

**White Paper – A Short History of the House of Deputies**  
**By the Rev'd Canon Dr. Gregory Straub, Secretary of the House of Deputies**

It is impossible to overstate the difficulties in which the Anglican Church found itself in the mainland North American colonies during and after the Revolutionary War. Before the war the church was established by law in several colonies (often against the wishes of the population), and newly empowered state legislative assemblies deprived the church of property, and vestries of civil power, as they viewed the Church of England (with justification) as an extension of the English crown. Many clergy in the colonies chose not to break their vow of loyalty to the king made at ordination and, instead, emigrated to England, Canada or the Caribbean islands. The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts and other missionary societies ceased support of the clergy. With few clergy (and no way to secure more, as ordination was controlled by the English bishops), leadership of the church fell to the church's lay members. (Vestries in the colonies already exercised authority undreamt of in England.) Beginning in 1780, statewide conventions organized for the purpose of reclaiming churches and continuing the worship and discipline of the Church of England. In 1784, the Rev. William White, Rector of Christ and St. Peter's Churches in Philadelphia, and a patriot of unchallenged loyalties—he had served as Chaplain to the Continental Congress—wrote a pamphlet urging the reorganization of the Church of England in the colonies, changing only those disciplines that the reality of independence dictated.

White proposed governing the former Church of England in independent North America by council, replacing Parliament with a convention. (In the 18<sup>th</sup> century all members of the House of Commons were required to sign an oath of conformity to the Church of England, so all members were, at least nominally, Anglicans. English bishops sat in the House of Lords. Parliament, which governed the Church of England, was, therefore, a body limited to Anglicans.) He proposed uniting the conventions of the former colonies into a national church, governed by a convention comprised of lay persons and priests. The first conventions met under White's leadership to work out a constitution and a first Book of Common Prayer.

The first General Convention under its new constitution met in 1789. Equality of representation between lay persons and priests was enshrined from the beginning, as was the equal representation of states. (The argument for equal representation of states was the same as the one leading to the adoption of the Constitution of the United States. Without protection for the small states—e.g., equal representation in the Senate and ratification of amendments to the Constitution by states—they would not have joined the Union.) To protect the rights of states with fewer church members the constitution made provision for votes by states—the words “state” and “diocese” were synonymous in the church's early years—for major issues. This provision was the ancestor of our votes by orders in which each diocese casts one clerical and one lay vote on amendments to the constitution, revisions of the Book of Common Prayer and other weighty matters.

To encourage the church in New England to join the General Convention, provision was made in the church's first constitution for a House of Bishops at such time in the future as there would be at least three bishops. Because the organizing conventions and the first General Convention under its constitution did not include bishops, the House of Deputies is sometimes referred to as the senior house (by date of establishment). After

the passage of the constitution the election of bishops required the consent of both houses of the General Convention, and consecrations could take place only during a meeting of the convention. When this proved unworkable, the convention voted in 1799 to allow diocesan standing committees to vote consent in place of the House of Deputies, except when the election fell within a reasonable time before a meeting of the General Convention.

Even after the population of the House of Bishops, the House of Clerical and Lay Deputies could override a “no” vote in the House of Bishops by a 4/5’s vote. This provision was amended in 1808, allowing the bishops to veto legislation passed by deputies, but only if they did so within three days of passage. (The House of Bishops did not get parity with the House of Deputies until 1901, when the “three days clause” was deleted from a revision of the constitution.) Since then, for legislation to be enacted, it must be passed in identical language by both houses. If either house fails to concur, the resolution does not pass.

The House has undergone many changes in its history. For one thing, it has grown from 44 potential deputies in 1789 to today’s house of 888, if all jurisdictions entitled to representation were to send full deputations. Yet, even at this size, it would not be its largest, which was in 1985, when the dioceses of Mexico, Central America and the Philippines were still represented, but before the erection of the Dioceses of Ecuador Litoral and Eastern Michigan and the admission of the Diocese of Venezuela.

The President of the House of Deputies was always a priest until the election of the first lay president, the Hon. Owen J. Roberts, retired Associate Justice of the Supreme Court, who was elected in 1946. Likewise, the President was also a male deputy until the election of Dr Pamela Chinnis in 1991. Although there has never been a provision specifying the order of ministry of the secretary, there has been only one lay Secretary of the House of Deputies, the Hon. Francis Hopkinson, signer of the Declaration of Independence, who served as Secretary of the Convention of 1786, before adoption of the church’s constitution.

Question 1: The equal involvement of clergy and laity in the governance of the church dates to its independence. What message does this cooperation between clergy and laity convey to the world outside the church? Does this icon of church governance further the mission of the church, or does it hinder it?

Question 2: The vote by orders, which acts as a conservative bias in the church’s voting life, is as old as the church’s independence, yet some have questioned its continuance, favoring instead a super majority (say 2/3’s of the House) for those votes now requiring a vote by orders, as it would be less time consuming. What do you think?

Question 3: The House of Deputies is a diverse body. Is there any danger to that diversity, if the house were to be downsized by decreasing the size of deputations?

Question 4: It is one of the House of Deputies’ oldest rights to consent to the consecration of bishops (if the election occurs within a window of 120 to 30 days before convention

convenes). In 2009, the convention passed a first reading, surrendering this right. What are the pros and cons of the House giving up this right?

Question 5: What do you think are the absolute essentials of the House without which the House would no longer be itself?