

GOVERNANCE IN THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH

The Episcopal Church, in harmony with ancient tradition, considers the ministers of the Church to be lay persons and clergy (clergy can be bishops, priests or deacons). Given this, it is only fitting where governance is concerned, that lay members and members of the clergy share in decision making.

The central element of organization in the Episcopal Church is the diocese and each diocese is made up of a number of congregations. (A diocese is a geographical grouping of congregations.) Grace and Holy Trinity Church is part of the Diocese of Virginia. The Rt. Rev. Susan Ellyn Goff is our bishop and she is assisted by the Rt. Rev. Jennifer Brooke-Davidson and Rt. Rev. Porter Taylor.

Congregations, which make up a diocese, are led by Vestries. The Vestry conducts the business of the congregation and sets the course for mission. The Vestry of Grace and Holy Trinity Church usually (we have 16 this year) has 15 members and it meets once a month. (Vestries may have as many as 18 members and as few as 3.) The members of the Vestry are elected at an Annual Meeting. These are typically held in early February or late January. Adult, confirmed, communicants in good standing who are enrolled on the books of the congregation are allowed to vote. (Adult means 16 years of age or older; confirmed means that you have been confirmed or received by an Episcopal Bishop; communicant in good standing means that for the previous year, unless for good cause prevented, you have been faithful in weekly worship and you work, pray and give, in a financial way known to the Treasurer, for the spread of the kingdom; and enrolled simply means that your letter of membership resides at Grace and Holy Trinity Church.)

The Vestries of the congregations in a diocese elect delegates to Annual Diocesan Conventions (in some dioceses called Councils). Delegates to Annual Conventions must be adult, confirmed communicants in good standing and enrolled on the books of the congregation they are representing. The Convention of the Diocese of Virginia typically meets in November. All clergy officially residing in the Diocese have seat, voice and vote at Diocesan Convention. Lay delegates are apportioned according to the size of the congregation, with every congregation getting at least one lay delegate. Grace and Holy Trinity Church has one lay delegate.

The Annual Diocesan Conventions elect deputies to the General Convention of the Episcopal Church. (It is not accurate to call the Episcopal Church the “National Church” because the General Convention contains some dioceses which are not in the USA. So, properly speaking, we refer to the “General Church”.) The General Convention meets once every three years and it sets policy for the Episcopal Church as a whole. So, for instance, it is the General Convention which adopts the Prayer Book to be used by all Episcopal congregations. You can read about the last General Convention by [clicking here](#).

The General Convention has two houses, roughly equivalent to the Congress of the USA, which has the House of Representatives and the Senate. The General Convention has the House of Bishops, equivalent to the Senate, and it includes the Bishops of the various dioceses. It also has the House of Deputies, roughly equivalent to the House of Representatives. Each diocese sends four clergy deputies and four lay deputies to represent that diocese in the House of Deputies at General Convention. Unlike the House of Representatives in Congress, smaller dioceses get just as many deputies as larger ones. The Diocese of Virginia is one of the largest dioceses in the Episcopal Church but this is not reflected in the constitution of the House of Deputies.

These paragraphs give you the essential outlines of church governance in the Episcopal Church. If you are interested in being involved or in learning more please contact the Rev. Bill Queen.