

The slide features a blue header with a shield icon on the left containing a red cross and a white cross with a blue pattern. The text in the header reads "Session One: The Polity of the Episcopal Church". Below the header, the main text asks "How do we organize ourselves as the Body of Christ in the Episcopal Church?". A small graphic on the right says "come and grow" with a calendar icon showing "2006" and a grassy base. At the bottom, it says "Session One: The Polity of the Episcopal Church" and "1".


Session One: The Polity of the Episcopal Church

How do we organize ourselves as the Body of Christ in the Episcopal Church?

come and grow
2006

Session One: The Polity of the Episcopal Church 1

This presentation is taken from Bishop Hollingsworth's (Diocese of Ohio) regional conversations about the polity of the Episcopal Church, enhanced for a focus on the General Convention. In sessions two and three, we'll be looking more closely at the General Convention and how it does its work.




Three forms of Church polity

“Episcopal”—having bishops and dioceses.

“Congregational”—autonomous congregations.

“Presbyterial”—having “elders,” but no “priests” or bishops.




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Speaking in general terms, there are three types of church polity: Episcopal, Congregational, and Presbyterian.


“Polity” means the particular way in which an organization makes decisions and governs itself.



"Episcopal" churches

Examples: Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Anglican.

- ❖ Authority is vested in bishops, who make decisions of doctrine.
- ❖ Bishops are the chief ministers, who then ordain other ministers (priests and deacons).
- ❖ The New Testament makes references to Deacons first, then to Bishops, and eventually, Priests.




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There is the "**episcopal**" form (the small "e" is intentional), where Church authority is vested in bishops who make major decisions of doctrine and direction for the churches in their charge.


- In this system the chief ministers of the church are bishops. Other ministers are presbyters (or priests) and deacons. All these are mentioned in the NT.
- The apostles are said to have practiced ordination by the laying on of hands (Acts 6:6; 1 Tim. 4:14), and they appointed elders in the churches they founded (Acts 14:23), presumably with the laying on of hands.
- The organization of the church subsequent to NT days supports this view. In the time of Ignatius the threefold ministry was clearly in existence in Asia Minor. By the end of the second century it is attested for Gaul and Africa by the writings of Irenaeus and Tertullian.



"Congregational" churches

Examples: United Church of Christ, some Baptist churches

- ❖ Each congregation can decide its own doctrine and positions.
- ❖ Congregations may join loose associations for mutual benefit, but not to have authority over one another.
- ❖ Congregationalism appeared after the Reformation.




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There is the "**congregational**" form, where final authority for belief and practice rests with the members of the individual congregation.


- As the name implies, this puts the emphasis on the place of the congregation. The chief scriptural buttresses of this position are the facts that Christ is the head of his church (Col. 1:18, etc.) and that there is a priesthood of all believers (1 Pet. 2:9). Nor is it any less fundamental that the way into the very holiest of all presences is open to the humblest believer (Heb. 10:19 - 20).
- Congregationalism as a system appeared after the Reformation. Some among the Reformed decisively rejected the idea of a state church and saw believers as forming a "gathered church," those who have heard the call of Christ and have responded.



"Presbyterial" churches

Example: The Presbyterian Church (USA) and its off-shoots.

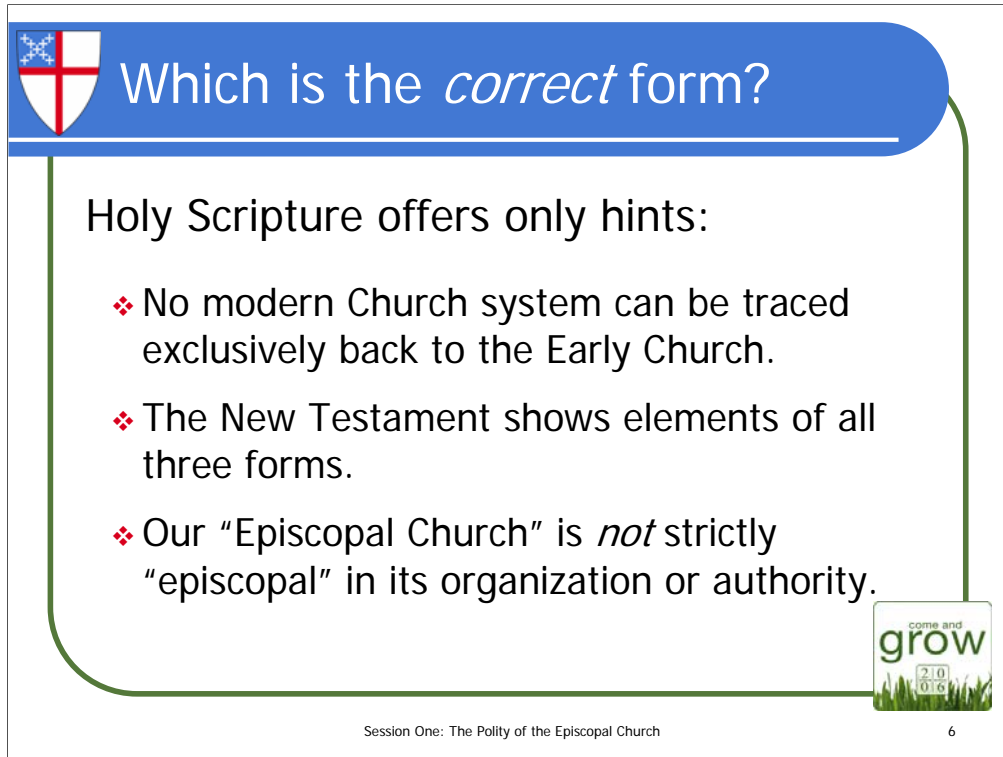
- ❖ No bishops, but congregations are organized into regional "presbyteries" and synods.
- ❖ Elected church officials, lay and ordained, make major decisions for congregations.
- ❖ Annual national "General Assembly" makes policy for the whole denomination.




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There is "**presbyterial**" form, (Frame 4) where the authority of ruling the church is vested in elected church officials, who make the major decisions on the behalf of the congregation.


- This system emphasizes the importance of elders, or presbyters. In the NT presbyters occupy an important place. They are identical with the bishops and form the principal local ministry. In each place there appears to have been a group of presbyters who formed a kind of college or committee which was in charge of local church affairs. That is the natural conclusion to which exhortations like Heb. 13:17 and 1 Thess. 5:12 - 13 point.
- From the account of the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 we see that the presbyters occupied an important place at the very highest levels of the early church. From the Reformation onward the presbyterial form of church government has been of very great importance.



 Which is the *correct* form?

Holy Scripture offers only hints:


- ❖ No modern Church system can be traced exclusively back to the Early Church.
- ❖ The New Testament shows elements of all three forms.
- ❖ Our "Episcopal Church" is *not* strictly "episcopal" in its organization or authority.



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A consideration of all the evidence leaves us with the conclusion that it is impossible to exclusively read back any single modern system into the apostolic age.


- If we are determined to shut our eyes to all that conflicts with our own system we may find it there, but scarcely otherwise.
- It is better to recognize that in the NT church there were elements that were capable of being developed into the episcopal, presbyterian, and congregational systems and which in point of fact have so developed.
- Our church, though it shares its name with the "episcopal" form, is *not* strictly episcopal in its organization and structure of authority.



The Episcopal Church, USA

Effectively blends “episcopal” and “presbyterial” forms.

- ❖ Shared decision making between clergy and lay leaders.
- ❖ Broadens the base for our discernment and authority.



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Our church, the Episcopal Church, effectively blends the episcopal and presbyterial forms.

- This structure shares decision-making between clergy and lay,
- and in so doing broadens our base of discernment and authority.



We all have equal authority— through Baptism

We believe that authority is given to us
through baptism:

- ❖ The Holy Spirit is active in everyone's life.
- ❖ Everyone has a voice.
- ❖ Everyone has gifts to give.
- ❖ True for everyone: Communicants, vestry members, priests, and bishops.

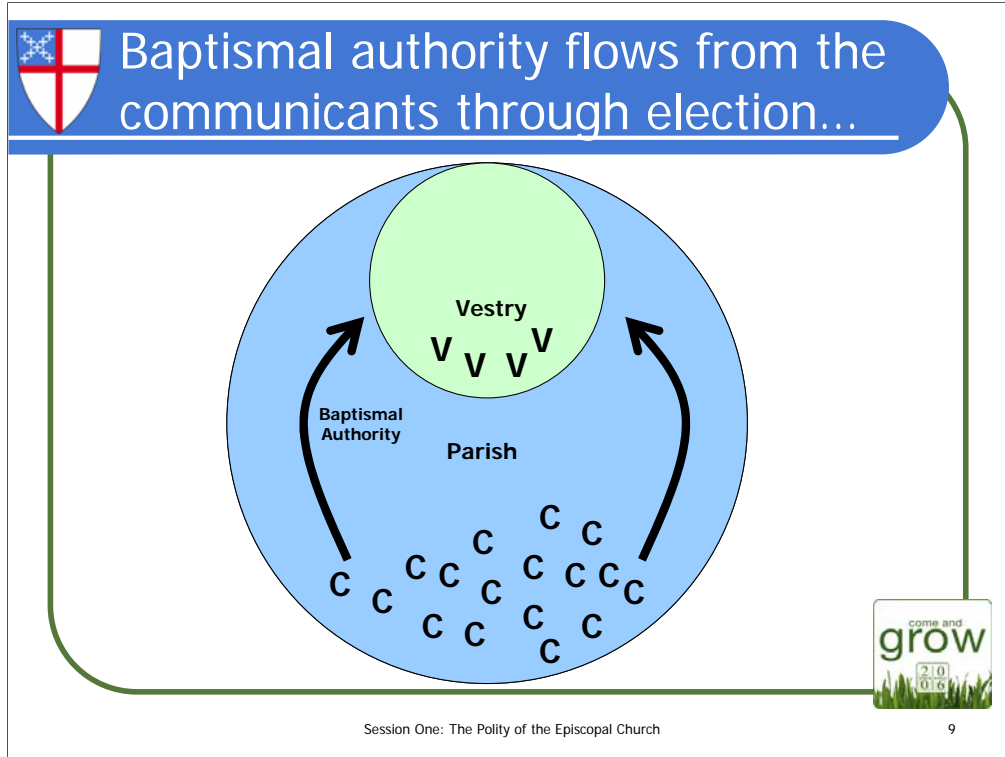


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We believe that the Holy Spirit is active in the lives and voices of all Christian people; and that the authority of the Church is grounded in our baptisms.

That is true for all people: Communicant. Vestry member. Priest. Bishop.

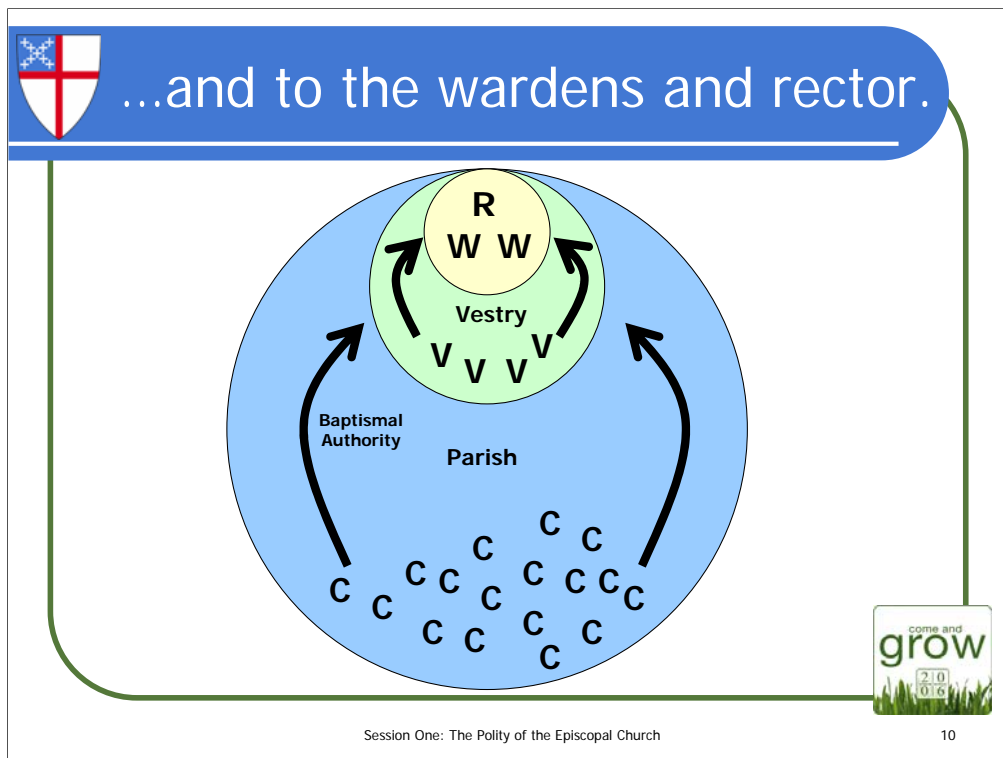


The process of sharing Baptismal authority begins with the “communicants” in the parish.

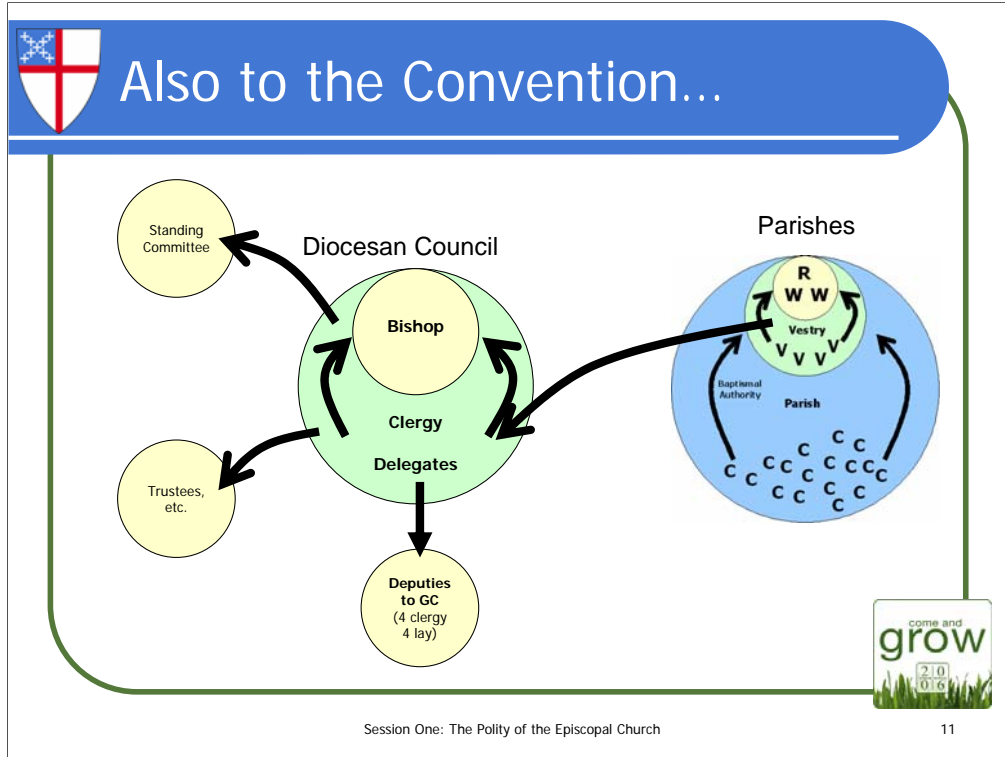
At the parish annual meeting, the communicants in good standing of the parish vote to elect new members of the vestry, thereby investing some of their baptismal authority in the vestry.

When a communicant, “C,” votes in the annual meeting of her parish, she invests SOME of her baptismal authority in the Vestry.

The vestry members receive that authority as responsibility to make their appointed decisions on behalf of the parish.



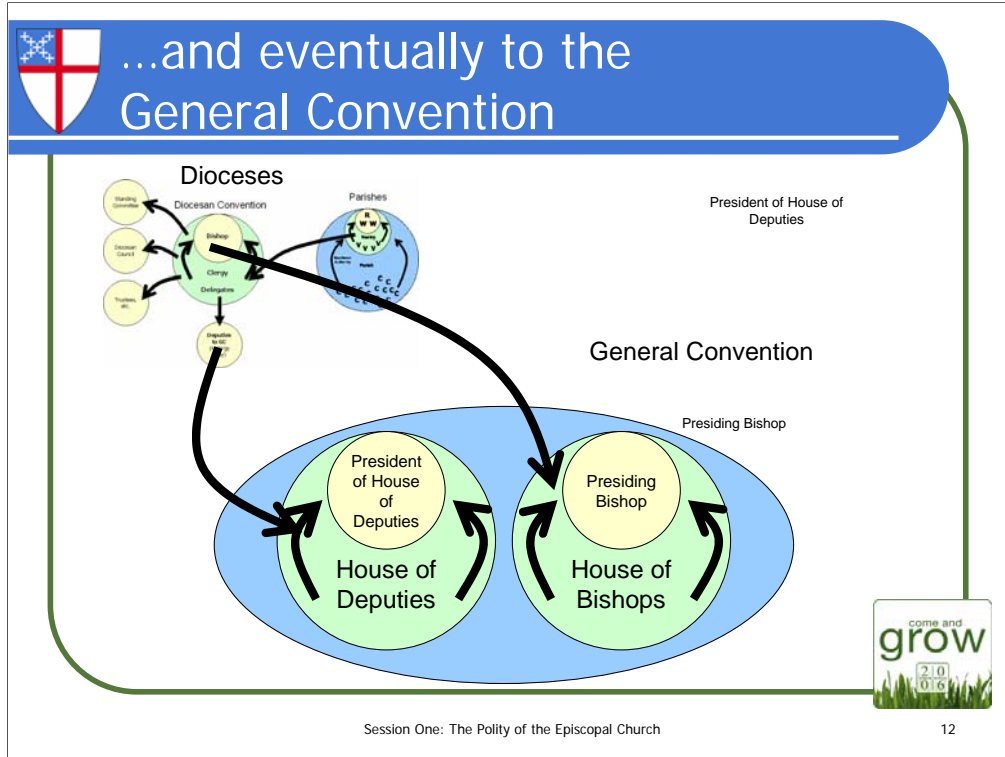
A vestry's election of wardens and appointment of a rector are further examples of investing SOME of one's baptismal authority in others.



The congregation also invests baptismal authority in the delegates it sends to the annual Diocesan Convention.


Delegates have seat, voice, and vote and are charged with

- Electing a bishop (when required)
- Passing the diocesan budget
- Electing leaders of the diocese (Standing Committee, Diocesan Council, Trustees, etc.), who in turn receive the baptismal authority as responsibility to make their particular decisions on behalf of the diocese
- Setting policy and canon law for the diocese.
- and every three years, electing the Diocese of West Texas deputies to General Convention.




When the Diocesan Bishop(s) and the Deputies attend the General Convention, they take with them the baptismal authority invested in them to make decisions for the Episcopal Church on behalf of the Diocese that sent them.

They in turn elect the President of the House of Deputies (from among the deputies) and the Presiding Bishop (from among the bishops).

 Authority sits in the pews

The Episcopal Church is a representative democracy:


- ❖ We surrender our authority to others through election of representatives.
- ❖ They make decisions on our behalf.
- ❖ We always have the choice to continue to elect some, or elect others.
- ❖ This approach to leadership is uncommon in the Anglican Communion.



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In OUR church (ECUSA), the authority is in the pews—not over us, coming down, but among us, coming up.


- When we invest our baptismal authority in others through election, we “surrender” our authority to them, which they then receive as “responsibility” to exercise that authority on our behalf.
- As in any representative democracy, we surrender our authority to others by election, so that those whom we elect can make decisions on our behalf, for the good of the whole.”
- When we believe those to whom we have surrendered some of our authority are acting in accordance with God’s good will, we may choose to continue to elect them. When we are concerned about that, we may choose to elect others.



Does this approach seem familiar?

The Episcopal Church's polity was devised the same people who wrote the United States Constitution.

- ❖ Dioceses have a lot of independence, like States.
- ❖ General Convention has two houses, like the Congress.
- ❖ Leaders are elected.
- ❖ Authority and power are shared, to provide checks and balances.

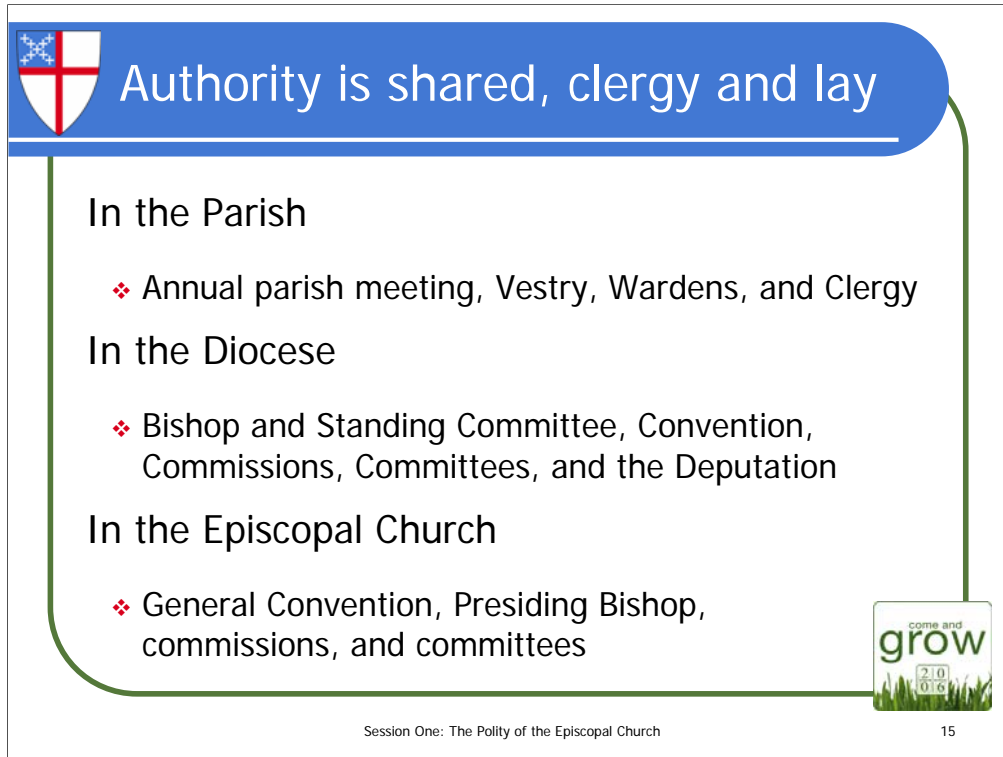



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As an historical note, the Episcopal Church's polity was devised by the same people—the same, specific people—who crafted the American Constitution,

- so the resemblance of the Episcopal polity to the United States federal government
- (dioceses being like states, houses of General Convention being like the two houses of Congress, and so forth) is no coincidence.



 Authority is shared, clergy and lay

In the Parish


- ❖ Annual parish meeting, Vestry, Wardens, and Clergy

In the Diocese

- ❖ Bishop and Standing Committee, Convention, Commissions, Committees, and the Deputation

In the Episcopal Church


- ❖ General Convention, Presiding Bishop, commissions, and committees



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On every level of our church, authority is shared between lay people and ordained people.


- Parish Level – Annual Parish Meeting, Vestry, Wardens and Clergy share authority.
- Diocesan Level – Bishop and Standing Committee, Diocesan Convention (voting in bi-cameral houses: clergy and lay), Diocesan Commission, other Diocesan committees
- National Level – General Convention (voting in bicameral houses: bishops and deputies), Presiding Bishop, commissions and committees



Issues, also, rise from the pews

The difficult issues the Episcopal Church has faced have come as a result of Episcopalians asking questions:


- ❖ Why should women not serve as clergy? Or as a warden? Or as a member of vestry?
- ❖ Why can't people of different colors worship together?
- ❖ Does our common prayer still speak to our community as well as it did fifty years ago?



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And it's not just the authority that begins in the pews, but the issues of the day as well, when communicants ask questions.

- For example, imagine the middle of last century: one girl asking why, if she feels called, she cannot serve as a priest, a vestry person, a warden;
- One person asking why people of color can't take part in our worship.
- People reflecting on whether the Book of Common Prayer speaks to today's Christians as well as it used to.
- Similar questions that will move us into our future are being asked in the pews today.




It doesn't work like this everywhere

Throughout most of the Anglican Communion:

- ❖ Bishops make decisions, and hand them down.
- ❖ No such thing as a “House of Deputies” or Standing Committee.
- ❖ No laypeople in diocesan leadership.

In Canada, New Zealand, and few others, it's more like in the United States.

We were organized this way 100 years before the idea of an “Anglican Communion” began.




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Decisions are not made in this way all over the Anglican Communion.

- In the Church of England and across Africa and Latin America, bishops make decisions, and then hand them down to the communicants.
- Throughout most of the Communion, there is no such thing as a “House of Deputies” or a Standing Committee that includes laypeople in the decision making process.
- In the Episcopal Church, and in a few other Anglican provinces, such as Canada and New Zealand, authority is in the pews; it is manifested through our relationships. So that every communicant has a voice of authority and can participate in the Church’s decisions.



Questions for reflection

- ❖ Of today's presentation, is anything new or surprising to you?
- ❖ What are the benefits and challenges of making decisions the way we do?
- ❖ How can people in the congregation participate more fully in the Church's decision making?
- ❖ What would help us to participate more fully?



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1. How much of what you heard in the presentation was new to you? Did any of it surprise you?
2. What are the benefits and challenges to having matters be decided by large groups of both clergy and lay people?
3. What is the most faithful Christian thing for a church member to do when she or he significantly disagrees with a decision or action the church has taken?
4. How can people on the parish level more faithfully fulfill their roles in our Church's process of discernment and decision-making?
5. What would help you better fulfill those roles?