

Episcopal 101 Session Two (Polity and Government)

Jesus of Nazareth came into our world to announce the good news of the Kingdom of God among us. Jesus encouraged the twelve and by default the “disciples” who followed to carry out the work of the Gospel by going out two by two and traveling to cities and towns and preaching the good news. This is the work of evangelization – what Jesus did not do was establish the rules and procedures for designing an institution which we call The Church. Jesus lived most of his public ministry outside of the confines of the structures of the religion of the day. The ministry of Jesus was directed toward those who most needed to hear the message of God’s redemption – that is the poor and downtrodden; the powerless and persecuted of society.

We who follow in The Church some 2000 years after Jesus’ earthly presence among us have more of a need to organize ourselves into a body which can effectively live out the Gospel commandments to love God with our whole heart, and mind and body and to love our neighbors as ourselves. The Church as we know it is founded on 4 characteristics which are summed up in a phrase which comes out of the Creed written in Nicea in the year 325: “*One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church.*” The first of these characteristics is unity. Jesus had a clear message that the desire is for the followers (which we can call the church) to be One as the Creator and the Redeemer are One. Jesus bears no responsibility for the factions into which Christianity finds itself divided. The second characteristic is holiness. This word “holy” originally meant to be set apart for the Diety, to be sacred. The Church is intended to be set apart – in the world and not of the world – removed from evil and deigned for righteousness. We who are members of the Church are to live our lives differently than those who are without the Church – we have become God’s holy people; reflecting in our lives and ministries the life and ministry of our founder; we belong to God. The third characteristic is catholicity. If you ever want to stir someone’s passions around the Church ask them what they think it means to be a member of the Church Catholic. For our context I like to change our focus from the word capitalized Catholic which we tend to associate with the Vatican and its form of church governance and pick up on the word with its context of universality. It is God’s intention that the Church be for people of every kind and context; fabulosly wealthy or desperately poor; of the royal and upper classes and of the untouchable castes; of the cream of the university crop and of the beauty school dropout. It was God’s intention that the Church be much more than a social band of local Jewish Palestinians – that in fact it was to be an organization which is to embrace all of humanity. The fourth and final characteristic is apostolicity. God’s Church was to be formed from the inner circle of the 12 followers as its first members and its leaders and it was those twelve who were to proclaim Jesus’ gospel to all the world after Jesus’ death and resurrection.

Over the course of time – and in the reality of human failings the Church has divided into a large number of communions which can be broadly categorized into two groups that are popularly labeled “Catholic” and “Protestant”. The Catholic group includes the Church of Rome, i.e. the “Latin Rite” and twenty two Eastern Catholic churches all in full communion with the Bishop of Rome who is sometimes better known as the Pope. The Reformation and post Reformation Churches use the term Catholic usually with a small

“c” and it often is used to refer to those churches who maintain that their Episcopate can be traced directly back to the apostles and that they are therefore part of a broad catholic or universal body of believers. Among those who consider themselves “catholic” and not “Roman catholic” are members of the various Eastern Orthodox churches, like the Greek and Russian Orthodox; the Oriental Orthodox; the Assyrian Church of the East, the Anglicans and some small groups such as the Old Catholic Church; the Polish National Catholic Church; The Independent Catholics and the Ancient Catholic and Liberal Catholic Churches as well as the Lutherans who claim as do the Anglicans that they are “both catholic and protestant”. The Protestant group are those churches formed out of the work of Martin Luther and John Zwigli and John Calvin among others who have formed and reformed around various doctrinal and dogmatic disagreement often connected with societal and/or governmental reorganizations. The four major traditions to emerge directly from the Reformation are the Lutheran tradition, the Reformed/Calvinist/Presbyterian tradition, the Anabaptist tradition and the Anglican Tradition. Certainly the Protestant churches were formed in reaction to the many abuses of the bishops and clergy working under the governance of the See in Rome. Once something begins to crack, the lines of that fission can spread longer and wider and the ability to control the direction of those cracks is next to impossible. The early reformers hoped to be able to influence the leadership in Rome to bring about much needed changes in the theology, liturgy and governance of the Church by the elite clergy. Institutions give up gained power very unwillingly and monumentally slowly. The Church is an institution created by God and turned over the hands of mere mortals.

In our Anglican understanding the Church of England considered herself (and so consequently do her daughter churches) not either/or but rather both/and. The essential features of a church Catholic is first that it have a three-fold ordained ministry of bishops, priest and deacons ordained by laying of hands by bishops who stand in line of succession from the apostles often referred to as apostolic succession or historic episcopate with local option. Second feature that it should have the Catholic creeds (those named “Nicene”, “Apostles” and sometimes “Athanasian” as the sufficient statement of the Christian faith). Third feature that it should have the scriptures of the Hebrew and Christian writers (oftentimes referred to as the “old” and “new” testaments) compiled as the canonical texts we more commonly refer to as the Bible as containing all things necessary for salvation. Fourth feature that it should have the dominical sacraments as instituted by Christ in Baptism and Holy Eucharist. These would be the essential elements to be used as a basis for the union (or communion) of the Episcopal Church with any other church body and outlined in the “Chicago Lambeth Quadrilateral of 1886 – 88.

The chief characteristics of a church Protestant are 1st what the word bears – that is its protest against or witness to the setting forth of the fundamental truths of the Gospel, and in particular its protest against the unique authority of the Pope or Bishop of Rome over other bishops and clergy, his right to rule all Christians, and to gather toward himself the power which has become assigned to him over the course of history. 2nd would be the use of the vernacular tongue in its worship; 3rd would be the simplicity of its ceremonial,

and 4th would be the freedom of the innsience of individual Christians in the matter of religious practice (more an ideal than a fact).

I think it could be demonstrated that the Episcopal Church fufills the essentials and characteristics of the Church both Protestant and Catholic and has consequently been called the “bridge Church.” Her general position has been that of a *via media* or middle way between two extremes. We have been described as a Church which strives to maintain in essentials unity; in non-essentials liberty and in all things charity. THE PROTESTANT EPISCOPAL CHURCH IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA is, in fact, a Protestant Church in that she both bears witness to the Gospel of God and protests against the Pope’s claim to authority over other bishops. She is, in fact, Episcopal in that she is governed by Bishops; and she is confined (with some exceptions) to the United States of America and its present or former teritorial possessions.

An Episcopal church is governed by bishops, a Presbyterian church by presbyters or elders; and a Congregational church by the congregations. The Episcopal Church, although governed by bishops, is also democratically ruled, for its final authority rests in the General Convention, which meets eveyr three years. It consists of a House of Bishops and a House of Deputies. Each diocese of the Church is entitled to send four clerical and four lay delegates into its House of Deputies. Similarly each diocese is governed by its Diocesan Convention which meets annually, with voting members including all of its ordained clergy and a certain number of lay delegates from each parish and mission based on its number of Communicants in Good Standing.

The Constitution of the Episcopal Church was drawn up in 1789 by many of the same men who helped to write the Constitution of the United States - and so there are many parallels between the two forms of Government. General Convention is similar to the Congress having bi-cameral or two equal houses; the House of Bishops corresponding to the Senate and the House of Deputies corresponding to the House of Representatives. The Presiding Bishop corresponds to the President; The President of the House of Deputies to the Vice President and the Executive Council to the Presidential Cabinate. The Dioceses correspond to the States and the Bishops to the Govenors. The administrative divisions (called by different terms in different dioceses; Deanaries; convocations or regions for example) correspond to counties, parishes correspond to cities, vestry’s to town councils and rectors or vicars to mayors or town council presidents. All the members of the church share directly or indirectly in its government through their election of representatives. In parishes members elect their vestries and their delegates to Diocesan Convention who then elect their delegates to General Convention.

The Church is comprised first of all of parishes presided over by rectors (or missions presided over by Vicars). Parishes may have one or more priests (called associates or assistants or curates) may have deacons (either vocational or transitional) and lay assistants such as musicians, youth ministers, custodians, Christian Eucation directors and secretaries. Parishes are grouped together in Dioceses presided over by bishops (explain Diocesan; Co-Adjutor, Suffragan, Assistant & Acting) There are nine

ecclesiastical “provinces” in the Episcopal Church which correspond generally (though not rigidly) to the geographic division of the Continental United States (New England, New York and New Jersey, Middle Atlantic, Southeast, Midwest, Northwest, Southwest, Pacific (which includes Alaska and Hawaii), and Province IX which includes Columbia, The Dominican Republic, Central Ecuador, Litoral Ecuador, Honduras, Puerto Rico, and Venezuela, as well as oversees dioceses in Haiti, the Convocation of American Churches in Europe (with the see in Paris), the Virgin Islands which are part of Province II and Taiwan which is part of Province VIII (or Pacific). In some Churches these would be overseen by an Archbishop – there are no archbishops in the Episcopal model of leadership nor are their cardinals to oversee the archbishops; instead there is an elected administrative head of the Church known as the Presiding Bishop, elected by the House of Bishops every nine years and must receive consent from 2/3rds majority in the House of Deputies. Prior to a change in the Canon in 1925 the presiding bishop was simply the senior member of the House of Bishops. This canonical change also had the presiding bishop relinquish any other see to which they had been elected or over which they had canonical or pastoral jurisdiction. A further change in the Canon in 1993 decreased the number of years for the term of Presiding Bishop from twelve (or the end of their 4th General Convention) to nine (or the end of their third). The Presiding Bishop is also the President of the Executive Council a body formed of elected members representing each of the provinces which supervises and stimulates the work of the Church inbetween General Convention. Council also acts as the Board of Directors of the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society whose constitution dates back to 1821 and is the legal body which holds fiduciary responsibility for the endowment funds of the Church.

A large professional staff is maintained at the Church’s headquarters (815 Second Avenue, NYC, NY) to assist the Church in carrying on the work of Christ in the five missionary fields of service (the parish, the community, the diocese, the nation and the world). In addition, there is a bishop specifically assigned for the Church’s work with the American armed forces at home and abroad. Other bishops may be appointed to special ministries by the Presiding Bishop or General Convention. The Church Medical Trust and Church Pension Fund also fall under the purview of Executive Council.

Useless information you might wish to know. “Dean” is a term used for the title of the head clergy person of the Cathedral church of the Diocese. Some dioceses are divided into regions with the title “sub-deanary” the head of a subdeanary can be titled Archdeacon. In some dioceses the Archdeacon is the bishop’s assistant (also called “canon to the ordinary” and may be responsible for clergy deployment. This individual may or may not be an ordained deacon. Titles and “pluses” for clergy. The Rev. Deacon (plus underneath) The Rev. (Plus after name); The Very Rev. (plus after name) The Rt. Rev. (plus before name) The Most Rev. (2 plus before name).

The Preamble to the Church’s Constitution begins: “The Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America, otherwise known as The Episcopal Church (which name is hereby recognized as also designating the Church), is a constituent member of the Anglican Communion, a fellowship within the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church, of those duly constituted Dioceses, Provinces and regional Churches in

communion with the See of Canterbury, upholding and propagating the historic Faith and Order as set forth in the Book of Common Prayer.”

The Anglican Communion consists of 44 member Churches in 34 Provinces, with 4 United Churches and 6 “other” Churches as well as “extra provincial dioceses” located around the globe. The Episcopal Church is an independent part of this larger whole, which includes the Church of England, the Church in Wales, the Church of Ireland, the Scottish Episcopal Church, The Lusitanian Church [Portugal] (Extra Provincial to the Archbishop of Canterbury), The Reformed Episcopal Church of Spain, (Extra Provincial to the Archbishop of Canterbury), The Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America (includes oversees dioceses in Taiwan, Hati, Columbia, Honduras, Dominican Republic and Ecuador) , the Anglican Church of Canada, Iglesia Episcopal de Cuba, la Iglesia Anglicana de Mexico, Iglesia Anglicana de la Region Central de America, The Church in the Province of the West Indies, Bermuda (Extra Provincial to Canterbury), Iglesia Anglicana del Cono Sur de America, Igreja Episcopal Anglicana do Brazil, Falkland Islands (Extra-Provincial to Canterbury), The Episcopal Church in the Philippines, The Church of the Province of Melanesia, The Anglican Church of Papua New Guniea, The Nippon Sei Ko Kai (The Anglican Communion in Japan), Hong Kong Sheng Kung Hui, The Anglican Church of Korea, Church of the Province of South East Asia, The Church of the Province of Melanesia, The Church of the Province of Myanmar (Burma), The Church of Ceylon (Sri Lanka) (Extra Provincial to the Archbishop of Canterbury), The Anglican Church in Aotearoa, New Zealand & Polynesia, The Anglican Church of Australia, The Church of Bangladesh, The Church of the Province of Myanmar (Burma), The Church of the Province of the Indian Ocean, The Church of North India (United), The Church of South India (United), The Church of Pakistan (United), The Church of the Province of Southern Africa, The Church of the Province of Central Africa, Province de L’Eglise Anglicane Du Congo, The Anglican Church of Kenya, The Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion), L’Eglise Episcopal Au Rwanda, The Episcopal Church of the Sudan, The Anglican Church of Tanzania, The Church of the Province of Uganda and The Episcopal Church in Jerusalem & The Middle East.

The Churches of the Anglican Communion are held together by bonds of affection and common loyalty, expressed through links with the “Instruments of Communion” – The Archbishop of Canterbury as the focus for unity, The Lambeth Conference, The Primates Meeting and the Anglican Consultative Council.

Approximately every ten years, at the invitation of the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Bishops of these Churches consult together at the Lambeth Conference (at Lambeth Palace) in England. The first Conference came at the instance of the colonial Church in Canada which had concerns that a number of decisions made by its convocations might cause its canons to be “different from those in force in England and Ireland, and thus cause us to drift into the status of an independent branch of The Catholic Church. They requested that the Archbishop call a national synod of the Bishops of the Anglican Church at home and abroad to meet under his leadership. Archbishop Longley assented and invited all the bishops of the Anglican Communion (then 144 in number) to meet at

Lambeth Palace in 1867. Seventy Seven of the Bishops accepted the invitation and they sat on September 24, 1867 for four days. Subsequent Conferences have been first received at Canterbury Cathedral where they are addressed by the Archbishop seated in the Chair of St. Augustine, then meets at Lambeth for five days, for deliberation on a fixed set of resolutions, adjourns and after a fortnight sits for five more days to receive reports , adopt resolutions and issue an encyclical letter. The Conference has no legislative authority over the national member Churches. Most of the succeeding conferences have emphasised the sovereignty and independence of the member Churches and call on each province to respect the decisions of the other member provinces. The thirteenth conference met in 1998 with 749 Bishops present where a controversial resolution on the compatibility of “homosexual practice” with scripture was debated and adopted 526 – 70. Afterward 182 of the Bishops world wide (including 8 Primates) issued a public appology in a pastoral statement issued to Lesbian and Gay Anglicans worldwide. Much controversy and disension among and within some member Churches of the Communion has led to speculation and rumor about what will happen in 2008. The Most Rev. Dr. Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury has begun planning and has ruled out (so far) the reopening of that resolution but emphasised that the so called “listening process” whereby diverse views and experiences of human sexuality are being collected and collated in accordance with that resolution, and has said it, “will be important to allow time for this to be presented and reflected upon in 2008”. It remains unclear at this time if the Rt. Rev. V. Gene Robinson, Bishop of New Hampshire will receive an invitation to the 2008 Conference.

Since 1979, the Archbishop of Canterbury has also invited the primates (the presiding bishop, archbishop or moderator) of each of the 38 Provinces, to join him in regular meetings for consultation, prayer and reflection on theological, social and international matters. These meetings take place approximately every eighteen months to two years.

In 1968 the Bishops of the Lambeth Conference requested the establishment of a body representative of all sections (bishops, clergy and laity) of the churches, which could coordinate aspects of international Anglican ecumenical and mission work. With the consent of the legislative bodies of all the provinces, the Anglican Consultative Council was established and has met regularly since. (aproximately every 2 to three years).