

An Inclusive Perspective of Polity in the Episcopal Church

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The way the Episcopal Church functions is, to many people, complicated and confusing. This is my attempt to bring an awareness as to how the Episcopal Church in the United States lives in community together. For a more complete and comprehensive view you can always to:

<http://www.dfms.org/index.htm>

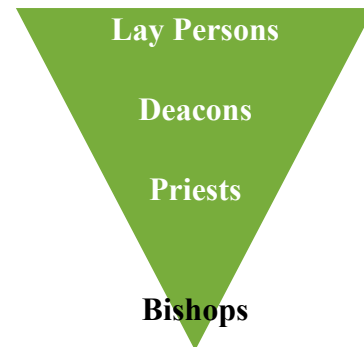
The most simple picture, to me, is an "up-side-down" pyramid. I suggest this because of one of the questions and answers that come from, "An Outline of the Faith commonly called the Catechism". (Book of Common Prayer, pg. 855)

Q. Who are the ministers of the Church?

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

When you picture an "up-side-down" pyramid the top longer line represents lay persons with bishops at the apex, deacons and then priests function in order between. Lay persons are the 99% of our church and are the corpus of strength and membership of the Episcopal Church. It seems clear that lay people, by their very size in comparison to the "other" ministers, are primary. This understanding, however, is not a common one for most people inside or outside of our church who assume that bishops, priests, and deacons are the most important ministers.

Practically speaking, would any church really exist without the 99%, lay folk? This is why it makes common sense to me.



No matter how you look at it, the majority of the work in any congregation is done by lay persons, most often ministries being organized into a variety of committees and groups. Most of our Episcopal congregations are small and cannot afford to hire staff to keep and maintain the local community on any level without the work of the "lay ministers". Even a larger church, who have several clergy and other paid staff, still partner with the laity. The paid staff of any church is basically to facilitate ministry within the church to function in an organized manner to coordinate, facilitate and increase the likelihood of a successful ministry to each other and within the larger community in which they reside. While all members of the Episcopal Church are ministers, not all persons are formally "ordered" to particular functions, the ordained ministries.

As we move down the organizational table we come to the level of Deacon. Our tradition explains the leadership role and purpose of the Office of Deacon in the words that are spoken and asked by the bishop prior to ordaining the candidate: (Book of Common Prayer, Pg. 543)

My brother/sister, every Christian is called to follow Jesus Christ, serving God the Father, through the power of the Holy Spirit. God now calls you to a special ministry of servanthood

directly under your bishop. In the name of Jesus Christ, you are to serve all people, particularly the poor, the weak, the sick, and the lonely.

As a deacon in the Church, you are to study the Holy Scriptures, to seek nourishment from them, and to model your life upon them. You are to make Christ and his redemptive love known, by your word and example, to those among whom you live, and work, and worship. You are to interpret to the Church the needs, concerns, and hopes of the world. You are to assist the bishop and priests in public worship and in the ministration of God's Word and Sacraments, and you are to carry out other duties assigned to you from time to time. At all times, your life and teaching are to show Christ's people that in serving the helpless they are serving Christ himself.

My brother/sister, do you believe that you are truly called by God and his Church to the life and work of a deacon?

Answer

I believe I am so called.

A Deacon, by study of scripture and example of life, is ordained to interpret to the Church (the entire people of God) the needs, concerns, and hopes of the world, and at all times, through his/her personal life and teaching show Christ's people that in serving the helpless they are serving Christ himself. The role of deacon is to help all ministers of our church to focus on serving as did Jesus by his words and deeds.

Continuing to move down the organizational pyramid of ordained ministry toward the apex of our pyramid, we come to the leadership role and purpose of the Office of Priest. (Book of Common Prayer, Pg. 531)

My brother/sister, the Church is the family of God, the body of Christ, and the temple of the Holy Spirit. All baptized people are called to make Christ known as Savior and Lord, and to share in the renewing of his world. Now you are called to work as pastor, priest, and teacher, together with your bishop and fellow presbyters, and to take your share in the councils of the Church.

As a priest, it will be your task to proclaim by word and deed the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and to fashion your life in accordance with its precepts. You are to love and serve the people among whom you work, caring alike for young and old, strong and weak, rich and poor. You are to preach, to declare God's forgiveness to penitent sinners, to pronounce God's blessing, to share in the administration of Holy Baptism and in the celebration of the mysteries of Christ's Body and Blood, and to perform the other ministrations entrusted to you.

In all that you do, you are to nourish Christ's people from the riches of his grace, and strengthen them to glorify God in this life and in the life to come.

My brother/sister, do you believe that you are truly called by God and his Church to this priesthood?

Answer

I believe I am so called.

The Priest is reminded that all baptized persons are called to make Christ known as Savior and Lord and to share in the renewing of God's world. Now, in ordination, is given a roll of leadership to work as pastor, priest, and teacher. A Priest is to love, serve and work among all people, to preach, declare God's forgiveness and pronounce God's blessing, to share in the administration of Baptism, celebration of Holy Eucharist, and perform other ministrations

entrusted to the order of priesthood. The priesthood brings leadership, focus, and organization to the life of the congregation to which he or she is called and appointed to serve.

In addition there are those who are consecrated to the Office of Bishop: (Book of Common Prayer, Pg. 517)

My (brother/sister), the people have chosen you and have affirmed their trust in you by acclaiming your election. A bishop in God's holy Church is called to be one with the apostles in proclaiming Christ's resurrection and interpreting the Gospel, and to testify to Christ's sovereignty as Lord of lords and King of kings.

You are called to guard the faith, unity, and discipline of the Church; to celebrate and to provide for the administration of the sacraments of the New Covenant; to ordain priests and deacons and to join in ordaining bishops; and to be in all things a faithful pastor and wholesome example for the entire flock of Christ.

With your fellow bishops you will share in the leadership of the Church throughout the world. Your heritage is the faith of patriarchs, prophets, apostles, and martyrs, and those of every generation who have looked to God in hope. Your joy will be to follow him who came, not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.

Are you persuaded that God has called you to the office of bishop?

Answer

I am so persuaded.

The bishop's role is to be the Chief Pastor of a Diocese (the territorial jurisdiction of a bishop) from which local churches are authorized. The word bishop comes from the Greek word - episcopos which is translated "an overseer". As you can see from the above, a person, who is usually a priest in our church, is selected to the office of bishop through an election process held by a diocese that is searching for an overseer. They are called to guard the faith, unity, and discipline of the church as well as to maintain the administration of the sacraments, ordain persons to the diaconate and priesthood and episcopacy, and to be faithful as a chief pastor with other bishops throughout the world. It is through the office of bishop that all our churches are interconnected as the people of God in the whole Episcopal Church.

What is a church? The dictionary says "*a church is the body of people who attend or belong to a particular local church*". The word church comes from the Greek word *ekklesia* meaning assembly. The people of God who assemble together in a particular area to act together as ministers to share the Gospel and to follow Jesus in service to the world bringing the Realm of God into this world. Very often the church is referred to as the Body of Christ because, like our physical bodies, a healthy church will utilize all the variety of its many parts to bring the Realm of God on earth as it is in heaven.

What is the Polity of the Episcopal Church? It is a very concise but comprehensive rule of "manners" in functioning together, often referred to as Canon Law. The word polity simply refers to the form of government of an organization. In the Episcopal Church it is not so much a rule of enforcement as much as a common agreement of how we can best function with and for one another in local and universal communities. Something akin to the Emily Post version of etiquette - "rules governing socially acceptable behavior" .

Our polity provides for local Churches to have an annual meeting to choose groups like Vestries and other committees to work together with clergy and staff. In each Diocese there is an annual convention of laity and clergy who elect a Standing Committee and other groups and leaders who assist the bishop in serving the local congregations. Every three years there is a convention of the whole church called The General Convention. Elected laity and clergy from each Diocese, called Deputies, come together with all our bishops to oversee the work of the entire church and make any Canonical adjustments necessary; through committees, discussion and voting the Deputies and Bishops keep the Episcopal Church viable and up to date.

If you read and study about these simple basics of the Episcopal Church you will discover that we genuinely attempt to recognize One Lord under whom we all serve together as Episcopalians. Our polity strives to make sure that no single person or group of people tries to "lord it over" others in our communion and assembly. In Matthew 20, the story of the workers in a vineyard, to whom the Foreman extended the same wage to each worker regardless of the amount of hours they labored, Jesus concluded this story by saying, "In this way the last will be first, and the first will be last." Perhaps these words are a good summary of the function of our Polity. At times our polity may seem confusing, it may be treated in a legalistic fashion, and it may at times seem unfair. The wages in the story of the workers in the vineyard may be hard to interpret as well. By the world's standard, time is money, but in the Realm of God our privilege is to use our time, talents, and treasure in serving as freely and consistently as did Jesus. If we recognize and acknowledge that time is a gift then each day is an opportunity to express our gratitude to God by freely sharing our time, talent, and treasure in the vineyard of the world in which we live. The good news is that we are loved in equal measure by that Source which is Life in all it's fullness regardless of our human judgment of worth or status.