

Beliefs of the Episcopal Church

The Episcopal Church is part of the original Church founded by Jesus Christ when He commissioned His disciples to go into the world to preach the *Good News*. The Episcopal Church today is part of the worldwide Anglican Communion (The Church of England) with sixty million members. *Episcopal* is from a Greek word meaning *bishops*. The Bishops of the Episcopal Church, elected by clergy and the people, shepherd the day-to-day care of the Church.

A Biblical Church - We believe the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament to be the Word of God and to contain all things necessary for salvation. The Bible is the source of our belief and moral standards. As God's Word to us, the Bible is the lens through which we view and evaluate all other claims to truth. The use of the Bible is a prominent part of our worship. Eighty percent of the *Book of Common Prayer* is taken directly from the Bible. Each Sunday, readings and preaching from the Bible help us apply its teachings to our everyday lives.

A Catholic Church, Reformed - We believe that we are both "catholic" and "Protestant." Some people apply the word "catholic" to one branch of the Christian church only, namely the Roman Catholic Church. This can be confusing. We are a "catholic" church because we share the beliefs of the early, undivided Catholic Church. We maintain the traditions of the church through the use of the ancient rituals and sacraments of the Church and today the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds are our statements of faith. We also believe we are "Protestant" or "reformed." Our distinction from the Roman Catholic Church was hammered out in the Protestant Reformation in England during the sixteenth century. The word "Protestant" means "to witness for." Protestants believe that our lives are saved by God's grace and not by our works. Church members, women and men, have a strong voice in church life and leadership. We encourage each member to arrive at a reasoned faith using the Scripture and traditions of the Church to inform their search.

A Liturgical Church - The *Book of Common Prayer* is the prayer book of the Episcopal Church and contains the format for how we conduct our worship services. Worship in the Episcopal Church ranges from the very plain to the very splendid. Episcopalians worship the Lord in private and in community. The congregation actively participates in worship by reading Scripture, helping administer the Sacraments and saying prayers together. We stand to praise the Lord, we stand or kneel for prayer, and we sit for instruction. The rich seasons of the Church year (Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter and Pentecost), sacred music (centuries old and modern) are integral parts of our church life. The liturgy reminds us of our love for God and reinforces us in carrying that message throughout the week.

A Relational Church - We believe God's love and grace are the rightful possession of all people. We believe that God best expressed His love and grace by sending His only Son, Jesus Christ, to live among us in flesh and bone (the Incarnation). Therefore Episcopalians believe that God's love and grace are best expressed through Christ's Body, the Church. Thus we welcome everyone from the youngest to the oldest and invite them to be a part of our larger worshipping community.

A Sacramental Church - We believe in the two "great" sacraments -- Holy Baptism administered once to each person either in their infancy or later in life, and the Holy Eucharist (Communion). We believe these two sacraments are essential to the life of every true Christian. Other sacraments of our Church are Confession, Ordination, Anointing (administration to the sick), confirmation, and Matrimony.

What is the Episcopal Church?

In the United States and Scotland it is called Episcopal, and in most of the rest of the world it is called Anglican. What is it?

There are many churches around the world that have the word Anglican in their name, and virtually all of them are god fearing Christian churches in the Anglican tradition. In some sense these are all Anglican churches, and most of them are part of The Anglican Church.

For more information on the history, tradition, beliefs, and organization of the Episcopal Church see the bottom of the page.

What to expect when you visit The Episcopal Church.

You'll be welcome

We extend a cordial welcome to you to worship with us. We offer this document as a brief introduction to the Episcopal Church and its ways.

The Place of Worship

As you enter, you will notice an atmosphere of worship and reverence.

Episcopal churches are built in many architectural styles; but whether the church is small or large, elaborate or plain, your eye is carried to the altar, or holy table, and to the cross. So our thoughts are taken at once to Christ and to God whose house the edifice is.

On the altar there are candles to remind us that Christ is the "Light of the world" (John 8:12). There are flowers on both sides of the altar to beautify God's house and to recall the resurrection of Jesus.

On one side at the front of the church, there is a lectern, for the proclamation of the Word. Here the Scriptures are read.

The Act of Worship

Episcopal church services are congregational. In the pews you will find the Book of Common Prayer, the use of which enables the congregation to share fully in every service. The large print is the actual service. The print in italics (rubrics) provide directions to ministers and people for conduct of the service. Page numbers for parts of the service that are printed elsewhere are announced or given in the service leaflet. But do not be embarrassed to ask your neighbor for the page number.

You may wonder when to stand or kneel. Practices vary---even among individual Episcopalians within the congregation.

The general rule is to stand to sing---hymns (found in the Hymnal in the pews) and other songs (many of them from the Holy Bible) called canticles or chants and printed as part of the service. We stand, too, to say our affirmation of faith, the Creed; and for the

reading of the Gospel in the Holy Eucharist. Psalms are sung or said sitting or standing. We sit to listen during readings from the Old Testament or New Testament, the sermon, and other presentations. Prayer is done standing or kneeling to show our gratefulness to God for accepting us as children or as an act of humility before God.

The Regular Services

The principal service is the Holy Eucharist. On some occasions it is celebrated quite simply, without music. When celebrated at a later hour on Sundays, or on other great Christian days such as Christmas, music and a sermon are customary

Another service is Morning Prayer. The parallel evening service is Evening Prayer. These services consist of psalms, Bible readings, and prayers; and may include a sermon. They may be with or without music and may be conducted by a layperson instead of a priest.

While some parts of the services are always the same, others vary. At the Holy Eucharist, for example, two or three Bible selections are read. These change each Sunday. So do the psalms. Certain prayers also change, in order to provide variety.

You will find the services of the Episcopal Church beautiful in their ordered dignity, God-centered, and yet mindful of the nature and needs of human beings.

Before and After Services

It is the custom upon entering church to kneel in one's pew for a prayer of personal preparation for worship. In many churches it is also the custom to bow to the altar on entering and leaving the church as an act of reverence for Christ.

Episcopalians do not talk in church before a service but use this time for personal meditation and devotions. At the end of the service some persons kneel for a private prayer before leaving. Others sometimes sit to listen to the organ postlude.

Vestments

To add to the beauty and festivity of the services, and to signify their special ministries, the clergy and other ministers wear vestments. Lay readers vestments usually consist of an alb, a white tunic with sleeves that covers the body from neck to ankles. Over it (or over the surplice) ordained ministers wear a stole, a narrow band of colored fabric. Deacons wear the stole over one shoulder, priests and bishops over both shoulders.

Another vestment sometimes worn is an under gown called a cassock (usually black) and a white, gathered over gown called a surplice. This may be worn by clergy or laity.

While celebrating the Holy Eucharist a bishop or priest frequently wears a chasuble (a circular garment that envelopes the body) over the alb and stole. The deacon's corresponding vestment has sleeves and is called a dalmatic. Bishops sometimes wear a special head covering called a mitre.

Stoles, chasubles, and dalmatics, as well as altar coverings, are usually made of rich fabrics. Their color changes with the seasons and holy days of the Church Year. The most frequently used colors are white, red, violet, and green.

The Church Year

The Episcopal Church observes the traditional Christian calendar. The season of Advent, during which we prepare for Christmas, begins on the Sunday closest to November 30. Christmas itself lasts twelve days, after which we celebrate the feast of the Epiphany (January 6).

Lent, the forty days of preparation for Easter, begins on Ash Wednesday. Easter season lasts fifty days, concluding on the feast of Pentecost.

During these times the Bible readings are chosen for their appropriateness to the season. During the rest of the year---the season after Epiphany and the long season after Pentecost (except for a few special Sundays)---the New Testament is read sequentially from Sunday to Sunday. The Old Testament lesson corresponds in theme with one of the New Testament readings. [Click here to view The Lectionary Page.](#)

Coming and Going

If there are ushers they will greet you. If you desire, they will answer your questions about the service. Pews are not reserved in Episcopal churches except for some special services where large family blocks are present -- like weddings, baptisms, and funerals.

Following the service the pastor greets the people as they leave.

You Will Not Be Embarrassed

When you visit an Episcopal church, you will be our respected and welcome guest. You will not be singled out in an embarrassing way, nor forced to stand before the congregation or to come forward. You will simply worship God with us.

Should you wish to know more about the Episcopal Church or how one becomes an Episcopalian, the pastor will gladly answer your questions and suggest the way to membership.

History, Traditions, Beliefs and Organization

History

The Anglican tradition emerged in the 16th Century, during a turbulent period of reform in the church. Anglican reformers chose a “middle way” between Roman Catholicism and the various forms of Protestantism, which developed in Europe at that time. There were two main stages in the spread of Anglicanism -- the first in the 17th Century, during the colonialization in the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. The second stage began in the 18th Century, when missionaries traveled to Asia, Africa and South America to spread the Gospel and to establish churches.

The Episcopal Church strives to offer a moderate and inclusive approach to faith. While the church presents clear, biblically-based teaching and guidance on most subjects, we also understand that there are some issues in life that can be experienced and interpreted in different ways by different people. We encourage respectful listening, dialogue rather than debate, and “unity in diversity” among our members as we seek to live faithful and fruitful lives.

Traditions

Episcopalians make extensive use of ritual, color and symbols to bring our worship alive. Central to our life in faith are the symbolic acts or rituals known as the Sacraments. Described as “an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace”, the Sacramental acts draw us into God’s presence and allow us to fully experience the grace of God in our lives. The Sacraments celebrated in the Episcopal Church are Baptism, the Eucharist, Confirmation, Marriage, Ordination, Confession, and Anointing With Oil.

What Episcopalians Believe

Although our members come from many different races and cultures and speak many different languages, we are unified by our belief in the transforming love and power of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. We believe that God offers unconditional love and eternal life to those who place their trust and faith in him and who strive to follow Christ's teachings of compassion, justice, mercy, respect, and love towards others. Central to our life in faith is the concept of "stewardship" -- the belief that all things in creation (including our own talents, skills, and financial resources) come from God. We believe that God has entrusted these gifts to us to be used wisely and responsibly for the good of all people.

Organization

The Episcopal Church consists of lay persons, deacons, priests and bishops. We consider all baptized Christians to be “ministers” as they share their gifts and talents. However, some members of the church feel called to be ordained as deacons, priests or bishops. In the Episcopal Church in the United States, both women and men are eligible for ordination.

Deacons serve as a bridge between church and community. Often employed outside the church, deacons help to interpret the needs and concerns of society to church leaders and help to support and nurture church members. There are two kinds of deacons -- Transitional deacons, who serve in this role for an interim period before being ordained to the priesthood, and Vocational deacons, who choose the diaconate as a lifelong ministry.

The priest serves as a pastor and teacher to members of the church, leads worship, preaches, and supports members of the congregation as they reach out into their community. Some priests find their vocation in a non-church setting, such as a hospital, university or prison chaplainry.

Bishops are elected by priests and lay people. They provide leadership and care for congregations and serve as a link with the mission and ministry of the national and international church and with other faith traditions. When bishops are elected to exercise oversight for a larger constituency within the church they receive the title Archbishop.

Titles, Terms, and Descriptions

Anglican Communion -- The world-wide network of Anglican Christians from 160 countries. While the church is known as either the Anglican Church, the Church of England, or the Episcopal Church, depending on the region, all Anglican Christians are part of the wider Anglican family, unified under the leadership of the Archbishop of Canterbury in England. The current Archbishop of Canterbury is the Most Rev. George Carey.

Cathedral -- Most dioceses have a central church designated as its Cathedral. Although every cathedral serves a local congregation, it is also the "Bishop's Church" and serves as the central gathering place for all Episcopalians in the diocese for special services and events. Virginia is unique in that there are no cathedrals, owing in part to the transition from Church of England to the Episcopal Church in America.

Diocese -- A regional grouping of churches, under the leadership of a bishop The Rt. Rev. Richard S. O. Chang is Bishop of the Diocese Of Hawaii.

Primate -- The national leader of the church. The Presiding Bishop and Primate of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America is The Most Rev. Frank T. Griswold.

Colors of Church Seasons

Green – Color of growth and is used during the seasons of Pentecost and Epiphany.

White – Color for occasions of joy and festivity such as Christmas, Easter, Trinity, non-martyred saints, weddings and baptisms. At funerals it reminds us of the hope of Christ's resurrection.

Red – Color symbolic of the tongues of fire which settled on the apostles at Pentecost with the coming of the Holy Spirit and is used at all feasts of the Holy Spirit such as Pentecost, ordinations and confirmations. It is also used on the days of martyred saints and reminds us of the blood they shed.

Purple – Color of penitence. It is used during Lent and, by some churches, used during advent.

Royal Blue – Color in Advent to remind us of our Lord's promised return to reign with power and glory. A lighter blue is also the color associated with Mary and prepares us for the celebration of Christmas.

Black – Color once used for burials and is seldom seen in modern liturgy. Black or red are the colors of Good Friday, and because it is an option on this one day of the year, most churches use red.

Other Church Traditions

Eucharist – Christ said “do this”. This is an action in the church that everyone takes part in.

Incense – This is used to show honor to the Alter, the Celebrant and those who are censed.

Collect for the Day – This brief prayer collects our intentions for this particular day and summarizes the teachings of the season or day. These are found on pages 211 – 261 of the Book of Common Prayer.

Scriptures – These instruct us in Christian living and beliefs.

Prayers of the People – We are directed to pray for the specific needs in the church, nation and world to avoid being too narrow in our self-centeredness. We are reminded in worship that we are a part of a greater fellowship, the Church, the Body of Christ, on whose heart lie the cares and concerns in the world.

Gradual or Gospel Procession – This is bringing the Holy Bible down to the congregation. It symbolizes carrying the good new to the people.

The Confession of Sin – An opportunity to let go of our sins before we approach the alter. In ancient times, Confession and Absolution was not included because the Eucharist was understood to be a thanksgiving for our redemption from sin.

The Peace – This is a very ancient tradition and provides a natural flow to the Offertory. It symbolizes our intent to forgive as we have been forgiven, to live in peace and harmony with all persons, and it is a sign of the Holy Spirit's presence in the Church.

Holy Communion – We now begin the great Action which Christ ordained. This is our act of obedience to His Command to “Do this.” The worshiper should consciously offer himself to God throughout this part. This is a time to pray.

The Offering of Alms – Having offered ourselves to God in the oblations, Bread and Wine, we now offer the work of our hands for the spread of His Kingdom.

The Lavabo – Water is poured over the hands and fingers of the celebrant so that they may be clean to handle the sacrament.

Benedictus Qui Venit – Now the King is about to enter our presence and we bid him welcome with the cry of the people. “Blessed is He who comest in the Name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest.”

Prayer of Consecration – All that has gone before has been leading to this great moment. In this prayer, the bread is taken, blessed and broken. The wine is taken and blessed as the celebrant says “This is my body... This is my Blood... Do this for the remembrance of me.” We are bring Christ back to us.

The Communion – Now that the consecration is complete, we prepare to receive God’s great gift as He gives back to us the Body and Blood of Christ so that we may become what we are – God’s sons and daughters.

Breaking of the Bread – This symbolizes the breaking of Christ’s body on the Cross for our sins.

The Post Communion Prayer – This expresses our gratitude to God for the gifts we have just received. We ask God to make our lives living proof of our union with Christ.

The Blessing – We must carry into the world the great gifts given to us by God and live our lives as His true sons and daughters. The celebrant sends us forth with the blessing of the Holy Trinity.

The Dismissal – Following the recessional hymn, we leave our worship to carry on our Lord’s work and mission in the world with a word of encouragement.