

**CHRISTIAN LIFE AND FAITH: PART IV**  
**THE STRUCTURE AND POLITY OF THE CHURCH**  
**(a handout)**

**III. Summary of the Structure and Polity of the Church**

1. The word polity refers to the structure of a church and how it is organized.
2. Examples of different kinds of polity are congregational, presbyterian, episcopal.
3. The polity of the Episcopal Church USA is Anglican, a unique blend of representative government and the unity achieved through our common worship and the role of the historic episcopacy.
4. The major unit of organization in the Episcopal Church is the diocese. It is a geographical unit under the leadership of a bishop.
5. Some dioceses have more than one bishop. The Diocesan Bishop is the chief priest, pastor, ecclesiastical authority and executive officer.
6. Only bishops confirm members of the Episcopal Church (or receive members from another church that has an historic episcopacy).
7. The Diocese is made up of all the Episcopal parish churches, mission, ministries and worshipping communities in a given geographical area. A province is a group of dioceses. A map of the Episcopal Church, showing its dioceses and its nine provinces can be found in the most recent Episcopal Church Annual.
8. The annual Diocesan Convention is the governing legislative body for the diocese. There bishops, priests, deacons and lay people meet together to plan the work of the diocese.
9. Between Diocesan Conventions, the work of the diocese goes on in departments, committees, task forces and commissions and with the help of the diocesan staff.
10. Two important interim bodies are the Diocesan Council, which carries out the work of convention, and the Standing Committee, which advises the bishop and acts as ecclesiastical authority in the absence of a bishop.
11. The diocese has other ministries including college and other chaplaincies, Hispanic ministry, ministry to the deaf, and the diocesan camp.
12. The work of the diocesan structure unifies and promotes the work of the church that takes place primarily in parishes.
13. Members of parishes are all baptized persons whose baptisms are included in the record books of the church. This includes infants.
14. Adult (over 16) confirmed members in good standing, who are known to the rector and treasurer to regularly support the mission and ministry of a parish vote in parish elections and serve on vestries.

15. Vestries work with the rector to govern a local parish and pursue the mission and ministry of that parish. In the Diocese of Alabama vestries are composed of 3 to 30 members. When there is no clergy person at a parish church, the vestry serves as the local church authority.
16. Vestries select a Senior Warden and a Junior Warden, a clerk and a treasurer.
17. Vestries report to the members of the church on their work and plans for the future at least once a year at a meeting of the parish.
18. When the parish is between rectors, the vestry works with the diocese and calls a new priest to be rector.
19. The priest called by the vestry to be in charge of a local parish and installed by the bishop for that purpose is called a “rector.” In addition to the rector there may be other priests and deacons on staff at a parish.
20. Staff clergy may serve according to terms and conditions set by the rector. The rector and vestry enter a pastoral relationship on behalf of the parish that may not be terminated except by mutual agreement, or at the instruction of the bishop.
21. Parish vestries and clergy guide the work of the local church and parish members are organized in different size churches in different ways to accomplish the work of the church.
22. The diocese has a set of church laws (canons) and a charter or constitution under which the diocese and its parishes function. Our church also has a constitution and canons at the national level. Although some parishes have bylaws, it is not necessary for parishes to have another set of laws.
23. The diocese selects clergy and lay people to send with its bishops to the General Convention of the Episcopal Church USA.
24. The General Convention meets every 3 years and conducts the business of the church at the national level.
25. There are two houses at General Convention, the House of Deputies and the House of Bishops. The House of Deputies is presided over by a President and the House of Bishops by the Presiding Bishop.
26. The Presiding Bishop also presides over the Executive Council, which meets during the time between General Conventions. The Presiding Bishop is the Chief Pastor and the Primate of the Episcopal Church.
27. Our church at the national level does its work through committees and commissions and a national church staff in New York City.
28. The Standing Liturgical Commission is an example of a commission of the ECUSA. Among other things, this commission considers changes to the *Book of Common Prayer*. As with the church’s constitution, it takes two meetings of General Convention to make changes to the *Book of Common Prayer*.
29. The Episcopal Church USA is a province in the world wide Anglican Communion, which has over 70 million members.

30. Provinces of the Anglican Communion are recognized by the Archbishop of Canterbury as in communion with the see of Canterbury and use a Book of Common Prayer for worship.
31. The Episcopal Church USA is the only province of the Anglican Communion in the United States.
32. The Archbishop of Canterbury is the spiritual leader of the Anglican Communion but he is not a pope.
33. Every 10 years the Archbishop of Canterbury invites bishops throughout the Anglican Communion to his home at Lambeth Palace for a conference.
34. This conference seeks to promote understanding and unity in the communion.
35. Sometimes the conference passes resolutions but these are not binding upon the provinces.
36. Between Lambeth Conferences the “primates” (chief pastors in a province like our Presiding Bishop) meet together; the Anglican Consultative Council carries on the work of the communion, and the staff at the Anglican Communion Office work with the Archbishop of Canterbury to continue the work of the communion.
37. From time to time the Archbishop of Canterbury appoints a commission to address particular areas of concern. One such commission is the Lambeth Commission. Most recently the Lambeth Commission released a report called the Windsor Report.
38. Anglicans value staying together in relationship even when they disagree, and are united primarily by worship.