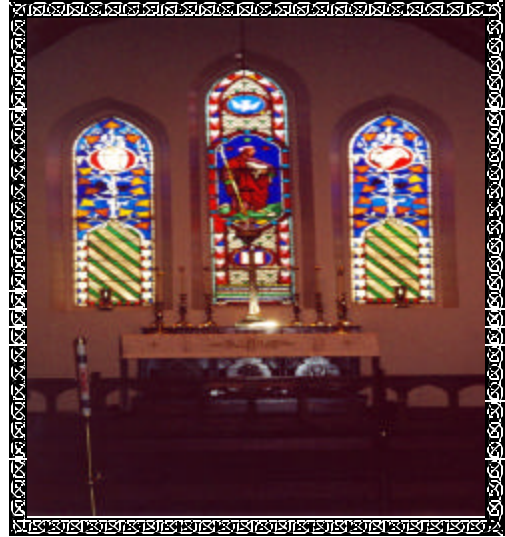


About the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion



The Brick Church



The Chapel

What Is the Episcopal Church?

The Episcopal Church is the American branch of the Anglican Communion. The Anglican Communion is an inheritor of 2000 years of catholic and apostolic tradition dating from Christ himself, rooted in the Church of England. When the Church of England spread throughout the British Empire, sister churches sprang up. These churches, while autonomous in their governance, are bound together by tradition, Scripture, and the inheritance they have received from the Church of England. They together make up the Anglican Communion, a body headed spiritually by the Archbishop of Canterbury and having some 80 million members, making it the second largest Christian body in the world.

Bishops in the American Episcopal Church are elected by individual dioceses and are consecrated into the Apostolic Succession, considered to witness to an unbroken line of Church leadership beginning with the Apostles themselves. For more than two decades the American Episcopal Church has ordained women to the priesthood. In 1988 the Diocese of Massachusetts elected the first Anglican woman bishop, Barbara Harris.

Although it subscribes to the historic Creeds (the *Nicene Creed* the *Apostles' Creed* and the *Athanasian Creed*), considers the Bible to contain all things necessary for salvation, and holds the Eucharist or Lord's Supper to be the central act of Christian worship, the Episcopal Church grants great latitude in interpretation of doctrine. It tends to stress less the confession of particular beliefs than the use of the *Book of Common Prayer* in public worship. This book, first published in the sixteenth century, even in its revisions, stands today as a major source of unity for Anglicans around the world.

The Church of England has always valued the life of the mind and dialogue with fields of secular study. The Episcopal Church maintains this tradition, routinely requiring its clergy to hold university as well as seminary degrees and supporting many university chaplains.

What to expect when you visit an Episcopal church

You'll be welcome

We extend a cordial welcome to you to worship with us, and 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 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 church is.

On or near the altar there are candles to remind us that Christ is the "Light of the world" (*John 8:12*). Often there are flowers, to beautify God's house and to recall the resurrection of Jesus.

At the front of the church, there is a lectern and/or a pulpit (or stand) for the proclamation of the Word; here the Scriptures are read and the sermon is preached. If there is a lectern, it is separate from the pulpit and stands on the opposite side of the chancel.

The Act of Worship

Episcopal Church services are participational. 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 smaller italic print (the "rubrics") gives directions to ministers and people for conduct of the service.

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

The general rule is to stand to sing--hymns and other songs 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 sitting. We sit during readings from the Old Testament or New Testament Epistles, the sermon, and the choir anthems. We stand or kneel for prayer to show our gratefulness to God for accepting us as his children or as an act of humility before God.

The Regular Services

The principal service is the Holy Eucharist (Holy Communion). In some Episcopal churches it is celebrated quite simply, without music, early on Sunday morning. Weekday celebrations also are frequently without music. When celebrated on Sundays or on other great Christian feast 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.

While some parts of the services are always the same, others change. At the Holy Eucharist, for example, two or three Bible selections are read. Bible selections and Psalms change each Sunday.

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. It is also the custom to reverence the altar, the symbol of Christ's abiding presence among his people, by bowing when facing the altar on entering and leaving the church.

Episcopalians do not normally 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. Choir vestments usually consist of an under gown called a cassock (usually black or red) and a white, gathered over gown called a surplice. The clergy may also wear cassock and surplice.

Another familiar vestment is the 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.

At the Holy Eucharist a bishop or priest frequently wears a chasuble (a circular, poncho-like, garment that envelops the body) over the alb and stole. The deacon's corresponding vestment has sleeves and is called a dalmatic. Bishops sometimes wear a special headcovering 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 normally corresponds in theme with the readings from the *Gospel*.

Coming and Going

If there are Ushers they will greet you, and may escort you to a pew. If you desire, they will answer your questions about the service. Pews are usually unreserved in Episcopal churches. Following the service the celebrant greets the people as they leave.

Beliefs of Episcopalians

The beliefs of Anglicans are quite diverse. The official standard is the Book of Common Prayer, but some parts of that are more clearly doctrinal than others.

The ecumenical creeds, both *Nicene* and *Apostles'*, are used by the Episcopal Church in its worship day-by-day and week-by-week. They are ancient and universal statements of Christian faith. In addition, the Episcopal Church follows ancient tradition and includes the *Athanasian Creed* among its statements of faith.

Another very important ancient statement of faith is the *Chalcedonian formula*, which defined the limits of Christological orthodoxy. The *Thirty-Nine Articles* were important at the Reformation, but are less so today. The *Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral* describes the general ecumenical principles of Anglicans.

The Episcopal Church also has a *Catechism*, which summarizes the faith in question and answer format. It may be found beginning at page 844 of the *Book of Common Prayer*.