A More True ‘Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society’: Toward a Missional Polity for the Episcopal Church.

Dwight J. Zscheile
Luther Seminary, dzscheile001@luthersem.edu

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CHAPTER 5

A More True “Domestic and Foreign
Missionary Society”: Toward a Missional Polity
for the Episcopal Church

Dwight Zscheile

There is no reason in the world wherefore we should esteem it as
necessary always to do, as always to believe, the same things; see-
ing every man knoweth that the matter of faith is constant, the
matter contrariwise of action daily changeable, especially the
matter of action belonging unto church polity.

Richard Hooker, Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity, III.x.7

Context, Polity, and the Episcopal Church

The polity of the Christian church is always contextual. From the early
church’s adaptation of leadership roles from the first-century synagogue,
to the incorporation of Roman models of office into the Constantinian
church, to Calvin’s use of the assembly system in Reformed Geneva, Chris-
tians have always taken organizational and leadership structures from lo-
cal cultures and transformed them for church use. In that process they
have sought to integrate these structures with biblical and theological
norms. The contextual nature of polity reflects the incarnational nature of

1. Richard Hooker, Ecclesiastical Polity, ed. Arthur Pollard (Manchester, UK: Carcanet, 1990), 129. Hooker (1553/4-1600) is the classic early exponent of Anglican polity.
the gospel and the church's life: Christianity is always embodied in local cultures, embracing, calling into question, and transforming the norms and presuppositions of those cultures. As the Richard Hooker quotation above suggests, polity is dynamic and must adapt to the church's changing contexts in order to serve, rather than constrain, God's mission.

The current polity of the Episcopal Church (USA) reflects three major contextual influences: (1) the established state church of the English Reformation and Colonial eras; (2) American representative democracy; and (3) modern corporate bureaucracy. However, the twenty-first-century American context of the Episcopal Church is shifting dramatically, calling for a critical appraisal of the assumptions and norms embedded in its polity. In this chapter I seek to explore the contextual influences — both theological and cultural — that underlie the organization of the Episcopal Church today in light of the realities now facing the church. Anglicanism has historically cherished a balance between continuity and discontinuity, universality and locality: that is, carrying forward core values and traditions from the past while still allowing flexibility for local adaptation and responsiveness in light of changing circumstances. It is in this spirit that I will offer a preliminary sketch of some principles for reconceiving Episcopal polity in an emerging missional era.

Establishment and the Legacy of Christendom: Sixteenth- to Eighteenth-Century Roots

The Episcopal Church began as the Church of England in colonial America, where it was the established state church in the southern colonies. As such, the basic underlying assumptions of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England were transferred across the Atlantic. These include the integration of church and state, the division of territory into geographical domains (parishes and dioceses) ruled by monarchical rectors (derived from the Latin regere, "to rule") and bishops, with the assumption that everyone was at least nominally Christian. The church was at the center of society, which the commissioners of the church of London, the Bishop of London, and the Book of Common Prayer as the church's liturgy and the central clergy of Anglicanism. The Episcopal Church inherited this established polity, which included the parishes and dioceses of England, the system of bishops and rectors, and the assumption of the collective clergy as the central clergy of Anglicanism.

Unlike in England, the Church of England in America faced an example of the contextual influences that shaped the polity of the Episcopal Church. The roots of the Church of England in America can be traced to the colonial era, where it was the established state church in the southern colonies. The basic underlying assumptions of the Church of England were transferred across the Atlantic, including the integration of church and state, the division of territory into geographical domains (parishes and dioceses) ruled by monarchical rectors and bishops, and the assumption that everyone was at least nominally Christian. The church was at the center of society, which the commissioners of the church of London, the Bishop of London, and the Book of Common Prayer as the church's liturgy and the central clergy of Anglicanism. The Episcopal Church inherited this established polity, which included the parishes and dioceses of England, the system of bishops and rectors, and the assumption of the collective clergy as the central clergy of Anglicanism.

3. "[T]he gospel, which is from the beginning to the end embodied in culturally conditioned forms, calls into question all cultures, including the one in which it was originally embodied." Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 4.
society, which was reflected in the taxation that funded its activities and by the commissary, or deputy, who oversaw the church at the behest of the bishop of London, under whose charge the colonial English churches lay.4

The classic Anglican compromise of uniformity (the required use of the Book of Common Prayer, for instance) and flexibility (a diversity of pieties and theological commitments) came alive as Anglicanism began to take fresh forms on American soil. Since there were no Anglican bishops in America until Samuel Seabury was consecrated in 1784, a lay governance system evolved in the colonies that differed significantly from England. In Virginia and other Southern colonies, vestries comprised of prominent lay people (usually the landed gentry) exercised much greater control over local clergy and the affairs of the church than had been known in England.5 This would lead to an important modification of the monarchical rule by clergy that was more typical of the church in England and New England. The roots for a more collaborative, lay-involved polity had been laid.

The parish system took root only tenuously in the United States.6 Unlike in England, where residents of a particular parish were expected to attend church of that parish, the American preference for freedom of choice eventually led to looser practices of domain. This was particularly true in those colonies where the Anglican church was not established, for example, in New England. The trajectory of American religious life was headed increasingly in a voluntary direction, shaped in part by the settling of the continent by people who had resisted England’s expectations of religious conformity. Nonetheless, the parish concept remains deeply influential in Episcopal polity to this day, even though it has never functioned very effectively.

The Late-Eighteenth-Century Democratic Synthesis

At the time of the American Revolution, the Church of England in the colonies faced a major crisis. Anglicanism was directly and symbolically

linked to the imperial power that the revolutionaries sought to overthrow (prayers for the king were included in the liturgy), and the distinguishing feature of its polity — bishops — represented exactly the kind of monarchy that Americans were rejecting in favor of democratic rule. Many Anglicans, especially in New England, openly sided with the Tories (including Samuel Seabury). Yet the Revolution also presented a dramatic opportunity to recontextualize Anglicanism in America.

The process for revising the polity of the colonial Church of England to serve a disestablished Anglican church in the new United States involved considerable negotiation between the low-church Southern Anglicans and high-church Northerners like Samuel Seabury. Its most notable feature was the integration of historic Anglican norms with the representative democracy so valued by the revolutionaries. It is probably no coincidence that the crafting of the original Constitution and Canons of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States took place parallel to the development of the United States Constitution in Philadelphia. William White, the rector of Christ Church in Philadelphia and chaplain of the Continental Congress, proposed this synthesis in *The Case of the Episcopal Churches in the United States Considered* (1782). White argued for retaining the historic orders of bishop, priest, and deacon alongside a democratic governance structure in which clergy and laity both participated in church councils at the local, regional, and national levels.7

Democracy has remained a defining feature of the Episcopal Church’s polity. On the one hand, it represents a move toward contextualization that still resonates strongly with American cultural values today. The monarchical, autocratic hierarchy reflected in the Church of England at the time was modified in the direction of greater collaboration: it established greater local autonomy and checks and balances to authority. However, the synthesis of hierarchical conceptions of office and democratic conceptions of majority rule took place primarily along cultural, rather than theological, lines: that is, the rationale for this integration was primarily one of fit with the emerging democratic nation, rather than one of clear biblical or theological reasoning. White argued pragmatically and provisionally; occasionally he invoked historical authorities such as Hooker and Cranmer, but he made no attempt to develop a sustained bib-

litical or theological argument for the polity innovations he introduced. Anglican theology since Hooker has made a theological case for flexibility in response to changing circumstances for the church. However, the changes introduced were not always proposed on theological grounds.

This has led to a somewhat contradictory tendency deep within Episcopal polity today: the affirmation of the authority and legitimacy of hierarchical offices alongside an abiding cultural mistrust of hierarchy and authority. On the one hand, Episcopal polity suggests a hierarchical succession of orders (from laypeople to deacons to priests to bishops) in its conceptions of ordination; on the other hand, all four orders are expected to govern the church collaboratively.

Another legacy of democracy is its tendency to foster factionalism and coalition politics. Since the Elizabethan settlement, Anglicanism has wrestled with how to reconcile the varying theological sensibilities present in its midst. The great conflicts with the Puritans and Roman Catholics during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Evangelical/Anglo-Catholic battles of the nineteenth century, and today's culture wars over sexuality all speak to a repeated pattern of internecine conflict. Democracy tends to lead to political maneuvering in order to attain the victory of majority rule. But the minority party that loses can be disenfranchised in the process. Discernment of the Spirit and consensus-building, while not prohibited by democracy, are also not necessarily encouraged by it.

Underlying modern American democracy are Enlightenment ideas of personhood that are being questioned by theologians today. As reflected in the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution, these ideas of personhood tend to be highly individualistic: they conceive of freedom as freedom from constraint by others rather than freedom for one another, or, as Jürgen Moltmann has put it, the freedom of lordship rather than love. Individuals in modern democracy tend to focus more on individual rights than on obligations to others or on the good of the whole. There has been a tendency in recent years within the church to frame debates in terms of civil rights rather than theological categories.

10. For example, in 2003, V. Gene Robinson, the openly gay bishop of New Hampshire, told the media that his ordination to the episcopate was a matter of civil rights.
While it has been argued that modern democracy's roots lie in covenant ideals from the Hebrew Bible, American democracy has tended to eclipse the key actor in that covenant process — God.11

**Modern Corporate Bureaucracy: The Twentieth Century**

The Episcopal Church grew in numbers and influence as it gradually recovered from the aftermath of the Revolution and reasserted its place in nineteenth-century American life. The church in the early twentieth century increasingly began to adopt the organizational forms and assumptions of the modern bureaucracies that were in ascendance in corporate America at that time. This trend occurred across mainline American denominations, as churches embraced the new “scientific” management principles espoused by Frederick Taylor, Henri Fayol, Max Weber, and others as a way of organizing an increasingly complex world along rational lines.12 During this period the Episcopal Church developed a centralized administrative and program bureaucracy in New York City. This bureaucracy grew large enough that it needed to acquire a new denominational headquarters at 815 Second Avenue in New York City in 1960, with triple the space of the previous offices. It was also at this time that the office of presiding bishop became a full-time job.13

Modernist bureaucracy as an organizational form was developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a means to organize the complexity of mass industrial production. It was based on a number of assumptions characteristic of Enlightenment modernity and a Newtonian cosmology, including predictability and linearity, command-and-control, hierarchy, and interchangeable parts. In the church this came to be expressed in a new emphasis on running the church “like a business,” as denominational, diocesan, and congregational boards and committees multiplied, centralized planning came into vogue, and organizational charts with clear lines of control proliferated across the American religious landscape.

One of the major features of the modern corporate understanding of church is the professional paradigm for clergy. The roots of this idea lie in Friedrich Schleiermacher’s designs for the new University of Berlin in 1810, in which he asserted a place for theology in the Enlightenment-era university by treating it as a profession, such as medicine or law. While the idea that Anglican clergy should be well educated (university and/or seminary trained) and devoted full-time to their pastoral work had long been held, there emerged in the nineteenth century a more clearly professional understanding of the priest’s vocation. The professional ideal was strengthened and reiterated in the mid-twentieth century in America by writers such as H. Richard Niebuhr. In the second half of the twentieth century, this professional paradigm developed three expressions: (1) the counselor/therapist (1970s); (2) the manager (1980s and 1990s); and (3) the technician (1990s). In each case, the priest or pastor is understood as a professional (like doctors, lawyers, psychologists and other specialists) with unique training and skills, to whom one goes for expertise in spiritual matters, or who is charged with managing a nonprofit corporation that provides services to its members and the community.

The legacy of the modern corporate bureaucracy and its accompanying professional view of clergy is deeply reflected in the current polity of the Episcopal Church. The process for the selection, screening, training, and ordination of clergy has become a bureaucratic labyrinth requiring many years, much paperwork, and a major investment of resources to navigate. The layers of screening (medical, psychological, marital, and background examinations) reflect corporate liability concerns on the part of the church and its associated bodies (e.g., the Church Pension Group). It is common to hear talk today, not only from the Pension Group but also from local bishops, about clergy wellness that sounds very similar to secular corporate wellness programs.

Moreover, the mechanistic concept of interchangeable parts shapes

the deployment of clergy, who are understood to be capable of functioning in virtually any context in the church. When candidates for the priesthood and diaconate begin the training process and are deployed subsequent to ordination, most dioceses prohibit them from returning to the congregation in which their call to leadership was first discerned. Like employees of modern corporations, clergy are expected to relocate at the will of the corporate system. While Anglicanism's understanding of ordination as being for the whole church, not just a local congregation or diocese, seeks to avoid provincialism and affirm the church's catholicity, it also severs leaders from the indigenous missionary and relational contexts out of which they emerged.

The denomination, dioceses, and even congregations have multiple boards, commissions, and committees around which they organize their activities. These are reflected in the current canons. Denominational offices across the United States have come under increasing stress in recent years, and it is not clear how long the corporate, bureaucratic paradigm of organizational life can persist. I should note that in recent years the corporations on which U.S. denominations modeled themselves in the early part of the century have streamlined their bureaucracies, eliminated layers of hierarchy, and adopted more flexible organizational models, such as networks, in order to adapt to today's dynamic global context. As is typical, the church lags a generation or two behind in making such organizational changes.

When the Episcopal Church, like other mainline denominations, began a period of steep decline in the mid-1960s, the denominational and diocesan corporate bodies sought to reassert legitimacy by shifting into a regulatory mode. This last phase of the modern corporate paradigm is alive and well in the Episcopal Church today. It is significant to note that Title IV, the disciplinary canons, constitutes the largest of any of the sections of the Constitution and Canons of 2003. Proposals to expand the disciplinary canons to encompass the work of laypeople in addition to just clergy came under consideration at the 2006 General Convention. While the impulse behind this expansion was a legitimate one — protecting the vulnerable from abuse by church officials, both lay and ordained — it also reflects the liability problems of modern corporations and their propensity to seek protection in Title IV of the canons. Modern corporations have come under increasing stress in recent years, and it is not clear how long the corporate, bureaucratic paradigm of organizational life can persist. I should note that in recent years the corporations on which U.S. denominations modeled themselves in the early part of the century have streamlined their bureaucracies, eliminated layers of hierarchy, and adopted more flexible organizational models, such as networks, in order to adapt to today's dynamic global context. As is typical, the church lags a generation or two behind in making such organizational changes.

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reflects the current recourse to regulation and control. Many bishops today find their schedules and budgets consumed more and more by lawyers, liability concerns, battles about control over dissident congregations (and their property), and the licensing and credentialing of laity and clergy. Embedded in this activity and these polity provisions are lingering hierarchical conceptions of ministry from the Church of England, alongside modern corporate bureaucratic notions of command-and-control.

Lawrence Miller's work on organizational lifecycles offers a provocative lens through which to view these dimensions of the church's life. Miller charts six leadership roles that characterize the phases of an organization's life, from founding to death: the prophet, the barbarian, the builder, the administrator, the bureaucrat, and the aristocrat. When an organization reaches the administrator phase, decline begins: the tighter the emphasis on control and regulation that follows, the deeper into the death cycle an organization has progressed. The fact that many Episcopal churches and dioceses are living off endowments as their membership dwindles may be interpreted as an ominous sign of the aristocrat phase.

Today's Changed Context

The context for the Episcopal Church in the United States bears little resemblance to the Christendom world that shaped Episcopal polity from the English Reformation to the 1950s. The Episcopal Church has consistently viewed itself through the lens of establishment even after it ceased to be established, priding itself in being the church of America's socioeconomic elite. Some scholars argue that establishment was the hallmark feature of Anglican identity through its early history, and when this began to dissolve, Anglicanism found itself in an identity crisis that pervades the church today. This conception of an ecclesiastical identity at the center of society simply no longer accords with reality. The Episcopal Church ac-

counts for a very small and shrinking percentage of the U.S. population. And its influence is diminishing along with its membership. Where it once spoke to the centers of power and expected to be heard, its voice today is generally disregarded.

Since the Revolution, society in America has progressed through several stages of disestablishment, from the initial separation of church and state, to the increasing presence of Roman Catholics and Jews alongside Protestants, to today’s individualistic and highly pluralist society. Basic acquaintance with the Christian story can no longer be assumed on any level. This is particularly true with emerging postmodern generations. Moreover, the Christendom division of geography is being challenged on several fronts. The parish (or neighborhood church) system around which Episcopal dioceses are typically organized in the United States is increasingly irrelevant. The U.S. experiment in reorganizing church as a voluntary association has led to people making choices about where to go to church, even if they cross from one side of a city to another and pass multiple congregations of their own denomination on the way. The ideas of domain that have long been hallmarks of Anglican conceptions of the episcopate are also under attack: international and missionary bishops (e.g., from Africa or the Anglican Mission in the United States) have asserted oversight over disaffected conservative congregations in liberal dioceses.

**Mission Assumptions of Current Polity**

While the church’s missionary context is changing beyond recognition, the current polity of the Episcopal Church reflects mission-theory assumptions from the Christendom era. The underlying mission paradigm in Episcopal polity is a Christendom expansion or colonial model. That is, mission is primarily understood as extending the church’s geographical domain into foreign lands. Historically, this has meant extending European culture and political rule alongside the gospel, whether across the U.S. frontier in the nineteenth century or overseas through foreign missions. Episcopal dioceses have served as the “linking pins” of the empire, making it easier to establish and maintain control of a territory.

The assumptions of this approach, reflected in the Baptismal Course, the Book of Common Prayer, and the Episcopal polity, are embodied in the mission statement of the Episcopal Church: “Mission is about extending the church’s geographical domain into foreign lands. Mission is about sharing the gospel and extending the love of Christ to the ends of the earth, and it is about extending the life of the church as a faith community.”

**Notes**

23. In 2004, average Sunday attendance for the whole Episcopal Church (including nondomestic dioceses), was 801,652, out of a total U.S. population of over 298,000,000 (sources: www.episcopalchurch.org and www.census.gov [accessed May 17, 2006]).
A More True "Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society"

missionary bishops and missionary dioceses alongside ordinary bishops and dioceses. One such missionary bishop was Jackson Kemper, the missionary bishop of the Northwest who sought to establish the church across a huge territory in the Midwest in the middle of the nineteenth century. The assumption was that missionary bishops function in that capacity only so long as it takes to set up a proper diocese. When the missionary function ceased, the bishop and diocese graduated to regular status. A similar distinction pertains between mission congregations and full-fledged parishes.

The role of missionary bishops has also historically reflected a high Christology more than a Trinitarian conception of mission. Mission efforts, particularly among evangelical Anglicans even to this day, have generally proceeded from obedience to the Great Commission. Just as Christ commands his followers to make disciples, so too does the monarchical bishop charge the church to go forth into the mission field for the same purpose. While obedience to the Great Commission is a biblically valid understanding of mission, it represents only a narrow dimension of the biblical narrative's treatment of mission. Perhaps most significantly, it does not take into consideration the major developments in ecumenical mission thinking since the 1950s.

The Copernican Revolution in Mission and Ecclesiology

In the mid-twentieth century, a paradigm shift began to take place in missiological circles regarding the relationship between the church, mission, and God. Drawing from the biblical theology movement, the influence of Karl Barth, and fresh attentiveness to the doctrine of the Trinity — combined with a growing awareness of the problematic legacy of the colonial approach to mission — leading mission theologians sought to reground mission in the doctrine of God, and specifically in the Trinity. Subsequent to the 1952 International Missionary Council meeting in

26. For a recent example, see Claude E. Payne and Hamilton Beasley, Reclaiming the Great Commission: A Practical Model for Transforming Denominations and Congregations (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000).
Willingen, Germany, this was expressed as *missio Dei* — the idea that God is a missionary God.\(^{27}\) The Father sends the Son, the Father and Son send the Spirit, and the Father, Son, and Spirit send the church into the world in mission. Thus mission is not a church-centered activity but rather a God-centered activity, the essential nature of the church itself.\(^{28}\) Mission is *God's* initiative, in which the church participates. This missional ecclesiology was affirmed by Vatican II in *Ad Gentes*: “The church on earth is by its very nature missionary since, according to the plan of the Father, it has its origin in the mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit.”\(^{29}\)

This is the global Christian consensus today, reflected in documents of the World Council of Churches, the Roman Catholic Church, and the evangelical Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization.

The polity of the Episcopal Church generally reflects the colonial, or Christendom-era, expansion paradigm of mission; but there is one interesting exception. While other American denominations were creating ancillary mission societies in the nineteenth century as parachurch organizations, in accordance with the view that mission was an activity done by specialists within the church and on behalf of the church, the Episcopal Church chose to go another route. Bishop Charles McIlvaine of Ohio anticipated the twentieth-century revolution in missional ecclesiology when he argued: “The Church is a Missionary Society, in its grand design, in the spirit and object of its Divine Founder.”\(^{30}\) The Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society, created in 1820 to support evangelism in the United States, became the official legal name of the denomination itself in 1835, so that “the Episcopal Church was itself a missionary society to which every Episcopalian by virtue of his or her baptism belonged.”\(^{31}\)

To this day, the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society remains the Episcopal Church’s legal corporate name, registered in the state of New York.

A missional ecclesiology calls for rethinking many basic underlying assumptions about the church and its participation in God’s mission. For


\(^{30}\) Hein, *The Episcopalians*, 69.

\(^{31}\) Hein, 69.

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\(^{32}\) See

\(^{33}\) See

\(^{34}\) Co
one, the Christendom idea of domain, in which the church controls certain areas in order to provide sacramental service and pastoral care to settled Christian populations, collapses under the much more expansive horizon of God’s mission to bring restoration to all creation. The church is turned inside out: instead of focusing inward and on tending to its members’ needs, its purpose and primary activities are out in the world as it participates in God’s redeeming work as a sign, foretaste, and instrument of the reign of God. "Missionary" and nonmissionary territories, organizations, and roles can no longer be distinguished. Everything the church is and does must be missionary in character. In this light, North America is a mission field, just as the rest of the world is. It is a mission field not just in the sense that Christianity has lost its dominant influence and the gospel needs to be reintroduced, but also because all of God’s creation is the field of God’s redeeming activity, and the church is called to share in it. We can no longer portion off mission as a subordinate activity or program of the church. Mission is the very reason for the church’s being and its lifeblood.

Episcopal Polity in Our Context: Foundations

In order to begin reframing the Episcopal Church’s organization and governance in the twenty-first century to be in line with a missional ecclesiology, we must first delve more deeply into theological foundations. Modern Anglicanism in the West has been dominated by two primary theological strands. The first (and more influential in America) is liberal Catholicism, a marriage of broad and high-church concerns that emerged in the late nineteenth century. As articulated in such seminal texts as *Lux Mundi* (1889), a collection of essays edited by Charles Gore, liberal Catholicism asserts the underlying unity of the Catholic faith and modern experience, and it emphasizes the doctrine of the Incarnation. R. David Cox has traced how the incarnational emphasis of liberal Catholicism led to a representative understanding of ordained office. A competing strand is Evangelicalism: its roots lie more in Reformed

34. Cox, *Priesthood in a New Millennium*, 32-34.
theology, and it tends to emphasize the doctrine of the atonement. Evangelicalism tends to be far less sanguine about human nature and modernity than is liberal Catholicism. These two strands can at times make such differing assumptions about human nature and the church that it can be difficult to reconcile them. That difficulty accounts for much of the partisanship and conflict that have been part of Anglicanism over the past century.

Recently, however, a koinonia ecclesiology rooted in the doctrine of the Trinity has gained prominence in ecumenical circles and has entered Anglican theology. It is reflected in the *Virginia Report* (1997) and the *Windsor Report* (2004), both produced by international Anglican Communion commissions. Behind this ecclesiology lies the seminal influence of the Orthodox theologian John D. Zizioulas, an active participant in ecumenical dialogue over the past decades. His book *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* reconceptualizes human personhood and the nature and organization of the church through the doctrine of the Trinity, particularly as developed by the Cappadocians, emphasizing the social, perichoretic character of the Trinity as opposed to the economic emphasis typical in the West.

A koinonia ecclesiology is particularly fruitful today for several reasons. The first is that it encourages us to move beyond the individualistic conceptions of personhood that have so problematically shaped modernity in the West. A more relational, interdependent sense of the self, based in the social Trinity, better reflects the worldview and assumptions of the biblical and patristic sources that are so cherished by Anglican theology. It also invites us into a fresh imagination about human interdependence and communion across racial, tribal, socioeconomic, geographical, and cultural boundaries in an increasingly complex world. As the *Windsor Report* suggests, understanding the church and its diversity through the lens of koinonia, or communion, offers a rich theological framework for reconciled diversity in mission.


Today these emergent koinonia and missio Dei ecclesiologies have generally been treated separately in theological discussions. Yet linking them provides a rich Trinitarian fabric for holistically reconceiving how the church's purpose is rooted in God's character as both a social and a sending God. It also presents an opportunity to reframe and enrich the theological debate within Anglicanism beyond the current polarities. An ecclesiology that emphasizes both communion and God's mission begins with the proposition that God creates the world out of the generative love of the Trinity for communion with Godself; it is through communion that God seeks to reconcile the world. The missionary character of God is evident through creation, the ministry of Christ, and the sending of the Spirit to lead the church in continued embodiment and proclamation of the reign of God. The content of salvation history cannot be understood apart from the communion that is constitutive of the divine life and thus of the church's essence and ministry. A missional koinonia ecclesiology sees communion as the destiny of creation toward which God is actively working.

Koinonia also presents a paradigm for understanding how the church's diverse structures, bodies, and offices can collaboratively serve God's mission, reflecting reconciled diversity aligned in service to the reign of God. As an overarching metaphor, koinonia offers a theological framework for integrating leadership and participation, unity and difference, catholicity and autonomy. Attending more explicitly to the theological foundations of Episcopal polity will strengthen the church's participation in God's mission and serve perhaps in some small way to correct the historic Anglican tendency to make organizational decisions based first on politics and then, if at all, on theology.

From Mission to Ministry to Organization to Office

Episcopal polity, as it has adapted itself to changing circumstances, has affirmed both continuities and discontinuities. So far in this essay I have emphasized the discontinuities, elements of Episcopal polity that date from contexts highly dissimilar to our own and thus warrant critical reflection. Yet there are also significant continuities, aspects of the current polity that remain pertinent and vital. It is my assumption, for instance, that democracy remains a relevant principle for our context and will continue to shape Episcopal polity significantly, just as it continues to shape American
life today. Likewise, the historic Anglican balance between connectional unity and local autonomy, expressed in a variety of ways in the current governance of the Episcopal Church, is crucial to faithfulness to biblical and theological sources and to effectiveness in mission. I also assume the continuing historical validity and usefulness for mission of the fourfold understanding of office in the church — layperson, bishop, priest, and deacon — though I will offer a reenvisioning of those roles in light of a missional ecclesiology and fresh attention to the doctrine of the Trinity.

Given these assumptions, we must nonetheless begin with mission before proceeding to ministry, organization, and office; otherwise, we run the risk of limiting and inhibiting the church’s participation in God’s mission by the structures and roles we design or have inherited. Mission-Shaped Church, a recent document from the Church of England, puts it this way: “It is not the church of God that has a mission in the world, but the God of mission that has a church in the world ... God is on the move and the church is always catching up with him. We join his mission. We should not ask him to join ours.”

What, then, is the church’s mission? A missional ecclesiology suggests that the mission of the church is fundamentally the missio Dei, the triune God’s mission to reconcile and renew all creation. The Prayer Book says, “The mission of the church is to restore all people to unity with God and one another in Christ.” The church is created and called to continue Christ’s ministry of announcing and embodying the reign of God in the power of the Holy Spirit, inviting and drawing all peoples and all things into communion with the Father.

This challenges us to attend to the role of the Holy Spirit, which has been significantly underemphasized in the modern era, just as the doctrine of the Trinity has been. The book of Acts and the New Testament Epistles repeatedly emphasize that the Holy Spirit, not human power, is the animating force in the life of the church. Modernity has tended to place its confidence in the latter, neglecting the Spirit’s central role. When we consider the implications of this for polity, it is striking to observe that the Holy Spirit is structurally extraneous to current Episcopal polity: that is,

the current polity makes no explicit recognition of the Spirit's governance of the church or provision for discerning the Spirit's leading. This is not to say that the polity prohibits the Spirit from acting; that would give our structures more power than they actually have. Rather, the Spirit is ancillary, optional, an add-on that may or may not play a role.

If the mission of the church is the mission of God and thus a given, how can we understand the ministry of the church? From the perspective of a missional ecclesiology, the ministry of the church is the service by which the church participates in God's mission in the world through practices that bear witness to the reign of God. Ministry takes place through four primary expressions of the church: the ministry of the laity in their daily vocations in the world, the ministry of congregations, the ministry of dioceses, and the ministry of the denomination. These four levels cannot be understood apart from one another; rather, they are interdependent and collaborative, mutually enriching, supporting, and enabling one another to fulfill the larger purpose of mission.

While the metaphor of the Trinity should not be pushed too far with respect to the church, it is nonetheless possible to construe the cooperative participation of these four expressions of church as a kind of communion, or koinonia, in which distinct, interdependent entities in a common life characterized by generative love and service reach out for the sake of renewing the world. The church as the laity dispersed into the world on a daily basis is unified on the local level in the congregation, on the regional level by the diocese, and on the national level by the denomination. Symbolically, this logic can be applied to the Anglican Communion at the global level as well.

Liturgically, the dispersed members of the “Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society,” or the assembly of called-out people (ekklesia), are gathered into an eschatological sign of unity in the weekly congregational Eucharist, where the local priest serves as an icon of unity in the liturgical narrative. This occurs on the regional level when the bishop, as representative of the catholicity of the universal church, celebrates the Eucharist, particularly at confirmations, ordinations, and diocesan convocations; and it occurs at the General Convention, similarly in the Eucharist, with the presiding bishop as icon of the unity of the denomination. Given the central-

The Ministry of the Laity in the World

Historically, due to the legacy of Christendom, the ministry of the laity in the world has been accorded the least attention relative to the ministry of the clergy. In part, this is because of the Reformation tendency to define the church not according to the four marks of the Nicene Creed (one, holy, catholic, and apostolic), but rather as a place where certain things happen, generally performed by clergy (i.e., preaching, administration of sacraments, and, for the Reformed tradition, church discipline). The Thirty-Nine Articles reflects this Reformation view when it defines the church as "a congregation of faithful men, in which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments...duly administered according to Christ's ordinance, in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same." As long as the focus remains on the gathering to the exclusion of the sending, the church will lose sight of its missionary character: it will lose sight of the fact that the frontline missionaries are not intended to be specialists sent overseas but rather ordinary Christians in their daily spheres of influence.

What would it mean for Episcopal polity to assert a priority on the ministry of the laity in the world as the primary expression of the ministry of the church? To begin with, the other expressions of ministry (congregations, dioceses, and denominations) would be invited to rediscover their purpose in supporting and equipping the laity for such service. Ephesians 4 speaks to this: "The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry." It is crucial to note in this Ephesians passage that such equipping is not merely a technical matter (done by professional church experts) but rather has a larger eschatological purpose: "[U]ntil all of us come to unity of the faith and knowledge of the Son of God, to matur-

41. See Bosch, Transforming Mission, 207.
42. Van Gelder, Essence of the Church, 54-56.
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...rity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ" (Eph. 4:11-13). The church is to grow into a fully mature likeness of Christ in its capacity to announce and embody the reign of God; no member can be omitted from this maturation process if the church is to be the church and represent faithfully the koinonia of the Trinity. Moreover, that process is mutual rather than one-directional: all members share in building one another up.

The Ministry of the Congregation

What is the ministry of congregations? Congregations are local expressions of the gathered church organized around core missional practices that enable all of their members to reach maturity in mission while at the same time serving as signs, foretastes, and instruments of the reign of God in their own right. These core missional practices include the classical activities of worship (leiturgia), witness (martyria), fellowship (koinonia), service (diakonia), and proclamation (kerygma). One might also include stewardship. The congregation is a local manifestation of the reconciled diversity of the reign of God. It is rooted in and reflects the matrix of relationships, geography, local cultures, and other particularities of a place as a force for the transformation and renewal of those localities.

Unfortunately, Anglican ecclesiology has tended to downplay the centrality of congregations in favor of dioceses (and bishops). Yet one of the well-documented realities of the Episcopal Church today is a turn toward congregations: "At its grassroots level, Episcopal life has moved from preoccupation with the intricacies of denominational life toward a practical focus on local community and mission."44 While it may be threatening to diocesan and denominational structures, this may actually be a helpful development.

The Ministry of the Diocese

Congregations are connected together into the koinonia of a diocese, itself a regional representation of reconciled diversity. Dioceses might more ap-

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propriately be recast today, from the Christendom domains of hierarchical authority and regulation to apostolic networks that serve to support, equip, and unify local mission outposts. As an organizational paradigm, networks have increasing cultural relevance in our North American context. To begin with, the governing cultural metaphor for emerging postmodern generations is the internet, a highly decentralized network in which resources, information, and relationships are shared spontaneously and mutually around the world.

Networks have arisen in response to the dramatic increase in the pace of change in the global organizational environment in the twenty-first century. Networks facilitate rapid and continuous adaptation through multiple and dispersed information processing. As organizational scholar Mary Jo Hatch notes, “Relative independence of decision making allows experimentation and learning, and the product of this learning can be rapidly diffused through the network.”

This fosters the creation and diffusion of innovations. There are two challenges inherent in network organizations that must be attended to. The first is that networks depend on teamwork and relationships that must be led, managed, and facilitated. The second is that the diversity fostered by networks requires the intentional cultivation and maintenance of a unifying identity.

Just as beginning with the ministry of laity in the world as the primary expression of church shifts the emphasis from the hierarchy to the grass roots, so too does recasting dioceses as networks. The ministry of the diocese is to support, equip, and empower local congregations and their members for mission through missional practices. For dioceses, these missional practices include leadership recruitment and development, resource sharing, partnership facilitation, teaching/interpretive leadership, oversight and accountability, and the sacramental expressions of unity traditionally reserved for the episcopate (confirmation, ordination, the consecration of churches, and so on).

46. Hatch, Organization Theory, 192.
Building on the overarching ecclesiological and organizational concepts of koinonia and network, the denomination links dioceses, congregations, and church members on the national level for mission. Currently, the denominational-level structures in the Episcopal Church are facing an even greater crisis of legitimacy than are diocesan structures. The corporate emphasis that made so much sense fifty years ago seems increasingly disconnected from the local realities of congregations and their members. General Conventions since the 1960s have been occasions for bitter partisan battles, and this is a trend that shows no sign of diminishing.

Missiologists such as Lesslie Newbigin have argued vigorously against the concept of denominationalism as a modern Western cultural form that should be abandoned in a missional era. Another stream of scholarship has declared the continued relevance of denominations through their role in identity development and cultivation. Within a missional ecclesiology in the U.S. context, it seems to me that there remains a valid, though reconfigured, role for the denomination. As a network organized around missional practices that support the ministries of laypeople, congregations, and dioceses in the world, the denomination is uniquely positioned to build theological identity, facilitate resource sharing, and link mission partners on a national and international scale. The core practices of the denomination lie in identity development, resource development and sharing, ecumenical relations for mission, global advocacy, and relief work. These activities are best organized not within one massive central bureaucracy but rather through a network of linked organizations. This is currently the case with the Church Pension Group and Episcopal Relief and Development, for instance, which are organizationally independent of the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society, yet retain a strong denominational identity and purpose.

As in other denominations, identity development and clarification is crucial for the Episcopal Church’s survival today; and given worldwide An-

47. See Sachs and Holland, *Restoring the Ties That Bind*.
glicanism's current identity crisis, this is particularly important. Within the Christendom context of England or colonial America, unity was sustained via establishment, the Book of Common Prayer, and the episcopate in a largely homogeneous cultural context. Within a plurality of cultures and languages, with an episcopate weakened by its own legitimacy crisis, and reflecting the divisive culture wars of American society, the Episcopal Church today must tend to theology. The lingering class elitism that would construe Episcopal identity around establishmentarianism is not only contradictory to the gospel and sinful; it is also less and less functional as the church ages.

This denomination, reconceptualized as a network of linked resources and institutions (including seminaries), has the potential to contribute significantly to mission in our context. But it must tend directly to the theological identity work the church has been so slow to embrace. Its purpose must derive directly from serving the mission of God through serving the ministries of the other expressions of church, rather than expecting congregations and dioceses to serve its purposes. Genuine responsiveness to the mission needs of the laity, congregations and dioceses would help the denomination deal with its legitimacy crisis and become relevant once more.

Recasting the Episcopal Church's various expressions as a Trinitarian koinonia of interdependent, mission-focused bodies who share resources and a common life would resolve the Christendom and bureaucratic legacy of conceiving the church's expressions as hierarchically ordered. As long as the church seeks to maintain the conception of the laity serving congregations, congregations serving dioceses, and dioceses serving the national church (in ascending levels of hierarchical importance and authority), the grass-roots revolt will only grow stronger and diocesan and denominational structures weaker. Reenvisioned in the image of the Trinity and networked in mission, these expressions of church could discover a fresh sense of unity and purpose in God rather than unraveling in internal conflict.

In this proposal of a paradigm shift from corporate hierarchy to Trinitarian network, there remains the question of accountability and power. On the one hand, corporate hierarchies carry risks of domination, privilege, and the concentration of power that flatter structures characterized by greater mutuality might avoid. On the other hand, Anglicanism has always cherished the principle of good order in its polity, worship, and life,
and the reality of human sin (both personal and corporate) must be reckoned with. To use Avery Dulles's typologies, the Episcopal Church has tended to emphasize "church as institution" above other models of the church. By suggesting a Trinitarian paradigm, I do not intend simply to swing to the opposite pole of "church as mystical communion" and reject the church's institutional character. Rethinking Episcopal polity along these lines involves a careful integration of spiritual and structural accountability with greater flexibility and freedom that would empower all members of the church (particularly those on the margins of the church's institutional life today) to participate and flourish in mission. The question is how the church's institutional life can best embody the character and life of God.

The Leadership of the Laity

A recent Episcopal Church Foundation study of leadership in the church discovered widespread "confusion about leadership roles" among laity and clergy. The Catechism in the 1979 Book of Common Prayer lists the laity first among the ministers of the church; yet the laity too often seem to be at the sidelines, rather than the center, of the Episcopal Church's life and


ministry. A missional ecclesiology calls for a rethinking of the leadership of the laity from complementing the rule of monarchical clergy to developing mission and ministry teams in the world. In Romans 12:8, *leadership* is listed among the spiritual gifts given by God to the members of the body of Christ. Throughout Anglican history, leadership has tended to be equated with office, primarily with respect to clergy, but also for the laity (i.e., “lay leaders” in the congregation are understood to be the vestry and perhaps some committee chairs). Understanding lay leadership as restricted to membership on the governing board or overseeing an internal committee fails to recognize the missionary nature of the church.

A missional polity encourages and equips those laypeople in the congregation who have the spiritual gift of leadership to lead teams in mission in the world. This might take a wide variety of forms, from short-term mission trips and partnerships to different kinds of entrepreneurial initiatives that seek to meet needs in the community. These mission teams are understood not to be extraordinary and occasional experiences in the life of the church and its members (as is the case presently), but rather to be ongoing, central dimensions of the church’s life. The multiplication and growth of the church and its impact in the world require the multiplication and growth of lay leaders.

Presently, most laypeople in the Episcopal Church who have the spiritual gift of leadership exercise that gift to great effect in their daily jobs or through other community roles without necessarily being equipped to reflect on and align their leadership with the gospel and the reign of God. It is the church’s responsibility to help them do so. Lay leadership must be understood not only as pertaining to explicit congregation- or diocesan-based mission initiatives, but also to the exercise of Christian leadership in whatever vocation and sphere of influence a leader may be placed. In this sense, the Catechism is more missional than the Canons when it says: “The ministry of lay persons is to represent Christ and his Church; to bear witness to him wherever they may be; and, according to the gifts given to them, to carry on Christ’s work of reconciliation in the world...”

Laypeople have a crucial role to play in the governance of congregations, dioceses, and the denomination, but their leadership must be understood holistically and collaboratively. They are partners on an equal basis with clergy, and their sphere of influence must not be restricted to mere fi-

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The Leadership of Bishops

The centrality of bishops to Anglican ecclesiology, while a given on one level, is also somewhat disputed. Historically, there has been a tendency among low-church, evangelical Anglicans to assert that bishops are of the bene esse (well-being) of the church. On the other hand, high-church Anglicans have more typically emphasized that bishops are necessary (esse) for the church to be the church. In mission history, this first position played out in the practice of the Church Missionary Society, under the influence of Henry Venn, to see the raising up of indigenous bishops as one of the final stages of the missionary endeavor. However, Anglo-Catholics tended to begin with bishops in mission, as in the practice of sending missionary bishops across the American frontier.

The three primary functions of bishops historically may be described as teaching, sending/developing leaders, and governance/oversight. While these are reflected in the Catechism’s description of the ministry of a bishop, current realities are heavily weighted toward the governance/oversight function. While bishops in the Roman Catholic Church, for instance, have issued a series of significant teaching statements in the past decades that address various aspects of life in our context (social, ethical, economic, and so on), it has been argued that the House of Bishops, like the General Convention, generally does not speak coherently on matters of theology, ethics, and discipleship.


The role of bishops within a missional polity is crucial. Bishops in the Episcopal Church have the authority to lead system-wide change, creating what organizational scholar Ronald Heifetz calls a "holding environment" to facilitate adaptation on the part of members of the system to a changed context.\(^{56}\) Within a missional polity, the episcopate must be shed of its regulatory, bureaucratic weight and freed up for a focus on mission. This means that dioceses should stop trying to safeguard or maintain institutional identity through regulation and control and instead focus on cultivating it through interpretive leadership.

Interpretive (or sense-making) leadership has its roots in the work of Philip Selznick in the 1950s: Selznick understood leadership as the definition and articulation of organizational identity and mission.\(^{57}\) It has recently come into sharper focus within the field of organizational studies through such writers as Karl Weick.\(^{58}\) The paradigm shift from a Newtonian cosmology, with its corresponding modernist bureaucracy, to a quantum cosmology has led organizational scholars to question the premises of command-and-control. Instead, attention has shifted to the leader's capacity to help others make meaning and define identity in a changing, adaptive environment.\(^{59}\) Bishops would do well to reclaim their apostolic teaching role as interpretive leaders who help the church make sense out of its place in a postmodern world by linking the biblical narrative to the lives of church members today.

Bishops also should shift from seeing themselves as providers of pastoral care to the clergy (pastor to the pastors) to instead reclaiming more directly an apostolic leadership development role. The bishop can cultivate relational communities of leadership formation, creating a dialogue and learning space in which established and budding leaders can reflect together theologically and biblically on what God is doing in the world and how the church can align with it. There will always be a certain amount of


administration that dioceses must engage in; however, bishops should to a great extent delegate this to competent administrators and focus instead on leading teams of missionary leaders.

This is where the complementary understandings of the social and sending Trinity offer a fruitful framework for reimagining the episcopate. On the one hand, the bishop’s identity is defined relationally by her or his participation in the community (koinonia) that is the church, and particularly by collaboration with a team of leaders for mission in a particular area. On the other hand, the bishop’s role is one of “sending” (apostolein) in mission. This Trinitarian conception provides for both leadership (teaching and sending) and partnership (sharing the work). It is a way of reconceptualizing the monarchical episcopate that moves the participation of others from mere democracy or counterbalancing authority to interdependent, collaborative partnership.

The Leadership of Priests

Currently, priests are still predominantly trained to be professional chaplains who cater to private spiritual needs. When they get into the parish, they find that they are also expected to be institutional managers, a role for which they are generally ill equipped. Both of these understandings of the presbyterate reflect deep Christendom assumptions: that the ministry of priests takes place largely in settled congregations whose greatest need is pastoral care, and that the church is primarily an institutional, nonprofit voluntary society that provides religious goods and services to its members and the community.

R. David Cox has described the prevailing view of the priesthood in Anglicanism as a ministerial representative model, tracing it back to the liberal Catholic Victorian theologian R. C. Moberly (1845-1903). Working from an incarnational ecclesiology, Moberly understood the priest to represent the collective priesthood of all believers in a concentrated way: “to Godward for man, to manward for God.” Added to this is the ideal of service (ministry). It is noteworthy that the “representative” language appears in the Catechism of the 1979 Book of Common Prayer as the first function
listed for all orders of ministry. It is not restricted to priests. Moreover, service is characteristic of all disciples of Christ, who are encouraged to follow his kenotic (self-emptying) example by washing one another’s feet (John 13). The concepts of representation and service fail to distinguish the presbyterate from the other orders of ministers in the church.

We might begin to reconceptualize the office of the presbyterate within a missional polity by focusing on the following three elements: cultivating missional communities, interpretive leadership, and leadership multiplication/sending. Rather than the presbyter merely sharing with the bishop in the governance of the church, she or he should also share in the bishop’s apostolic function: teaching and sending leaders. One striking thing about the ministry of Jesus is the extent to which he focused on replicating his own leadership in a team of followers, whom he empowered with the Holy Spirit and sent to continue the announcement and embodiment of the reign of God that he began. The first apostles developed and multiplied subsequent generations of leaders in turn. In the case of priests in a missional twenty-first-century Episcopal Church, that leadership multiplication process is primarily focused on lay leaders to lead the mission and ministry teams, through which most of the congregation’s service in the world is done.

The priest’s particular role is to cultivate the gathered and dispersed community through teaching and interpretive leadership that opens up the biblical narrative to engagement by the missional imagination of all of God’s people. This narrative leadership role has three intersecting dimensions: a modeling role, in which the priest articulates the gospel story enfolded in the particularity of her or his own life; a pedagogical role, in which the priest teaches and interprets the gospel story through Scripture and theology; and a liturgical role, in which the priest convenes and serves as the icon of unity within the sacramental telling of the story, and in which the various orders of ministry collaborate to enact together the Eucharist and other celebrations as eschatological signs of the reign of God.

Cultivating missional communities requires developing the capacity

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The Leadership of Deacons

The Anglican Catechism describes the ministry of deacons as “to represent Christ and his Church, particularly as a servant of those in need; and to assist bishops and priests in the proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments.” As in the “representative ministerial” conception of priesthood I referred to above, what is to distinguish the service of deacons from the missionary service of all of the church’s members toward the needy? Even as it continues to be revived in the Episcopal Church today, the diaconate is ambiguous and calls for redefinition.

For most of Anglican history, the diaconate was a transition period immediately preceding ordination to the priesthood, a kind of apprentice priest role. This concept, retained from medieval Catholicism, is still part of current polity, as those called to the presbyterate must first be ordained deacons (and solemnly swear that they are called to the diaconate!) for at least six months before ordination to the priesthood. Deep behind this idea is the progressive concept of orders, which reflects the Roman imperial career track. In the twentieth century, the diaconate has seen a revival as a permanent order within Roman Catholicism, Anglicanism, Lutheranism, and Methodism. In the Episcopal Church it has been construed primarily as an order dedicated to serving the needy in the community, typically in a nonstipendiary capacity under the oversight of the bishop.

Recent scholarship has called this concept of the diaconate deeply into question. Within a missional polity, the diaconate takes on a differ-

64. Book of Common Prayer, 856.
65. Cox, Priesthood, 314.
66. See John N. Collins, Diakonia: Re-Interpreting the Ancient Sources (New York: Ox-
ent role from this prevalent (mis)conception of care-giving service. Indeed, serving the needy in the community is a ministry of the whole church, not just deacons; setting apart some congregants by way of ordination for the diaconate only feeds the distorted view that mission is an activity done by specialists. As John N. Collins has pointed out, the biblical and apostolic understanding of the diaconate was much more missionary in character than today’s prevailing conceptions of it. The diakonos role was one of significance in that such men and women were entrusted with important communications and executive authority. In the New Testament context, this included the proclamation of the gospel. Later in the early church, deacons worked closely with bishops as administrators of ministry in large areas. In the third century, for instance, there were seven deacons responsible for overseeing the church’s ministry in various parts of Rome, including the treasury.

Within a twenty-first century missional polity, deacons in the Episcopal Church may be fruitfully understood as mobile leaders who initiate, lead, and facilitate the church’s missionary witness in the world across congregational boundaries. As such, it is a highly entrepreneurial, connectional office that links ministry teams, congregations, community leaders, resources, and partners to participate in mission.

The ordination liturgy for deacons speaks to the interpretive character of diaconal leadership: “As a deacon in the Church . . . you are to make Christ and his redemptive love known, by your word and example, to those among whom you live, and work, and worship. You are to interpret to the Church the needs, concerns and hopes of the world.” Just as the bishop and priest exercise interpretive leadership overseeing the diocese and congregation, respectively, the deacon also assists members of congregations and the diocese to interpret the mission of God in their context. As emissaries of the bishop, deacons bear the sacred commission of the gospel across boundaries within the larger diocesan mission field.

Outside of diocesan context, these gatherings in national level also the assembly national level, the spirit of purpose.

As emissaries of the bishop, deacons bear the sacred commission of the gospel across boundaries within the larger diocesan mission field,
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facilitating the development of mission and ministry initiatives that might involve members of multiple congregations. Theirs is primarily a regional (or cross-congregational) ministry, while the priest's is primarily a local (congregation-specific) ministry.

Rethinking Diocesan Conventions and General Convention

Outside of those who relish church politics, most Episcopalians approach diocesan conventions and General Convention with apprehension, for these gatherings are typically characterized by coalition politics, parliamentary maneuvering, and divisiveness. Within the structure of these gatherings, Bible study and theological reflection are typically subordinated to the central content — the legislative process. This approach to church assemblies reflects not only the downside of democratic rule, but also the assumptions of Christendom that legislative governance is the primary reason for the church's representatives to assemble on regional and national levels. Governance must take place, and policy must be made; yet the spirit with which it is undertaken should reflect a larger missionary purpose.

To begin with, we might reconceptualize such conventions as convocations of missionaries who gather first and foremost to cast vision, share best practices, and build one another up in ministry. In such a model, prayer, Bible study, and theological reflection would take center stage as the main event — with legislation relegated to the sidelines. This would begin to reshape the way the Holy Spirit is attended to in the councils of the church by placing discernment at the heart of things. Conferees could share stories of mission experiences that would spark the imagination of those present. Collaborative networking for mission partnerships would be a key feature of such events.

Conclusion: A True Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society

At its worst, Anglicanism's via media approach to ecclesiology leads to an undigested assortment of contradictory theological impulses that lacks clarity and cohesion. At its best, however, Anglicanism represents an integration of the richness of the wider Christian tradition: Protestant, Catho-
lic, and Orthodox, as well as high, low, and broad church. A missional ecclesiology and polity would leverage that richness as a living sign of reconciled diversity, an expression of *koinonia* whose identity is grounded first and foremost in the triune God’s mission to renew all creation. The ecumenical movement in the twentieth century petered out when it sought to discover its unity in shared doctrine and polity. Lowest-common-denominator statements such as *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* failed to do justice to the riches of any one tradition. Perhaps the future of ecumenical cooperation lies not in doctrine or polity but rather in mission. The Episcopal Church, set within one of the most diverse and dynamic mission contexts in the world today, could contribute significantly to an emerging missional church in North America if it were to live more truly into the comprehensiveness it has historically claimed.

A missional sign of recovery is grounded in creation. The church is about when it comes to spirituality. Lowest-Order Ministry CD the future is not in mission and dycere and diversity significantly to live more

Appendix: Episcopal Church Membership Trends, 1930-2004

Unadjusted membership falls into line with adjusted membership in 1985, when non-domestic dioceses were removed and the definition of membership changed to include active members only.