

THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH

The Episcopal Church is a member of a family of churches known as the Anglican Communion. The word, Anglican, is here used to describe those churches that were derived from the Church of England and its expansion overseas, and which share in the common traditions of faith, church order, and worship that is distinctively theirs.

A striking characteristic of the Anglican tradition is its incorporation in a single church life of Christian elements sometimes sharply divided by the words "Catholic" and "Protestant." The Anglican Communion is a fellowship of churches at one and the same time catholic in seeking to do justice to the wholeness of the Christian truth and the proclamation of the apostolic witness; in emphasizing continuity from the earliest church through the Episcopate, or bishops; and, in retaining the historic creeds, that of the Apostles and Nicene Creeds, and the sacraments of the one, undivided, holy church, and evangelical in its commission to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ and in its emphasis on personal faith in Jesus Christ as Savior.

The Episcopal Church is a sacramental Church in that its central rites of worship are sacraments, visible signs and effectual means by which God's grace works in us, and by which our faith in him is strengthened. The two sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Eucharist (Holy Communion) were ordained by Jesus Christ as the chief sacraments of his Church. The Episcopal Church also believe that Marriage, Ordination, Confirmation, Unction (the healing rites and last rites) and Reconciliation of the Penitent (confession) are also sacramental rites.

The Episcopal Church is a believing Church. Its answer to those who object to "ancient old-fashioned creeds and dogmas" is that what a person does and stands for depends upon what and in whom he or she believes. Everyone lives by some creed. The Episcopal Church states her faith in the historic words of the two great creeds of Christendom, the Apostles' and the Nicene.

The Episcopal Church is a Bible Church. The early church recognized the writings we know as the books of the Old and New Testaments as inspired by God, and as being crucial to our knowledge of God in Christ. The Episcopal Church believes that the Holy Scriptures contain all doctrine necessary for salvation, and that nothing that cannot be read in or proved by Scripture shall be required as an article of the faith or as necessary for salvation.

The Episcopal Church is a worshiping Church. The Book of Common Prayer has well been called the Bible in worship. It also contains doctrine which the Church requires to be taught and believed. For Episcopalians, what we pray is what we believe. Our doctrine of faith is contained within the prayers that we say.

The Episcopal Church is a teaching Church. It has cherished customs, a rich history, and a great tradition, all of which stem from the earliest days of Christendom. Great emphasis is placed upon the teaching of these. But over and above customs, traditions and history, there is the great body of Christian belief about which all members of the Church need to be informed. The Church wants all persons to know in whom they believe and to be convinced that Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Christian education, or Christian formation is offered for both children and adults, understanding that the community is responsible for the teaching of the young.

THE CHURCH'S WORSHIP

The most frequently used of the Church's services is the Holy Eucharist, which is the principle act of Christian worship on Sundays. The daily offices of Morning and Evening Prayer are used daily, as well as the offices for noon day prayers and the service of Compline that is said at the end of the day. One of the Great Anglican principles is that the Church's worship is a corporate affair, an activity of the whole fellowship. Thus, great emphasis is place on congregational participation in the services, and the Prayer Book is designed to be used by both clergy and laity.

THE ORDAINED MINISTRY

It is the teaching of the Church that all its members share in Christ's ministry to the world and to one another. Within the Church, however, from the time of the Apostles, there have been three orders of ordained ministers: bishops, priests, and deacons. The chief pastors of the Church are bishops, in Greek, Episcopos, from which our name derives. They are ordained and consecrated to proclaim the Gospel, to be the chief pastor and sacramental minister of a diocese (a geographical area), and to confirm and ordain. They are both a visible symbol of Christian unity in the Church's life and a link with the Church of all the ages. Priests are ordained and consecrated to assist the bishop in the overseeing of the Church. They usually serve as pastors of congregations, teaching and preaching God's word, celebrating the sacraments, and pronouncing absolution and blessing the God's name. Deacons are ordained and consecrated to assist the bishop in the ministry of service, particularly to those in need. They also assist in public worship, proclaiming the Gospel and assisting in the celebration of the sacraments.

CHURCH GOVERNMENT

The Episcopal Church is both constitutional and democratic in its government. The governing body of the Episcopal Church is the General Convention, composed of two Houses: the House of Deputies whose members are laity and clergy elected in equal numbers from their diocese, and House of Bishops. A diocese is a geographical area containing no fewer than six parishes and is under the jurisdiction of a bishop. It is governed by its bishop and a diocesan convention composed of the clergy of the diocese and lay persons elected by the parishes. A parish is a body of lay persons called a vestry, or in the case of a mission, a Bishop's Committee, elected by the congregation to be its legal representatives in all matters concerning its corporate properties and to perform other duties prescribed by Canon Law. A priest who serves a parish is called a Rector; a priest who serves a mission is called a Vicar.