

Title Eligibility of Deacons to Serve on Standing Committee

Proposer Constitution & Canons Committee

1. Whereas, the Constitution of the Diocese of West Missouri directs that Standing
 2. Committee be composed of four priests and four laypersons; and
 - 3.
 4. Whereas, the Constitution & Canons of The Episcopal Church do not limit the clergy
 5. members of a diocesan Standing Committee to priests only; and
 - 6.
 7. Whereas, in its canonical role as a Council of Advice to the Bishop and as the
 8. Ecclesiastical Authority in the absence of a Bishop, Standing Committee would benefit
 9. from the perspectives of laypersons, deacons, and priests; and
 - 10.
 11. Whereas, allowing deacons to serve on Standing Committee would bring the Diocese of
 12. West Missouri in line with the practice of other dioceses.
 - 13.
 14. Now, therefore, be it resolved that the Constitution of the Diocese of West Missouri be
 15. amended to allow deacons to serve on Standing Committee, to wit:
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 17. ARTICLE XIV - THE STANDING COMMITTEE
 - 18.
 19. SECTION 1. The Standing Committee shall consist of four (4) Clergy members and
 20. four (4) Laypersons who are eligible to seats in the Convention, and who shall be elected
 21. by concurrent vote of both orders to serve for terms of two years. At each annual
 22. Convention, two (2) Clergy members and two (2) Laypersons shall be elected to serve for
 23. terms of two (2) years. No member of the Standing Committee may be elected to serve
 24. for more than three (3) consecutive terms. No currently serving Dean/Deanery Council
 25. Chair of a Deanery or Member of the Commission on Ministry shall be eligible to serve
 26. on the Standing Committee.
 - 27.
 28. SECTION 2. The members of the Standing Committee shall serve until their
 29. successors are elected.
 - 30.
 31. SECTION 3. Vacancies in the membership of the Standing Committee shall be filled
 32. by a majority vote of the remaining members.
 - 33.
 34. SECTION 4. The Standing Committee shall perform the duties required by the
 35. Constitution and Canons of the Diocese and by resolution of the Convention.
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Explanation

At the 2023 Convention, this resolution was referred to the Constitution & Canons Committee for further consideration and study. The original explanation for the resolution is still operative:

The Constitution & Canons of The Episcopal Church do not require clergy members of Standing Committee to be only priests. Likewise, nearby dioceses, including West Missouri's partners in the Bishop Kemper School for Ministry (Missouri, Kansas, Western Kansas, Oklahoma, and Iowa), allow deacons to serve on their Standing Committees. Most importantly, Standing Committee is responsible for serving as the Bishop's Council of Advice and as the Ecclesiastical Authority in the absence of a Bishop. The perspectives of deacons should be available to Standing Committee's work in these roles. This constitutional change would not mandate the presence of deacons on Standing Committee; it would only make deacons eligible to serve on Standing Committee (or be eligible for appointment in the event of a clergy vacancy).

In addition, the Community of Deacons has prepared a memorandum further clarifying and explaining the role of deacons in the church vis-à-vis service in church governance. The full memorandum follows on pages 3-11. Here is an executive summary of the memorandum:

The Standing Committee serves as a bishop's Council of Advice. Given the deacon's position as clergy having one foot in the world and one foot in the church, a deacon has a unique contribution to make in exercising the deacon's prophetic voice in the church's legislative and policy-making bodies. Being under the authority of the bishop means that the bishop has the authority to assign the deacon to one or more congregations, other communities of faith, or non-parochial ministries, as the deacon is not called by a congregation as a priest is.

When the Standing Committee canon, which limited committee membership to "four Priests and four Laypersons" was adopted in 1891, the only deacons in the Diocese of West Missouri were "transitional deacons," as permanent deacons were not reintroduced into The Episcopal Church until 1970. In 2024, deacons are recognized as a full and equal order, to which The Episcopal Church gives the right to "participate in the governance of the Church."

MEMORANDUM

TO: Constitution & Canons Committee of the Diocese of West Missouri
FROM: The Community of Deacons
RE: Deacons on Standing Committee Resolution
DATE: April 15, 2024

At the November 2023 Diocesan Convention, after some debate, the Deacons on Standing Committee Resolution was referred back to the Constitution & Canons Committee for further review. The Committee enlisted the Community of Deacons to examine four theological and canonical issues raised with such a change.ⁱ

➤ **First, why the canon was drafted with the presbyters-only limitation?**

The Church has experienced several distinctive “waves” of diaconal theology in the last 150 years.ⁱⁱ

An early Protestant Reformation view held that a plethora of subordinate (or “minor”) orders to that of priest or pastor was undesirable. Most Protestants eliminated the diaconate or kept it as a lay “office,” concerned with providing social service to the unfortunate. Those Protestants, including Anglicans, who maintained the diaconate maintained it only as a temporary step to the priesthood called the “transitional diaconate.” This usage has been maintained in The Episcopal Church.

However, in the United States from the 1840’s through the 1930’s, The Episcopal Church also ordained men as deacons to serve as missionaries to ethnic groups and in isolated communities. These men were generally African- or Native Americans of the ethnic community they served and remained deacons for their entire ministries. Among them was the Episcopal saint David Pendleton Oakerhater, a Cheyenne.

From 1885 through 1970, many Episcopal bishops set apart women as deaconesses by prayer, and sometimes by the laying on of hands, to care for the poor, sick, and needy. These women modeled their ministries on that of the German Lutheran Church, which had revived the ministry to assist in alleviating the distressing social conditions created by the Industrial Revolution. In Chicago in 1953, the Central House for Deaconesses was founded for the training of women in this lay office.

In a separate development, from 1952 through 1970, The Episcopal Church ordained men as “perpetual deacons,” to serve in parishes as sacramental and pastoral assistants for the booming post-war Church. These few men were generally older, privately trained by their supervising priest, and ordained to serve only their sponsoring community.

By the late 1960’s, churches world-wide began to question subsuming the

ancient order of diaconate under priestly identity, and of surrendering the useful icon of an order that embodies the call of all the baptized to dedicate themselves to service. The second Vatican Council renewed the Roman Catholic “permanent diaconate” as a permanent position for men, including those who were married.

The Episcopal Church, influenced by the international wave of theology advancing the renewal of the order, renewed the order of deacon in 1970, and citing the biblical record, for the first time allowed women to be ordained as deacons. The remaining Episcopal deaconesses . . . were deemed deacons, and the office of deaconess was abolished by canon. After extensive debate, the traditional period of temporary transitional diaconate prior to priesthood was also retained.

Beginning in 1971, deacons generally served in social care ministries outside a parish. Until 1976, many of these deacons were seminary-trained women with a priestly call. . . .ⁱⁱⁱ

The ordination of women to the priesthood freed the diaconate to mature into its own. . . . [I]n the 1990’s, [n]ew research highlighted the ancient deacons’ role as agents of the bishop, and accentuated their role as prophet, interpreter, and catalyst of social change. In 2003, the General Convention of The Episcopal Church changed the diaconal canons to more accurately reflect evolving diaconal theology, and set out distinctive guidelines for diaconal training, life, and work. Again, the transitional diaconate was debated and retained.

. . . .

Today, servanthood remains a major feature of diaconal identity as deacons enlist, train, and support baptized persons in ministries of care, or lead the church’s efforts in social action and justice.

In the Diocese of West Missouri, the initial Diocesan Constitution and Canons was passed at Convention in 1891. In that document, the Standing Committee was composed of three presbyters and three laypersons. As noted in the preceding historical overview, in 1891, deacons were “transitional deacons,” who were ordained deacon as a preliminary step toward ordination as a priest, with a few exceptions for missionary and indigenous deacons. Thus, it is not surprising that the composition of the Standing Committee was confined to priests and laity. The General Convention did not create the order of “perpetual deacon” until 1952. Male “perpetual deacons” served as sacramental and pastoral assistants from 1952-1970. The Episcopal Church did not reintroduce permanent deacons until 1970.

The 1979 Book of Common Prayer provided much needed direction, increased visibility, and clarity regarding deacons’ central role in the life of the church.

In 1981, a resolution to allow deacons to vote in cases of votes by orders was tabled at the Diocesan Convention. In 1982, a resolution was presented to allow deacons to serve on the Standing Committee. It was sent to the Constitution and Canons Committee, which stripped that section out of the resolution, so it never came to the floor for a vote. A resolution allowing deacons voice and full voting at Diocesan Convention did pass.

In 2024, Deacons are recognized as a full and equal order, to which The Episcopal Church gives the right to “participate in the governance of the Church.”^{iv}

- **Second, what is the theological rationale for the charge in The Examination in The Ordination of a Priest in The Book of Common Prayer that priests “share in the councils of the Church” and what are the implications of the absence of such a charge in The Examination from The Ordination of a Deacon for deacons serving on the Standing Committee?^v**

According to The Examination of a Priest in The Book of Common Prayer (BCP 531), one of the numerous responsibilities that a priest is expected to fulfill is to “take your share in the councils of the Church.” This is spoken by the bishop as a *description* of the presbyteral ministry, and it can be found in the first paragraph. Noting that it is not a promise that follows during The Examination questions is something that should be taken into consideration.

According to the second paragraph of The Examination of a Deacon, deacons are tasked with the responsibility of “interpret[ing] to the Church the needs, concerns, and hopes of the world.” (BCP 543) Appropriate venues in which deacons are to minister to effectively follow this ministry description is in the councils, committees, and meetings of the diocese. To ensure that the voice of the community with which the Church aspires to engage and to minister to is given equal consideration, the Church must make that room available.

It is not the case that the absence in The Examination of a Deacon of descriptive language found in The Examination of a Priest implies that those who serve in diaconal ministry are to be prohibited from serving on the councils of the Church. If this line of reasoning were applied, then the laity would not be allowed to participate in the councils of the Church. The remark that is made in the first paragraph of the presbyteral Examination is *descriptive rather than prescriptive*.

It is clearly stated in the Constitution and Canons of The Episcopal Church in Title III, Canon 7, Sec. 4.e: “Deacons may participate in the governance of the Church.”

The following is a concise summary of Canons of The Episcopal Church that support the position that deacons may participate “in the councils of the Church”:^{vi}

1. It is clear that the Canons consider both priests/presbyters and deacons as “clergy” and that deacons are expected to serve

alongside priests and laity on the councils of The Episcopal Church. The Canons say “priests or deacons” when it is prescribing the number of “clergy” to serve on various commissions:

- a. Title I, Canon 1, Sec. 2.a-c Standing Commissions
 - b. Title I, Canon 2 Sec.1.a-b Members of the Nominating Committee
 - c. Title I, Canon 4, Sec. 1.a & d Executive Council
 - d. Title III, Canon 16, Sec. 1 Board of Transition Ministry
2. The Canons also indicate that at the diocesan level, deacons are to serve alongside priests and laity on the Diocesan Commission on Ministry (Title III, Canon 2, Sec.1).
 3. Deacons serve directly under the authority of and are accountable to their bishop. “Under authority” means “with permission.” This is necessary because deacons may serve in parochial or non-parochial settings; they must have permission to serve as a clergy person in a given diocese (Title III, Canon 7, Sec.1)
 - a. A Bishop may assign a deacon to one or more congregations, other communities of faith, or non-parochial under the authority (with permission) of the member of the clergy or other leader exercising oversight in all matters concerning the congregation.” (Title III, Canon 7, Sec. 4) That does not mean that deacons act under the authority of priests in the case of diocesan matters,
 - b. Deacons may serve as administrators of congregations (Title III, Canon 7, Sec. 4.c)
 - c. Deacons may accept chaplaincies in any hospital, prison, or other institution (Title III, Canon 7, Sec. 4.d)
 4. Deacons serve independently regarding ecclesiastical discipline.
 - a. Deacons serve alongside priests and laity on each diocesan Disciplinary Board (Title IV, Canon 5, Sec. 1)
 - b. The Court of Review MUST include at least two deacons (Title IV, Canon 5, Sec. 4.a)
 5. The Disciplinary Board for Bishops consists of four priests OR deacons and four lay people. (Title IV, Canon 17, Sec. 3.b)
 6. The Conference Panel and Hearing Panel shall each consist of one priest or deacon (Title IV Canon 17, Sec .5).
 7. Bishops (and priests) may not coerce or improperly influence deacons performing functions under disciplinary proceedings (Title IV, Canon 19, Sec.11)

This summary reflects the fact that deacons may hold positions on many of the governing and important decision-making commissions of The Episcopal Church. Deacons act and serve in any given diocese with the permission of that diocese’s bishop because they are not called to serve at churches like priests are. Being under

the authority of the bishop means that the deacon has the bishop's permission to serve in that diocese, and the bishop may assign the deacon to one or more congregations, other communities of faith, or non-parochial ministries.

- **Third, what is the theological rationale for the seemingly different levels of autonomy and relationship to ecclesiastical authority for priests and deacons? Specifically, in The Examination in The Ordination of a Deacon in The Book of Common Prayer describes the work of a deacon as "a special ministry of servanthood directly under [the] bishop" and "assist[ing] the bishop and priest," while in The Ordination of a Priest, it describes the work of a priest as being done "together with [the] bishop and fellow presbyters."^{vii}**

The Preface to the Ordination Rites explain that:

The Holy Scriptures and ancient Christian writers make it clear that from the apostles' time, there have been different ministries within the Church. In particular, since the time of the New Testament, three distinct orders of ordained ministers have been characteristic of Christ's holy Catholic Church. First, there is the order of bishops who carry on the apostolic work of leading, supervising, and uniting the Church. Secondly, associated with them are the presbyters, or ordained elders, in subsequent times generally known as priests. Together with the bishops, they take part in the governance of the Church, in the carrying out of its missionary and pastoral work, and in the preaching of the Word of God and administering his holy Sacraments. Thirdly, there are **deacons** who **assist bishops and priests in all of this work**. It is also a special responsibility of deacons to minister in Christ's name to the poor, the sick, the suffering, and the helpless.

BCP 510 (emphasis added).

As to the autonomy and relationship of priests and deacons to their bishop, at The Presentation, ordinands of both orders are asked to declare whether, "in accordance with the canons of this Church, [the ordinand will] **obey your bishop** and other ministers who may have authority over you and your work?" (BCP 526, 538, emphasis added) During The Examination, ordinands of both orders are asked if they will "**respect** and be **guided** by the pastoral direction and leadership of your bishop?" (BCP 532, 543, emphasis added) Accordingly, both presbyters and deacons are required to "obey," "respect," and "be guided by the pastoral direction and leadership" of their bishop.

It is the distinctive character of the orders of ordained ministry that differentiate the priest's and the deacon's relationship to their bishop.

“The ministry of a priest is to represent Christ and his Church, particularly as pastor to the people; to share with the bishop in the overseeing of the Church; to proclaim the Gospel; to administer the sacraments; and to bless and declare pardon in the name of God.” (BCP 856)

During The Examination, the ordinand is charged to “work as pastor, priest, and teacher, together with your bishop and fellow presbyters, and to take your share in the councils of the Church.” (BCP 531) Whereas the bishop’s role is as “chief pastor” (BCP 513) on a diocesan level, the priest’s role is as “pastor, priest, and teacher” on the congregational level.

On the other hand, “[t]he ministry of a deacon is to represent Christ and his Church, particularly as a servant of those in need; and to assist bishops and priests in the proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments.” (BCP 856)

During The Examination, it states that deacons are called “to a special ministry of servanthood directly under your bishop.” (BCP 543) This statement is immediately followed by: “In the name of Christ, you are to serve all people, particularly the poor, the weak the sick and the lonely.” Since the first statement uses the words “ministry of servanthood” and the second statement expounds on the first statement – saying what that ministry looks like (serving all, particularly the poor . . .) – it is arguable that “special ministry of servanthood directly under your bishop” is referring to the role of the original seven deacons, as this is what they were ordained to do. These two sentences are directly linked and dependent on each other. As the early church grew, the original apostles and later the bishops needed deacons to help them meet the needs of the poor. The statement, “special ministry or servanthood under your bishop,” does not in any way mean that deacons are to function, in every and all ways, “directly under your bishop”; it just refers to deacons assisting the bishop through their servanthood role. Thus, this statement does not mean that deacons cannot function without direct consent of their bishop in carrying out any of their other duties and functions. This includes serving on any of the councils of the church, including the Standing Committee.

Deacons are charged “to interpret to the Church the needs, concerns, and hopes of the world. You are to assist the bishop and priests in public worship and in the ministration of God's Word and Sacraments, and you are to carry out other duties assigned to you from time to time.” (BCP 543). Deacons cannot fully live into their responsibilities if they are intentionally excluded from any leadership councils on which bishops, priests, and laity are allowed to serve. Excluding deacons from Standing Committee prevents them from exercising their prophetic voice and from having the same opportunity to provide advice to the bishop and the diocese as priests and laity.

- **Fourth, what is the theological rationale as to why "Deacons may serve as administrators of congregations or other communities of faith, but no Deacon shall be in charge of a congregation or other community of faith," specifically based on a comparison of Title III Section 7 "Of the Life and**

Work of Deacons" of the Canons and Constitution of The Episcopal Church with Title III Section 9 "Of the Life and Work of Priests"?

A priest is chosen by a congregation to serve as rector. (BCP 559) Title III, Canon 9, Sec. 6, "Of the Life and Work of Priests," enumerates the duties of rectors and priests-in-charge,^{viii} including "full authority and responsibility for the conduct of the worship and the spiritual jurisdiction of the Parish, subject to . . . the pastoral direction of the Bishop"; use and control of the church and parish buildings; instruction in faith and ministry and Christian stewardship; prepare persons for baptism, confirmation, reception, and reaffirmation; announce visitation by the bishop; read pastoral letters and position papers to the congregation; enter records in the parish register.

Title III, Canon 7, Sec. 4, "Of the Life and Work of Deacons," enumerates the "Rights and Responsibilities" of Deacons:

The Bishop, after consultation with the Deacon and the Member of the Clergy or other leader exercising oversight, may assign a Deacon to one or more congregations, other communities of faith or non-parochial ministries. **Deacons assigned to a congregation or other community of faith act under the authority of the Member of the Clergy or other leader exercising oversight in all matters concerning the congregation.**

a. Subject to the Bishop's approval, Deacons may have a letter of agreement setting forth mutual responsibilities in the assignment, and, if such a letter exists, it is subject to renegotiation with the Vestry/Bishop's Committee after the resignation of the Rector or the Priest-in-Charge.

b. Deacons shall report annually to the Bishop or the Bishop's designee on their life and work.

c. **Deacons may serve as administrators of congregations or other communities of faith, but no Deacon shall be in charge of a congregation or other community of faith.**

d. Deacons may accept chaplaincies in any hospital, prison, or other institution.

e. Deacons may participate in the governance of the Church.

. . . .

(Emphasis added.)

A deacon is called "to a special ministry of servanthood directly under [the] bishop." (BCP 543). Unlike a priest, a deacon is not chosen by a congregation but is assigned by

the bishop, is under the authority of the bishop, and is directly accountable to the bishop. (BCP 543). So, even though a deacon is assigned by the bishop to a parish, the deacon's ministry is to that parish *through* the bishop. In a parish, the deacon is supervised by the rector or priest-in-charge.

An "administrator" has been defined by one diocese as a person "authorized to exercise administrative responsibility in a congregation and serves under the direction of the clergy, as defined by the bishop. The parish administrator serves as custodian of all parochial records, administers the operation of the parish, is responsible for the completion of all reports that are required in compliance with diocesan and [The Episcopal Church] canons, and manages budgeting and fiscal administration of the parish."^{ix}

While deacons may conduct certain routine administrative duties in a parish, they are not permitted to be "in charge" of a congregation; that is, deacons are not authorized to assume the duties of a rector and exercise full pastoral care over the community. This boundary is consistent with the distinct ministries of priests and deacons, and the duties, rights, and responsibilities of these two ordained orders.

➤ Summary

The Standing Committee serves as the diocesan bishop's "council of advice." Given the deacon's position as clergy having one foot in the world and one foot in the church, a deacon has a unique contribution to make in exercising the deacon's prophetic voice in the church's legislative and policy-making bodies. Being under the authority of the bishop means that the bishop has the authority to assign the deacon to one or more congregations, other communities of faith, or non-parochial ministries, as the deacon is not called by a congregation as a priest is.

It is clear that when the Canon at issue was promulgated in 1891, the only deacons in the Diocese of West Missouri were "transitional deacons," as permanent deacons were not reintroduced into The Episcopal Church until 1970. In 2024, deacons are recognized as a full and equal order, to which The Episcopal Church gives the right to "participate in the governance of the Church." Therefore, the Community of Deacons supports the adoption of the proposed Deacons on Standing Committee Resolution.

ⁱ The Community of Deacons thanks the Very Rev. Chandler Jackson III, Diocesan Archivist, for his assistance in researching the background and legislative history of this canon.

ⁱⁱ <https://www.episcopaldeacons.org/history.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ In 1976 the General Convention approved the ordination of women to the priesthood and the episcopate in the Episcopal Church and stated that such ordinations might begin on Jan. 1, 1977. An Episcopal Dictionary of the Church, *Ordination of Women*, <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/glossary/ordination-of-women/>

^{iv} Constitution and Canons of The Episcopal Church, Title III, Canon 7, sec. 4.e. See <https://extranet.generalconvention.org/staff/files/download/31954>

^v Thanks to Dcn. Adam James for contributing the response to this question. See <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/organizations-affiliations/church-governance/>

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- ^{vi} Thanks to Dcn. Carol Peterson for contributing this summary.
- ^{vii} Thanks to Dcn. Carol Peterson for contributing the response to this question.
- ^{viii} “Priest-in-Charge shall exercise the duties of Rector outlined in [Canon III.9.6](#) subject to the authority of the Bishop.” Title III, Canon 9, Sec. 3.b.
- ^{ix} <https://dioet.org/parish-administrator/>