Sometimes, people say they “have no use for ‘organized religion.’” The correct punch line is, “Oh, then you’ll love The Episcopal Church!” Our democratic elements often make us look rather unorganized, but as a denomination, we do have structures within which we operate, and they can seem confusing.

People often think that they don’t care about the structural organization of the church or that it does not affect them as “folks in the pews.” After all, that is “only politics,” and few of us want anything to do with that, especially in church. It isn’t long, though, before they begin to ask why a certain statement was made, how a decision was reached, or how some issue could be addressed. All of these needs involve the polity, or institutional operation, of the church. Though the church is of God, it exists in the world, and that means it must have an institutional life. Understanding how that is structured will aid in comprehending many events, decisions, and attitudes we encounter even on a purely local level.

Since the Episcopal Church was established in the late eighteenth century, it will not be surprising to discover that the American Revolution and Constitution play a large part in its structure. In fact, many of the same men who framed the U. S. Constitution were involved also in setting up the Episcopal Church. They used many of the same checks and balances. But though power is distributed somewhat among bishops, priests, and lay persons, the Episcopal Church remains far from completely democratic for, while the laity are represented by delegates, the clergy, in their orders, still have a disproportional amount of power at both national and diocesan levels. This is probably the major cause of disgruntlement within congregations of our church: we don’t just gather and vote on everything, majority wins. We are not a congregational entity!

The heart of the Episcopal Church is the Diocese. We are, after all, the Episcopal Church: not “Catholic” with a world-wide government; not “Presbyterian” with district rule by Presbyters (elder-level clergy); not Congregational with purely local autonomy. Because we draw members from all of these backgrounds, we find that people often make assumptions about what can be done and not done based on their earlier experiences. But like it or not, we might as well get used to it: our church is Episcopal. That means that the chief pastor and the leading authority for all questions ecclesiastical, for every Episcopalian, is his or her bishop. The Diocese is the basic building block of the church, and its structure is the model for both national and local operations.

THE DIOCESE

In the beginning, each state formed a diocese, except in New England where Episcopalians were scarcer. That is the origin of our tradition of having diocesan boundaries coincide with state boundaries and use state names. (Diocese of West
Virginia, Diocese of Montana, Diocese of New Hampshire.) The Roman Catholic Church usually uses “see cities” for its diocesan names, and that is an alternative that we have used occasionally, also (Dioceses of Easton, Spokane, Los Angeles, Chicago, for example.) Later, especially on the East Coast, the population of Episcopalians required that we either considerably multiply the number of assisting bishops, or divide the dioceses. We have historically preferred to do the latter, though we do utilize assisting bishops as well. That is why some states have multiple dioceses (Dioceses of Southwestern Virginia, East Tennessee, Southern Ohio, etc.) Only in the late 1960’s did we finally violate state lines, forming the Diocese of the Central Gulf Coast, consisting of South Alabama and the Florida Panhandle. The Diocese of Navajoland encompasses an Indian Reservation rather than a portion of a state, and crosses multiple state lines. We probably will continue to see more flexibility and creativity in this regard in the future.

Every Diocese has one bishop, called the “Ordinary,” meaning the one who orders (regulates) things. The bishop is elected by a Diocesan Convention, which consists of elected delegates from each congregational entity within the diocese, and all of the clergy, each group voting separately. There is usually a slate of candidates nominated by a specially formed search committee, and nominations “from the floor” (but usually required in advance now, for background checks) are allowed. A candidate must win a majority of the clergy votes and laity votes on the same ballot in order to be elected. Once elected, the office is for life, or until retirement, with the mandatory retirement age at 72. Once one is ordained a bishop, she remains so for life; it is a separate order of ministry. A diocese may not “impeach” a sitting bishop; bishops can be removed only by the House of Bishops sitting as an ecclesiastical court, and then only for serious offenses, such as heresy, malfeasance in office, or departing from the communion of The Episcopal Church. The House of Bishops has been extremely reluctant to act in that way; usually, the threat of a trial produces a decision to “retire.” Experience has been a good teacher for the House of Bishops. In the 1920’s, Bishop Paul Jones of Utah resigned rather than face removal from office, primarily because of his pacifism during the war frenzy of the U. S. entry into World War I and his sympathies with some socialist economic and social principles. Much later, (the 1990’s) the General Convention repented and gave Jones a day of remembrance in the church calendar as a strong voice for peace and justice. Since that time, the bishops have been loath to discipline one of their number for expressing opinions, however unpopular at the time, realizing that one generation’s heretic can be the next generation’s saint. In the 1960’s, Bishop James Pike of California was widely decried for erratic statements. The House of Bishops refrained from removing him, apparently in large measure because many believed him to be ill, as seems to have been the case. Later, Bishop John Shelby Spong of Newark became the center of controversy because of his many public statements and writings challenging just about every point of the Nicene Creed. The House of Bishops made efforts to remind the faithful that, where he differed from the teaching of the church, Spong spoke only for himself, not for them or for the church; but they never acted to remove him from office. Spong’s retirement may have been timely! Several bishops have been pressured to retire or resign under threat of action because of their behavior, however. In 2010, several bishops were removed from office for “abandoning the communion of The Episcopal Church.” That is because they affiliated themselves and their followers in their dioceses with Anglican
provinces outside the United States, such as Rwanda and the Southern Cone of South America, to avoid association with openly gay bishop Eugene Robinson of New Hampshire, female Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts-Schori, and fellow bishops who would support such developments. In those cases, the parishes and missions in which the leadership chose to remain in the church have been formed into new Episcopal dioceses, with new Episcopal leadership.

While the diocese is administered by the bishop, it is governed legislatively by the Diocesan Convention, which is comprised of all the priests of the diocese and representative laity by parishes or missions. In some dioceses, deacons have “voice and vote;” in others only the right to speak. Diocesan Convention adopts an annual budget for the diocese, considers resolutions to express the position of the diocese on various matters, and elects members for its various commissions and committees, as well as deputies to the General Convention. The Bishop presides at meetings of the Diocesan Convention. In important matters (when requested), the Convention votes “by orders,” priests and lay members voting separately as if in a bicameral legislature. No doubt this is a vestige of our national government’s organization, and it similarly can make a resolution more difficult to pass.

When there is too much episcopal work for one person, but the diocese is reluctant to divide itself, there are several ways that the bishop can be given help, subject to approval and funding by the Diocesan Convention, and approval of the Bishops and Standing Committees of the Dioceses. First, if the bishop is close to retirement or in poor health, the diocese could choose to elect a Bishop Coadjutor. This person would be the designated successor to the ordinary, with a right of succession upon retirement or death of the incumbent. Until that time, however, he/she would serve as assistant under the supervision of the ordinary. Obviously, there could be some potential for conflict there, since the ordinary cannot control whom the Diocesan Convention might elect to succeed him or her. Coadjutors are normally chosen only at the very end of a bishop’s tenure.

Second, the Diocesan Convention could decide to elect a Suffragan Bishop. The difference is that the Suffragan, though ordained as a bishop, has no authority to act except as assistant to the ordinary, and he or she has no right to succeed the incumbent. Upon the death or retirement of the ordinary, the Suffragan could be elected bishop, but also might not be elected. If not elected, then the Suffragan could be out of a job if the new bishop did not need or want him or her as assistant.

Third, the Diocesan Convention could approve funding to hire an assisting bishop. This would be either a retired bishop who still wanted to work in the episcopal role, but without the pressure of the ordinary’s office, perhaps on a part-time basis; or it could be a suffragan no longer needed in one diocese, and now available to another. These bishops would be already consecrated as bishops and would not need to be elected. They would serve under the ordinary, often for a contracted term.

In case of a vacancy in the episcopal office, the Standing Committee might hire an available bishop to serve as Assisting Bishop to them. The Standing Committee is
composed of elected clergy and laity who, together, act in the administrative role of bishop during an interim period; they would need a temporary bishop to perform the sacramental acts of that office. When there is a bishop in office, the Standing Committee serves as a council of advisors for him or her, and must certify that all procedures have been properly followed before the bishop may ordain any person to diaconate or priesthood. They also have the responsibility for ratifying the election of any bishop in any diocese before he or she can be consecrated: more than half of the Standing Committees and more than half of the sitting bishops must give their consent to every episcopal election (unless the General Convention performs that role, if the event is within a few months of its session). The Standing Committee must also approve any property transaction of any congregation in the diocese, for all church property belongs to the diocese, not the congregation.

Another important diocesan body is the Diocesan Council. Its members are also clergy and laity, representing regions of the diocese and also a few groups, such as youth and women’s ministries. They administer the diocesan budget and the policies and statements of the Diocesan Convention between meetings of the Convention itself.

Every diocese has a number of other committees, commissions, and departments which are responsible for various forms of ministry in the entire diocese. In West Virginia, these areas include: our conference centers at Sandscrest and Peterkin; Youth ministries; Women’s ministries; work against racism, domestic violence, and poverty; educational programs like Education For Ministry and ConneXions; selection and preparation for clergy; ecumenical dialogue; evangelism; and other matters.

THE PARISH

The church is represented locally in the parish, which serves a village, a town or a section of a city. We don’t try to put a congregation on every corner, just one per neighborhood or community, where viable. This may be the true reason why we are not a large denomination in America. If a clique becomes dissatisfied with their own congregation, they cannot go down the block, rent a store front, and start a new, competing congregation. Episcopal congregations are planned and planted by the diocese.

In West Virginia, and in some other dioceses as well, popular parlance is to refer to all local churches as “congregations,” without distinguishing between parishes and missions. Even do, those formal designations remain.

More precisely, if a congregation is well-established and self-supporting (and there is a size factor, too), it has the official status of “parish.” Historically, parishes had set boundaries and controlled all church activities within those boundaries in the original southern states, but that is no longer the case, except in eastern Maryland, which has colonial roots. The designation “parish” confers the right, with the bishop’s approval, to “call” their own priest, who is designated “rector.”
A new, struggling, or dependent congregation would be designated a “mission congregation.” It would often receive support from the diocese, and the bishop would retain the right to appoint its priest, who would be called “Vicar,” or perhaps “Priest in Charge.” But some congregations might be “yoked” (partnered with a nearby congregation) or “clustered” (formed into a group of several such congregations), mainly for their financial viability. Their clergy might be called “missioners,” and they serve the yoke or cluster, rather than just one congregation.

A congregation also could have a seasonal or supplementary worship location, which might be called a “chapel,” or a “preaching station.” Usually, it would be hoped that these would become missions and eventually parishes, but some continue in that status for generations.

To call a rector, a parish conducts a search, using the Diocesan Deployment Officer, the Church Deployment Office in New York, and word of mouth to seek the right priest. They do a self-study to determine what characteristics they most need in a clergy leader. They visit and interview prospects. When the Search Committee has reached a decision, they present that person to the Vestry of the Parish, who may vote to issue a call. If the candidate accepts, and the bishop approves their selection, a date for “Institution” is set, when the bishop officially establishes the rectorship. The rector is thus placed in office by the bishop, at the request of the Vestry, and the bishop is the rector’s superior, not the vestry. The term of a rector is indefinite. Rectorships have lasted thirty years and more, but the average is much less; for a mid-size congregation, eight to twelve years is much more likely; shorter, generally, in a small congregation. Generally, the rector is the one who makes the decision when his or her work in a particular place is complete, but of course, church members sometimes “help” their clergy to come to that decision. What is not supposed to happen in the Episcopal Church is for lay leaders to get angry with their rector over something and get the Vestry to fire him! Our idea is that when there is a conflict, Christians work through that conflict, they do not simply end the relationship. The bishop’s office is always available to offer guidance to clergy and lay leaders when there are behavioral problems or unreasonable expectations to be dealt with. At the very least, the diocesan leaders can be helpful in negotiating a fair and graceful parting. The bishop is the only one who can terminate a pastoral relationship, and that must be for good and weighty cause.

This may sound anti-democratic and archaic, but authority is important in the church; it is not merely a free market of ideas and opinions. A priest and a bishop are called to speak to their congregations prophetically at times, and they must sometimes say things that are not palatable to popular opinion. Their views are not infallible—they simply have a special role to speak from the Gospel and for the unpopular and the powerless. If they could be removed anytime powerful people disagreed with them, their ability to be “Jeremiah” would be hindered and the church would be ill served. It is hard enough to say unpopular things when each individual church member can vote “by shoe leather” as well as “by wallet leather” every week!
While on the topic of dissention and discord, it should also be pointed out that, since all church property belongs to the Diocese in the Episcopal Church, a parish cannot break away, though the individuals can. There can be no such thing as an independent congregation in the Episcopal Church, for a congregation separate from its bishop would not be Episcopal. Now on to happier topics.

At an annual parish-wide meeting every year, the congregation elects its delegates to the Diocesan Convention and also elects several members for its governing body of lay people, the Vestry. Terms are usually for three years, and one-third of the Vestry completes its term each year. The Vestry prepares a budget, supervises administration of that budget by the staff and officers, advises the rector, and helps plan and execute the mission, the service, and the community life of the congregation. Vestries typically meet monthly. The rector is presiding officer. Many operate by consensus today, rather than vote. The lay person elected to act for the rector in his or her absence or incapacity is the Senior Warden. The Junior Warden traditionally has responsibility for buildings and grounds. The Treasurer supervises the keeping of the books, though there may be a book-keeper or administrator to do that on a daily basis. The Clerk of the Vestry acts as Secretary for meetings, and often must sign official documents produced by the Vestry.

Parishes may have multiple clergy according to their size, but only one rector. Other priests might be designated Associate Rector, Assistant Rector, Rector Emeritus, or Curate. There may also be one or more deacons. The rector has responsibility for supervising all of them, along with the lay staff members, such as administrator, secretaries, musicians, educators, and sextons (cleaning and maintenance staff.)

THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH’S GOVERNMENT

The Episcopal Church as denomination has the least impact on the typical Episcopalian, but it does serve some important functions. As already noted, each diocese relies on the other dioceses as a group to endorse their selection of bishops, for each bishop serves as a bishop for the whole church, even though functioning only in his or her own diocese. We meet as a whole church body only once every three years, in the General Convention, which moves from one city to another. Our “whole church” today is not a national church, for we have dioceses in a number of countries outside the United States.

At this level, the representatives do actually meet in two houses: the House of Bishops, made up of all the diocesan bishops, and the House of Deputies, comprised of deputations of four clergy and four laity from each diocese, irrespective of the size of the diocese. They adopt a church-wide budget, and they also consider canonical changes and various statements of position on timely topics. Resolutions must pass both houses in order to take effect. But the General Convention almost amounts to a tri-cameral legislature, because in the House of Deputies, clergy and laity often vote separately, as in Diocesan Conventions, and a majority of each is required for passage. One might note that, while the House of Bishops is 100% clergy, the House of Deputies is still 50%. 
clergy—a preponderance of clergy influence! Nevertheless, since the Deputies vote by 
majority of both clergy and lay deputies, and a tie counts as a “no” vote, nothing can get 
through the House of Deputies, hence the General Convention, without the consent of a 
¾ majority! It is not unheard of for a resolution to be stymied by lack of a majority 
among the laity, or among the bishops.

Not all Episcopal lay people agree with all the decisions of the Convention, nor 
are they required to do so. Perhaps it helps to know that in each of its actions, General 
Convention at least requires a super-majority to act. Like it or not, however, the General 
Convention is the only entity with the authority to speak for and act on behalf of the 
entire Episcopal Church. We are all free to hold and express our own opinions on any 
matters. We are not accurate in asserting that they are the views of the Episcopal Church 
unless the General Convention says so.

The bishop who presides over the House of Bishops is the Presiding Bishop. In 
the early days, he was simply the senior bishop present. Now the Presiding Bishop 
serves for a single nine-year term. The Presiding Bishop also administers church-wide 
ministries and structures out of a headquarters in New York City. Located at 815 2nd 
Avenue, near the United Nations, it is affectionately known as “815” for short.

At the General Convention of 2006, an historic event occurred with the election of 
The Right Reverend Katharine Jefferts Schori, Bishop of Nevada, as the church’s first 
female Presiding Bishop. During her tenure, many offices have been moved out of 
“815” to decentralized locations around the country. Together, they are often referred to 
as “Church Center,” rather than “815.” Also, there is a push to move away from referring 
to The Episcopal Church as “the national church,” because we no longer are that! Our 
extire Province Nine is extra-territorial to The United States, consisting of dioceses 
located in Central and South America, all Spanish-speaking. The Diocese of Haiti and 
the Episcopal Churches in Europe are contained in Province Two, and the Diocese of 
Taiwan is in Province Eight. These provinces also provide a structure for encouraging 
ministries and relationships on a regional basis.

The Church Center also houses three other church-wide organizations of 
importance, titled The Church Pension Group:

- The Church Pension Fund is the only fully-funded pension fund in the 
  world, which was established for the church by J. P. Morgan and is the 
  original model for the Social Security Administration;
- The Church Insurance Corporation insures all church properties at 
  below-market prices;
- The Church Hymnal Corporation, publishes our prayer books, hymnals, 
  and other publications.
THE ANGLICAN COMMUNION

We are an independent church. Therefore, there is no body or authority outside the United States which has power to over-rule the General Convention in any matter whatsoever.

We are also members, or a “Province,” of the world-wide Anglican Communion. That means, quite simply, that we are “in communion” with the Church of England, our mother church, through its head, the Archbishop of Canterbury. “In communion,” means having a shared understanding of what it is to be the Christian Church, and a shared history and general practice. The Archbishop is considered “first among equals” with American bishops: he has primacy of honor, but not of authority.

Since 1867, Archbishops have invited all the bishops in their communion, once every ten years, (now the “8’s”) to a Lambeth Conference, named for Lambeth Palace in London, the archbishop’s official residence, though they long ago outgrew it as a venue. The Lambeth Conference usually issues some sort of statement, which represents the views of the majority present. This statement is highly influential throughout the communion, but has no legislative authority anywhere.

In recent decades the communion’s strength in members and in numbers of bishops has shifted from England and North America to Africa, where Anglican missionaries were very successful in converting large populations within the British-held territories. That means that Lambeth Conferences are tending to be more conservative socially and more evangelical theologically, since that is the make-up of the African Church. Several African provinces have declared that they are now in “diminished communion” with the Episcopal Church since the Diocese of New Hampshire elected, and our General Convention affirmed, Gene Robinson, a partnered gay man, as its bishop. (A few years ago, our differences were over their toleration of polygamy, versus our “serial polygamy” through divorce!) Presumably, now not only Bishop Robinson, but any bishop who voted for his acceptance, would not be welcome to act officially in these African provinces. In fact, however, that was already the case with regard to women: women ordained here, including the several bishops, have not been recognized as such in some African Anglican churches. We have some work to do, and probably some waiting to do, to reconcile western ideas of social progress with traditional ideas of social stability and authority. Ordinary Episcopalians will not notice any difference, however. We will still be welcome family members in any Anglican church anywhere in the world, as our Anglican brothers and sisters also are among us. And we will be made to feel at home.

Our church is much bigger than any controversy, of which we have weathered many over the years. It is far more that “politics.” Our history, our traditions, our organizational structures, our leadership—all work together to help our church operate as an institution in this world. But at the same time, we are not of this world, but all of
those things also work together to bring about our mission, which is nothing less than advancing the cause of Christ until he comes again.