



Convocation of American Churches in Europe

WHAT'S THE CONVOCATION GOOD FOR, ANYWAY?

An article for our parishioners by
Bishop Pierre Whalon

Most people notice eventually that their congregation belongs to something called “The Convocation,” which is short for “The Convocation of American Churches in Europe.” They might connect it with the Bishop—me—because sooner or later, I come visiting to preach, celebrate the Eucharist, baptize and confirm, and meet with the Vestry or Bishop’s Committee. When a new priest arrives, I also come to officially delegate my oversight of our congregation to him or her.

But there is a difference between the Bishop and the Convocation itself.

Furthermore, Vestry members looking over their budgets will see an assessment payable to the Convocation of 7% of disposable (that is, unrestricted) income. The question arises, “What’s the Convocation good for?” Since your delegates voted this past convention to increase this assessment by 0.5% next year and again by 0.5% in 2011, it seems good to explain something about dioceses, convocations, and bishops. And you.

All Christians, even the most lackadaisical, live in congregations, of course (no “Lone Rangers”!). The oldest churches—Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican/Episcopal—group these into regional structures, called “dioceses.” The regional government regulates the life of the congregations, beginning with planting them, picking clergy for them, designing their local governing bodies, regulating their worship, choosing their educational and other programs, etc. The diocese also connects its congregations to national and international structures.

In Europe, where our congregations are scattered across six countries and among other Anglicans, our regional government is called “The Convocation of American Churches in Europe.” It functions like a diocese, only that we are not limited to a particular region. Wherever there are people who need a church on this continent, we are there. We link all our members with The Episcopal Church, headquartered in New York but active from Taiwan to Austria. Through the Episcopal Church, we are all part of the 80-million-strong family of churches called the Anglican Communion, under the leadership of the Archbishop of Canterbury.

In 1859, the General Convention of The Episcopal Church created a canon law (now numbered I.15) that places any congregation not within an existing Anglican diocese under the jurisdiction of the Presiding Bishop and within a “Convocation.” It also calls for a Bishop in charge to be appointed to oversee these congregations. The first official Episcopal congregation outside the United States was the Church of the

Holy Trinity in Paris. In 1922 the parish became the seat or *cathedra* of the Bishop in charge of the Convocation.

So what's the Convocation good for, anyway? First of all, it is what allows your congregation to exist and flourish, as part of something bigger than itself. Everything that makes up the shape of your congregation's life passes through the Convocation to The Episcopal Church and to the Anglican Communion. Conversely, being a part of these helps define our congregations— who your priest is, how you worship, what people study, how you make decisions for your common life, relations with other churches around you, and so on.

Every year, you elect lay delegates to accompany your clergy to a convention of the Convocation. This body chaired by the Bishop decides on the budget, which includes the amount of your congregation's annual assessment, as well as possible grants to you. It also elects members of the Council of Advice, which manages the Convocation with the Bishop in charge, and officers such as the Treasurer and Assistant Treasurer. The convention also elects four clergy and four laypeople as Deputies to the General Convention held every three years. These guarantee that the interests of your congregation are represented at both the European level and the wider church. The convention also approves major mission initiatives, as well as policies and canons for all the congregations (for instance, the mandatory Child Protection Guidelines). Finally, in 2001 the convention elected the Bishop in charge for the first time.

Since my election, we have made every effort to make the Convocation ever more responsive to your needs—in fact, the Convocation exists to serve the needs of its congregation that they cannot meet for themselves. It provides me with a secretary and an office rented from the Cathedral, and a travel budget big enough for my work as your Bishop: doing missionary work, planting churches, confirming people during my pastoral visits, overseeing the clergy (to whom I delegate my oversight of individual congregations), training and ordaining new clergy, licensing lay ministers, helping congregations and clergy with transitions, making sure “the rules” are followed, and connecting all of us with the wider church— both the living around the world today, and the first apostles. The elected Council of Advice serves as my advisers, as well as a standing committee whose approval (along with mine) is necessary for starting new churches, ordaining (and deposing) clergy, establishing or modifying congregational by-laws and encumbering church property. The Council also has committees to help it: finance, canons, mission goals implementation, and mission congregations.

I appoint other bodies: the Commission on Ministry of the Baptized, who put on an annual conference called “What is God calling me to do?” to which anyone can go, and otherwise helping people (and me) discern their lay and ordained ministries, as well as creating resources for clergy mentoring and continuing education. The European Institute of Christian Studies creates educational resources and programs for laypeople like the *Transformed By Stories* process, as well as training for ordained ministry. The Youth Commission gathers resources to enable every congregation to develop ministries to and with young people that are integral to its life and work. Check out these and much more at your website: www.tec-europe.org

So the Convocation is “good for something.” As I mentioned assessments, you should know that ours remains the lowest in the entire Episcopal Church even when it rises to 8% in 2011. Furthermore, all the congregational assessments combined account for only about one-third of the Convocation’s income. The rest comes from the Board of Foreign Parishes, a New York non-profit corporation that manages some of our funds and properties on our behalf, and the General Convention, which pays my salary and benefits. A lot of other people help us do our ministries here in Europe.

No congregation can exist on its own. Thanks to the Convocation, yours can always have the outside resources necessary to grow and flourish. But the work – and the joy – of being your unique congregation is entirely yours to do, and to enjoy.

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