An Introduction to Bishops in The Episcopal Church

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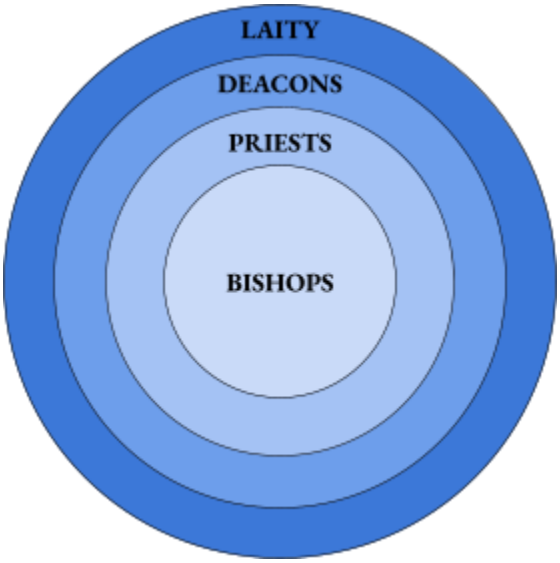
Who Are Bishops?

The Episcopal Church recognizes **four orders of ministry**: lay persons (also called the laity), bishops, priests, and deacons. All baptized persons are ministers of the Church, commissioned for their ministry through the baptismal covenant (vows) taken in the sacrament of Holy Baptism. Within this, bishops belong to the **three-fold order of ordained ministry**—bishops, priests, and deacons—a pattern that traces back to the earliest centuries of the Church and is one of the defining marks of churches in the **Anglican Communion** and the broader **catholic (universal)** tradition.

It is tempting to view the orders of ministry as a hierarchy, with lay persons on the bottom and bishops on the top. We would do well, instead, to view the **orders as concentric circles** representing narrowing focuses of ministry.



A bishop is an ordained person who has been called, elected, consecrated, and set apart to a ministry of **oversight**. The word "bishop" comes from the Greek *episkopos*, meaning "overseer," which is also where we get the word "Episcopal": The *Episcopal* Church refers to governance by bishops (as opposed to a lay governing group, such as Presbyterians or congregationalists).

The Book of Common Prayer describes the ministry of a bishop this way:

> The ministry of a bishop is to represent Christ and his Church, particularly as apostle, chief priest, and pastor of a diocese; to guard the faith, unity, and discipline of the whole Church; to proclaim the Word of God; to act in Christ's name for the reconciliation of the world and the building up of the Church; and to ordain others to continue Christ's ministry.
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> —From "An Outline of the Faith," in *The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 855

Types of Bishops

Diocesan Bishop *(e.g., The Rt. Rev. Lawrence Provenzano)*	The chief bishop of a diocese with full authority. When we say "the bishop," we are usually referring to the diocesan bishop.
Bishop Coadjutor	Elected to succeed the current diocesan bishop
Suffragan Bishop	An assisting bishop without right of succession
Assistant Bishop *(e.g., The Rt. Rev. Geralyn Wolf)*	A canonically defined role (Title III, Canon 12, Section 5): a retired or unassigned bishop formally appointed by the diocesan bishop with Standing Committee approval to serve in an ongoing capacity with defined duties
Assisting Bishop *(e.g., The Rt. Rev. R. William Franklin)*	A less formal, customary arrangement in which a retired or visiting bishop helps on an occasional or ad hoc basis at the diocesan bishop's invitation
Presiding Bishop *(e.g., The Most Rev. Sean Rowe)*	The chief pastor and primate of The Episcopal Church

The Role & Responsibilities of a Bishop

- **Chief Pastor of the Diocese:** A diocesan bishop has pastoral oversight of all the congregations, clergy, and people within a diocese. They are the spiritual leader and shepherd of that community.
- **Guardian of the Faith:** Bishops are charged with maintaining the apostolic faith (i.e., the teaching handed down from the apostles through the centuries). They ensure that the doctrine, discipline, and worship of the Church are upheld.
- **Ordainer:** Only bishops can ordain deacons, priests, and other bishops. This is a critical function that maintains apostolic succession (i.e., the unbroken chain of ordination stretching back to the earliest days of the Church).
- **Minister of Confirmation:** In The Episcopal Church, the bishop is the minister of confirmation, reception, and reaffirmation of baptismal vows, which is why the bishop's visitation to a parish is often a significant occasion.
- **Administrator and Leader:** The diocesan bishop oversees the governance of the diocese, working with the Diocesan Convention, the Standing Committee, and other bodies. They make clergy appointments, visit parishes, and provide strategic vision.
- **Representative of Unity:** The bishop is a visible sign of the unity of the Church, connecting local parishes to the diocese, the broader Episcopal Church, and the global Anglican Communion.

Why Do We Have Bishops?

The Episcopal Church maintains the **historic episcopate** (governance by bishops) because:

- **It is apostolic.** We believe this pattern of ministry connects us to the ministry of the apostles and the early Church.
- **It preserves unity.** Bishops serve as a bond of communion between congregations, dioceses, and the wider Church.
- **It provides accountability.** Bishops exercise oversight and discipline, ensuring that clergy and congregations remain faithful to the Church's teaching and mission.
- **It is part of the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral (1886/1888)**[1], which identifies four essentials of church unity, one of which is *"the Historic Episcopate, locally adapted."*

Electing a New Bishop

Unlike some traditions where bishops are appointed from above, in The Episcopal Church, **bishops are elected by the laity and clergy of the diocese**. In other words, the election of a bishop is a profound act of **shared discernment**. It reflects the Episcopal conviction that the Holy Spirit works through the whole people of God—laity and clergy together—in choosing their leaders. It also reflects our commitment to democratic governance within an apostolic framework.

The Episcopal Diocese of Long Island will hold a **special election** on Saturday, April 18, 2026, to elect our next diocesan bishop. The election timeline is included on the next page. Visit **dioceseli.org/bishopsearch** to learn more about the process.

Prayer for the Bishop Search *from the Joint Oversight Committee*

Almighty God, giver of every good gift and source of all wisdom and understanding, look graciously upon your church and so guide the minds and hearts of those who will choose our next bishop. We pray that those who offer themselves as candidates in this process, you will grant them wisdom and discernment, a spirit of revelation and knowledge of your will, that they will care for all your people and equip us for our ministries through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

[1] The Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral is one of the most important documents in Anglican history. It originated with the Rev. William Reed Huntington, who proposed in his book *The Church Idea* (1870) a set of essential principles that could serve as a basis for Christian unity. These principles were adopted by the House of Bishops of The Episcopal Church in Chicago in 1886, and then, with some modification, by the Lambeth Conference (the gathering of all Anglican bishops worldwide) in 1888. The Quadrilateral is included among the Historical Documents of the Church in *The Book of Common Prayer*, pp. 876–878. It remains a foundational reference point for Anglican identity and ecumenical dialogue to this day.

TIMELINE

SEARCH FOR THE NINTH BISHOP OF LONG ISLAND

Bishop Provenzano Announces Resignation

DECEMBER 2024

Bishop Provenzano announces his intention to retire in September 2026.

Joint Oversight Committee Active

JANUARY - FEBRUARY 2025

Members of the Standing Committee and Diocesan Council appointed to Joint Oversight Committee (JOC). JOC meets with the Presiding Bishop and Consultants for the process.

JOC Calls for Committee Applications

MARCH - APRIL 2025

JOC requested applications for Search and Transition Committees. Application review and selection.

Announcement of Search and Transition Committtees

MAY 2025

Committees and Co-Chairs announced to Diocese.

Search and Transition Committees Active

MAY - JUNE 2025

Beginning with a shared retreat, the committees are hard at work on communication, data collection, and profile creation plans.

Listening Sessions and Survey Conducted

JULY - SEPT 2025

Your chance to make your voice heard! Survey link and listening session info will be available soon.

Diocesan Profile Published, Application Opens

FALL 2025

A snapshot of our Diocese is available for potential applicants. Nomination and application period opens.

Application Period Ends, Discernment Begins

FALL 2025

Applicants are screened and interviewed by the search committee.

Slate Announced, Petition Period Opens

WINTER 2026

JOC announces slate of candidates. Petition process begins.

Meet and Greets with Candidates

SPRING 2026

Your opportunity to hear directly from the candidates through in-person events across the Diocese.

Electing Convention

SPRING 2026

Ninth Bishop elected at a special convention.

Ordination of Ninth Bishop

SEPTEMBER 2026

The Diocese gathers for the ordination of the Ninth Bishop of Long Island.