

Summary of Episcopal Church governance

All major decisions affecting the life of the Episcopal Church are made jointly by lay people, clergy and bishops.

Parishes elect a vestry to govern the affairs of the parish in conjunction with the rector, who is sought and elected by the vestry.

Parishes also elect lay delegates to attend an annual diocesan convention with all the diocese's clergy and bishops. Diocesan conventions vote on the major policy decisions of the diocese, set the budget for the diocese and, at times, make statements about issues in the church and in civil society. Diocesan conventions also elect bishops to help lead their dioceses.

Diocesan conventions elect deputies as members of the House of Deputies of the Episcopal Church's triennial General Convention. The General Convention sets the mission priorities, budget and policies of the Episcopal Church for the next three years. It approves changes to the Church's Constitution and Canons, and broadly defines the standards of worship.

The House of Deputies is the older of the two Houses of General Convention. It has equal numbers of clergy and lay deputies selected by each of the 110 dioceses and one convocation of Episcopal Church congregations in Europe. The first session of the first General Convention, held in 1785, consisted only of the House of Deputies. It adopted a constitutional provision establishing a separate House of Bishops, which joined the Convention at its second session in 1789. The bi-cameral nature of the General Convention continues today.

There are approximately 300 bishops eligible to sit in the House of Bishops. The Presiding Bishop (currently the Most Rev. Katharine Jefferts Schori) and the President of the House of Deputies (currently Bonnie Anderson), both of whom are elected, oversee the legislative process in their Houses. General Convention decisions take the form of resolutions agreed to by both the House of Deputies and the House of Bishops.

Resolutions come to Convention from the groups which carry out the work authorized by the previous convention as well as from bishops, dioceses, provinces (geographic collections of diocese), and deputies. Convention legislative committees hear public testimony on all resolutions before they come to the houses.

Deputies and bishops cannot be instructed to vote one way or another by their diocese. They agree to come to Convention with an open heart so that they can prayerfully listen to others and be led by the Holy Spirit. And, they cannot refuse to vote on an issue.

An Executive Council carries out the programs and policies adopted by the General Convention. The council is composed of 40 members: 20 of whom (four bishops, four priests or deacons and 12 lay people) are elected by General Convention, 18 of whom (one clergy and one lay person) are elected by each of the nine provincial synods (groups of dioceses), plus the Presiding Bishop and the President of the House of Deputies.

The House of Bishops often meets between General Conventions and its agenda is limited by the Constitution and Canons. It does not have any legislative power so it cannot initiate or amend the programs, budget, or Constitution and Canons of the church as adopted by General Convention. It does have some responsibilities for the discipline of bishops and it sometimes issues statements on matters affecting the general state of the church or in response to the needs of contemporary society.