

What We Believe



The Episcopal Church



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.

What is the Episcopal Church?

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. The Anglican Church is made up of all churches that are in communion with the Archbishop of Canterbury. The Archbishop of Canterbury is located in England, and 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.

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.

How do Episcopalians worship?

The Episcopal Church is liturgical, which means it has formal rites and instructions for public worship. We use three central texts in our worship 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. Hymnal

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 is the structure of the Episcopal Church?

Within the Episcopal Church all people are ministers. Some are called into special ministry positions to which they are "ordained." These are deacons, priests, and bishops who are together called "clergy." All others are called "lay people." All participate in the work of the church and all participate in its governance. Their special functions are described in the Catechism.

The service of Holy Baptism ends with the following:

Celebrant: Let us welcome the newly baptized.

Celebrant and People: We receive you into the household of God. Confess the faith of Christ crucified, proclaim his resurrection, and share with us in his eternal priesthood.

These words are a reminder that "the people" are sanctified participants.

"Episcopal" means "governed by bishops." An unbroken line of bishops may be traced back to the early church commissioned by Jesus. Bishops are the spiritual overseers of their dioceses (groups of churches, parishes and missions), which elected them to office. Bishops act as counselors to clergy; ordain (or "invest officially with priestly authority") priests and deacons; consecrate (or "bless, invoke divine care for") other bishops; administer Confirmation (a mature affirmation of one's faith); are final counselors in church matters. Together, bishops share responsibility for the welfare of the church.

Priests are parish leaders. The full scope of their duties covers every pastoral, spiritual and educational activity. Specifically, priests celebrate the Eucharist, baptize, pronounce absolution from sins, and perform many other duties.

Deacons assist priests in parish work, or minister in missions or unorganized parishes. They cannot perform sacramental acts of the priesthood; though not allowed to celebrate the Eucharist, they may minister the consecrated Holy Communion at a service, to the sick, etc.

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 \(Free Online Service\)](#)