (in fact it was originally their reason for being). From the beginning until now, it has limited its decisions with respect to specific local situations, but in making decisions for the whole church, its authority is supreme. Only a successive General Convention can undo the decisions taken at another. The genius of the Episcopal Church’s governance structures has been the ability to set clear parameters for faith and church order that are not subject to local ratification or alteration, while granting the necessary latitude to make decisions at the local level for matters of concern to those Episcopalians, within the parameters of the Constitution and Canons. Over the years there have been attempts to assert “states’ rights” in the church, just as in the country’s history. Over and over, the foremost nineteenth- and twentieth-century commentators on the government of The Episcopal Church have refuted this, and the General Convention has never passed any legislation tending in that

direction. While each diocese indeed has significant latitude in ordering its life in adaptation to its local needs, it cannot make decisions that affect the whole Church, including itself.⁶

During the strongest attempt to undo the federal Union, the Civil War, the successive Conventions simply refused to recognize the absence of the dioceses of the Confederate states. With the war over, they were reintegrated as if nothing had happened.⁷ That first General Convention made possible in theory today's 109 dioceses, recognizing each one in turn when the General Convention established them.

Another difference between the English and the American churches is in the limiting of the authority of bishops in the exercise of episcopacy. From the beginning, the Episcopal bishops had their powers somewhat limited by their diocesan "standing committees". For example, an English bishop decides alone whether to ordain a properly vetted candidate. An Episcopal bishop must first secure from the diocesan Standing Committee a certificate saying that all canonical requirements have been met for the ordination of a particular candidate. Furthermore, the authority given the General Convention's House of Deputies requires the House of Bishops to work together with them in making decisions, although there is usually the traditional division of labor between "spiritual" and "temporal" matters in which House considers which resolutions first.

Just as the Elizabethan Settlement made the Crown and the Church work together, sharing leadership, the Episcopal version has leadership shared among all the ministers of the Church: Laypersons, Bishops, Priests, and Deacons. This is true at the congregational and diocesan levels as well. The ordained assist the whole Church by accepting responsibility for worship, the Church's principal act; for the faithful proclamation of the Gospel, the teaching of the Faith, and the administration of all the sacraments. The laypeople take responsibility for finances, and for maintaining the properties of the congregation for the use by the rector for ministry. Most importantly, they do the work of God's mission in the world. However, it is the whole people of God — all the Baptized — who share together the responsibility for the life and work of the Church in the mission of God.

The single most obvious difference between the Church of England and the Episcopal Church is in the General Convention's consistent refusal to create an archbishop. In the Church of England, as well as many other (but not all) Anglican Provinces of the

⁶ In his summary at the 1852 trial of Bishop George W. Doane, John Henry Hopkins, then Bishop of Vermont and future Presiding Bishop during and after the Civil War, wrote: "With respect to the other phrase, AN INDEPENDENT DIOCESE, a definition is equally desirable. According to my judgment, it is a phrase without any meaning, unless it be a very bad one. A diocese cannot be independent in its legislation, because its laws must always be subordinate to the General Convention of the whole Church, of which it is but one member. If its Bishop be infirm, and it be required to give him an Assistant, it cannot be independent, because it must have the consent of the whole Church for the consecration of the elected person. If its Bishop be dead, it cannot be independent, because, without the same consent, it cannot have a successor. And if its Bishop be the subject of evil report, it cannot be independent, because the other Bishops are the only tribunal in the Church who are authorized to try, and either acquit or condemn him. The truth is, that this phrase can never be reconciled with genuine Catholicity. It belongs of right to the Puritan school, and its influence all tends in a schismatic direction." Bishop Doane was acquitted. Accessed January 11, 2013, at <http://anglicanhistory.org/usa/gwdoane/trial1852.html>

⁷ The founders of the Confederate church made it clear that they founded it only because the Confederacy considered itself a new nation, not because they wanted a new church. However, the General Convention never recognized any of its acts. For example, the Confederates had created a diocese of Arkansas and chosen a bishop for it. The General Convention ignored this decision, and Arkansas had to wait ten years before the Convention made it a diocese of the Church.

Communion, an archbishop exercises what is termed “metropolitan” authority. Metropolitan authority is essentially that which a bishop exercises over other bishops in a region or nation, a “supervisory authority for defined purposes”.⁸ The Pope exercises that same authority in the Roman Catholic Church throughout the world, as do the Orthodox Patriarchs in their national churches.

Episcopalians have, since 1785, consistently assigned final authority and function in our church to the General Convention itself. In between Conventions, there is an elected Executive Council whose task is to carry out the policies and budget set by Convention. It is presided by the Presiding Bishop, elected by the House of Bishops and ratified by the House of Deputies. The vice-president of the Council is the President of the House of Deputies, elected by the Deputies. However, major decisions must await the judgment of the General Convention through the agreement of both Houses.

The Presiding Bishop of The Episcopal Church functions somewhat differently from most such “metropolitan” figures in the Anglican Communion. The Constitution and Canons of the General Convention define the roles and functions of the Presiding Bishop. The direct power and authority of the office are situated within the parameters set by the Convention. Nonetheless, as a peer of the archbishops in the Communion, the Presiding Bishop has carried since the 1982 Convention the title of “Primate” (as well as “Chief Pastor”). In a real sense, the title indicates a “first among equals” understanding of the office.

What does this all mean?

This Primer has tried to explain how the distinctive shape of the Episcopal Church began in the United States. Episcopalians following the American Revolution wished to remain loyal to the understanding of the Church as it had evolved in England, along with their own traditions that had developed during the colonial period.

We should also recognize that this form of church government, at once hierarchical and democratic, has not prevented the Church from supporting unjust structures of society. The African-American experience in the Episcopal Church, outlined in the Timeline below, shows how slowly the Church moved from the acceptance of slavery to the full and free participation of African-Americans in the life and governance of the Church. Similar histories hold true for women, Native Americans, and gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people. Yet remarkable saints of “all sorts and conditions” of humans have come forth in the power of the Spirit throughout our history, whose life and witness have changed and continue to change the whole Church.

For today’s Episcopalians, living in seventeen countries around the world, this history and theology form our inheritance. What the first General Conventions bequeathed to us is a way of being Church that has proven very fruitful. In 1820 the Domestic & Foreign Missionary Society was created, to which every Episcopalian now belongs. Soon there were Episcopal dioceses across the country, and outside the United States. While remaining a numerically small church, what began in America — the first Anglican Church not under the English Crown — has spread around the world. One-quarter of the thirty-eight provinces of the Anglican Communion owe their existence to The Episcopal Church. While no other province has perfectly copied its form of governance exactly (the principle the Chicago-

⁸ As defined routinely in Church of England documents. Norman Doe points out that among all the provinces of the Anglican Communion, not one defines this type of authority in its canon law. See his *Canon Law in the Anglican Communion: A Worldwide Perspective* (London: Clarendon, 1998), p. 107.

Lambeth Quadrilateral calls “local adaptation” prevents that), its distinction from the polity of the Church of England has encouraged others to establish their own particular way of being the Church of Jesus Christ in their own places and times, while remaining faithful to the ideal of a catholic Church that reforms itself.

All Christians need an ordered church (Gal. 5:1; compare with I Cor. 10:29). Our particular way of being church tries to establish and maintain the conditions of an ordered freedom for the flourishing of all. How this happens is through the participation of every Episcopalian through prayerful voting in representative bodies devoted to “upholding and propagating the historic Faith and Order set forth in the Book of Common Prayer” (Preamble to the Church’s Constitution). Even within The Episcopal Church, this life looks somewhat different in, say, the Diocese of Haiti than in the Diocese of New Hampshire. Yet both dioceses belong to the same Church.

And that Church belongs to a global communion of Churches, each trying to practice “ordered freedom” in its own way, yet with results that remain remarkably faithful to the ideals developed in the Church of England from the earliest days of the Body of Christ. At a time when many voices are calling for changes in The Episcopal Church’s governance, it is good to recall where we have come from, for our ancestors in the Faith have made us who we are today.

Timeline

Up to 400 A.D: The Roman period; Christianity is planted in Britain; the Council of Nicaea is held in 325, with representatives from Britain attending.

400-600: Celtic Christianity develops in the British Isles.

597: Augustine and his companions arrive in Canterbury.

664: The Synod of Whitby is held. 600-1300: The Middle Ages; in 1215, King John accepts the Magna Carta, still a statute in England and Wales.

1300-1500: The harbingers of the Reformation; Jan Hus burned at the stake in 1415.

1517: Martin Luther ignites the Reformation with his 95 Theses.

1534: The Act of Supremacy gives the Monarch, not the Pope, authority over the Church in England.

1547: Henry VIII dies, and is succeeded by Edward VI.

1549: The first Book of Common Prayer is published.

1552: The second Book of Common Prayer is published; Queen Mary ascends to the throne the next year.

1558: Elizabeth becomes Queen of England; the 1559 Book of Common Prayer is issued; many “puritans” return from Geneva to England.

1603: Elizabeth I is succeeded by James I.

1607: A colony is established in Jamestown, Virginia, and a Eucharist there marks the beginning of a continuous presence of the Church in America.

1640-1660: Oliver Cromwell makes the Church of England “puritan.”

1662: The restoration of Crown and Church; catholicity of the Church of England is renewed; the 1662 Book of Common Prayer is issued, still the official Prayer Book of that Church today.

1701: Thomas Bray initiates the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, eventual sponsor of some 300 missionaries in the American colonies.

1776: American colonies declare independence from Great Britain; France and Holland soon offer their official recognition.

1783: Peace treaty with England acknowledges the United States of America.

1784: Samuel Seabury consecrated Bishop in Scotland for Connecticut; Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York meetings call for a “General Convention” to ensure the continuity of the Church in a new era.

1785: First Convention plans Constitution, Prayer Book, consecration of bishops, adopts name “Protestant Episcopal Church.”

- 1786: Second Convention — first draft of the Book of Common Prayer; consecrations of William White and Samuel Provoost approved by English bishops under Parliament's new law.
- 1789: Third "General" Convention ratifies Constitution and Book of Common Prayer.
- 1804: Absalom Jones ordained as priest; first African-American to be ordained.
- 1817: General Convention charters the General Theological Seminary in New York City, under leadership of Bishop John Henry Hobart.
- 1819: First diocese after 1789 organized in Ohio; Kentucky (1832), Tennessee (1834), Illinois (1835), and Michigan (1836). The first created by division was Western New York in 1839, which marks the first official use of the term "diocese."
- 1820: The General Convention launches Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society; although originally a club which persons had to join, the Convention in 1835 reconfigured the DFMS to be the whole Church in which all Episcopalians are thereby members.
- 1835: General Convention establishes office of Missionary Bishop. Missionary bishops now required in new territories to organize missionary districts and missionary dioceses.
- Jackson Kemper immediately ordained as first missionary Bishop.
- 1861: Attempt to organize a Confederate Episcopal Church begins.
- 1865: General Convention quietly reintegrates the southern dioceses.
- 1867: St. Augustine's School (now College) chartered by the Protestant Episcopal Freeman's Commission.
- 1868: General Convention establishes Commission of Home Mission to Colored People.
- 1875: The Diocese of Haiti is admitted.
- 1878: Bishop Payne Divinity School established for African-American students.
- 1883: General Convention rejects "the Sewanee Plan" to create "Missionary Organizations" to separate formally white and black Episcopalians.
- 1886: The House of Bishops ratifies the Chicago Quadrilateral, with the Lambeth Conference approving it in 1888.
- 1889: General Convention approves canon "Of Deaconesses."
- 1906: Board of Missions establishes the American Church Institute for Negroes (ACIN) to support religious and vocational training.
- 1917: Edward Thomas Demby (Arkansas) and Henry Beard Delany (North Carolina) elected Suffragan bishops; consecrated in 1918. First African-American bishops in the United States.
- 1919: The National Council (now Executive Council) is established.
- 1937: General Convention establishes the Joint Commission on Negro Work.

- 1944: Henry St. George Tucker becomes the first full-time Presiding Bishop.
- 1949: National Council, ACIN, trustees agree to close Bishop Payne Divinity School. Merged with Virginia Theological Seminary in 1953.
- 1959: Episcopal Society for Cultural and Racial Unity (ESCRU) formed.
- 1964: General Convention passes a canon that all Episcopalians have equal rights. Bishop James Pike “recognizes” Phyllis Edwards, a deaconess, as a Deacon in Holy Orders.
- 1967: General Convention establishes the General Convention Special Programs to address issues of race and poverty.
- 1969: John Burgess elected Bishop Coadjutor of Massachusetts (diocesan 1970). First African-American diocesan bishop.
- 1970: General Convention approves constitutional change allowing women to serve as Deputies. Deaconess canon repealed; women allowed to be ordained Deacon.
- 1971: Harold Stephen Jones elected Suffragan Bishop of South Dakota, first Native-American Bishop
- 1974: Ordination of first eleven women to the priesthood
- 1976: General Convention approves proposed Book of Common Prayer on first reading; provides for ordination of women to all three orders; declares that “homosexual persons are children of God who have a full and equal claim with all other persons upon the love, acceptance, and pastoral concern and care of the Church” (A069-1976); shortly thereafter a group of congregations breaks away and forms an alternative church, though it soon fragments into various bodies.
- 1977: The Rev. Dr. Sr. Bernadette (Ellen Marie Barrett), OSB, was ordained a priest by the Rt. Rev. Paul Moore, Jr., Bishop of New York. First openly gay woman to be ordained.
- 1978: General Convention created Navajoland out of the Episcopal dioceses of Utah, New Mexico, and Arizona, as an “area mission” dedicated to Navajo language, culture, families, and area events.
- 1979: General Convention approves 1979 Book of Common Prayer; affirms traditional understanding of the place of sexual relations to be within marriage between a man and a woman.
- 1989: Barbara Harris becomes the first woman ordained to the episcopate.
- J. Robert Williams ordained on December 16, 1989 by John Shelby Spong, Bishop of Newark. First ordination of an openly partnered gay man.
- 1990: Walter Righter, then Assisting Bishop of Newark, ordained Barry Stopfel, an openly partnered gay man, to the diaconate; Bishop Spong ordained him priest in 1991.
- 1991: Steven Charleston elected Bishop of Alaska, first Native-American diocesan bishop.

- 1993: Otis Charles, father of five, having resigned as Bishop of Utah for several years, steps down as Dean of Episcopal Divinity School, and publicly announces that he is a gay man.
- 1996: Bishop Righter goes on trial for heresy in having ordained Stopfel; trial court rules that "... there is no Core Doctrine [of the Church] prohibiting the ordination of a non-celibate, homosexual person living in a faithful and committed sexual relationship with a person of the same sex..."
- 1998: Rwandan Bishop John Rucyahana asserts episcopal authority over an Episcopal parish in Arkansas, the first breakaway since 1977; later, Lambeth Conference Resolution I.10 asks for pastoral inclusion of gay and lesbian people, but posits that "homosexuality is incompatible with Holy Scripture."
- 2000: The Anglican Mission in America launched in Singapore on January 29 with consecrations of Charles Murphy and John Rodgers by Moses Tay, Archbishop of the Province of South East Asia; John Rucyahana, Bishop of the Diocese of Shyira in Rwanda. They were assisted by C. Fitzsimmons Allison, the thirteenth Bishop of the Diocese of South Carolina, Alex D. Dickson, the first Bishop of the Diocese of West Tennessee, and David Pytches, Bishop of Chile, Bolivia and Peru.
- General Convention Resolution D039 acknowledged that "there are couples in this Church" not living in marriage but "in other life-long committed relationships" and states that it "expect[s] such relationships will be characterized by fidelity, monogamy, mutual affection and respect, careful, honest communication, and ... holy love."
- 2003: V. Gene Robinson elected and consecrated Bishop of New Hampshire, the first openly partnered gay person at the time of his consecration.
- 2004: Archbishop Rowan Williams appoints the Windsor Commission; its resulting report calls for moratoria on other provinces setting up alternative jurisdictions in North America, on the consecrations of openly gay people, and on same-sex blessings.
- 2005: Episcopal House of Bishops declares temporary moratorium on all episcopal consecrations; by request, delegations from The Episcopal Church and the Anglican Church of Canada voluntarily refrain from taking their seats as members at the Anglican Consultative Council meeting in Nottingham, but stay on as observers.
- 2006: Katharine Jefferts Schori elected as Presiding Bishop and Primate, the first woman to hold that position, as well as the first scientist, as she was formerly an oceanographer.
- 2008: Anglican Church of North America constitution approved under Robert Duncan as Archbishop. Some Anglican provinces call for it to be recognized as the North American province of the Anglican Communion.
- 2010: As incursions in the United States continue despite the moratorium, Mary Glasspool, the second openly partnered gay person at the time of her consecration, is consecrated Suffragan Bishop of Los Angeles.
- 2012: General Convention approves a provisional rite of same-sex blessings following 2000 resolution D-039, not a new rite of Holy Matrimony; House of Bishops calls for the appointment of an Ecclesiology Committee.

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