

Research Report: A History of the Executive Council
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Executive Summary

For the first forty years of its existence from 1919, Executive Council, also known as “the Presiding Bishop and Council” maintained a unified executive relationship to General Convention, which was understood to be the Church’s policy and legislative body. These relationships broke down, however, in the tumultuous 1960s, a period of social change that challenged institutions run largely by and for white males. Dramatic changes in the composition and expectations of the Church’s polity led to considerable tension between General Convention and Executive Council during the transitional years that resulted in a more representative Church in both Convention and Council. In the most recent decades, Council has responded to its diversity, a strengthened sense of lay ministry, and an awareness of its fiduciary responsibilities to exercise greater accountability in its relationship to General Convention.

Introduction

The Executive Council is largely a twentieth century response to the growth in the number of congregations and jurisdictions of the Episcopal Church at home and abroad. It came into being during a period of national enthusiasm led by corporations and government to create efficient bureaucracies through central control and planning. The Church was ripe for experimentation and reform. By 1910, three independent boards of the General Convention were operating to advance the central mission concerns of the Church. The (DFMS) Board of Missions was the lead organization, enacted by canon in 1877 as the official mission (church planting and evangelism) arm of the General Convention. General Convention had also established and funded the General Board of Religious Education, and the Social Service Commission, which carried out the Church's domestic social ministries. These entities were all administered separately with each receiving its own budget from the General Convention.

Early History

In 1916 the General Convention's Joint Commission on Missionary Organization and Administration recommended several fundamental changes to the organization of the national church. The General Convention responded positively and requested the Board of Missions of the DFMS to create a comprehensive budget for the Episcopal Church. This proved to be a transformative request that led the Board of Missions to invite the General Board of Religious Education and the Social Service Commission to collaborate and present one program to the General Convention. That program later became known as the "Nation Wide Campaign" of 1919. The success of this combined initiative encouraged support for the passage of the canon that created a central council for the Episcopal Church and a more prominent role for the Presiding Bishop in leading mission program initiatives.

Three independent boards were replaced on December 31, 1919 by the new entity called, "the Presiding Bishop and Council." The Council included 24 members total, sixteen of whom were elected by the General Convention (four bishops, four presbyters, and eight lay persons). The Provincial Synods each elected one representative to Council. There were also provisions to

elect a First and Second Vice-President of Council, as well as a Secretary, with the Treasurer of the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society also serving as Treasurer of the National Council.

The General Convention of 1919 was also the first to call for the election of a Presiding Bishop, rather than continuing the selection of this office by seniority. John Gardner Murray of Maryland was the first Presiding Bishop to be elected in 1926. The Council initially provided for the creation of five departments, each with its own advisory committee: Mission and Church Extension, Religious Education, Christian Social Service, Finance, and Publicity. The bylaws provided that the Presiding Bishop served as Chief Executive and chairperson, *ex officio*, of each department (the equivalent of today's standing committees). The Presiding Bishop was given the power to appoint one of the two vice-presidents to serve the National Council.

Tension and misgivings surrounded the move to a centralized authority outside of the General Convention. The General Convention continued to experiment with the make-up of the executive body. In 1934 the Presiding Bishop was removed as, "executive and administrative head" of the National Council to be replaced by a president elected by the House of Deputies and confirmed by the House of Bishops. The Presiding Bishop would continue to serve as *ex officio* chairperson of the National Council and to preside at meetings when present. This Convention also placed four members of the Women's Auxiliary on National Council.

The election of a Council president, however, was short-lived. The 1937 General Convention returned the officers of the National Council back to the 1922 canonical structure of Presiding Bishop, two Vice-Presidents, a Secretary, and Treasurer. The structure was modified slightly in 1940 by allowing for "one or more Vice-Presidents."

This period in the institutional history of the Episcopal Church saw important changes to the office of the Presiding Bishop. The General Convention of 1943 passed a canon that required the Presiding Bishop to resign his jurisdiction upon assuming office. Under this new rule, Henry Knox Sherrill was able to craft an episcopate that conformed closely to the 1925 General Convention concept of a Presiding Bishop as a chief executive officer whose primary focus is the prosecution of the Church's mission.

Although Sherrill was widely praised for his effective work on behalf of the national church, concerns mounted about the administrative demands on the office and the appropriate role of the Presiding Bishop in defining the direction of the Church. The existence of multiple departmental committees alongside the national executive council had a record of many new initiatives and accomplishment, but centralization was also perceived by some to have created an unwieldy and unresponsive bureaucracy. These ongoing tensions reached a boiling point in the highly strained social atmosphere of the 1960s as General Convention pushed to re-define the balance of authority.

General Convention and Ecclesiastical Authority

The changes to the executive offices and the Council that were proposed in the 1960s were brought on by a confluence of important external and internal forces, especially governance roles for women, liturgical reform and lay ministry, and African American Episcopalians. The 1961 General Convention began the decade emblematically by allowing the newly constituted (and

independent) Episcopal Churchwomen to elect the four seats on the National Council previously reserved for the Women's Auxiliary. Recognizing the reality of a post-colonial international membership, the National Council in 1964 proposed renaming itself the "Executive Council." That same year General Convention expanded its elected representation on Council from 16 to 22.

The structural changes were brought poignantly into the open by a discussion that seemed to be centered in the House of Bishops about the nature of authority in the Church. At the 1964 General Convention, in response to a pastoral letter by Presiding Bishop Lichtenberger, the House of Bishops brought forward a resolution in the form of a statement entitled, "The Levels of Authority Within the Church." The resolution identified four levels of authority within the Episcopal Church: (1) Scripture, the Creeds, and the resolutions of General Convention; (2) the House of Bishops; (3) the Presiding Bishop and Executive Council; and (4) the officers and staff of the Executive Council. The Presiding Bishop and Executive Council were placed under the authority of the General Convention and House of Bishops, but recognizing the pace of modern life, they were given a distinct role to "speak God's word to his Church and to his world."

In response to the Anglican Communion's MRI initiative, Bishop Hines appointed a Commission that produced an extensive report for the 1967 General Convention. The Commission looked specifically at the relationships between the Presiding Bishop's Office, the General Convention, and the Executive Council. They presented an expansive view of the Executive Council as acting for General Convention – a view that did not prevail due to concerns that Council could displace the historic role of the General Convention.

General Convention adopted Canon 4 revisions in 1967, however, that restated Council's role in, "charge of the unification, development, and prosecution of the missionary, educational, and social work of the Church and of such other work as may be committed to it by the General Convention." The Commission was more successful in outlining expectations for the office of the Presiding Bishop and placing election in both Houses of General Convention. The report also stated for the first time that the President of the House of Deputies would serve as Vice-Chair of Executive Council and be, "structured into those essential elements of our national life."

Perhaps in reaction to the Special Convention Program, the 1970 General Convention repealed the additional seats that had been reserved for women, racial and ethnic minorities, and young people. The Convention set the number of elected positions on the Executive Council to 30. The Provincial Synods continued to be allowed a representative on the Executive Council, but *ex officio* members were reduced to two: the Presiding Bishop and President of the House of Deputies. In part a reaction to the controversies that existed during his tenure, Hines announced his early retirement from the office of Presiding Bishop in 1972.

The 1976 General Convention considered but made very few changes to Executive Council. A widely distributed and discussed report of the Structure Commission reiterated that Council is, "an executive and administrative body for the whole Church." Recognizing the source of its authority, the Commission recommended that it be referred to as "the Executive Council of the General Convention." Convention doubled the number of regional representatives from the Provincial synods and added the Secretary and Treasurer of the General Convention as *ex officio* members of the Executive Council. It articulated the relationship between the Presiding Bishop and Executive

Council as “yoked together and together share (to the extent they can be shared) the burdens and responsibility of administration.”

Executive Council Structure

Under the leadership of Bishop Hines, the Presiding Bishop and the Executive Council had taken an activist role to address long standing issues that had urgency to many. Others, felt the Presiding Bishop and Council traveled too far ahead of General Convention and the local church. This was epitomized in the 1967 General Convention Special Program (GCSP) and the 1969 Special General Convention. Hines, in consultation with elected members of the Executive Council, set up a special unit of the Council to administer the program of the GCSP, which was not rooted in local church connections and grew rapidly unpopular, resulting in diminished revenues for the Church and eventually the discontinuation of the GCSP. During this period, Executive Council was expanded to introduce diversity by including six additional representatives to Council who would serve until the 1970 General Convention: two youth between the ages of 18 and 30, and four minority representatives. Two of these four were to be nominated by the Union of Black Clergy and Laity.

Structurally, Executive Council underwent a period of loose structural organization and ambiguity – some of it intentional in order to experiment and be responsive to the changing Church. In 1968 a Council Committee on Structure delivered a report entitled “Statement of Principles Underlying the Approach to Executive Council Structure.” Recognizing its need to be more strategic and flexible in an increasingly “issue-oriented” era, Council abolished the departmental structures and replaced them with an assortment of committees. Only one of the new committees was enacted in the bylaws: Finance. Several other committees were established as “standing” or *ad hoc* (established by vote but not enacted in the bylaws) committees, although it was very unclear (even then to Council) how these would evolve. The committee list included: Agenda, Long Range Planning, World Relief and Inter-church Aid, Allocations (Grants), Visitation, Structure, and a number of “Program Advisory Committees” (e.g. Higher Education). The Trust Fund Committee (established 1943 and today called Investment) was continued.

As Council’s structure drifted remarkably from the bylaws, it became difficult to identify all its parts and relationships. By December 1976, General Convention and Executive Council were ripe for another major restructuring. Council eliminated *ad hoc* committees and program groups and created a system of standing committees and subcommittees reporting to them. The standing committees were named: Mission, Church/Society, Finance, Administration, Development/Stewardship, Communication. Audit was added to Trust Funds (Investment) as “chartered committees” reporting to Council. Note that while not in violation of the bylaws, the “standing committees”(excepting Finance) were not specifically named or provided for therein.

Lacking a firm grounding in the bylaws, various committees and task forces accumulated alongside the standing committees in the 1980s and 1990s. Questions arose on Council from time to time regarding the lack of sun-setting provisions. This uncertainty was resolved with the bylaw revision of 2003 when the standing committees and the chartered committees were explicitly listed in the DFMS bylaws. This eliminated the question of sun setting except for Task Forces and Special Council Committees (e.g., Social Responsibility in Investments, Jubilee Advisory Committee).

Conclusion

The tension between the executive leadership (the Presiding Bishop and Council) and the Church's legislative synod that first appeared with the creation of an executive council in 1919 did not entirely disappear during Bishop Allin's tenure. Indeed, the once close relationship between the "Presiding Bishop and Council" as a unified executive evolved as Council incorporated the diversity of voices and viewpoints that were now the norm for General Convention. One could speculate that the creative tensions and ambiguities between General Convention and Executive Council were partially resolved by the Church having achieved a more representative and confident executive body. Thus, for example, Bishop Allin was immediately challenged by the Executive Council, when he announced a "Venture in Mission" to renew the church's focus on outward mission rather than destructive inwardness. The Council expressed opposition to a program that had not been properly discussed with them as representatives of the wider Church.

By the late 1970s, a balance seemed to be achieved as few structural changes took place after 1976, even though social issues continued to make demands on the governing structures. The next wave of structural change resulted from the introduction of industry standard governance measures in the wake of a major financial misappropriation in 1996. In 1997 and 2003, Council adopted bylaws that clearly defined its structure to include the named standing committees in addition to its two chartered committees on Audit and Investment.

Bibliography

Note: In the course of writing this report, staff relied heavily on several core collections related to the governance and administration of General Convention and Executive Council. This history does not intend to represent a definitive account, but a selective reading of inter-related archival documents. In addition to the core collections, a number of key documents were especially valuable for outlining the history of and impetus for the structural changes to the administration of the Church from 1919 to today.

Archival Collections

By-Laws of the Executive Council and of the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society, 1923-2009.

Constitution and Canons of the Episcopal Church, 1964-2009.

Journals of the General Convention, 1916-1976.

Minutes of the Executive Council, 1919-2000.

Key Documents

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Meeting Minutes of the Executive Council, May 21, 22 and 23, 1968.

Meeting Minutes of the Executive Council, December 8-10, 1976.

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Report of the Executive Council to the 63rd General Convention of the Episcopal Church, October 11-22, 1970.

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