

The Episcopal Church: Introduction to a Particular Way of Being Christian

O God, you manifest in your servants the signs of your presence: Send forth upon us the Spirit of love, that in companionship with one another your abounding grace may increase among us; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

-Book of Common Prayer, p. 125

In many ways, the Episcopal Church can be viewed as the heir to the English Reformation in the United States and several other countries of the Western Hemisphere. Among churches emerging out of the sixteenth-century reformations, the Church of England was distinctive in several respects. Unlike Protestant churches on the continent, the English Reformation resulted in a fundamentally political (rather than doctrinal) separation from Rome and its bishop, the pope. More than most other churches, it retained the sacraments, traditions, and governance of the medieval Church, and it saw itself as both Catholic and Reformed.

Some chose to emphasize one aspect of this heritage over the other, but tensions between different factions in the Church were resolved by royal supremacy. In the so called Elizabethan settlement, it was also agreed that different points of view would co-exist within a single church with agreement about the historic Creeds and a common liturgy, embodied in the Book of Common Prayer. One great apologist for this way of being Christian, John Jewel, argued that the Church of England intended to preserve the faith and practice of the undivided Church. Another, Richard Hooker, argued against the Puritan party that the Church of England would be governed by Scripture, tradition, and reason rather than by Scripture alone.

After the American Revolution of 1776, the Episcopal Church became self-governing, no longer subject to the Crown. With help from the Scottish nonjurors and eventually the Archbishop of Canterbury, bishops were ordained for service in the new world. The Church was also organized with a Constitution that provided for substantial roles for clergy other than bishops and for lay people in the governance of the Church. Every three years, the General Convention meets to set policy for the Church. It is a bicameral legislature, with a house of clerical and lay deputies and a house of bishops. Similarly, each diocese is governed by a diocesan convention, which passes canons (church laws) and resolutions (statements of policy) and elects officers to assist the bishop in the governance of the local church. Unlike some Protestant denominations, in the Episcopal Church, the diocese is the fundamental unit of organization, and the bishop is the chief pastor for all Episcopalians in that diocese. We believe that bishops are successors to the apostles, charged with overseeing the whole Church, coordinating its mission, and preserving the eyewitness testimony to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Our diocese, Southern Ohio, includes 82 congregations and about 25,000 people. At the local level, laypeople also participate in Church governance through the vestry, or governing board, and through the annual parish meeting, which elects vestry members and some of the officers of the congregation.

The Church of England did missionary work throughout the British Empire. Beginning in the nineteenth century, bishops from churches established by the British, some of them in former colonies and others still part of the Empire, began to meet to discuss matters of mutual concern. Today, the churches that meet together in this way comprise the Anglican Communion, the third largest Christian body in the world, with roughly 80 million members. Churches in the Anglican Communion are autonomous, fully self-governing, but they do cooperate in mission and seek to come to a common mind on questions of teaching and practice. In recent years, tensions have arisen in the Anglican Communion over different attitudes toward the role of women in the Church and society, and the attitudes of the Church toward LGBT persons. It remains an open question whether these tensions can be resolved in a postcolonial age.

From our Anglican heritage, the Episcopal Church has received a habit of encouraging conscientious disagreement within a culture of civility and a framework of Common Prayer. We do not always agree about everything, but we come to the Lord's Table together. The Episcopal Church is incredibly diverse. It includes all political parties, all theological persuasions, and just about every point of view. We do take stands on matters of public policy and have a strong tradition of advocacy for social justice, but we also try to provide room for those who disagree.

Our fundamental traditions are a generous orthodoxy, rooted in the Holy Scriptures and the historic, ecumenical creeds, and a Christian humanism that is open to all truth, wherever it may be found. We encourage respectful criticism and a variety of interpretations of the traditions we cherish and love. Our Church has proven remarkably open to such developments as the theory of evolution and historical criticism of the Bible. Still, we try to preserve a faithful witness to Jesus Christ, which is both open to mystery and responsible to the testimony of our brothers and sisters in other times and places.

Our hope is summarized in the words of a prayer we offer together at Daily Evening Prayer, that "in companionship with one another, God's abounding grace may increase among us, through Jesus Christ our Lord."

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