When does a bishop become a bishop? At his or her election?

If you answered “yes” to that question, then it’s time to brush up on your knowledge of the canons of the Episcopal Church. And since this is “election season” – with eight bishop elections completed in the past few months – it’s a good time to look at the process.

While bishops in the Episcopal Church are elected on the local level, they are not approved to serve as bishops until after the completion of a consent process by the leaders of the rest of the church. Ordination may take place only after these consents have been received.

The process

Generally, the process for electing bishops in the dioceses of the Episcopal Church is the same, whether the election calls for a bishop diocesan (who has jurisdiction over a diocese), a coadjutor (who will succeed a sitting bishop diocesan upon the latter’s retirement or resignation) or a bishop suffragan (who is elected to assist the bishop diocesan).

After a process of discernment within the diocese, in which a selection of candidates is presented to the diocese, usually by a representative committee, an election is conducted on an appointed date. Upon election, the successful candidate is a bishop-elect.

Following some procedural matters, including examinations, formal notices are then sent to bishops with jurisdiction (diocesan bishops only) with separate notices to the standing committee of each of the 110 dioceses in the Episcopal Church. These notices require their own actions and signatures. (Special procedures are used for elections that take place just before a meeting of General Convention; the next GC will be in 2012.)

It’s at this point that time starts ticking.

Approvals

In order for a bishop-elect to become a bishop, Canon III.11.4 (a) of the Episcopal Church mandates that a majority of diocesan bishops and a majority of diocesan standing committees must consent to the bishop-elect’s ordination as bishop. These actions — carried out separately — must be completed within 120 days from the day after notice of the election was sent to the proper parties.

If the bishop-elect receives a majority (at least 50% plus one) of consents from the diocesan bishops as well as a majority from the standing committees, the bishop-elect is one step closer. Following a successful consent process, ordination and celebration are in order.

If the majority of diocesan bishops do not consent, and/or the majority of the standing committees do not consent, the Presiding Bishop, in accordance with Canon III.11.5, is required to declare the election null and void. In such a case, the person elected by the diocese will not be ordained, and the process must start anew.

If the consents are received in time and good order, it is at this point, often more than four months after local election, that a bishop-elect is made a bishop by at least three ordained bishops through the service of ordination (found in *The Book of Common Prayer*).

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You are called to guard the faith, unity and discipline of the Church; to celebrate and to provide for the administration of the sacraments of the New Covenant; to ordain priests and deacons and to join in ordaining bishops; and to be in all things a faithful pastor and wholesome example for the entire flock of Christ.

With your fellow bishops you will share in the leadership of the Church throughout the world. Your heritage is the faith of patriarchs, prophets, apostles, and martyrs, and those of every generation who have looked to God in hope. Your joy will be to follow him who came, not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.

—From the Examination in the service of Ordination of a Bishop, The Book of Common Prayer