

Scope and Authority of the General Convention
By Sally Johnson

“There shall be a General Convention of this Church” Thus opens the Constitution of the Episcopal Church. Art. I.1.

Dr. Pamela Chinnis, President of the House of Deputies from 1991-2000, once summarized General Convention’s authority in this way:

General Convention has the authority to change the documents that define us as Episcopalians: the constitution and canons and the Book of Common Prayer, along with its accompanying Hymnal and supplemental music and worship texts.

It must also authorize use of national resources and staff who coordinate various missionary, educational and social-justice ministries, and adopt a budget to support them.

. . . Historically, the convention has also considered resolutions addressing a broad range of ecclesiastical and social policy issues.

Decently and in Order, Pamela Chinnis (Forward Movement, 2000).

In order to fully understand the role of General Convention in the life of the Church it is necessary to understand the nearly unlimited scope of its authority. To those familiar with the form of government of the United States, at first blush it may appear that the form of the Church’s governance is much the same. “We often hear it said that those who drafted the Constitution of the United States walked across the street, so to speak, and drafted the Constitution on the Episcopal Church.” *Decently and in Order*, p. 1, Pamela Chinnis (Forward Movement 2000). While many of the men who were deeply involved in creating the structure to govern the new country were also involved in creating the structure for the new life of what, before the Revolution, had been congregations of the Church of England, the type of governance system chosen for each was very, very different. The governance system of the United States of America is a “federal” one in which the Constitution allocates certain limited powers to the federal government, certain powers to the States, and says that “powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people.” The Constitution of the United States of America, Amendment X.

The governance system of The Episcopal Church is a “unitary” one in which the General Convention has ALL authority. There is no limitation in the Church’s Constitution on the powers of General Convention nor does it say that any powers not granted to the General Convention are retained by the Dioceses or members. See *Many Parts, One Body*, James Dator, (Church Publishing, 2010). Unlike the United States government with its three distinct branches- legislative, judicial, and

executive- each with specific and limited powers, General Convention has all the powers, all the authority for executive, legislative and judicial functions of the Church. While most of General Convention's time is spent on legislative matters, it is not just a legislative body. It has created a system of courts (some of which are now called Disciplinary Boards) but has not chosen to create an ultimate court of appeals similar to a supreme court. General Convention has retained the authority to be the final interpreter of the Constitution and Canons. It is the ultimate judicial authority in the Church. It has also delegated some executive functions to others in the Canons but can rescind or change those in a single Convention.

General Convention has chosen over the years to delegate portions of its authority to persons holding certain positions and various bodies in the Church: i.e. the President of the House of Deputies, the Presiding Bishop, Executive Council, Dioceses, Bishops, Standing Committees, etc. However, General Convention can take back unto itself any authority it has delegated. If it chose, General Convention could do away with Bishops, dioceses, and even General Convention itself.

The clearest example of the difference between a federal and unitary form of governance is that the Constitution of the United States, in order to become effective, had to be adopted by States and can only be amended upon ratification of the amendment by three-fourths of the States. In contrast, the Constitution of the Church became effective upon its adoption by the representatives of various churches present at a meeting to organize the Church. It did not have to be adopted by the Dioceses (then known as States) to become effective. Similarly, General Convention itself amends the Church's Constitution without any requirement for ratification by the Dioceses.

At a meeting General Convention may be required or chose to:

- Approve the admission of dioceses that want to join the Episcopal Church and allow dioceses to leave the Church (generally to form an autonomous province of the Anglican Communion such as the Philippines or Mexico that were previously dioceses of this Church).
- Set the criteria and process for the selection of Deacons, Priests and Bishops and define their respective duties and responsibilities.
- Set the criteria and process for the restriction of or removal from ministry of Deacons, Priests and Bishops.
- Adopt the budget for the Episcopal Church for each triennium. The budget is a detailed line item budget.
- Elect persons to various Church positions including members of Executive Council, officers of General Convention and boards of related entities such as

the Board of Examining Chaplains and the Trustees of the Church Pension Fund.

- Approves the Calendar of the Church year, the Lectionary and Psalter.
- Authorizes the translations of the Holy Scriptures from which Lessons are to be read.
- Give specific assignments to Executive Council and Interim Bodies to accomplish during the triennium, in addition to their canonical duties.
- Adopt resolutions expressing the mind of the Church to the world or to the dioceses and asking for specific action by the designated body. These are often on issues of social justice such as the economy, poverty, war, health care, violence, the environment and human rights.

Discussion Questions

- 1) “There shall be a General Convention of this Church” Do you think the fact that the Constitution starts with this statement is significant? Why or why not?
- 2) “We often hear it said that those who drafted the Constitution of the United States walked across the street, so to speak, and drafted the Constitution on the Episcopal Church.” What does this statement mean to you?
- 3) What impact do you think the belief that the governance structure of the Church is basically the same as that of the United States has on your own or others’ understanding of the role of General Convention?
- 4) Is the idea of a “unitary” governance system new to you? Does it affect or change your view of the governance of the Church or of General Convention in particular?
- 5) What constraints, if any, do you think there are or should be on General Convention’s authority? Are there topics, issues, subjects or questions that should be decided by other bodies in the Episcopal Church (without General Convention being able to change them) or in the Church universal? If so, what and why.

Additional Resources

Decently and In Order
Pamela P. Chinnis
Forward Movement (2000)

Many Parts, One Body
James Dator with Jan Nunley
Church Publishing (2010)

An Introduction to the Episcopal Church
J.B. Bernardin
Morehouse (1983)