

FAQ: Common Questions



The Episcopal Church



Frequently Asked Questions

You may have heard of the Episcopal Church or driven by a church in your area. But what goes on there? What's it like inside? What makes the Episcopal Church different? How do ordinary people participate in the life of the church? To answer these and other common questions, we created this simple FAQ. To learn more, we invite you to visit one of the Episcopal churches (called "parishes") in your area. (Click here to locate a church.) Just ask to speak to one of our members (called "parishioners") or clergy members. You might be pleasantly surprised by the answers you get!

What is an Episcopalian?

A person who belongs to the Episcopal Church is called an "Episcopalian." The word "Episcopal" means a church governed by bishops. We call our local churches "parishes," which are governed by an elected "vestry" of ordinary people who help lead the church and make important day-to-day decisions. The pastor of an Episcopal church is usually called a "priest." In the Episcopal Church, priests are allowed to marry and women may also serve as priests.

Do you have to be an Episcopalian to go to an Episcopal Church?

No. All people are welcome here, regardless of background. Many of our members come to us from other faith traditions and denominations. You'll find a friendly community of people united by their faith in God and eagerness to serve others.

Will they tell me how to think, how to act or how to vote?

Absolutely not. In the Episcopal Church, we know that every journey toward God is unique and highly personal. You won't be forced to think a certain way or "get in line" with everyone else. In fact, you're welcome to bring your questions, doubts, hopes and dreams with you. There's a good reason why the Episcopal tradition is sometimes called "the thinking person's church." You'll be encouraged to think for yourself and seek guidance from God through prayer, worship, meditation, reading and any other method that works for you. Each one of us is precious to God and we all find God in different ways.

Where did the Episcopal Church come from?

The Episcopal Church is a member of the worldwide Anglican Communion; derived from the Church of England and sharing with it traditions of faith and order as set forth in its Book of Common Prayer. Before the American Revolution, we were known as the Church of England in America. After the Revolution, we became the Episcopal Church – a self-governing faith community affiliated with the worldwide Anglican tradition. The word “Anglican” means in the tradition of the Church of England. Today, more than 80 million people around the world are part of the Anglican faith tradition: every continent except Antarctica has Anglican churches today. For example, if you travel to Australia or Argentina, you’ll find an Anglican churches that worship in the same style as the Episcopal Church in America.

What’s an Episcopal Church service like?

The Episcopal Church worships in the “liturgical style,” which means all Episcopal churches follow a relatively common order of service. Being with a community of believers inspires us, nurtures us, encourages us, and comforts us.

Our Sunday services throughout the year usually include an opening procession, singing, Bible readings, prayers for ourselves and others, time for meditation, a sermon or pastoral message, and Communion (Holy Eucharist) where we share bread and wine in remembrance of Jesus Christ and the Last Supper. All people are welcome to approach the front of the church during the Communion portion of the service, even if you’re not an Episcopalian. Anyone who has been baptized (in any tradition) is invited to share in the bread and wine. Unbaptized persons are welcome to come forward for a special blessing.

We use three central texts during our services:

1. The Bible

2. **The Book of Common Prayer** (contains calendar of Church year, order of Bible readings, orders of services, and some of the most beautiful prayers ever written)

3. The Hymnal

To learn more, we invite you to read the Anglican Book of Common Prayer online ([click here now](#)) or borrow a copy to read from one of our local Episcopal churches ([locate a church now](#)).

What if I don’t know what to do during a service?

Don’t worry. You won’t be embarrassed or singled out. Most Episcopal Churches provide a “service bulletin” during each Sunday service. It guides you through the service and provides basic instructions for participation. Once you’ve been to a few services, it will seem like second nature to you. The Book of Common Prayer can also serve as a guide to our Sunday worship service (sometimes called our “liturgy”), as well as a wide range of other services for everything from baptism to funerals. Many people, even those outside the Anglican tradition, consider the Book of Common prayer to be the most beautiful collection of prayers and meditations in the English language.

What can I expect when I show up for an Episcopal worship service?

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 be 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. On one side at the front of the church, there may be a lectern-pulpit, or stand, for the proclamation of the Word; here the Scriptures are read and the sermon is preached. In many churches, however, the lectern is separate from the pulpit and stands on the opposite side of the church.

The Act of Worship

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 print 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 (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 during readings from the Old Testament or New Testament Letters, the sermon, and the choir anthems. We stand or kneel for prayer 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 (Holy Communion). In some Episcopal churches it is celebrated quite simply, without music, early on Sunday morning. Weekday celebrations also are frequently without music, and without sermon. 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.

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. These change each Sunday. So do the psalms. Certain of the prayers also change, in order to provide variety. Page numbers for parts of the service printed elsewhere in the Book are usually announced or given in the service leaflet. But do not be embarrassed to ask your neighbor for the page number.

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 (Liturgical Clothing)

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 undergown called a cassock (usually black) and a white, gathered overgown 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. At the Holy Eucharist a bishop or priest frequently wears a chasuble (a circular garment that envelops the body) over the alb and stole. Bishops sometimes wear a special head covering called a mitre. Vestment colors change 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.

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 pastor greets the people as they leave.

Is real wine used during the Communion part of the service?

Yes. We use consecrated wine in remembrance of Christ's instructions during the Last Supper.

Why does the Episcopal liturgy typically use wafers instead of bread?

The Last Supper was held during the Jewish holiday of Passover, which commemorates the Hebrews flight from captivity in Egypt. The Bible says that they prepared the Passover meal "in haste," which meant they didn't have time for leavened bread to "rise" before baking it. Instead, they served unleavened bread (bread made without yeast), which is very flat. We believe that this Passover tradition was incorporated during the Last Supper, which is why most Communion services in the Episcopal Church use unleavened bread "wafers" instead of pieces of regular bread. That being said, some churches do use regular bread during the Communion (Eucharist) service. Individual parishes (churches) are free to do so.

Does the Episcopal Church report to the Pope?

No. The head of the worldwide Anglican tradition is the Archbishop of Canterbury in England. He or she serves as the spiritual head of the Anglican Church. Unlike the Pope of the Roman Catholic Church, the Archbishop serves only as a leader and guide, and does not make rules or laws for the Church to follow. The Episcopal Church is the term we use for that branch of the Anglican union located in the United States.

Is the Episcopal Church Protestant or Catholic?

Yes. Both. Neither. All of the above. In the Episcopal Church (Anglican tradition), we embrace aspects of both the Protestant and Catholic traditions, in terms of worship styles, beliefs and actions. Some people refer to the Anglican tradition as a "bridge" between Protestants and Catholics. We are independent of the Catholic hierarchy and we don't report to the Pope or anyone else in Rome. At the same time, we share a liturgical and Apostolic tradition with the Catholic Church. As you'll read below, the Episcopal Church's beliefs are also rooted in many Protestant traditions. This explains why so many people from different faith backgrounds feel comfortable worshipping in the Episcopal Church today.

Are women allowed to serve as priests in the Episcopal Church?

Yes. Women can serve as priests, deacons, bishops and many other positions in the Episcopal Church today.

Are Episcopal priests allowed to marry and have children?

Yes. Absolutely. It's a personal decision on their part.

Does the Episcopal Church allow gay men and lesbians to participate?

Yes. All of God's children are welcome to participate in the Episcopal Church and answer God's call to service in a wide variety of roles and missions. Gay men and lesbians are warmly welcome here, along with everyone else.

What other services are held in the Episcopal Church?

Besides the normal Sunday services, you'll find many other opportunities to worship and meditate at your local Episcopal Church. Examples include daily prayer services, evening prayer, special observances such as feast days, Bible study groups, faith education groups, funerals, baptisms, ordinations and so forth. You can even organize your own special prayer group if you'd like.

What is the Episcopal Church’s position on “hot topics” such as abortion, gay rights and political affiliation?

Episcopalians are very diverse in their beliefs on these topics. The Episcopal Church doesn’t force anyone to vote or think in a certain way. Members are encouraged to pray, meditate, read and discuss these topics – and then, with help from the Holy Spirit, make informed decisions for themselves. Episcopalians can be Democrats, Republicans, Libertarians, Independents or just about any other political affiliation. We do not endorse political candidates or parties. You can be yourself here.

What do Episcopalians believe?

There are three basic sources of Episcopal Church beliefs:

1. **Scripture** (the primary source)

The Old and New Testaments contain the essence of Christian doctrine. They reveal God to humankind, and tell of our response to God in history. The Bible helps us to know God’s will, revealed supremely through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. The Scriptures are the word of God, proclaiming that Jesus – both God and human being – is Christ, the Messiah.

2. **Reason** (gifts of the Holy Spirit)

The Episcopal Church does not control interpretation and practice. Instead, members are encouraged to use reason to explore and comprehend God’s works; to make responsible moral decisions under the guidance of Scripture, the ordained ministry and in response to sincere prayer.

3. **Tradition** (wisdom of generations past).

Tradition helps us to interpret Scripture; lets us share experiences of early Christians and believers of every era; preserves hymns, prayers, etc., that keep our faith alive; strengthens our faith. Through its continuity and consistency, tradition helps preserve essential truths through liturgy.

The Book of Common Prayer tells us that private worship is not always adequate; religion is a fellowship. You relate to the whole church through your parish, your local church community. Being with a community of believers inspires us, nurtures us, encourages us, and comforts us.

What key terms and basic definitions help define our faith?

Interpretation of the faith varies somewhat from parish to parish, but within the framework of these basic guidelines:

1. **The Holy Trinity:** God is three persons or beings in one:

God the Father: infinite, omnipotent, good.

God the Son: the joyous union of both God and human being, whose life and death and resurrection set us free from bondage of sin and death, and reunited us with God our Father in love and forgiveness.

God the Holy Spirit: God’s power of love moving within us and among us in mysterious and unexpected ways.

2. Salvation: This means the end of our separation from God; the beginning of a new life, lived according to God’s will; gained by us because of Christ’s sacrifice, when he took all of our sins upon Himself and paid for them with his life; every Christian should witness to Christ’s sacrifice and express the living truth of this sacrifice to the world (which is called “evangelism”).

3. The Church: The people of God; all baptized people are the members and all play an equally important role in proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ.

One: One Body under one Head, Jesus Christ.

Holy: The Holy Spirit dwells in it and its members.

Catholic: Universal; holding the faith for all time, everywhere, for everybody.

Apostolic: Continuing in the Apostles' teaching and fellowship. (The Apostles were the authoritative New Testament group sent out to preach the gospel and made up especially of Christ's original disciples ["followers"] and Paul.)

4. Worship: A joyous response to God's love; an expression of hope for salvation; a chance to praise God and receive strength and forgiveness; a way to share faith with other believers.

Online Links and Suggested Reading:

Click on one of the links below to learn more about the Episcopal Church, or to explore new dimensions of your faith.

[Episcopal Church USA Website](#)

[Live Online Worship Channel](#)

[The Book of Common Prayer \(Online\)](#)

[The Oxford Study Bible](#)

[Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time \(Book\)](#)

[Reading the Bible Again for the First Time \(Book\)](#)

[Jesus Was An Episcopalian \(And You Can Be One Too!\): A Newcomer's Guide to the Episcopal Church](#)

[Saving Jesus from the Church \(Book\)](#)

[Daily Meditations \(Free Online Service\)](#)