

**Sermon Preached March 29, 2009**  
**Year B, Lent 5 – Church Polity**  
**St. Paul’s Episcopal Church**  
**North Andover, Massachusetts**  
**The Rev. Stephanie Chase Wilson**

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Today I’m going to offer the final installment in my three part series on what it means to be an Episcopalian. We’ve already looked at the via media, the middle way, as well as the three-legged stool source of authority – scripture, tradition, and reason. Today we are going to look at our polity – our governmental structure.

As usual, we’ll start with a bit of history. Fast forward about 200 years after Queen Elizabeth to the American Revolution. The New World has been settled but now is becoming restless. No longer content with being a colony of England, America wants to become its own nation. There are many denominations, and even different religions, present in this new world and many of them share this desire for independence. The Anglican Church, which is the Church of England, too was a prominent denomination in America. Many of the leading citizens of the time were Anglican. In fact, 2/3 of the signers of the Declaration of Independence were Anglican. But there was a problem. After the United States won the war and gained its independence, the church was in trouble. You see, in England there is no separation between church and state. Priests were loyal to the King, and Bishops were Lords wielding political power. That meant that all the

Anglican Churches in America were suspect. We may have thrown out the English after the war, but every Anglican Church was a little outpost of English political power in this new country. What were we to do?

It was decided the Anglican Church had to separate from England. But what would an Anglican Church look like separate from its mother country? We had to start nearly from scratch. It took a while to figure out the Bishop and ordination thing, but that finally sorted itself out. What I really want to focus on today, however, is our governmental structure. Remember how I said that 2/3 of the signers of the Declaration of independence were Anglican? These same men who organized the democratic government for the United States, used exactly the same template for organizing their new church. And there was a separation of church and state. No longer would churchmen have political power. Bishops were not answerable to the King or President. No longer would priests and bishops be appointed by the King or church leaders.

It would be the people, the laity, who would have the real power in the church. Please pull out the sheet in your bulletin marked, "Chart of Parallels."

## Chart of Parallels

Nation.....	Episcopal Church	State Assembly.....	Delegates to Dio.
President.....	Presiding Bishop	Conv. (Jensens, Bob Z. Lenore	
Congress.....	General Convention	City.....	Parish
Senate.....	House of Bishops	Mayor.....	Rector
House of Repres.....	House of Deputies	City Council.....	Vestry
State.....	Diocese		
Governor.....	Bishop		
State Legislature.....	Diocesan Convention		
State Senate.....	Clergy at Convention		

So you all here at St. Paul's have power in the church. You elect representatives to diocesan Convention each year at our Parish Annual Meeting. These representatives bring the issues of St. Paul's before the whole Diocese. They vote on matters pertaining to St. Paul's and the diocese. They then elect representatives from the Diocese to go to the national General Convention. This is where larger decisions pertaining to the national Church are decided.

While we are a church of Bishops, our Bishops only have the power that the people give to them, and they enforce the laws that the people have voted on. We are a hierarchical church in the way that the U.S. government is hierarchical. We elect our congress-people and presidents to do the work we have voted on for them to do. In the same way we elect our lay representatives, priests and bishops to do the work we have voted for them to do. In addition, the clergy - deacons, priests and bishops - are elected by people, not appointed from on high. If one feels called to be a priest in the Episcopal Church, one cannot simply show up in front of the Bishop and expect a decision to be made. Each candidate is trotted out in front of a Commission of Ministry of lay and ordained people, a community, to discern if the call to ordination is genuine. Bishops are created by priests coming before the people of a diocese, both lay and ordained, the community, to discern if he or she is called to become a bishop within that community.

As an aside, that is where some of the anxiety in the Episcopal Church came when Gene Robinson was elected Bishop of New Hampshire. He was elected not by the National church, nor was he appointed by the Presiding Bishop. He was simply lifted up

out of his community who prayerfully discerned that he was the best person to lead them as their Bishop. Outside dioceses have no jurisdiction in New Hampshire's decisions, assuming they abided by the laws, which they did. In the same way on the state level, Virginia cannot complain when Colorado chooses someone they don't like to be their governor. Robinson's election was a local event, done by the local community. It just ended up have national and international repercussions.

In all matters pertaining to the Episcopal Church, decision making lies within the community. Yes, Rectors and Bishops make decisions, but these leaders are elected by the community and these decisions cannot be in violation of the laws the community has agreed to.

Sometimes we like to grumble about the Diocesan budget. We have to pay an assessment every year from St. Paul's to the Diocesan Center. They in turn must pay something to the National Church every year. Where does this budget come from? It is created by laity and clergy and then presented before the Diocesan Convention. Then St. Paul's delegates, and those of all the other parishes, vote on it and pass the budget. We cannot complain about that which we have voted on and agreed to. Nothing is imposed on us from the Diocesan Center which we as a parish have not signed on to in some fashion. We are a democracy. Decisions are discerned prayerfully by the community with the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

This is one reason I absolutely LOVE Annual meetings! This is your chance to be heard! This is your chance to let your opinions be known by the diocese and larger church. This is also why I LOVE Vestry meetings. It is where your elected representatives

discern where the Holy Spirit is leading the parish. What could be more fulfilling or fun than to be with a group of great people in communion with the Holy Spirit?!

I would like you to notice the thread that has run through all these three sermons. It is the idea of community. Over the three Sundays we have learned:

- 1) It is not individual belief which binds us together, but common worship, the community at prayer.
- 2) Authority is found not through scripture alone, but through scripture as interpreted by the community, both past and present (in other words, tradition and reason).
- 3) Our church structure is designed especially to facilitate this community, so that all voices are welcome at the table.

And all of this is guided not solely by logic, but also prayerfully by God. We are a church of both the head and the heart.

We are not a top-down church with absolute rules and beliefs sent down from on high, we are a bottom-up church where truth and belief may be a little messier, but where we believe we leave room for the Holy Spirit and God's ongoing revelation.

Humanity was created in the image of God. And God is the Holy Trinity. Three-in-one. This means God's very nature is that of a community. God is relationship. So we too, when we are fully ourselves, are not individuals. No man is an island. We are in community. That is what it means to be human. And it is as a community that we come before God at Holy Communion. It is as the community of faith that we enter into and are

sustained as the Body of Christ. At our baptism we entered into this community, this Body. The Body itself is a community, each part dependant on the other.

What does it mean to be an Episcopalian? It means to worship the Almighty in community with others. It means to be grounded in scripture and tradition, yet prayerfully open to the winds of the Spirit. It means to welcome many voices and cherish our differences. It means to love Jesus, and each other, despite our differences. In short, it means to be a member of the Body of Christ and a child of God. Amen.