

The Archives of the Episcopal Church

Research Reports: Considerations of a Unicameral Structure for General Convention

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The question of a unicameral legislative structure was present in the earliest days of The Episcopal Church. William White's 1782 pamphlet *The Case of the Episcopal Church in the United States Considered*, an influential sketch for the structure of a national church body, advocated a unicameral representative body. When White made his proposal, a peace treaty with Great Britain had not yet been reached, and he was concerned with establishing a legitimate legislative body that could guide the church even if an episcopate could not be secured.

Over the next few years, however, three American bishops were ordained, creating a native episcopate that would not be seen as a threat to the independence of the young church. By the time of the 1789 Constitutional Convention, the church had moved away from a unicameral conception of governance. A separate House of Bishops was established to serve as a check on the more numerous lay and clergy votes, an arrangement echoing local church governance practice in colonial America as well as the broader ethic of participatory culture that marked American community life.

The prospect of a unicameral legislature seems not to have been debated again at General Convention until 1970, when the Church of England restructured its own polity, adopting a single General Synod (composed of three orders) which would constitute the primary legislative body of the church. This change prompted some within The Episcopal Church to seriously reconsider its own legislative structure.

In 1973, the House of Deputies adopted a resolution instructing the Standing Commission on Structure to study the new structure of the Church of England and the possibility of a unicameral General Convention. Though the House of Bishops did not concur this action, the Standing Commission nonetheless addressed those issues in its 1975 Preliminary Report. In that document, the Standing Commission noted several arguments in favor of a unicameral house, including joint deliberation of the orders and a general streamlining of the legislative process.

The Commission ultimately recommended against the adoption of a unicameral system concluding that such a restructuring would not be "practical of accomplishment at this time or [...] in accord with what has come to be the polity of the American Church since 1789."¹ They further noted that the House of Bishops discharges responsibilities not shared by the House of Deputies, necessitating its separate deliberation. The report argued that the merging of the houses into a unicameral legislature would demand a significant reduction in the total number of delegates, and that voting by orders, already a fraught and confusing process, would become unmanageable in a unicameral house. In their final report to the 1976 General Convention, the Commission noted that none of the many comments received with regard to the Preliminary Report favored the unicameral proposal.²

At the 1979 General Convention, another resolution calling for a study of the unicameral issue was debated and rejected, in accordance with the recommendation of the Standing Commission on Structure. The Committee, however, proposed a compromise on the issue. In its report, the Committee noted that, while it did not support the switch to a unicameral legislature, one of that system's "principal advantages...could be accomplished by having joint sessions of the two Houses for debate of important resolutions."³ They proposed a resolution to amend Joint Rule VIII to allow for these joint sessions, but

¹AR1994.027. Preliminary Report of the Standing Committee on the Structure of the Church, 1975, p. 78

²Journal of General Convention 1976, p. AA-31

³Journal of General Convention 1979, p. AA-304

the resolution was rejected on the recommendation of the Committee on Rules of Order.

The unicameral proposal was not addressed again until 1994, when a resolution to appoint a Task Force to plan for the creation of a unicameral body was rejected ([1994-A039](#)).

In 2012, two resolutions on unicameral legislature came forward. One resolution, which proposed amending the canons to create a single house, was referred to the Standing Committee on the Structure of the Church ([2012-B015](#)). The second resolution was proposed by the Standing Commission on the Mission and Evangelism of the Episcopal Church. It called for a Task Force on Missional Structure and Strategy, which would create a plan for restructuring of the Church polity, including “serious consideration” of a unicameral model for General Convention.⁴ Again, the House of Deputies declined to set the House on this path and discharged the Committee on Structure of further consideration.

The 2012 General Convention did, however, call for a wide-ranging study of church structure with its creation of the Task Force for Reimagining the Episcopal Church (TREC). This Task Force was charged with presenting to the 2015 General Convention “a plan for reforming the Church’s structures, governance, and administration” ([2012-C095](#)). The report prepared by TREC proposed a number of structural changes, including the creation of a unicameral General Convention comprised of three voting orders (Lay, Clerical, and Bishops). The report notes that this restructuring would make Convention, “a more truly deliberative body, and will more closely share governance across all orders of ministry.” The unicameral structure would be part of a broader shift in the nature of Convention, which would “evolve to become a Church-wide mission convocation,” the “primary focus” of which would be “to convene local mission practitioners to celebrate, to share learning and best practices, and to develop mission-focused networks and collaborations.”⁵

TREC drafted three resolutions to enact the unicameral aspect of its proposed structural changes: 2015-A002, which outlined the full slate of reforms; 2015-A005, which delineated the role of and election by the Presiding Bishop within a unicameral body; and 2015-A007, which comprised the canonical changes needed to enact the structural shift. 2015-A002 was referred to the Standing Commission on the Structure of the Church, while 2015-A005 and 2015-A007 were discharged from further consideration.

⁴Reports to General Convention, 2012, p. 506

⁵Reports to General Convention, 2015, p. 616