

EPISCOPATE

The Role of Bishops in a Shared Future

Edited by C. ANDREW DOYLE

Foreword by MICHAEL B. CURRY



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Foreword

Michael B. Curry

I was delighted when my friend and fellow bishop, Andy Doyle, told me about this collection of essays on the episcopate. Such a compendium makes perfect sense; we are, after all, The *Episcopal* Church. And having served as a bishop for well over two decades, first as bishop diocesan in North Carolina and now as presiding bishop, I confess that I have a particular interest in the book's theme, and so I was, therefore, quick to say yes when asked to contribute this foreword.

As the age of the apostles was coming to a close in the latter half of the first century, Paul addressed one of his final letters to "all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops [Gk: *episkopoi*] and deacons." A baton was being passed, and yet there would be different ways in those early years of understanding what it actually meant to be a bishop.

A scholar I know well recently brought to my attention an important aspect of episcopacy noted over fifty years ago by R. P. C. Hanson in *Lambeth Essays on Ministry*, a compendium prepared in advance for bishops attending the 1969 Lambeth Conference. Hanson said that our Anglican understanding of episcopacy has what he termed both Ignatian and Cyprianic elements. He was referring here to two early church fathers, those second-generation leaders who received the baton from the apostles and wrestled with what it all meant. Ignatius of Antioch focused on the bishop's authority as chief shepherd in the diocese. Cyprian of Carthage lifted up the need for shared counsel between bishops, as those who hold a common responsibility. Even then, in those earliest days of *episkopos*, there was a lively conversation over understandings viewed at times as being in conflict and at other times as complementary.

In the centuries between then and now, there have been questions and challenges aplenty over the meaning of *episkopos*, especially in our branch of the Jesus Movement:

- At the end of the sixth century, monastic bishops in the northern and southern parts of the British Isles adapted what they knew to a new and unfamiliar local context.

- In the sixteenth century, a scholar-archbishop sought to balance the need for change with the need for continuity in the time of upheaval that was the Reformation.
- At the end of the eighteenth century, revolution gave birth to a new republic, and a church without *episkopoi* discerned what role they would have moving forward.
- In the late twentieth century, a bold African American pioneer took her place in a historic succession that for far too long had been closed to women.

In these moments, and countless others, both the idea and the reality of “bishop” in our tradition have been explored by many. The chapters you are about to read provide important additions to that ongoing conversation. I pray that by listening to the various voices, you will hear things that will both comfort and challenge you. And perhaps you then will find ways to give voice to your own thoughts and help contribute to this important part of Christian mission and ministry. God bless you. And you keep—and share—the faith.

Introduction

C. Andrew Doyle

In conversations with many in and outside the House of Bishops there has been an expressed desire to reimagine the future of the episcopate in our Episcopal Church. We are electing nine to fifteen bishops a year—the turnover is high. There is a sense of urgency to capture the moment of change as new bishops enter and begin to share their episcopacy with—and at the same time are formed by—the church they serve.

We have been in the midst of a pandemic that is now endemically with us. Church leadership and people have struggled for two years. It has been a time of adaptation and change. New questions about the role of bishop have emerged around authority. Questions have emerged also about changes in mission strategy. This has been coterminous with the desire for pastoral care from the episcopate. There continues to be a call for mission leadership. An ever so brief survey of recent episcopal elections brings the following themes to mind: congregational growth, evangelism, health, racial justice, unity amid division, and prophetic leadership. None of these is the particular gift of any one bishop, but all are shared in the priesthood of believers, of which the bishop is only one. Nevertheless, these themes indicate a desire for change, leadership, and vision.

We are also preparing for the election of a new presiding bishop. Here again arise questions concerning the role of bishop, the role of the House of Bishops, and the needs of the wider church that demand the presiding bishop's attention. Questions will inevitably arise around preaching, teaching, sacraments, and the nature of administration. The age-old debate will begin again about whether the presiding bishop can serve institutionally while continuing to serve as a bishop in a local diocese.

This collection attempts to offer to the people of The Episcopal Church some conversation starters regarding our history, our present, and the potential future role of bishop. The collection should not be seen as a solution to questions about our future. Instead, my hope is that the chapters inspire more curiosity about the ministry of bishops in The Episcopal Church. I hope that you will read the chapters in a group of discerning leaders in conversation with one another.

We are in a time of discernment. These diverse voices call our attention to our history, our unity, and our diversity in ecclesiological opinion. The collection aspires to provide the reader with a sense of what binds us together as well. Therefore, you will find common themes shared across the chapters.

The ordering of the chapters has some method. The chapter by George Sumner that started a recent conversation about the episcopate in the House of Bishops is first. I chose Bob Prichard's chapter as the next one because it gives a historical view of the episcopate and offers questions about its future. William Gregg continues the conversation as he considers the theological and practical understanding of the episcopate and what it means to do the work decently and in order while balancing history, canons, and present and future changes. Next is Bill Franklin's chapter on William White, a history piece that sits in conversation with Prichard's. Franklin also allows the reader to go deeper into one example of American episcopacy in its nascent stage. Allen Shin then takes up the topic of race within The Episcopal Church in his chapter and explores its legacy.

Katharine Jefferts Schori's chapter is a consideration of women's leadership in the Christian church of the first century to the present. It begins to expand on thoughts and questions from the previous chapters. Sheryl A. Kujawa-Holbrook invites a more particular consideration of the changes underway in the House of Bishops today and how they are affecting and may continue to affect our ecclesiology. Hector Monterroso's chapter signals a shift to topics of vision and mission. I felt as though his perspective of noncontinental US dioceses would offer a particular view of the episcopate. Bob Fitzpatrick then explores the idea of ministering within and among a people.

The collection shifts again at this point, taking up episcopate as leadership. Robert Wright breaks open the idea of leadership for us and lays a challenging foundation for future bishops. Kym Lucas then considers the role of vision and suggests that it is the community that holds the vision, and the bishop who comes alongside to help nurture it into reality. Diana Akiyama provides a forthright consideration of the challenges we face as bishops. This is followed by a consideration of authority, bishops, and General Convention resolutions by Joan Geiszler-Ludlum.

The final grouping of essays considers the future. Jennifer Baskerville-Burrows invites us into the imaginative work of relational leadership as a core component of the future episcopate. Sean Rowe considers the role that adaptive

leadership will need to play for new bishops. This part of the discussion is wrapped up by Cornelia Eaton, who ponders the beauty way basket and how the episcopate may be part of the weaving of our lives with God and one another.

I believe you will find that these essays point to two emerging ideas about the future episcopate. First, I believe they point toward a church active at the margins of justice and compel us toward an episcopal presence in the world. This suggests that an embodied episcopate is a narrative-bearing vessel. In these chapters I suggest we see how the bishop is charged to speak a word of gospel to both the church and the world about what it means to be a just community. Oppression, objectification, and commodification are bred by the world of categorization and nurtured in the heart of disconnected community.¹ An embodied episcopate incarnates a just community of liberation and imprints a different relationship with God, others, and creation on the hearts of the participants. The change we see at present is a new and more diverse embodiment, and so a more reflective incarnational word is ever more available for mission.

The second theme is that of a missionary bishop. There is together a shared understanding that missionary bishops working in teams share episcopal authority and the implementation of new structures will replace the “full-time one bishop to a diocese” model. Bishops will raise up and call forth diverse clergy and lay populations focused on the mission of the new church. There will be bishops who hold positions as heads of congregations and large urban communities. There will be bishops who travel to support new ministry contexts where various creative and innovative styles of leadership are needed to propel ministry forward. There is no one solution that will define how the future church carries out its ministry. It will do all things necessary for the sake of God’s mission of shalom. At the core will be missionary bishops in relationships with other orders—each taking their place in the work of an active missional church.

I hope to have brought together a few of the brightest minds across the church to help us with this very important conversation about the life of bishops within the life of the whole community of the faithful. I hope you will enjoy and be challenged by the texts collected here. Hold them in prayer, ponder them, and allow them to work on us as we elect new bishops, as we consider the presiding bishop elections, and as we contemplate how we might all work together in the life of a truly shared episcopate.

On the Episcopate

George R. Sumner

Setting Out the Question

Why bishops, beyond the sheer inertia of habit? What are they good for? How has the case for them changed due to the rapidly changing circumstances of the contemporary church? What have our answers got to do with basic questions of identity in The *Episcopal* Church? These are the questions I want to address in this brief chapter. At the outset, I set as my goal to offer arguments that are equally accessible to readers with various commitments on contemporary and controversial theological issues. I also want to recognize the valid side of the tacitly “congregationalist” assumption in much of our church life: the local congregation in worship, community, and service is most real to most members. It is against this natural sense that the case for bishops must (and can) be made. Of course, I acknowledge that we bishops live up to our calling fallibly; all Christian ministry, lay and ordained, exists under the sign of forgiveness, both offered and received.

The Inherited Nonnegotiables

Let us begin with the features of the episcopate that are inherent to the calling: the nonnegotiables—features that are context independent but not content independent theologically. By this I mean that the office is comprehensible only within the specific tradition of Christian theology, throughout which it has borne certain theological meanings. It does not suffice to offer general reasons for leadership in social, or specifically religious, organizations. While the church can be helpfully studied sociologically, those features particular to the episcopate as a tradition of explicitly Christian leadership are more pertinent. How is the

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episcopate as a role in the narrative of the church in general, and Anglicanism in particular, to be understood? Going back to basics, returning *ad fontes* (“to the sources”) is crucial, especially in situations that are otherwise confounding. To change the metaphor, in such a murky moment we most need the polestar.

Bishops, as our ordinal tells us, are “called to be one with the apostles.”¹ In the New Testament, the apostles were witnesses of the resurrection of the incarnate and crucified Jesus.² First then, the office has an inherently Christological center of gravity. We are like the figure of John the Baptist in the great triptych of Gruenewald (itself a product of a time of plague), with his outsized index finger pointing to the cross.³ Because the scriptures are the primary witness to the crucified and risen One, bishops are invariably to be its exegetes as well. Resurrection here is not a symbol for some more general concept, but points to Christ in his specific, narratively derived identity. Furthermore, the Resurrection both anticipates the End and inaugurates his eschatological reign. To be its witness is to point toward the invasion of the kingdom into time and space, the confrontation with the transcendent in Christ. The liminality and the sanctity of the episcopate are derived from the One to whom they point. In his light we are not reducible to managers or church bureaucrats (though we are those too).

Second, bishops remind us that the church is “deep and wide,” by which I mean reaching back in time to the apostles and reaching out in space to the ends of the earth. Bishops are inheritors, bearers of memory, signs for the local church that they do in fact have a wider story, inheritance, family. It is worth noting that with respect to being signs of our inheritance from the apostles, as well as our share in the apostolicity and catholicity of the church, the episcopate in our church claims to partake of a wider Christian tradition. Bishops cannot be understood simply as designated functionaries or religious practitioners of our national denomination. In the same way, our appeal to scripture, our celebration of Baptism and Eucharist, and our recitation of the Nicene Creed make a claim, sometimes explicit and sometimes implicit, that we stand in a vaster company and are answerable to an older norm. We are, again, doing more than providing administration and leadership for our own membership or implementing our own rules (though we are also doing that).

To call it “the episcopate” necessarily makes a wider claim and places implied conceptual constraints on us that we may not notice: the doctrine that we have received, to which the ordinal refers, not only is from our own local formulations

but also partakes of a wider inheritance of articulated belief.⁴ In a similar way, our invitation to a gathering like Lambeth, while not imposing on us a superior synodical and canonical authority, symbolizes the wider global collegiality that one famous Anglican statement described as “mutual responsibility and interdependence in the Body of Christ.”⁵ Though there is in us Americans often the spirit of “don’t tread on me,” we cannot evade these wider bonds of affection inherent to the episcopal office. To be sure, the episcopate in its “rabbinic” and exegetical side will lead to disagreement, since the interpretation of the Bible is hardly uniform. At least we can say that the episcopate is an inherited and collegial ministry of fellowship and contention around the Word of God.

Third, the bishop is the chief pastor, though of course we share this role collegially with our clergy in the diocese. Shepherds protect, feed, and guide the sheep. How this is lived out varies by era and area, though the functions remain (and, in the time of SafeChurch, for example, an important aspect of guarding has been rediscovered). These three dimensions, witness to the Resurrection, representative of the church catholic and apostolic, and chief pastor, are true regardless of what the financial, educational, geographic, and other particularities of a diocese might be. Note that this third basic aspect of episcopacy has, in most cases, an element of place—one is a bishop of somewhere in particular. Hence there is inevitably a tension between the localism and the universalism of the calling, between the bishop thought of with their presbyters in one place and that same bishop with fellow bishops “from away.” And at the heart of the office is that this all-too-human, walking symbol of these wider realities actually shows up, at a parish, early Sunday morning, with hat and stick, a present and embodied reminder of these wider things. Thus, in this distressing time of distance and virtuality, bishops must struggle to continue to be witnesses to the necessarily present and embodied nature of all sacramental acts.

Contextual Particularities

It is surely true that context-independent theological parameters can make non-anxious leadership more likely by alleviating the need to make it all up anew. However, we must also bring these features, like bass notes, into relationship with factors that do have more to do with our own twenty-first-century North American context. First, there is the unique history of the American episcopate: an

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order not derived from its (former) imperial power, with democratically elected bishops exercising authority in synod, and an episcopal house, in parallel with our secular government, that may sometimes act as a “cooling dish” in convention debate. These are features of our own kind of contextualization that are worth noting and protecting. To see bishops as per se elitist may overlook this particularly American contribution.

Second, the episcopate is being exercised in an era of disestablishment and ecclesial marginalization. We are a smaller and less wealthy church, further from the levers of power, in a gradually more secularizing culture than in the past. These trends have been accelerated by the present pandemic/recession. The prescriptions one commonly hears in the face of these challenges are sometimes diametrically opposed. Do we need to become more socially dense, better catechized, more distinct, a kind of liturgical “community of character” (as in the work of Hauerwas and Dreher)? Or is our future more diffuse, localized, and pluralist in expression (Moltmann’s “total ministry” and “emerging” are examples)? Both react to the same seismic shifts, and both may overestimate how much say we have in some of the changes coming our way. The first reaction, for example, would lead one to think we need a more disciplined and traditional form of theological education, and the latter would reinforce the use of local schools of ministry of a more informal kind. But throughout, the challenge of postmodernity—conceptual, financial—faces us all. Differing responses to the same shift have more in common than one would at first see, for in both cases the bishop must find his or her voice in a situation of diminished power of various kinds (and try to grasp the kinds of freedom it allows).

Third, in a visibly fraying society we need bishops with a prophetic edge. We could have a debate about what the theological conditions for such a ministry would be. One might argue that a strong sense of divine transcendence is the main prerequisite for such a prophetic word to the wider culture, since it provides the leverage over the culture’s own assumptions.⁶ Some of the most trenchant social critiques in our tradition have come from theological viewpoints that were less culturally accommodated.⁷ The trick is that the bishop offering critique must at the same time empathize and be in solidarity with their people. At the very least we need to recognize that the relation between this prophetic edge and one’s theology of culture, as well as between the edge and pastoral identification, is not a simple or straightforward matter.

A few years ago, a priest in a suburb told me, “Bishop, we are growing because, more or less, people who come like my sermon, the band, and the Sunday school. As soon as we’re batting one for three, they’re gone to a church down the street. Very few are here because we are Episcopalians.” The market is king! On the other hand, they have come to expect communion every Sunday. The notion that having a bishop is a part of their ecclesial identity is a work in progress. The American democratic inheritance, functional disestablishment, and the edge are, to greater and lesser extents, what they expect in the ethos of the church they have joined, and they only need to be helped to see how episcopate relates to these too.

In reprise, those abiding features mentioned earlier ought to be entailed in all churches: Christology, apostolicity and catholicity, and *koinonia* are not our own possessions. So bishops are servants of things that are of the *esse*, and precisely as they faithfully subserve these, they show bishops to be of the church’s *bene esse*.⁸ In other words, the people in that suburban church tacitly expect certain things that make their gathering a *church*, and they may come to see the benefit of this particular kind of symbolic person who is responsible for ensuring that first things stay first, that birthrights not be sold for bowls of lentil stew. Maybe, culturally, they can come to imagine me, at least, to be “spiritual quality control.”

With every calling comes a concatenation of trials and challenges. Given this mantle and context, it is not hard to locate the pitfalls, some of which I have already mentioned.⁹ In our time, partisanship tinged by anger is an obvious risk. Our culture turns everything into an individual commodity, even as it valorizes novelty. The workaholic is not rare in the episcopal ranks; feeling the lack of time to study and read we may have brought with us from the presbyterate too. Sometimes we forget that the symbol that we embody precedes and exceeds us as individuals, though this ought to be a relief. For example, nearing retirement, we, like all pastors, wonder what it has amounted to and whether it was enough—the challenge of ego integration.¹⁰ As to this last test, we must by grace grasp at the conclusion that our calling is by its nature a handing over to us and from us for a time, of testimony, symbolic personhood, and shared pastoring. Retirement is the gift of seeing how little of it is ours. All the aforementioned challenges grow directly out of the intersection of the enduring nature and the present context of this calling.

As an addendum, we can readily find all these apostolic elements and contextual features named or implied in our own ordinal in the Book of Common

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Prayer of 1979. The preamble to the examination¹¹ comprises all three of the perennial callings of the bishop, while what we have called contextual particularities have left fingerprints in the subsequent interrogation in the sharing of the “government of the whole Church,” “the support for all the baptized in their gifts and ministries,” and in the “stirring of conscience.”¹²

Where Does All This Leave Us?

One common thread throughout this account is inheritance, which does not exclude contestation or tension. Another is the challenge that the retrieval of the abiding meaning of the episcopate offers to contemporary construals of the episcopate as a leader/administrator of a nonprofit, say, or only a representative of a particular American, twenty-first-century denomination. While these are true, they are not enough either to sustain us or, by God’s grace, to renew our church. The thread running through this whole account is what I would call the indirect pertinence of the office. By this I mean the episcopate’s essential difference from the local pastorate, not just in order of magnitude but also in purpose. The bishop points away toward Christ, upward to the mysterious reality of the Resurrection, backward and outward to the apostles and our fellow churches of the nations, to the midst of society, toward features of society we may wish to avoid seeing. In each case being a contributor toward a surplus of meaning is inherent in the job. While the bishop may have a burden to worry over the perplexities of our cultural moment in many ways, this here-and-now edge is not blunted but enhanced by the office’s more distant provenance and its oblique nature. The bishop learns to come alongside his or her larger flock, but as a living symbol of attention to these wider referents. In a moment in which our life may be consumed by immediate worries of survival, the retrieval of the episcopate in its indirect pertinence, ironically, may never have been more important.