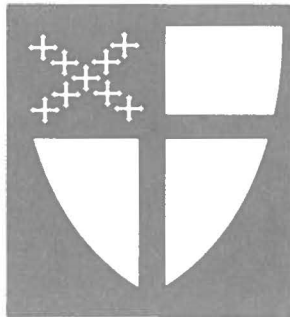


**A PEOPLE
CALLED
EPISCOPALIANS**



A Brief Introduction to Our Peculiar Way of Life

by

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VI

ANGLICAN POLITY

A tradition's polity is its political structure and organization. Misunderstandings about how we Anglican Episcopalians govern our common life can result in serious divisions among us.

Historically there have been four polities within Christian bodies: congregational, presbyterial, episcopal, and Anglican. The Episcopal Church in the United States is founded upon an Anglican rather than an episcopal polity.

Congregational polity rests on the principle of governance by each and every member of a local, autonomous, independent congregation.

Presbyterial polity rests on the principle of governance by elected representational bodies of clergy and laity ordered in a hierarchy.

Episcopal polity rests on the principle of governance by bishops, either elected or chosen, for life or a stated term, typically in apostolic succession, but not always.

While Anglican polity rests on a principle of governance which combines elements of presbyterial and episcopal, congregational is denied. Further, while Anglican polity has many common elements, there are elements within the polity of the Episcopal Church in the United States that are different from other Anglican bodies.

More than any other church in the worldwide Anglican Communion, the Episcopal Church is deeply rooted in a representative form of church government. This is because the birth of the Episcopal Church coincided with the birth of the nation. The constitutions of the nation and the Episcopal Church were ratified in the same city (Philadelphia), in the same building (Independence Hall), in the same year (1789). Authority in the Episcopal Church is conferred through representatives duly elected by the people.

For example, vestry members are elected by the parish; representatives from each parish to Diocesan Convention (Council) are elected by the parish vestry; and deputies to General Convention are elected by the representatives to Diocesan Convention (Council).

What follows will not be a comprehensive or complete description of our polity but a summary of some important and unique elements aimed especially to help those who come from other traditions understand our political ways.

For example, congregational polity is a dominant protestant polity in the United States, and many Episcopalians come from denominations with a congregational polity, for example, the Baptists. These persons often assume that they should have the right to vote on parish issues, such as who will be their priest, how their money will be spent, what hymns they will sing, and what curriculum should be used in the church school.

Those from a presbyterial tradition, such as former Presbyterians, often believe that votes taken by representative bodies, such as a vestry decision to build a new building, should not require the consent of the bishop.

Those from an Episcopal tradition, such as former Roman Catholics, sometimes expect that they can influence their priest by appealing to his or her bishop.

We are neither a church in which a few persons have absolute authority to make unilateral decisions, nor are we a church in which everyone has equal authority to make communal decisions. We understand power as the ability to influence rather than to coerce. We understand authority as the right to be heard rather than the right to be obeyed. While some persons are granted structural authority—that is, the right to be heard because of their office—most often our understanding of authority works best when it is founded upon a person’s proven wisdom, moral example, spiritual being, or charism.

If the Episcopal Church has a weakness, it is the reluctance of the system always to hold everyone accountable. For example, if a bishop, out of conscience, chooses not to follow the mind of the House of Bishops, that person is rarely censured.

Such reluctance to act diminishes the proper role of authority throughout the church, though its pastoral concern can make it possible for us to be a reconciled community composed of very divergent people.

At our best those in authority listen carefully to every voice, reflect seriously on every side of an issue, and pray faithfully before they make a decision. And when a decision is reached they communicate as best they can how they arrived at their decision with the hope that while everyone may not agree, everyone will understand why and therefore be willing to accept and support it. In general we believe that important decisions should be made by consensus. A consensus does not mean that everyone wholeheartedly supports a decision but that everyone can live with it and support it. On those occasions when responsible, representative bodies have believed they must act without consensus, they have deliberately acted to maintain unity by providing some way out for those who cannot in conscience live with or support the decision.

As Anglicans we have typically intended to live by the virtues of honesty, loyalty, good manners (being polite, courteous, and gracious), mutual respect, restraint, and patience. Nevertheless, we need also to understand the political structures and organization of our church.

Our polity is contained in a small volume (approximately 200 pages) entitled *The Constitution and Canons of the Episcopal Church*. The first edition of *The Constitution and Canons of the Episcopal Church* was published in 1789; it has been revised when the church has met in General Convention every three years. Each diocese also has a constitution and canons to govern its life.

Canon law, however, does not dominate our life as it does in some traditions. We have very few professional canon lawyers, and canon law is not considered a major subject in our seminaries. Each diocese has a chancellor, someone knowledgeable in both secular and church law, who acts as the canon lawyer for the diocese.

Having our foundation in English jurisprudence, it is rare to find a strict constructionist of canon law among Anglicans. Most of the time we maintain a

very loose constructionist interpretation and application of our canons. This fact can make our common life appear chaotic, but it has helped us over time to maintain that tension between continuity and change, unity and diversity so characteristic of our way of life.

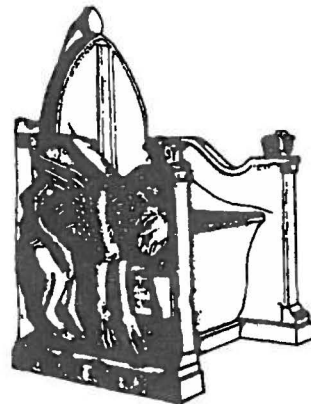
The Anglican Communion

When we think about our political structures and organization we begin with the Anglican Communion, that worldwide assembly of churches that, in communion with the Church of England, recognizes the leadership of the Archbishop of Canterbury. However, unlike the Bishop of Rome, the archbishop has no canonical authority over the Anglican Communion. In general, our understanding of clergy—bishops, priests and deacons—is more in terms of symbolic than functional roles.

This means that, while ordained clergy are assigned numerous functions, such as preaching and celebrating, which they are to perform, those called by the people and God to be bishops, priests, and deacons are to point beyond themselves to those qualities intended for all the baptized.

For example, because we believe in the “priesthood of all believers” we have priests whose purpose it is to illumine the priesthood of the community. The bishop is to be the symbol of unity—reconciled community—in which we are to live as a sign and witness to God’s reign; the priest is to be the symbol of our common ministry of bringing all people into God’s loving embrace and God’s suffering, redeeming love to all people; the deacon is to be the symbol of our common ministry to care for those in any need or trouble.

Each member church sends its bishops every ten years to a **Lambeth Conference** to discuss mutual concerns. This body has moral influence, but no legal authority over the bodies represented. There is also an Anglican



Consultative Council or representative advisory group of bishops, clergy, and laity selected by member churches of the Anglican Communion that meets periodically to provide consultation and guidance for the whole Anglican Communion.

This Anglican Communion is composed of numerous national church bodies, each with some functional autonomy. Each has its own constitution and canons, its own authorized prayer book or books, its own authorized hymnal or hymnals, and its own authorized translations of the Scriptures. Many have different names. There are the Episcopal Church in the United States, the Anglican Church of Canada, the Church of England in Australia, the Church of the Province of Southern Africa, the Holy Catholic Church in Japan, the Episcopal Church of Brazil and so on.

However, the Episcopal Church in the United States, every Episcopal diocese, and every local Episcopal parish (congregation) are intended to understand themselves fundamentally as an integral part of the Anglican Communion and not as autonomous bodies. For this reason we pray each week for the Archbishop of Canterbury, for other Anglican churches and their spiritual leaders around the world, for our presiding bishop and other dioceses, for our own bishop(s), and for other parishes in our diocese.

The Episcopal Church is divided into nine provinces composed of a group of geographically adjacent dioceses usually with a diocesan bishop as president and administrative officer. Having no authority or power, their purpose is to promote cooperation among dioceses.

