

Why the Diocese?

A Brief Guide to the Diocese-Parish Relationship for
The Anglican Diocese of the Living Word

Introduction

The relationship of the diocese to the parish involves questions of theology and history, but this brief guide will take a practical approach—what exactly does the diocese provide for the parish, and what does the parish provide for the diocese? How are the diocese and parish supposed to work together? This guide will highlight seven areas in the diocese-parish relationship.

1. Episcopal Visits

We can start with episcopal visits. In the 39 Articles, Article 19 gives a definition of the visible church as “a congregation of faithful men, in the which the pure word of God is preached, and the sacraments be duly ministered according to Christ’s ordinance in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same.” Our bishops are responsible for ensuring that the word of God is preached and the sacraments are duly administered in all of our congregations. And a critical way they do that is going to visit each of the parishes.

These visits are also crucial for confirmation, which is an opportunity for the person being confirmed for catechesis, for a public profession of faith, and for blessing through the bishop’s laying on of hands. The person being confirmed is connected, through the person of the bishop in apostolic succession, to the whole Church of Christ.

These visits are not only meant for confirmation, for instruction from the bishop, even *inspection* by the bishop, but they’re also meant for inspiration. For each congregation to catch a broader vision of God’s work, of how the kingdom of God is alive and well outside the four walls of your church.

2. Ecclesiastical Discipline

A second area in the diocese-parish relationship is ecclesiastical discipline. The ministry of Christ is a sacred calling, and there are high

standards for the life and doctrine of our ministers. The clergy know this from their ordination vows. It can also be seen in the ecclesiastical discipline process, which in the Anglican Diocese of the Living Word can also apply to lay people such as churchwardens and vestry members.

The discipline process is described in the diocesan canons, available [here](#). (“Canon” means rule, and in this context the “canons” are the laws of the church.) This brief guide will not describe the disciplinary process, but it is important to know that discipline happens. It is absolutely critical for the protection and the spiritual health of the church, and also the spiritual health of her ministers and lay leaders. The words *discipline* and *discipleship* share an etymology.

Most cases of discipline do not ever get to the point of trial and sentencing. But some do, and in 2023 that process resulted in a sentence of deposition against a member of the clergy. Deposition is the highest sanction usually given in the Anglican Church in North America: it “is ‘the permanent taking away of the right to perform the duties of every office for which Holy Orders is required’” (Norman Doe, *Canon Law in the Anglican Communion*, at 88).

Five other areas in the diocese-parish relationship will be sketched more briefly: ordination and licensing for ministry, money, policies, expertise, and moments of crisis.

3. Ordination and Licensing for Ministry

The ordination process is a central function of the diocese. But beyond that, the bishop licenses anyone who ministers in the diocese, including by preaching, as well as lay readers and lay eucharistic ministers (also called Communion servers). That license encourages accountability and common standards, and it establishes a relationship with the bishop.

4. Money

Everything the diocese does happens only because it is supported by the parishes. In many parishes finances are tight, but the suggested model is

for every parish to tithe to the diocese, just as it would like each parishioner to tithe to the parish. And for parishes that can give more, to do so, just as they would want individual parishioners to do.

The Anglican Diocese of the Living Word is a very lean diocese, administratively. If you want the diocese to do more—to have more resources for church planting, for clergy training, for archdeaconries, for catechesis materials, for support for bivocational ministers—it needs the giving of each parish to do that. The diocese also helps coordinate and focus occasional gifts, like the one for our churches in Haiti.

5. Policies

The diocese has policies on certain questions—such as child protection—that are invaluable for parishes. A lot of thought has gone into these, with committees or commissions drawn from throughout the diocese, including clergy and lay people. In the diocese, there's a much bigger pool of people and experiences to draw on than just one parish. So that's a gift to each parish.

But sometimes, as with the [Policy for the Protection of Children](#), it doesn't stop with the diocese having one that applies in all the parishes. That diocesan policy requires that each parish also have its own child protection policy. So each parish has to take the diocesan standards and think about how they are operationalized in its context, and what other requirements it may need for where it is. That's a great example of the diocese and parishes working together on something that is of the utmost seriousness.

6. Expertise

This is a two-way street. The diocese has a lot of expertise it can make available to the parish. Whatever it is going through, someone else has gone through it. But each parish, including its lay people, also have a lot of expertise that can be contributed to the diocese. From finance to law, from cooking at synod to music, from graphic design to mediation, from

data analysis to human resources—there is expertise in each parish that could benefit the diocese, and through it, all the other parishes of the diocese.

7. Moments of Crisis

Every church is going to have moments of crisis eventually. There's going to be a conflict between lay people, or between clergy members, or between the congregation and the rector, and someone is going to need to come in to resolve the crisis. It shouldn't be that person's first rodeo. And the diocese, in the person of its bishops and archdeacons, provides those crucial authoritative mediators who guide the canoe of the congregation through the rapids, without capsizing, to calmer waters on the other side.

Conclusion

Lots more could be said on each of these points, including more about the ecclesiology that undergirds all of it, and how it is worked out in our canons. Putting all these points together, we could say that the parishes are the front lines of ministry—they are where the gospel is preached, people come to know Jesus, people grow in their Christian life. But the diocese helps parishes do things that need scale, or outside expertise, or another level of authority, to ensure that the church of Jesus Christ is in fact teaching and living like it's supposed to.

The diocese, and the relationship of the parishes in the diocese to the bishop, is how we as Anglicans live out St. Paul's metaphor of the church as a body (1 Corinthians 12). "No man," and we could add, no parish, "lives or dies to itself" (Romans 14:7). It is part of the body.