

Part 5 - What is the Church?

The word “polity” when used in reference to a church has to do with its structure. Although it sounds like “politics” because it comes from the same root, the Greek word for city.

There are several ways that churches are organized. Perhaps the most familiar organization for Protestant churches is **congregational**. In congregational churches, decisions are made about the life of the church in each particular congregation. Each congregation may call its own ministers to be ordained, may buy property and erect buildings, may decide the requirements of membership and how decisions will be made among the members. **The Episcopal Church is not a congregational church.**

Since we are known as the Episcopal Church it stands to reason that our polity is “**episcopal**,” that is that we are governed by bishops, the Greek word for which is *episcopoi*. And that is a true statement, up to a point.

A purely episcopal polity would mean that bishops alone govern and administer the Church, as is the case in the Eastern Orthodox Churches. In the Episcopal Church tradition, diocesan bishops are the chief priests and pastors of their respective dioceses, and as such hold considerable authority and responsibility. Lay persons, priests, and deacons also share in the governance of the Church, each taking a rightful place in councils of the Church. This means that in addition to being episcopal in polity we are also **synodical**. Both clergy and lay persons come together in church councils to chart the course of the Church. Bringing together these two types of Church polity allows for a healthy balance between purely episcopal polity and purely democratic polity.

It is worth noting that each member Church in the **Anglican Communion** is free to have its own polity structure. What is true for the American Episcopal Church might not necessarily be true for other Communion members' churches.

The Anglican Communion is a worldwide organization made up of over 70 million members in every continent. The “provinces” in the Communion are the Anglican churches in a given country. These provinces share two characteristics: (1) They are recognized by the Archbishop of Canterbury to be the church province in communion with the see of Canterbury and (2) they worship according to a Book of Common Prayer. Early on the Anglican communion developed in countries that were once part of the British Empire, but today the communion is more widespread.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, who is primate of the Church of England and successor to Augustine of Canterbury, is the recognized spiritual head of the Communion. He is considered “first among equals.” The Church of England is still an “established” church. The Archbishop is chosen by the ruling monarch of England and the Prime Minister from a very short list compiled through an elaborate nominating process in the Church of England.

Note that at the national level, provinces are groups of dioceses. At the international level, however, a province is a national church, for example: The Philippine Episcopal Church, The Church of the Province of South Africa, The Anglican Church of Australia. Although there may be churches in the United States that use the names Anglican or Episcopal, the Episcopal Church USA is the only province of the Anglican Communion in the United States. Each province has a “primate,” sometimes called an Archbishop. Our primate is Presiding Bishop Michael Curry.

The central unit of organization in the Episcopal Church is the *diocese*. The diocese is a geographic area in which one Bishop, the Diocesan, is charged with being the chief pastor, priest, church authority and executive officer. Our diocesan bishop is Bishop Andy Doyle.

The Diocesan Bishop, also called the Ordinary, may work with other bishops. A diocese may elect a Bishop Coadjutor who will become the Diocesan bishop when that position is vacated. A diocese may also elect a Bishop Suffragan, who works with a Diocesan Bishop but does not automatically become the Diocesan when that position is vacated. Our suffragans are Bishop Jeff Fisher and Bishop Kai Ryan. An Assisting Bishop is the only kind of bishop who is selected from outside the diocese to assist a Diocesan Bishop and frequently is retired from another diocese. Our assisting bishops are Bishop Hector Monterosso and Bis

This diocesan structure exists to unify and promote the work of the church that takes place primarily in parishes, worshiping communities, and missions of the Episcopal Church that are the members of a given diocese. (Some dioceses have missions. Missions are usually start-up churches that require special diocesan support.

The parish church is the place where Christians come together to worship, work, and give to the support of the Kingdom of God.