

How the Church Works

From the Parish to the Diocese

Where do I find answers

- We start with the Constitution & Canons of the Episcopal Church if the answer isn't there....
- Go to the Constitution and Canons of the Diocese of Western New York if the answer isn't there...
- Go to the by-laws of your congregation
- Keep in mind that the by-laws of your congregation are governed by New York State Religious Corporation law & other applicable state laws

Congregation, Mission & Parish

- All Parishes are congregations but not all congregations are parishes

- Parishes are: Incorporated in the State of New York; Have been accepted by the Diocesan Convention and have proved to the Convention that it:
 - Has sufficient members to elect wardens and members of the vestry
 - Has a suitable building for worship
 - Can pay its operating expenses, pay a rector's salary & pension & its assessments to the Diocese
- Missions are: Either new congregations in the process of becoming parishes or existing parishes who have asked to convert to Mission status because they need help with any or all of the above.

What's the Difference

- Parishes
 - Call a tenured rector
 - Have by-laws that govern the number & term of wardens and vestry members
 - Hold title to their buildings in trust for the Diocese & are responsible for their finances
- Missions
 - The Bishop is rector & may appoint a vicar
 - Are governed by Canon 12 of the Diocesan Canons
 - Real & other property will be transferred to the Diocese and the Bishop, Diocesan Council or Trustees may assume control of the parish finances

Members - Laity

- Anyone who has been baptized & whose baptism is recorded in the parish register is a member.
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- Any member 16 years or older is an adult member
 - Any member who has received communion 3 times in the last year is a communicant
 - Any communicant who in the previous year: “has been faithful in corporate worship, unless for good cause prevented, and have been faithful in working, praying and giving for the spread of the Kingdom of God.” are communicants in good standing
 - Clergy in charge (or warden if there is no clergy in charge) decides

What about the clergy?

- Clergy people (deacons or priests) are not members of congregations – they are members of the Diocese in which they are canonically resident
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- A rector – priest in charge of a congregation who is elected by the vestry with the approval of the bishop & has tenure. The rector is the “president” of the parish corporation.
 - A vicar – priest in charge of a mission who is appointed by the bishop to “vicariously” exercise the bishop’s authority as rector
 - Priest-in-Charge – A priest called by the vestry under terms agreed by the vestry, priest & Bishop

- Absent a rector, vicar, priest-in-charge or interim rector, vicar or priest-in-charge the ecclesiastical authority of the congregation rests with the senior warden, then the junior warden
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- Extended supply – clergy who serve a congregation on a regular basis usually under contract
 - Assistant priest – serves at the pleasure of the rector – usually paid & usually have a contract
 - Associate priest – serves at the pleasure of the rector, sometimes paid, sometimes volunteer
 - Deacons – assigned to a congregation by the bishop

Elected Leadership

- Parishes elect wardens & vestry members in accordance with their by-laws
- Missions elect wardens & have an advisory council that may be elected or appointed as the Bishop, Vicar & Wardens decide
- Delegates to Diocesan Convention – elected by the annual meeting or the vestry as by-laws dictate
- Treasurer & Clerk of the Vestry – elected by the vestry (unless by-laws say otherwise)

Vestry

- The Vestry is made up of the Rector, Wardens & elected members of the vestry.
- Deacons, assistant & associate clergy may be invited to the vestry meetings and given voice, but are not members of the vestry
- Vestry meetings are open meetings, the vestry may go into executive session under the terms of state law
- The rector has the right to preside at all vestry meetings

Who Makes Decisions

- In most cases the rector and the wardens and vestry makes decisions together
- Rector
 - Worship
 - Use of Building
 - Programs
 - Staff
 - Committees
- Vestry
 - Money
 - New Programs
 - Repairs/Changes to Building
 - Committees

The Rector, Wardens & Vestry are responsible together for

- Record keeping
- Filing reports
- Business methods, HR practices etc...
- Finances
- Building upkeep
- All of the other things that corporations have to do

There are very specific ways in which the bishop can intervene in the life of a parish without the invitation of the rector or vestry

But

You can always ask for advice or help.

The first place to start is Canon Dempsey-Sims – (cdsims@episcopalwny.org)

She can connect you to resources, Diocesan staff with expertise or other help