

# No Consents: A Crucial Test for The Episcopal Church

by Lionel E. Deimel  
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*This essay is reproduced from the Web site of the author, where it includes embedded links to material written by the Rev. Mark Lawrence. Rather than show URLs of Web pages in this printed version, underlining is used to indicate references to Web pages. Readers wanting to read Fr. Lawrence's material should follow the links on Dr. Deimel's Web site, at [http://deimel.org/church\\_resources/no\\_consents.htm](http://deimel.org/church_resources/no_consents.htm).*

Imagine a candidate running for the U.S. Senate who was on record as being opposed to maintaining the Constitution as the basis of our government. Imagine further that this person wants to replace our current government by a ruling committee consisting of the heads of various English-speaking nations. I suspect that such a candidate would be soundly rejected by voters, irrespective of his or her sincerity or positions on other issues of the day. That rejection would be utterly justified.

This scenario seems absurd, of course. How could such a candidate entertain even the remotest hope of being elected? Bizarre as this situation sounds, however, it is not much different from one that has arisen in The Episcopal Church.

The Rev. Mark Lawrence, rector of an Episcopal parish in the Diocese of San Joaquin, has been elected by the Diocese of South Carolina to become its next bishop. He is on record as saying that the polity of The Episcopal Church is informed more by notions of democracy and nationalism than Anglicanism, disqualifying it as being appropriate for the current age. He wants to replace it immediately and, without sanction of the General Convention, allow the Anglican primates to govern The Episcopal Church. The election of Mark Lawrence offers a clear indication of just how radical the Diocese of South Carolina has become; he was generally viewed as the most centrist of the three candidates in the episcopal election that took place in South Carolina on September 16, 2006!

Is a person holding such views someone we want to see become a member of the House of Bishops and, thereby, part of the governing structure of The Episcopal Church? This question needs to be asked now because Lawrence cannot be consecrated Bishop of South Carolina unless a majority of bishops with jurisdiction, and a majority of diocesan standing committees, give their consent. In the history of The Episcopal Church, fewer than a dozen priests elected bishop have failed to receive the necessary consents, and it has been more than half a

century since anyone has been denied consecration this way. Lawrence's election poses an unprecedented challenge, however. When confronted by such a clear and present danger to its very existence—the South Carolina election is part of the wider assault on The Episcopal Church—can our church rally the resolve to protect its faith and order? I believe that it must, and that the outcome of the South Carolina election should not be allowed to stand. To appreciate what is at issue and what the church can do, we must look at what Mark Lawrence has said and examine the consent process itself.

## Church Polity and the Bishop of South Carolina-elect

With some effort, we could build a detailed profile of the Rev. Mark Lawrence, establishing not only his current positions on theological and ecclesiological issues, but also the path by which he arrived at them. He has disclosed enough about his present beliefs, however, that examining only a few documents will be adequate to determine whether this priest should be consecrated a bishop. We will limit our exploration, therefore, to an essay of his that recently appeared in *The Living Church*, and to disclosures he made in the episcopal selection process recently concluded in South Carolina.

Mark Lawrence's essay "A Prognosis for this Body Episcopal" appeared as a Reader's Viewpoint column in the June 11, 2006, issue of *The Living Church* (pp. 32–33 of vol. 232, no. 24). This essay has not appeared on the magazine's Web site, but it is reproduced [here](#) with permission. Without precisely explaining what he considers to be wrong with The Episcopal Church—it must be said that the Reader's Viewpoint column is severely restricted in length—Lawrence describes his church as "a comatose patient on life support." The Episcopal Church has, he asserts, "lost its Anglican identity, even while it has failed to reach its own American culture in any significant way." (This latter complaint, which he does not explicate, seems intended to strip away possible defenses the church might raise to the charges that follow.) "Anglicanism," continues Lawrence, "has been trying haphazardly to come to grips with the transformation brought about by its dramatic worldwide expansion during the last 150 years." It must, he says, "correct its fatal allegiance to provincialism." In the new climate of globaliza-

tion—another term he uses without further explanation—Lawrence claims to have discovered “the Achilles heel of the Anglican Communion.” “While claiming to be a worldwide communion within the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church, it is actually only a loose confederation of provinces, each *unduly autonomous* [emphasis added], with profoundly different forms of governance, ethos, and doctrinal commitments.” Fr. Lawrence is quite troubled by the resulting “plurality” in Anglicanism and longs for not simply *unity*, but *uniformity*. Most Episcopalians, on the other hand, would find the Anglican Communion as he describes it, save for the “unduly autonomous” part, to be quite felicitous.

What is Lawrence’s solution to the “problem” he has identified? Only the primates, he says, have “sufficiently representative authority” to set straight “things doctrinal and moral” until such time as the Communion can work out a common polity to enforce the uniformity he views as necessary. In the meantime, “Episcopal Church polity ... will be supplanted by a new, emerging form of Anglican governance sufficient for the age of globalism.” Our constitution and canons are tainted by “strident nationalism” and “the ethos of democracy,” he tells us, and “it [*sic*] no longer serves us well.” Our survival and growth “necessitates the surrender of our autonomy to the governance of the larger church—that is, the Anglican Communion.” We require “a surgery that frees us from the ‘heresy’ of a national church,” from our “ecclesiastical nationalism and ... provincialism.”

In other words, The Episcopal Church should immediately surrender its autonomy to the leadership of the primates of the Anglican Communion, so they can “establish temporary perimeters for belief (doctrine) and behavior (morals).” He admits that this raises questions. “What do we do,” he asks, “with bishops and priests whose current practice and belief is [*sic*] beyond what the primates understand as within the boundaries of Anglicanism?” Lawrence has no answers for such questions. He seems untroubled by the anarchy likely to be unleashed by acting on his “proper diagnosis” of the patient.

Lest the reader think Fr. Lawrence’s essay is an aberration, consider his written responses to questions from the Diocese of South Carolina. Two documents are relevant here. One is a questionnaire filled out by each of the candidates. Most of the questions required the respondent to circle a number, where 1=strongly agree, 2=agree, 3=unsure, 4=disagree, and 5=strongly disagree. Lawrence’s responses included the following bearing on commitment to The Episcopal Church:

17. There should be room in the Episcopal Church for priests and bishops who accept homosexual conduct as a valid, non-sinful choice. Answer: *disagree*
18. There should be room in the Episcopal Church for priests and bishops who consider homosexual contact a sin. Answer: *strongly agree*
19. The church should not divide over this issue [homosexuality]. Answer: *strongly disagree*
20. If the Diocese of South Carolina does not become separate in some formal way from ECUSA, I intend to resign my orders as an Episcopal priest. Answer: *unsure*
21. If the Diocese of South Carolina separates in some formal way from ECUSA, I intend to transfer from this diocese to an ECUSA diocese. Answer: *strongly disagree*
22. The solution to our problem in ECUSA is for ECUSA to repent of its actions and return to traditional standards. Answer: *strongly agree*
25. The solution to our problem in ECUSA is time; we should wait and let the fuss die down. Answer: *strongly disagree*
26. The solution to our problem in ECUSA is for the conservatives to go along and get along (not that big an issue). Answer: *strongly disagree*
27. As a priest, I should not follow my bishop’s direction when it conflicts with Scripture, traditionally interpreted by the Anglican Church. Answer: *strongly agree*

We may conclude from these answers that Mark Lawrence is schismatic (believes the church should be divided over views on homosexuality); might resign his orders if South Carolina does not leave The Episcopal Church; will leave The Episcopal Church if schism occurs; longs for schism sooner, rather than later; and will ignore the direction of those put in authority over him if he disagrees with that direction. In other words, he is prepared to act against both the vows he has already taken and those he would take should he be consecrated a bishop in The Episcopal Church.

Finally, as Exhibit C, we have Lawrence’s written answers to questions asked of each episcopal candidate for their walkabout. One of the questions was particularly timely, as it addressed the request by South Carolina for “alternative primatial oversight.” It is unclear what this arrangement is supposed to be, given that it is not provided for by any

instrument of the Anglican Communion and is contrary to the constitution and canons of The Episcopal Church. It is apparently intended to isolate a diocese from the discipline of The Episcopal Church, to which it submitted when it became part of the church. The exact question asked was the following: “The Diocese of South Carolina is among those dioceses which have requested Alternative Primatial Oversight. Do you support this decision? If so, what issues does it raise? Please make reference in your answer to: a) the authority of Holy Scripture b) catholic ecclesiology c) Anglican identity.” To this question, Lawrence first points out, without any apparent distress, that his current diocese, San Joaquin, has made a similar request. He then discourses for about three pages on how the church cannot depart from “the teachings of the apostles and prophets.” Along the way, he asserts that the General Convention has denied “the very truth the Spirit of God has revealed” and exhibited a “misguided passion to be culturally sensitive and intellectually flexible.” The request for alternative primatial oversight was made, he suggests, “because all due parliamentary procedure to convince The Episcopal Church that it has erred have [*sic*] proved fruitless.” “Tough-love” with respect to the church is now called for. More than once, however, does Lawrence declare himself to be Anglican. Never does he call himself Episcopalian, which is not surprising, given his low opinion of his church. Lawrence echoes what he wrote for *The Living Church*: “The mantra of autonomy is a hindrance to the future.” He describes alternative primatial oversight—there is no question, by this time that he is in favor of it, even though he has not offered a simple “yes” to the question asked—as necessary, but temporary, until “some new and hard thinking about the way the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion lives [*sic*] out our unity in Christ,” presumably, the sort of hard thinking behind his Reader’s Viewpoint essay. He concludes by saying that “conservatives” are being progressive, and “progressives” are digging in their heels.

Lawrence is correct in his final statement. “Conservatives” have, in fact, become revolutionaries prepared to remake The Episcopal Church, not through regular, parliamentary means, but by any means necessary, and Lawrence has, through his pronouncements, declared himself to be one of the insurrectionists. The “progressives,” on the other hand, have become defenders of traditional Anglicanism. How ironic!

### The Test Ahead

It should be clear that Mark Lawrence has little respect for The Episcopal Church and is disdainful

of *any* church claiming autonomy for itself. That he has special problems with The Episcopal Church and with the General Convention is less important than the fact that he is willing to employ extralegal means to achieve his notion of some larger catholic unity, however. If Lawrence is to be consecrated a bishop in this church, he will be asked to “guard the faith, unity, and discipline of the Church [*i.e.*, The Episcopal Church]” and to “share with [his] fellow bishops in the government of the whole Church” (BCP, p. 518). How can he possibly take such a vow unless he renounces the statements he has made about The Episcopal Church? How can he uphold the “discipline” of a church whose entire (and rather substantial) body of canon law he has repudiated? Some might argue, of course, that a person being consecrated a bishop is referring to the Church Universal in his ordination vows, and not specifically to The Episcopal Church. There is ambiguity in the ordination vows—perhaps even some intentional ambiguity—but only The Episcopal Church has the canonical right to impose discipline, and the only church the consecrated bishop has an obligation to participate in the governance of is The Episcopal Church, so any suggestion that the vows have a meaning other than their plain meaning is disingenuous. That vows taken refer specifically to The Episcopal Church is made crystal clear in the disciplinary canons. For example, Canon 9.1 of Title IV begins: “If a Bishop abandons the communion of *this Church* (i) by an open renunciation of the Doctrine, Discipline, or Worship of *this Church* [emphasis added] ... .”

Some will argue that the election of Mark Lawrence should be consented to for the same reason advanced by many for consenting to the election of Gene Robinson, namely, that he is the choice of his diocese, and that fact should be respected by other dioceses. This is a strong, though not unassailable argument. Gene Robinson had not declared himself a schismatic nor expressed his contempt for our ecclesiastical structures. Even if Mark Lawrence is the choice of South Carolina, one can surely argue that it is unwise to take into the heart of The Episcopal Church one who has so arrogantly proclaimed his desire to overthrow its polity without the consent of the governing bodies of the church. The canons establish no right to be made a bishop and do not specifically enumerate disqualifying factors. Not only are bishops and standing committees free to withhold consent to consecrate Mark Lawrence, but it would be a serious lapse of judgment to do otherwise. It is suicidal for the church to consecrate bishops dedicated to destroying it, bishops committed to making schism a reality.

At the 75<sup>th</sup> General Convention, resolution B033 was passed, which resolved that “this Convention therefore call upon Standing Committees and bishops with jurisdiction to exercise restraint by not consenting to the consecration of any candidate to the episcopate whose manner of life presents a challenge to the wider church and will lead to further strains on communion.” Surely, *not* consenting to the consecration of Mark Lawrence is likely to “lead to further strains on communion,” but it may also delay the headlong plunge into schism that that is gripping The Episcopal Church and that its leaders have been unable or unwilling to stop. Consenting is also problematic, however. Is there integrity in being a part of a church that one apparently despises and views as hopelessly flawed? Surely there is none in taking the vows of a bishop if one has such an attitude. Is not exhibiting such a lack of integrity a “manner of life” issue?

Like many of the provisions of the United States Constitution, the requirement for consents found in Article II of the constitution of the General Convention, and elaborated in Canon 16 of Title III, is part of a system of checks and balances. Should a diocese make a serious misstep in the selection of a bishop, bishops and standing committees are given an opportunity (and responsibility) to act in the interest of the church by requiring the episcopal search to be started again. The importance of this particular check is easily overlooked. The theological center of a diocese changes over time, becoming more conservative one decade, more liberal the next, more centrist the one after that. If a diocese leans too much in one direction, however, and if a bishop is willing to push it further in that direction, the diocese may become nearly monochromatic in the theology of its clergy and, through their influence, its laypeople. In such a situation, it may be nearly impossible ever to move the diocese back toward a more comfortable *via media* status. This is not to say that all dioceses should somehow be “moderate” in their theology, but there is a tendency, over time, for at least some dioceses to be driven to one extreme or another and to get stuck there. Readers can probably name several dioceses, not all of them “conservative,” where, arguably, this has occurred. This phenomenon risks depriving a diocese of the interplay of the various strains of Anglicanism that many consider one of our tradition’s greatest strengths. There is hardly any check on this tendency. In South Carolina, for example, where an exceedingly “orthodox” bishop is being replaced, it was a foregone conclusion that the next bishop would not be notably more moderate. The requirement for obtaining consents is virtually the only mechanism by which an extreme

diocese might be brought back from its extreme position over any reasonable timescale. South Carolina, I would argue, needs to be pulled gently back from the brink.

Although Mark Lawrence’s Anglo-Catholic theology is hardly mainstream Episcopal thinking, it is not his theology, but his unwillingness to abide by the canons of The Episcopal Church that disqualify him from becoming a bishop. Even if he sincerely believes that he is correct and the church is wrong, he has no right to expect that others in the church who as sincerely believe otherwise should grant him license to disobey the canons. He has an obligation to deal faithfully with his brothers and sisters in the church as long as he is part of it.

The obligation to give or withhold consent for the consecration of a person elected bishop is a solemn responsibility, and it is with a heavy heart that I advocate denying consent to the Diocese of South Carolina. It will be painful to vote against consent, and denial of consent will cause pain in South Carolina, in The Episcopal Church, and in the Anglican Communion. It will not heal divisions within our church, and, at least in the near term, it may intensify conflict. On the other hand, choosing not to give consent might keep an anti-democratic, ecclesiastical revolutionary out of the House of Bishops and demonstrate that The Episcopal Church is serious about who becomes a bishop and about the need to abide by church canons. As has been emphasized in recent years, bishops are chosen for the whole church, not simply for one diocese, and it is clear that Fr. Lawrence’s ecclesiological views are held by a tiny minority within our church and are—or would be if they were widely known—repugnant to most Episcopalians.

The consent process does the church a disservice if it cannot prevent consecration of one such as Mark Lawrence. The unity and integrity of The Episcopal Church are at stake, and its resolve is being tested. I pray that we find the courage to do what is right for our church when consent to the consecration of Mark Lawrence is considered.

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