



What is the Episcopal Church About?

The Episcopal Church is made up of between two and three million worshipers in about 7500 congregations across the United States and a few related dioceses outside the US.

The Anglican Communion

During the Reformation in the 16th Century, Henry VIII declared the Church of England independent of the Roman Catholic Church with himself as its head. It was the result of many factors, some political and some theological, but it has given rise to a distinct form of Christianity, known as Anglicanism.

The Episcopal Church is a member of the worldwide Anglican Communion, the churches around the world that trace their roots to the Church of England, and maintain a “communion” with it, hence the name “Anglican.” Other members of the Communion include the Anglican Church of Canada and the Anglican Church of Nigeria. In fact, most Anglicans now live in Africa.

The member churches of the Anglican Communion are joined together by choice in love, and have no direct authority over one another. The Archbishop of Canterbury, the head of the Church of England, is acknowledged as the spiritual head of the Anglican Communion, but while respected, the Archbishop does not have direct authority over any Anglican Church outside of England.

While there are other churches that call themselves “Anglican,” only one Church in any country can be considered “in full communion” with the Church of England, and the Episcopal Church is the American member of the Communion.

What makes us Anglican?

Hallmarks of the Episcopal Church

The Episcopal Church, having its roots in the Church of England, is also an Anglican Church. Like all Anglican churches, the Episcopal Church is distinguished by the following characteristics:

Protestant, Yet Catholic

Anglicanism stands squarely in the Reformed tradition, yet considers itself just as directly descended from the Early Church as the Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox churches. Episcopalians celebrate the “Mass” in ways similar to the Roman Catholic tradition, yet does not recognize a single authority, such as the Pope of Rome.

Worship in one's first language

Episcopalians believe that Christians should be able to worship God and read the Bible in their first language, which for most Episcopalians, is English, rather than Latin or Greek, the two earlier, “official” languages of Christianity. Yet the Book of Common Prayer has been translated into many languages, so that those Episcopalians who do not speak English can still worship God in their native tongue.

The Book of Common Prayer

Unique to Anglicanism, though, is the Book of Common Prayer, the collection of worship services that all worshipers in an Anglican church follow. It's called “common prayer” because we all pray it together, around the world. The first Book of Common Prayer was compiled in English by Thomas Cranmer in



the 16th Century, and since then has undergone many revisions for different times and places. But its original purpose has remained the same: To provide in one place the core of the instructions and rites for Anglican Christians to worship together.

The present prayer book in the Episcopal Church was published in 1979. Many other worship resources and prayers exist to enrich our worship, but the Book of Common Prayer is the authority that governs our worship. The prayer book explains Christianity, describes the main beliefs of the Church, outlines the requirements for the sacraments, and in general serves as the main guidelines of the Episcopal life.

Scripture, Tradition, and Reason

The Anglican approach to reading and interpreting the Bible was first articulated by Richard Hooker, also in the 16th Century. While Christians universally acknowledge the Bible (or the Holy Scriptures) as the Word of God and completely sufficient to our reconciliation to God, what the Bible says must always speak to us in our own time and place.

The Church, as a worshipping body of faithful people, has for two thousand years amassed experience of God and of loving Jesus, and what they have said to us through the centuries about the Bible is critical to our understanding it in our own context. The traditions of the Church in interpreting Scripture connect all generations of believers together and give us a starting point for our own understanding.

Episcopalians believe that every Christian must build an understanding and relationship with God's Word in the Bible, and to do that, God has given us intelligence and our own experience, which we refer to as "Reason." Based on the text of the Bible itself, and what Christians have taught us about it through the ages, we then must sort out our own understanding of it as it relates to our own lives.

Governance of the Episcopal Church

"Episcopal" means "bishop" in Greek, and the Episcopal Church is governed in part by its bishops. The basic unit of ministry in the Episcopal Church is the "diocese," or a region of a reasonable number of Episcopalians. Each diocese is presided over by a "diocesan bishop" who may have help from a variety of other kinds of bishops, depending on the circumstances.

The Diocesan Bishop chooses and ordains priests and deacons to serve the "parishes," or congregations, of the diocese, which carry out the ministry of the diocese in their local communities. The priests lead the parish in worship, make decisions related to the sacramental life of the parish, and in general, supports the ministry of the worshipping Christians there.

The Episcopal Church is governed by a Constitution and a set of laws (known as "canons") which it establishes for itself by Convention, but the diocesan bishop is the ecclesiastical (or "church") authority in his or her particular diocese. The bishops of the Episcopal Church have no jurisdiction outside of their dioceses, so they meet together twice per year to pray and make decisions about the life of the Church. Every nine years, the Church elects a "Presiding Bishop" who represents the Episcopal Church in the Anglican Communion and "presides" over meetings of the bishops, known as the "House of Bishops."

Every three years, delegations (or "deputations") from all the dioceses, along with the House of Bishops, gather to worship and pass legislation for the Church. This General Convention is where broad decisions are made about policy and worship, as well as revitalizing the Christian community for ministry "back home."



What to Expect When You Visit

Worship in the Episcopal Church

Sunday is traditionally when Episcopalians gather to worship. In most churches now, the principal worship service is the Holy Eucharist, or as it is also known, “The Lord’s Supper,” “Holy Communion,” or “The Mass.” In most Episcopal churches, worship is accompanied by the singing of hymns, and in some churches, much of the service is also sung.

Worship Styles

There are many different styles in which Episcopalians worship, from very formal, almost Catholic styles that have lots of singing, music, fancy clothes (called vestments), and incense, to very informal spoken styles that have less music. Yet all worship in the Episcopal Church is based in the Book of Common Prayer, which gives it a familiar feel to Episcopalians, no matter where they go.

Liturgy and Ritual

Worship in the Episcopal Church is said to be “liturgical,” which means that the congregation follows the same service and prays from texts that don’t change very much from week to week during a season of the year. The sameness from week to week gives the worship a rhythm that becomes comforting and familiar to the worshippers.

Liturgy can be confusing, however, or difficult to follow for the first-time visitor. It often involves switching between two or more books or a service pamphlet, and there may be a lot of standing, sitting, kneeling, bowing, and sung or spoken responses. Liturgical worship can be compared with a formal dance: Once you learn its steps and movements, you learn to appreciate its rhythm and it becomes satisfying to dance, again and again, as the music changes.

The Holy Eucharist

In spite of the diversity of worship styles in the Episcopal Church, Holy Eucharist always has the same components and the same shape.

The Liturgy of the Word

We begin with the praise of God through singing and prayers, and then listen to as many as four readings from the Bible. Usually, they are one from the Old Testament, a psalm, and one from the Epistles, but there is always a reading from one of the Gospels.

There is usually then a sermon or meditation on the readings given by the priest.

The congregation recites the Nicene Creed, which was written in the Fourth Century and has been the Church’s statement of what we believe ever since.

Next, the congregation prays together—for the Church, for the World, and for those in need. We pray for the sick, we thank God for all the good things of our lives, and finally, we pray for the dead.

Then usually, the congregation confesses its sin before God and before one another. This is a corporate statement of what we have done and what we have left undone, and the priest “pronounces absolution.” In so doing, the priest assures the congregation that God is always ready to forgive our sins.

The congregation greets one another and wishes them “peace.”



The Liturgy of the Table

Next, the priest stands at the table, which has been set with a cup of wine and a plate of bread—or thin, crispy wafers. Then he or she raises his or her hands and greets the congregation again: “The Lord be With You.” Now begins the Eucharistic Prayer, in which the priest tells the story of Christianity, from the beginning of Creation, through the choosing of Israel to be God’s people, through our continual turning away from God and God’s calling us to return. Finally, the priest tells the story of the coming of Jesus Christ, and about the night before his death, on which he instituted the Eucharistic meal (communion) as a continual remembrance of him.

The priest blesses the bread and wine, and the congregation recites the Lord’s Prayer. Finally, the priest breaks the bread and offers it to the congregation, as the “gifts of God for the People of God.”

The congregation then shares the bread and the wine. Sometimes the people all come forward to receive the bread and wine; sometimes they pass the elements around in other ways.

All Are Welcome

All baptized Christians—no matter what age, and no matter of what denomination—are welcome to “receive communion,” that is, eat the bread and drink the wine with the congregation, regardless of which Church they were baptized in. This invitation to other Christians who are not Episcopalians is in sharp contrast to the position of other Churches, such as the Roman Catholic Church, which allows only Roman Catholics to receive. Episcopalians invite all baptized people to receive, not because we take the Eucharist lightly, but because we take our baptism so seriously.

Visitors who are not baptized Christians are still welcome to come forward during the Communion to receive the blessing of the priest.

At the end of the Eucharist, the congregation prays once more in thanksgiving, and then is dismissed to continue the life of service to God and to the World.