

**EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF MICHIGAN**  
**VITAL CONGREGATIONS COMMITTEE**  
**EPISCO-POLITY 101**

Our Church's polity (or how we organize ourselves) derives from our baptism into the Body of Christ. Authority throughout the Episcopal Church is conferred and shared — not over us, coming down, but among us and with us, coming together.

**PRAYER FOR THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH (ADAPTED FROM BCP 204)**

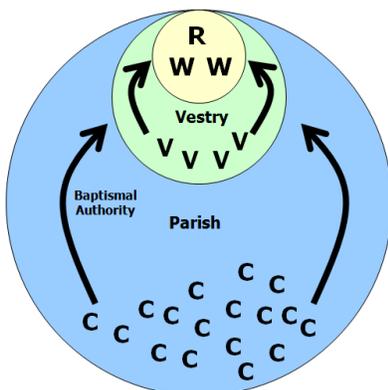
Almighty Father, whose blessed Son before his passion prayed for his disciples that they might be one, even as you and he are one: Grant that your Church, being bound together in love and obedience to you, may be united in one body by the one Spirit, that the world may believe in your Son Jesus Christ our Lord, whom you sent and who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the same Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

**WHERE AUTHORITY COMES FROM**

In the Episcopal Church we believe that authority is given to us through baptism. We all have equal and mutual authority through our baptism:

- ❖ The Holy Spirit is active in everyone's life, gives us each unique and incomplete gifts, and unites us in a larger whole (I Corinthians 12; Ephesians 4).
  - Every person's gift is important to the Body of Christ.
  - We are each more significant because we are part of Christ's Body.
- ❖ All baptized persons have a ministry (Baptismal Covenant; TEC Title III, Canon 1).
- ❖ True for everyone: communicants, vestry members, deacons, priests, and bishops.

**THE "FLOW" OF BAPTISMAL AUTHORITY: LOCAL CONGREGATION**



The process of sharing Baptismal authority begins with the "communicants" in the parish. At the parish annual meeting, the "adult communicants in good standing" vote to elect new members of the vestry, thereby investing some of their baptismal authority in the vestry. This means that a person who is over 16, has their baptism recorded, has received Holy Communion at least three times in the congregation, is faithful in worship, and who works, prays and gives for the spread of God's Kingdom is a member. Notice that

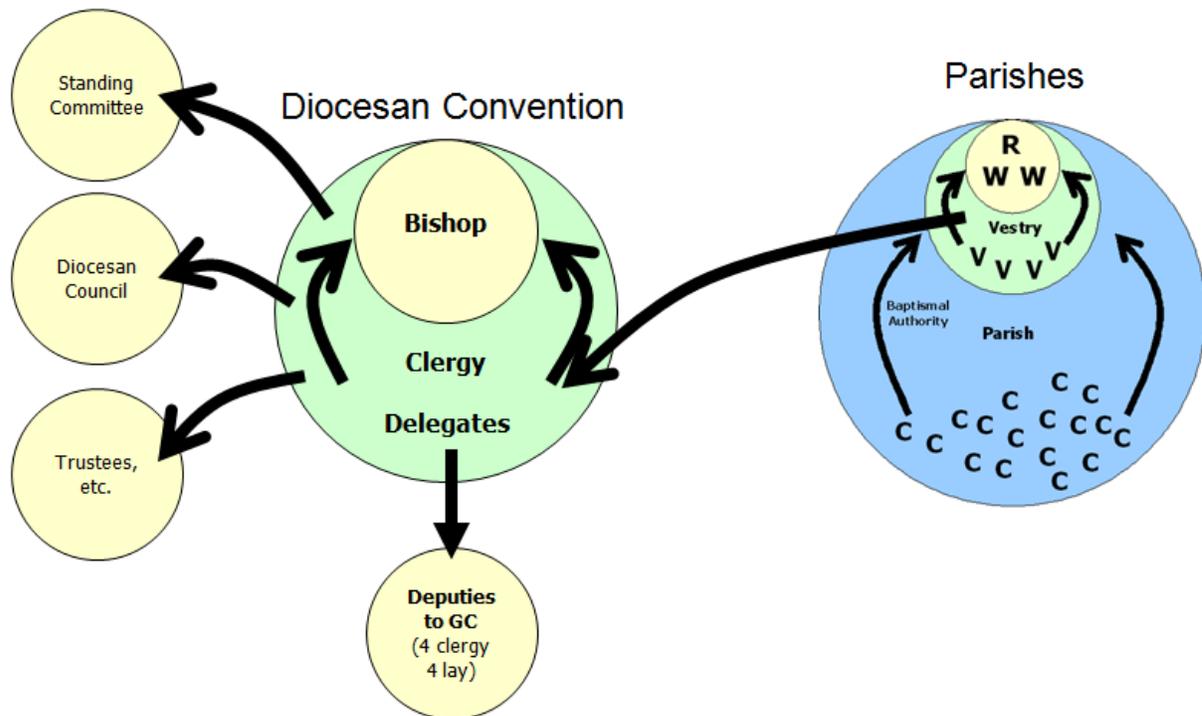
membership requirements are based on your connection to God's Kingdom.

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 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 "FLOW" OF BAPTISMAL AUTHORITY: DIOCESE

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



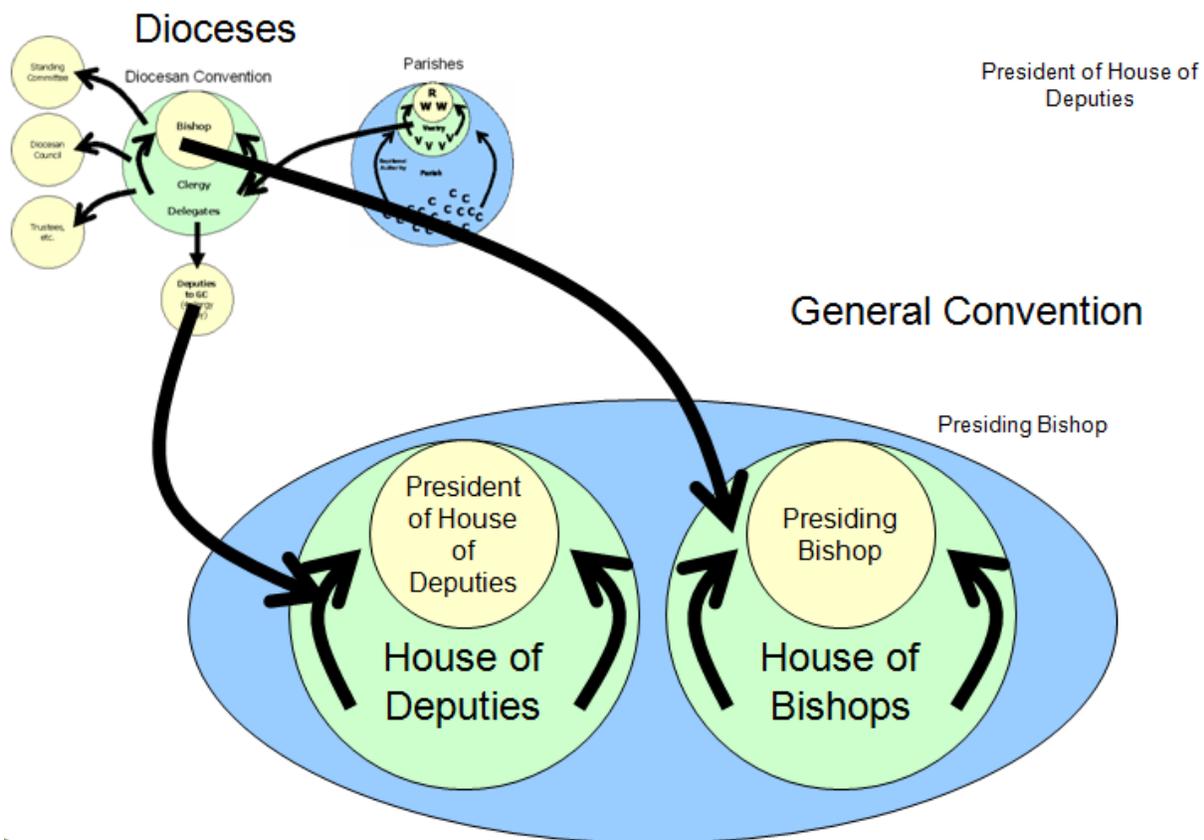
Delegates have seat, voice, and vote and are charged with

- 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 Michigan deputies to General Convention.

## THE "FLOW" OF BAPTISMAL AUTHORITY: THE WIDER CHURCH

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).



## SHARED AUTHORITY

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 for the good of the whole Body (similar to a representative democracy).

The method of sharing is expressed in a variety of rules and structures, all of which are incomplete and imperfect representations of the Body of Christ which we need to live into:

- National Constitution and Canons
- State corporate laws
- Diocesan Constitution and Canons
- Church Bylaws

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
  - Michigan Canon 3.1.1.1 identifies a potential political tension: the congregation is "in the charge of a rector" and "the governing body is a vestry." Working well together is always the only solution to this tension.
  - National canons grant a rector significant authority (such as over the conduct of worship and the spiritual jurisdiction of the congregation and use and control of all buildings, furnishings and records of the congregation (III.9.5(a) and (b)) and more than sacramental duties (including presiding at vestry (I.14.3), instructing all persons in Christian stewardship (III.9.5(b)(2)) and in the Faith (III.9.5(b)(1)), but the mission of the Church is only accomplished through the Body.
- Diocesan Level – Bishop and Standing Committee, Diocesan Convention (voting in bicameral houses: clergy and lay), Diocesan Council, other Diocesan committees
- National Level – General Convention (voting in bicameral houses: bishops and deputies), Presiding Bishop, commissions and committees

Through our Baptismal Covenant, both lay and ordained are fully responsible for the mission and operations of the Body. A body does not function and has no power (see, e.g., Matthew 18:18-20) unless the parts work together. Every part takes on significant responsibility for leading some parts of this ministry and collaborating with the other parts.

Baptismal authority is not a democratic or congregational or political authority. It is representative of God and the church community all working together. It is based in LOVE. Jesus proclaims the Great Commandment as the primary rule in God's Kingdom (Luke 10:27). St. Paul writes to churches about the Body of Christ, "And now I will show you a better way" and offers I Corinthians 13. We need always to keep that overall objective in mind.

## **1 CORINTHIANS 12 (THE MESSAGE)**

Each person is given something to do that shows who God is: Everyone gets in on it, everyone benefits. All kinds of things are handed out by the Spirit, and to all kinds of people! . . . By means of his one Spirit, we all said good-bye to our partial and piecemeal lives. . . Each of us is now a part of his resurrection body, refreshed and sustained at one fountain – his Spirit – where we all come to drink. . . I want you to think about how all this makes you more significant, not less. A body isn't just a single part blown up into something huge. It's all the different-but-similar parts arranged and functioning together. . . But I also want you to think about how this keeps your significance from getting blown up into self-importance. For no matter how significant you are, it is only because of what you are a part of. . . The way God designed our bodies is a model for understanding our lives together as a church: every part dependent on every other part, the parts we mention and the parts we don't, the parts we see and the parts we don't. If one part hurts, every other part is involved in that hurt, and in the healing. If one part flourishes, every other part enters into the exuberance. You are Christ's body— that's who you are! You must never forget this.