

Episcopal Diocese of Southern Virginia Bishop Search

WHAT IS A BISHOP?

Bishops as we know them in the Episcopal Church emerged in New Testament times. They were called by the title “*episkopos*,” a Greek word that means “overseer.” The Anglican Communion today teaches that we can trace a direct line from these earliest overseers of the church to today’s bishops. The original overseers in the church were the Apostles chosen by Jesus, whom he called to follow him, to whom he taught his message, and whom he prepared for leadership.

As we know, the earliest followers of Jesus were his fellow Jews. But as the gospel message quickly began to touch more and more lives, especially through the ministry of St. Paul, the Apostles to the Gentiles, people from a variety of backgrounds and expanding geographical areas became attracted to the new faith. This growth not only added organizational problems and theological complexity, it also expanded the responsibilities of the Christian community and created a need for more leadership. Persons deemed worthy of leadership positions were chosen to assist the Apostles and their successors in passing on the faith to new generations. By the 2nd century, however, fewer women were being ordained to positions of leadership in the church. That exclusion lasted in the Episcopal Church until the late 20th century, but women are now welcomed to all orders of the clergy in our church, including the office of bishop.

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The church has taught from the beginning that the Apostles and those leaders who came after them are to serve as the chief shepherds of the Christian community, the church's chief teachers, and the guardians of the unity of the church. We have bishops in the Episcopal Church today because we believe it is important to govern and administer the affairs of a church according to the norms and traditions inaugurated by Christ himself.

Today the office of bishop carries with it a wide range of responsibilities, including defending the integrity of the faith, confirming and receiving new members into the church, ordaining and providing pastoral care for priests and deacons in their charge, providing community leadership, administering the business affairs of their dioceses, and participating in the affairs of the Anglican Communion, both nationally and worldwide.

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