

## A Brief Introduction to Anglican Church Order

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*This introduction aims to set out and demystify the basic order or way of being Church as practiced by the Churches of the Anglican Communion. This may help people from diverse church and non-church backgrounds who make up chaplaincies in the Anglican Diocese of Europe. While the matters covered are not presented as critical issues of faith or dogma they are important and particularly so in understanding roles, making decisions and relating to the wider church.*

### **Chess anyone?**

Anyone who learns to play chess starts with a quick introduction to what the various pieces do. Once we understand the powers and limitations of each piece there is vast creative potential as to how they can work together. While the ultimate objective in chess (over powering the opponent's King) is always the same there are many ways to pursue this.

Being Church also benefits from introducing the pieces and learning the order of play. The objectives of a Christian Church are always the same, proclaiming, honouring, representing and serving God through Jesus Christ. However unlike chess, there are different ways of understanding what the various pieces or ministries in a church might do or how they may relate. Among our international congregations drawn from many denominational streams this can make for some confusion and possibly tension. Well meaning church members may attempt to order church at cross purposes to each other or 'play' by different rules. Imagine an international chess tournament where contestants each arrive with different sets of pieces and different assumptions about what some pieces can do. So let's consider the Anglican set of pieces and what they do within Anglican church order.

### **Continuity and Relationship, A key value.**

The Anglican way of being church seeks to be in relationship with the whole church of God. In particular it seeks to be in continuity with the church that enjoyed communion from the time of the Apostles through to the schism between East and West in the eleventh century and the later Protestant

Reformation in the West. Great value is placed on being what the Nicene Creed describes as "One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church". While this is the faith of all orthodox or 'standard' Christians the responsibility for maintaining and nurturing this is assigned within the Anglican Communion to a particular group of people. These are the Bishops.

### **Bishops**

Bishops are people called and set aside to provide a designated region of the church with leadership in keeping within the teaching and practice of the first Apostles of Christ. Bishops are called to exercise the apostolic authority Jesus bestowed on the first apostles as builders and shepherds of his church. Bishops are essentially overseers and shepherds who exercise a ministry over a wide span. Within their span of care bishops delegate their role as shepherd to local agents. Local shepherds (Vicars/Chaplains) are formally licensed by the Diocesan Bishop to exercise ministry on his behalf in a given parish or chaplaincy. This licensing is often enacted within a service of institution for all to see.

In all matters the Bishop is the highest human authority within a diocese. In most parts of the Anglican Communion they are selected through an electoral synod by lay and ordained representatives of the diocese under the oversight of another Bishop. England is the exception where the fact of establishment still requires government involvement. Bishops by virtue of their oversight role have limited relationship with any local church. In practice they seek to act collegially with other bishops to maintain unity and order across the Church on both a national and international scale. While chaplaincies may rarely see their bishop they are still in relationship with him and through him related to the wider church.

### **Local Clergy, Vicars and Chaplains**

As mentioned already, bishops delegate their pastoral role of leadership, care and nurture to selected ordained priests in local contexts. A priest is given his bishop's license to exercise a local pastoral ministry. This may involve a wide range of possibilities. However the focus is the gospel of God in word and sacrament. The pastoral role includes providing leadership and direction for the local congregation in collegial cooperation with the Church Wardens and the Church Council. The appointment of local clergy is formally the responsibility of the Diocesan Bishop. In practice Bishops work collegially with representatives from the local church and sometimes diocesan advisors as well to seek the best appointment for a congregation.

# Anglican, what does that mean?

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In many if not most parts of the Anglican Communion the monthly payment of a parish priest or chaplain is administered through the Diocesan Administration. This reflects the relational structure of a priest/chaplain serving the Diocesan Bishop. Perhaps because of the currency complications the Diocese in Europe does not do this which can obscure awareness of diocesan involvement. Vicars or chaplains are paid on the basis that they should be enabled to fulfill their ministry. The rates of income or 'stipend' are set externally and include provision of a home to enable the Priest to fulfill his ministry calling in the local setting.

## Church Wardens

Now we meet two pieces on the Anglican chessboard which may sound somewhat exotic, Wardens. In a nutshell the two Church Wardens are the designated lay leaders of the local congregation and authorised as officers of the Bishop to play a special role. In the Diocese in Europe they are both elected by the congregation while in most parts of the Anglican Communion one is elected by the congregation and one appointed by the Vicar/Chaplain to ensure a balance.

Church Wardens have a number of responsibilities which more than keep them busy. They are the spokespeople for the laity (non-clergy) of the congregation representing them to the Bishop or the Chaplain if necessary. In any commercial transaction the church enters into it is the Wardens who sign. Wardens are also responsible for good order in Church and ensuring that services happen with adequate frequency and quality. The Wardens are the foremost in relating with the Chaplain/Vicar and in ensuring (s)he is cared for and supported as circumstances require.

Chaplain and Wardens together form a leadership core for the local Congregation as well as a representative link between Bishop and local Church. As such they may often act on matters without publicity. The trust between Chaplain and Wardens is important for the well being of the congregation as they often need to relate on sensitive and far reaching concerns. This needs to be considered when congregations discern and elect wardens each year at the Annual General Meeting.

## The Church Council

At the Annual General meeting church members elect a council from amongst the church membership. The Council can vary in size but will also include the Wardens (elected separately) and the Chaplain (not elected) who normally also chairs

the Council. The role of council is to consult with chaplain and wardens on matters of concern and importance to the Church. The Council plays a leading role in the management and administration of the Church. It is to be a group of people who cooperate with the Chaplain in getting things done for the Church.

The Church or Chaplaincy Council is not a church eldership in the sense of spiritual oversight or government. Members are not ordained to a leadership role or one of spiritual ministry but elected to serve the church in managing its resources and serving its needs. It is not a representative body but elected to serve in the widest interests. The forum of council meetings provides a place to consider possibilities together. When a church council needs to speak this is done by the Church Wardens. Within standard Anglican order both the Secretary and Treasurer are chosen from within the Church Council at its first meeting and serve as council members with a specific responsibility.

## Other Members

The roles described so far are by no means the whole Church. What would a church be without many more people? There are also many other roles of service and ministry. The ideal of any church is that as many as possible are exercising gifts and serving as they are able. In an Anglican Church that happens within the provisions provided by the aforementioned roles and ministries. There are other valid ways of being Church and this is not the only way of being a church with bishops or ordained clergy. However to dispense with the basic provisions described above would be to depart from even a broad appreciation of what Anglican Church Order provides.

## Want more Details?

Within these broad details individual dioceses adapt these traditions to their local context. This is also the case in Europe. Details can be read in the Diocesan Handbook easily available on the Internet at <http://europe.anglican.org/admin/administration.html>