
The House of Deputies and The House of Bishops: Is One the Senior House?

**An article from the *Cathedral Times*
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Some people say it to tease, and some people say it as a matter of principle; but at several points between now and the General Convention of the Episcopal Church, we will hear the House of Deputies referred to as "the senior house." (General Convention meets this summer in Anaheim, California, July 8-17).

In the Episcopal Church, the House of Bishops consists of all our bishops of the church. The House of Deputies consists of four elected priests and four more elected laypersons from each of the regular dioceses of the Episcopal Church. At General Convention, a successful resolution must pass both legislative houses in the same form. Here's how the two houses came to be:

In the 1780's, there was no formal Episcopal Church. Anglican Christians (those connected to the Church of England) found themselves organizing and setting up leadership along three different structures. First, there were those Anglicans in the southern colonies below Connecticut, including Virginia and South Carolina, who were great believers in representative government. Many of their Anglican churches had existed for a long time without the presence of a bishop at all. They had grown accustomed to organizing and supervising themselves. Nevertheless, they wanted bishops, because bishops distinguished their identity from the new world Protestant bodies.

Secondly, there were Anglicans in the north, especially in Connecticut, who followed the high church principles of Samuel Seabury. The Diocese of Connecticut organized itself to have no lay representation at all. A group of clergy elected Samuel Seabury to be bishop and sent him across the Atlantic for ordination. He ended up being consecrated in November of 1784, in Scotland, not England, because the English Parliament would not allow anyone to be consecrated bishop without vowing allegiance to the English monarchy.

Thirdly, there were those many Anglicans who were deeply influenced by The Great Awakening. The early Methodist leaders were mostly Anglican, and they would finally decide, at the Christmas Conference in 1784, to elect and ordain two of their own as "supervisors"-Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury. Obviously, this group would separate from the other Anglicans in the new world; that was a great loss.

The first two general conventions of the Episcopal Church met in 1785 and 1786, without the Diocese of Connecticut, and without any bishops. They were following The Reverend William White, who had plans for the church to be democratically operated but otherwise to conform as much as possible to the Church of England. In 1786, English Parliament relaxed its ordination laws, and William White and Samuel Provoost (from New York) were permitted to be ordained in England for service in the United States.

Thus, it was not until the 1789 General Convention of the Episcopal Church that bishops were present. In fact, this date serves as the formal establishment of (what is now) the Episcopal Church. 1789 is the date of the church's first real

constitution; it created a House of Bishops, which would be allowed to veto the House of Deputies if it had enough votes!

Today, it probably does not matter who is the "senior house;" the Episcopal Church has contributed a democratic and representative form of church government in a catholic and apostolic tradition. May God be with us!

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