

# **A Beginner's Guide to the Episcopal Church**



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**Diocese of Northwestern PA -  
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# Welcome!!

This booklet is aimed at people who've never been inside an Episcopal church, or who are entirely new to Christianity. Perhaps you've walked past a church and wondered what goes on inside, or perhaps you've heard a lot about Christianity from the media and you're wondering if what you've heard is representative of Christianity as a whole. (A lot of it isn't. The extremists at both edges get most of the publicity.)

This booklet isn't meant as a comprehensive guide to Christian belief. It's intended to give you some background information so that - we hope - you'll feel comfortable enough to come along to a church service and begin finding out more about us. In the words of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, don't panic. We welcome visitors and promise you won't be bullied into anything!

## Introduction

The Anglican Communion is one of the most significant Christian denominations worldwide, with about 75 million members.

Much of Anglican/Episcopal worship, like that of other churches, is based on traditions stretching back for centuries. The Anglican Communion welcomes new members, but faces a serious difficulty; to a newcomer, much of what we do in church looks puzzling or entirely incomprehensible.

This section attempts to explain the basics of Episcopal / Anglican Christian belief, and to serve as an introduction to what we do, and why. There<sup>3</sup> are sections on general Christian beliefs, on the Anglican Communion in particular,

and on what actually goes on in a church service. There is a glossary of terms on pages 16 & 17 of this booklet.

Please read on - we hope you might be pleasantly surprised by what you find.

## **What is the Church for? Why not be a Christian in private?**

The Church fulfills three important functions. Worship is one of them. We don't worship God because we have to, or because we're afraid of what God might do to us if we don't. We worship God because we believe that God is a being who fully deserves our respect and love. Worshipping God is simply the most appropriate behaviour for the beings God has created, and a church service is an effective and time-honoured way of carrying out this behaviour.

The second purpose of the Church is teaching. Partly this is something we do to each other; passages from the Bible are read out in church, and sermons comment and enlarge on them and other issues, and relate Christianity to real life. But Christians also have a responsibility to make their own insights about God available to the rest of the world, and an organized Church can attempt to do this in ways that individual Christians cannot.

Our third purpose is fellowship; we are a community of people with a common goal, supporting and strengthening each other as we work towards that goal. An important part of Christian teaching is the need to have compassion for others, and so this, too, is an external as well as an internal activity. The Church provides material support for the needy, and it attempts to promote social justice to the rest of society.

## Who can come to an Episcopal service?

Anyone! You don't need to be an Episcopalian or even a Christian to come along. (Holy Communion, a ceremony which takes place during many of our services, is technically restricted to baptized Christians; see that section below.) Attending a service doesn't commit you to anything. We will (hopefully) try to be friendly, but that's all. You can become a Christian at your own pace.

We don't charge membership fees. (We're always after donations, but how much you contribute is up to you, and entirely private.) There's plenty of ceremony in a typical Episcopal church, but we don't have secret initiation rites or anything else scary or sinister. We don't even have a dress code - people normally dress tidily for church, but you don't have to wear a suit or a big flowery hat.

"Audience" participation in an Episcopal service isn't particularly strenuous. The words of the service are provided, either in the Book of Common Prayer or in a missalette. If you're not familiar with the service, just sit near the back and do what everyone else does. You can stay in your place when people go up to the altar for Communion, if you don't want to take part in this section of the service.

## What do Christians Believe?

There are two important parts to Christian belief. Firstly, Christians believe in a God who is an all-powerful intelligent being, existing independently of the physical Universe, and responsible for its creation. We also believe that God cares deeply about the Universe and all of its inhabitants. This belief is common to many<sup>5</sup> major religions. Jews, Mus-

lims and Christians all worship the same God, in different ways.

Secondly, Christians believe that Jesus of Nazareth (c. 6 BC to AD 27) was a manifestation of God on Earth as a human, and that His teaching as recorded in the Bible is therefore a direct insight into God's wishes for humanity.

## **Lots of people have claimed to be gods. Why do Christians believe Jesus really was?**

There are several good reasons. Firstly, He taught a path of self-denial and caring for others, and followed these teachings Himself, and as a result He was executed by the Romans. This is hardly the behaviour you'd expect from a person claiming to be the Ruler of the Universe - unless He was telling the truth.

Secondly, He was clearly not a construct of people's expectations. The Jewish people of the time had prophecies concerning a Messiah, but they were expecting an Earthly ruler - although with God's authority - who would kick out the Romans and make Israel great again. Jesus was not at all what they had expected. Later theologians found it challenging to separate the Jewish expectations from the Old Testament 'prophecies' which were specifically relevant to the life of Christ. And yet - without once commanding an army or possessing any material wealth - Jesus became the most influential person in history.

Finally, Jesus rose from the dead shortly after His execution, and appeared to hundreds of his followers before (we assume) returning to God. Whether you believe this or not depends on how much weight you give to the hundreds of

eyewitness accounts, and to the simple fact of Jesus' continuing, dramatic influence on history through the people who had known him.

## **So what did Jesus teach?**

Jesus came not to form a new religion, but to reinforce and improve people's existing relationships with God. His main commandments were to worship God, and to care for other people. He said that God has very high standards - but that God understands that we usually can't live up to them, and loves us nonetheless. God is always willing to forgive, and let us make a clean start, as long as we keep trying.

The very presence of Jesus shows that the God who created the universe, and who knows the position and state of every subatomic particle, also cares deeply about individual humans, and wants us to love Him and live fulfilling lives in accordance with good moral principles.

Christians believe that when Jesus became human, He opened the door for us to become more closely connected with God. He revealed to us a God who wants to be in close personal relationship with everyone - including YOU!

## **Where does the Bible come in?**

The Bible is the record of humanity's gradually increasing knowledge of God, culminating in the Gospels - four accounts by different writers of the life of Jesus. It is humanity reflecting on its experience of God. God was/is present in writing and reading of the Bible, by the Holy Spirit. It is a form of God's revelation.

## **Is every word of the Bible true? Do Christians believe that the Earth was created in seven days?**

Some do, but this is not a common view in mainstream churches. Christians believe that the Bible was inspired by God. However, different parts of it were written for different audiences and not all of it is intended as literal history. Christians take the teachings of Jesus, as recorded in the *Gospels*, very seriously indeed.

## **Is Christianity incompatible with science?**

No. It can't be, because science is a self-correcting method of finding truths about the Universe, and we believe that Christianity is one of these truths. As a general principle, science tells us 'what' and 'how' and religion tells us 'why'.

## **What about life after death?**

Christians believe that human consciousness doesn't cease when we die. We don't know what Heaven is actually like; it's probably something well beyond our current capacity for understanding. We believe that we will have a permanent existence in the presence of God, in a form fuller and richer than our current physical one.

## **What is the Trinity?**

The short answer is; we don't know. Christians see God as having three aspects; God the creator, Jesus of Nazareth, and the Holy Spirit, which is the manifestation of God which we believe can still interact directly with human be-

ings. We do not believe that God is a sort of committee; the idea is more that a single God appears in different personae for different purposes. In the past, theologians have attempted to explain and codify the idea of the Trinity, but in fact it's something which we don't fully understand.

## **What about the Anglican Communion?**

The Anglican Communion is an organization with branches in 164 countries and a total of about 75 million members worldwide. The national Churches have a good deal of autonomy, but all recognize the spiritual leadership of the Archbishop of Canterbury (Canterbury in England), and they talk to each other via a body called the Anglican Consultative Council. Also, all Anglican bishops come together at the Lambeth Conference, held every ten years.

There are many differences between individual Anglican churches, but we hold four things in common:

- The Bible as a basis of our faith;
- The Nicene and Apostles' Creeds, basic statements of Christian belief;
- Recognition of the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion, and
- The historic episcopate; that is, the continuity of the line of bishops since the time of Christ.

The formational beliefs of the Anglican Communion can be found in the "articles of religion" (also known as the 39 articles) found in the Book of Common Prayer.

It has been said that the Anglican Communion rests on the four pillars of **Faith, Reason, Experience** and **Tradition**. The unique strength of Anglicanism lies in our balance of these four aspects of our religion.

## **Wasn't the Anglican Church formed by Henry VIII so that he could annul his marriage?**

Ouch. Yes, it was, but leaders in the Church of England took the opportunity to make a number of reforms which the central authorities of the Roman Catholic Church opposed. The timing did coincide with the Protestant Reformation and Anglicans are seen as 'Protestants' denominationally. Something like the Anglican Communion would probably have happened without Henry VIII's political interference, but it might have taken longer. King Henry's main concern was simply independence from Rome.

## **So what else changed?**

At the time, there were a number of doctrinal concerns, such as the exact nature of the Eucharist. The main practical difference between the Anglican/Episcopal and Roman Catholic Churches nowadays is that the Anglicans / Episcopalians, while maintaining a hierarchy of priests and bishops, give much more autonomy to individual churches. This means that, while the basics of our belief are fixed, there are wide differences in our style of worship from parish to parish.

## **Is the Anglican Communion male-dominated?**

It's trying not to be. The Diocese of Dunedin, New Zealand was the first in the world<sup>🌐</sup> to appoint a female Bishop,

and 30% of priests in the Episcopal Church USA and the Anglican Church of Canada are women. The Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church of the USA is the first woman to head a National Church in the Anglican Communion. Most services and modern hymns use inclusive language. Some traditional hymns and forms of service do unfortunately contain male-specific language which can't be removed without damage to their poetic quality. We still often (but not always) refer to God as 'He' and 'Father', because sadly the English language has no suitable neutral terms other than the horribly impersonal 'it'. We are working on improvements in this area.

## What Happens in Church?

The core of most Anglican/Episcopal services is **Holy Communion**, also known as **Eucharist**. This is a ceremony derived from the last supper which Jesus held with his followers on the night before his arrest and execution. Christians believe that this ceremony creates a special sort of contact with God, which helps to strengthen us as Christians.

## What actually happens?

Holy Communion involves the giving out of bread and wine which has been consecrated, or made holy, with special prayers. In some parishes real bread is used; others use special wafers which look like slices of glue-stick. Normally the congregation walk up to the front of the church and kneel at the altar, receiving the bread from the priest in cupped hands. The chalice, the ceremonial goblet containing the wine, is usually taken up by an assistant.

## **Won't I catch horrible diseases from sharing a cup?**

Probably not, as alcohol is a disinfectant and the rim of the chalice is wiped between uses. If you are concerned, you may receive just the bread, which is also perfectly acceptable and is considered complete.

## **Does anything weird happen when you receive Communion?**

Mostly, no. People do have mystical experiences, but they are not a normal part of Communion in most churches. (Some branches of Christianity actively encourage them; the Episcopal Church tends to be suspicious of this sort of thing.) In general, Communion strengthens your relationship with God in the same way as you can get to know people well by spending a lot of time with them over many years.

## **Can anyone take part in this ceremony?**

Although some individual parishes invite all to share in the Eucharist, officially, you have to be baptized in order to receive Communion. It doesn't have to be an Anglican/Episcopal baptism; any branch of the Christian Church will do.

The ceremony of Confirmation (a deliberate reaffirmation of the vows of baptism, made when we're old enough to know what we're doing) still exists in the Anglican Church, but it's no longer necessary to go through this process before you can receive Communion.

## **Will I go to Hell if I don't receive Communion regularly?**

We sincerely hope not! Holy Communion, like most of the Church's activities, is a means to an end rather than an end in itself. However, the Church believes that Communion is a valuable component of our relationship with God.

## **What else happens in a church service?**

Episcopal/Anglican services are extremely varied and flexible. Set forms of words found in the Book of Common Prayer and in *Enriching Our Worship* are often used. However, there is much variation in style between individual parishes, and some parishes use different services on different Sundays.

There are specific words to accompany Communion, and the Lord's Prayer will normally find its way into a service. There will often be a Creed, a formal statement of basic Christian beliefs. Most services include hymns, which may be either traditional or modern. There will be prayers; some of these will be in set words, but we also pray about current issues. Services also include readings from the Bible.

## **And a sermon?**

Quite often. We're fully aware that sermons have a reputation for inducing sleep. This doesn't have to be the case. Some preachers are very good speakers, adept at making Christianity relevant to everyday life.

## **And . . . ?**

Yes, we admit it. There will normally be a collection. We need to meet running costs and pay salaries, and the Episcopal Church is also a major social service organization. No one will pay attention to how much you're dropping in the basket, and

you don't have to make a contribution at all. If you see any value in what we're doing, you'll probably want to help if you can. We collect money because ministry costs money.

We don't believe people give to the church - they give through the church to touch the lives of people in need.

## **Why do priests wear funny clothes?**

Like many of the details of our worship, this is a historical accident. A priest's robes are based roughly on the garments worn by Roman officials in the early days of the Church. We've added Christian symbols to them, but (being Episcopalians) we haven't actually changed anything much. There are also important symbols such as holiness and obedience connected to what is worn.

## **Where do I Go from here?**

Newcomers are always welcome at any Episcopal church. There are no membership fees and you don't have to fill in any forms. Anyone can attend any Episcopal service and see what happens.

## **Where and when?**

St. Stephen's has a notice board outside listing service times and contact numbers. As the times could change, especially for special occasions and summer months, please check those boards, visit our website ([www.ststephens-fairview.org](http://www.ststephens-fairview.org)) or call the church (814-474-5490). Our regular service times are:

8:00 Holy Communion (spoken service)

9:00 Sunday School & Adult Formation

10:00 Holy Communion (traditional service/with music)

## **What if I like what I see?**

There are two ceremonies relevant to becoming a fully functional Episcopalian. The first is **Baptism**, and the second is **Confirmation**.

**Baptism** is a ceremony representative of spiritual cleansing, 'renewing' a person upon entry into the Church. Originally the recipient was fully immersed in water; a modern baptism in the Episcopal Church usually involves a ceremonial sprinkling of water on the head, and special prayers.

Some people are baptized as babies. This is an indication that the parents have decided to bring up their child as a Christian. In this case, people can be **Confirmed** when they are old enough to make their own decision to be part of the Church.

You can take part in most of the activities of the Church without going through either of these procedures, and there are no rules about how soon, or how late, you should make a formal commitment. Talk to your friendly parish priest about it some time.

## **What can the Church do for you?**

The Church can bring you closer to God. We believe this is more important than anything in 'ordinary' physical existence. It can also help teach you to become a better person by living in a more 'God-like' way. The Church answers

the human need for something greater than ourselves in which to believe, and gives our lives a sense of meaning.

The Church also provides community with fellow humans, all working towards a common goal.

## **What can you do for the Church?**

Many Christians become involved in the life of their Church in ways other than simple attendance. Many functions in a church service, such as reading lessons from the Bible, can be undertaken by any member of the congregation. Many churches have choirs and music groups.

Parishes also run groups which operate outside the confines of Sunday services. These include youth groups, studies and courses, and community service organizations.

Christians can also become qualified as ministers. Becoming a priest requires several years of study, and a deep commitment to Christianity. However, all Christians have a part to play, using their own individual talents in their everyday lives to further the work of the Church and bring the world a little closer to the way God wants it to be.

## **Glossary of Terms**

**Baptism:** the ceremony of cleansing used when a person becomes a member of the Christian Church.

**Confirmation:** a conscious reaffirmation of baptismal vows, for those baptized as babies.

**Congregation:** the group of people who attend a church.

**Creed:** a formal statement of Christian belief.

**Diocese:** a regional grouping of parishes under the direction of a bishop.

**Eucharist:** another term for Holy Communion, or the service containing it.

**Gospel:** one of the four accounts of the life of Jesus in the New Testament.

**New Testament:** the part of the Bible dealing specifically with Christianity, and containing the Gospels.

**Old Testament:** the part of the Bible predating Jesus, and containing Jewish religious laws and traditions. Also called the Hebrew scriptures.

**Parish:** an individual church, and the area for which it has responsibility.

**Sacrament:** one of the core ceremonies of the Church, defined as 'outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace'.

**Theology:** Traditionally defined as "Faith seeking understanding" and perhaps best understood as "reflecting upon our experience of God" either as an individual or as a community of seekers.

**Theologian:** a scholar who studies questions of God and religion.

**Trinity:** the combination of the three recognized aspects of God, known as Father, Son (Jesus of Nazareth) and Holy Spirit.

We hope that this booklet was of some help to you in better understanding our Episcopal Church. If you have further questions that have not been answered, please feel free to contact us at the address and phone number listed on the front of the publication.

**Peace Be With You!!**

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