

The Episcopal Church: History, Church Government and Ecumenical Relations

From its beginnings until today, the Episcopal Church has been marked by both continuity and change, by disparate opinions and common prayer. As the Episcopal shield shows, with the Cross of St. Andrew standing alongside the Cross of St. George, the Church emerged from the Church of England, but was also heavily influenced by the Scottish Episcopal Church, from which we took our name. In the aftermath of American revolution, the Church was born alongside a new republic, with no official connection to the State but with an influence on civil society that often belied its size. Through the years, the Episcopal Church has confronted conflicts within and without, struggled to embrace an increasingly multinational and multiethnic identity, and sought to embrace its role as partners and leaders in a worldwide Anglican Communion.

Today, the Episcopal Church is present in seventeen countries, including seven in Europe. The church's formation and ethos, developed from a particular history beginning with arrival of Anglican Christianity with English colonists in 1607 and its further development in what would become the United States of America. In the 19th century, the Episcopal Church began mission work outside the United States and the current dioceses beyond the borders of the United States reflect that legacy. This paper is complementary to the longer paper¹ on development of governing structures in the Episcopal Church by the Rt Rev Mark D.W. Edington.

History

THE EARLY PERIOD

The founding of Church of England congregations on the North American continent spread steadily following the first recorded celebration of Holy Communion in the Colonies in 1607 in Jamestown, Virginia. This conformed to the typical colonial expansion pattern of the English Church in other parts of the world at the time, grounded in the then accepted "doctrine of discovery," the legacy of which has since been rejected by the Episcopal Church.² In the English colonial period from 1607 until 1783, there was a form of legal Anglican establishment in the colonies of Virginia, Maryland, North and South Carolina, Georgia, and New York. The New England colonies of Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New Hampshire had Congregationalist/Calvinist established churches into the early 19th century. Only Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey did not have an established church. All Church of England parishes throughout the colonies, regardless of establishment, were under the authority of the Bishop of London, as no bishops were provided for the colonies. The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG) provided clergy and financial support, especially in the colonies where the Church was not established and conducted mission work among native peoples.

During the American Revolution (1776-1783), most northern clergy tried to maintain ties with the SPG and to support England in the war, while those in the South tended to be more sympathetic to the Revolution.

¹ Edington, Mark D.W., *Episcopal Views of Episkopé: Sources, Significance, and Expression* available [here](#)

² See <https://doctrineofdiscovery.org/the-episcopal-church-usa/>

The "American Revolution left the Anglican parishes shattered, stripped of most of their financial support, weakened by the flight of many clergy and thousands of members, with a number of buildings destroyed and property lost," notes Powel Mills Dawley in *Our Christian Heritage*.³

After the war, support by the SPG to the newly independent colonies was cut off, and public (US government) support of churches was withdrawn because of the newly accepted principle of the separation of church and state.

ESTABLISHMENT PERIOD

By 1784, the former Church of England churches in most states agreed on the need to (1) draft a binding constitution for the whole church; (2) revise the English Book of Common Prayer to make it appropriate for use in the U.S. church; and (3) obtain consecration of bishops in historic succession to give the U.S. church episcopal oversight and ministry.

Church leaders were split on whether the U.S. church could proceed without bishops in historic succession and disagreed on various other points.⁴ On March 25, 1783, 10 Connecticut clergy elected Samuel Seabury as their bishop. Seabury traveled to England, but English law prevented the consecration of any clergyman who would not take the oath of allegiance to the English crown. Seabury then sought consecration in the Scottish Episcopal Church, where he was ordained on Nov. 14, 1784, in Aberdeen. Thus, Seabury became the first bishop of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America, the name the newly independent church adopted after the Revolution.

By 1786, English church leaders helped change the law so the Church of England could offer episcopal consecration to those churches outside England. On Feb. 4, 1787, the Archbishop of Canterbury and three other English bishops consecrated William White as bishop of Pennsylvania and Samuel Provoost as bishop of New York. Soon after, James Madison was consecrated in England as the bishop of Virginia. When Seabury, White, Provoost, and Madison joined to consecrate Thomas Claggett (Bishop of Maryland) in Trinity Church in New York in 1790, the episcopate in the U.S. church could declare its independence from Great Britain.

An assembly of the U.S. church met in Philadelphia in 1789 to unify all Episcopalians in the United States into a single national church. A constitution was adopted along with a set of canon laws. The English Book of Common Prayer was revised (principally in removing prayers for the English monarch). This first U.S. Book of Common Prayer was based mostly on the English Book of Common Prayer of 1662. Its consecration prayer in the Holy Communion service was based on the Scottish Book of Common Prayer of 1764.

The new constitution provided for annual diocesan conventions with the bishop of the diocese as presiding officer. A national General Convention was established, composed of two legislative houses, the House of Deputies, composed of lay and clergy representatives, elected by their dioceses, as well as a House of Bishops.

As the United States began its westward expansion, the church followed. Missionary bishops went into these territories establishing parishes and congregations.

³ Dawley, Powel Mills, *Our Christian Heritage* (Morehouse-Gorham, 1959), p. 178

⁴ See Edington above

CIVIL WAR PERIOD AND ITS LEGACY

After the state of South Carolina seceded from the Union in 1860, 10 more Southern states followed, creating the Confederate States of America. In 1861, the Protestant Episcopal Church in the Confederate States of America was established. The Confederate church continued until 1866, after the Civil War had ended, when the Southern dioceses were reincorporated into the Episcopal Church. The Episcopal Church in the pre-civil war period tolerated slavery, and many Southern bishops and some Northern bishops were openly supportive of the institution. The Confederate church endorsed slavery, racial subjugation, and white supremacy, often using biblical texts as their reasoning. This legacy of white supremacy continued in parts of the Episcopal Church for more than a century after the war's end in 1865.

Many leaders of the Confederacy were Episcopalians, including Confederate President Jefferson Davis and General Robert E. Lee. Bishop Leonidas Polk, Bishop of Louisiana, previously missionary bishop to the Southwest, was himself a slave owner and became a general in the Confederate Army. He died in battle in 1864 and was revered in the South, due to his extensive missionary activities and founding scores of churches.

The "lost cause" movement, which idealized the pre-Civil War South, deeply affected the Episcopal Church. Confederate leaders were honored in churches with memorials, statues, and stained-glass windows. There were some churches named for General Lee and Bishop Polk.

The University of the South at Sewanee, Tennessee, an institution owned by 28 Southern Episcopal dioceses, was founded in 1857 by Southern bishops with the goal to create a Southern university free of Northern influences. Its early benefactors were slave owners and slave traders. The University was open only to White men until 1961 (although Black men were admitted to the School of Theology in 1953). In recent decades much has been done to acknowledge and reckon with this legacy. In June 2020, Reuben E. Brigety II was appointed President and Vice Chancellor of the University, the first African American to hold this position. His brief tenure before being nominated as Ambassador to South Africa, was marked by racially motivated attacks, a reality that the board is beginning to confront.

Even in the North, the slave trade benefitted Episcopal churches and its most prominent members. Legal segregation remained in parts of the US and continued throughout the church until the 1960s. Indeed, the full extent of the legacy of slavery and white supremacy in the church is only now being fully acknowledged and examined.

The Church's largest seminary, Virginia Theological Seminary in Alexandria, VA, has recently begun paying reparations to descendants of slaves formerly owned by the seminary. Discussions and resolutions for reparations are currently under consideration in many parts of the church.

Church Polity

The Church's basic organizational system has remained largely what it was from its beginnings, albeit with revisions and amendments along the way.

Each self-supporting congregation (parish) elects its lay governing board (vestry) which together with the rector, are responsible for the temporal and spiritual welfare of the parish, while always under the direction of the diocesan bishop. Clergy and lay representation from all congregations meet annually in the diocesan convention to conduct the business of the diocese. The convention elects the bishop to serve until retirement, resignation, or death. A Standing Committee (in the Convocation of Episcopal

Churches in Europe "Council of Advice"), elected by the diocesan convention advises the bishop and is required to give consent in areas defined by canons. It also serves as the ecclesiastical authority in the absence of a bishop. Its members are evenly divided, clerical and lay.

GENERAL CONVENTION

The dioceses in The Episcopal Church meet together triennially in General Convention. All bishops are members of the House of Bishops, and the House of Deputies is made up of equal numbers of clergy and laity. Each diocese (and also the Convocation of Episcopal Churches in Europe) is entitled to four lay and four clergy deputies, who are elected by their diocesan conventions. Decisions at General Convention are made by joint-concurrence of the House of Deputies (in some cases in separate votes by clergy and laity) and the House of Bishops.

The Executive Council, operates as the board of the church, making necessary decisions between General Conventions. Its members are elected by General Convention with representation by bishops, clergy, and lay leaders. The Presiding Bishop presides over the House of Bishops and is also president of Executive Council. The President of the House of Deputies (who can be a lay person) serves as vice president of the Council

The dioceses of The Episcopal Church (currently 109) and three regional areas are organized into nine provinces, each governed by a synod. Europe belongs to Province II, together with New York, New Jersey, Haiti, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands. The Episcopal Church is a part of the Anglican Communion.

OUTSIDE THE UNITED STATES

Beginning in the mid 19th century mission dioceses were established outside the United States. This process developed in parallel with mission work of the Church of England in other parts of the world. Many of these former mission areas have formed independent Provinces within the Anglican Communion, including Mexico, the Philippines, and Brazil. Others have remained dioceses in the Episcopal Church, including Haiti, Honduras, the Dominican Republic, Colombia, Ecuador, Taiwan, and Venezuela. The Episcopal Church in Cuba was a Diocese of the Episcopal church until the Cuban revolution of 1961. In 2018 the Cuban Church was readmitted to the Episcopal Church.

In Europe, congregations were formed in cities with a significant American expatriate presence, while the Church of England also established chaplaincies in areas with a strong British presence, or in connection with their embassies. The Convocation of Episcopal Churches in Europe has its origin in an act of General Convention in 1859. Continental Europe is the only part of the world where the Episcopal Church and the Church of England have partially overlapping jurisdictions. In Germany, after World War II, the Episcopal Church is present almost exclusively in the former US occupation zone, while the Church of England is mainly present elsewhere. The first American Episcopal Church in Europe parish was formed in Paris in 1858 (separating from an American Protestant Church in Paris with origins to 1815), and the most recent mission to be recognized is St. Michael's in Thuringia, Germany, in 2020.

MODERN PERIOD

General Conventions of the 1950s and 1960s ignored increasing pressure from women seeking ordination as priests and deacons in the church. Only in 1970 did The General Convention permit

women to be seated as lay deputies in the House of Deputies. That same year the Convention voted to admit women to the diaconate and granted women serving as deaconesses the same status as male deacons. In July of 1974, 11 women deacons were ordained to the priesthood in Philadelphia. The House of Bishops declared the ordinations invalid, saying that the "necessary conditions for valid ordination "were not met. In 1975, five women were ordained in Washington, DC, joining the "Philadelphia 11".

After 1976, the Philadelphia and Washington ordinations were regularized when the General Convention voted to allow women to be eligible for ordination to both the priesthood and the episcopate. Barbara Harris, the first woman bishop in the Anglican Communion, was elected as bishop suffragan of Massachusetts on Feb. 11, 1989.

A revised Book of Common Prayer (BCP) was adopted in 1979, and an updated Hymnal was adopted in 1982. Expansive language liturgies have been approved by subsequent General Conventions, as well as other authorized hymn collections. A lengthy process of Prayer Book revision was approved in 2018 at the 79th General Convention, with the 1979 BCP retained as its basis. It is expected that this process of revision will continue for about a decade. Authorized translations of the Book of Common Prayer have been made into French and Spanish. Portions of BCP have been translated into many languages. Bilingual editions of some BCP texts in French, German, Italian, and Spanish have been produced by the Convocation of Episcopal Churches in Europe.

The Episcopal Church has eschewed discrimination based on sexual orientation since an action of the 1976 General Convention. However, the full inclusion in the ordination process and marriage equality for LGBTQI persons has been a long struggle within the church. The 2003 General Convention approved the election of the Rev. V. Gene Robinson as Bishop of New Hampshire. He is the first openly gay bishop ordained in the Episcopal Church. General Conventions in 2012 and 2015 approved rites for same - gender marriages.

In 2006 the General Convention elected the first woman as Presiding Bishop, Katharine Jefferts Schori, and in 2015 the General Convention elected the first African American as Presiding Bishop, Michael B. Curry. A major emphasis of Presiding Bishop Curry has been challenging the Episcopal Church to focus on becoming a "beloved community," which includes addressing its long legacy of white supremacy. The Presiding Bishop's Theology Committee, with his authorization, has issued a theological document on White Supremacy in the Episcopal Church, "Resources for Becoming the Beloved Community," in September 2020. In September 2021 the Theology Committee issued a second document on racism in the Episcopal Church on behalf of the Presiding Bishop, "The Baptismal Call to Reparations."

Revisions of liturgy, support of civil rights, openness to the ordination of women, and full inclusion of LGBTQI+ persons has not been without resistance. Each of these actions has caused a minority to eventually leave the Episcopal Church and form "continuing Anglican" bodies, which continue to exist outside of the Episcopal Church and of the Anglican Communion.

Ecumenical Relations

The Episcopal Church has been in the forefront of ecumenical work since the latter part of the 19th century. With the end of the American Civil War in 1865 and the continuing divisions in American politics wrought by the Civil War, the solution of William Reed Huntington, Rector of Grace Church in New York City, was the drafting of what came to be called the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral of 1888, a statement of Anglican belief and the basis for ecumenical dialogues with other denominations.

Huntington's Quadrilateral captured the idea of unity with other denominations to form a united "Church of All Americans."

In 1886, at a meeting of the House of Bishops in Chicago, by a unanimous vote, the bishops adopted the Quadrilateral as the official statement of the faith of the Episcopal Church, and of its Anglican identity. There are four points:

1. The Holy Scriptures as God's revelation to humanity
2. The Apostles' and Nicene Creeds as witnesses to the faith of the Historic Church
3. The sacraments of baptism with water and the Supper of the Lord, ministered with the unailing use of Christ's words of institution
4. The Historic Episcopate as a fact deeply rooted in Christian history

It was endorsed by the Anglican Communion at its Lambeth conference in 1888.⁵ Through the twentieth century and so far into the twenty-first century, this Quadrilateral has served as the standard theological statement to define issues of unity and full communion and to identify ecumenically significant issues to promote actual achievement of the unity of the Churches.

Today, the Episcopal Church has full communion agreements with The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Moravian Church (northern and southern districts), The Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht, the Philippine Independent Church, the Mar Thoma Syrian Church of Malabar, and the Church of Sweden. The Episcopal Church is in dialogue with the United Methodist Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bavaria, the Presbyterian Church (USA), and conversations with other Christian denominations are in the planning stages.

As for conciliar and other ecumenical bodies, the Episcopal Church was instrumental in the founding of the World Council of Churches and a founding member of the National Council of Churches in the USA begun in the Post World War II era.

Current interreligious engagement includes such bodies as Shoulder to Shoulder to address anti-Muslim bias, of which The Episcopal Church is also a founding member, as well as Religions for Peace. Interreligious Dialogues are held ecumenically through the National Council of Churches with Buddhists, Sikhs, Jews, Muslims, and Hindus. The Episcopal Church works in coalition with ecumenical and interfaith partners on the public witness and public policy of the church. The identity as a multicultural church in a multifaith world is ever more urgent in the 21st century context of polarization and pandemic. Even as the pandemic recognizes no borders, neither does the call to engage and love neighbors near and far.

*Walter Jacob Baer, with additions by Bishop William Franklin,
Canon Charles K Robertson, and the Rev. Margaret R. Rose⁶*

⁵ The Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral 1886, 1888, Historical Documents section in The Book of Common Prayer, 1979, p. 877 (<https://bcponline.org>)

⁶ **Sources:** This paper is based on "History of the Episcopal Church" at <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/who-we-are/history-episcopal-church/american-church/>, revised and expanded by the author.