

Episcopal Church (United States)

The Episcopal Church, based in the United States with additional dioceses elsewhere, is a member church of the worldwide Anglican Communion. It is a mainline Protestant denomination and is divided into nine provinces.

The church was organized after the American Revolution, when it became separate from the Church of England, whose clergy are required to swear allegiance to the British monarch as Supreme Governor of the Church of England. The Episcopal Church describes itself as "Protestant, yet Catholic" and claims apostolic succession, tracing its bishops back to the apostles via holy orders. The Book of Common Prayer, a collection of rites, blessings, liturgies, and prayers used throughout the Anglican Communion, is central to Episcopal worship. A broad spectrum of theological views is represented within the Episcopal Church, including evangelical, Anglo-Catholic, and broad-church (*Broad church as an expression is now increasingly replaced by references in the Church of England to liberalism*) views.

Historically, the members of the Episcopal Church have played leadership roles in many aspects of American life, including politics, business, science, the arts, and education. About three-quarters of the signers of the Declaration of Independence were affiliated with the Episcopal Church, and over a quarter of all Presidents of the United States have been Episcopalians.

The Episcopal Church maintains ecumenical dialogues with the *United Methodist Church* and the *Moravian Church in America*, and participates in *pan-Anglican dialogues with the Oriental Orthodox Churches*, the *World Alliance of Reformed Churches*, and the *Roman Catholic Church*. In 2006 a relation of interim Eucharistic sharing was inaugurated with the *United Methodist Church*, a step that may ultimately lead to full communion.

Structure

The Episcopal Church is governed according to episcopal polity with its own system of canon law. This means that the church is organized into dioceses led by bishops in consultation with representative bodies. It is a unitary body, in that the power of the General Convention is not limited by the individual dioceses. The church has, however, a highly decentralized structure and characteristics of a confederation. At the local level, there are 6,447 Episcopal congregations, each of which elects a vestry or bishop's committee. Subject to the approval of its diocesan bishop, the vestry of each parish elects a priest, called the rector, who has spiritual jurisdiction in the parish and selects assistant clergy, both deacons and priests. There are 110 dioceses in the United States, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Haiti, Honduras, Puerto Rico, Taiwan, Venezuela and the Virgin Islands.

The highest legislative body of the Episcopal Church is the triennial General Convention, consisting of the House of Deputies and the House of Bishops. All active (whether diocesan, coadjutor, suffragan, or assistant) and retired bishops make up the over 300 members of the House of Bishops. Diocesan conventions elect over 800 representatives (each diocese elects four laity and four clergy) to the House of Deputies. The House of Deputies elects a president and vice-president to preside at meetings. General Convention enacts two types of legislation. The first type is the rules by which the church is governed as contained in the Constitution and Canons; the second type are broad guidelines on church policy called resolutions.

Worship and liturgy

Worship according to the Book of Common Prayer (BCP) is central to the Episcopal Church's identity and its main source of unity. The current edition of the BCP was published in 1979 and is similar to

other Anglican prayer books in use around the world. It contains most of the worship services (or liturgies) used in the Episcopal Church.

The Episcopal Church has a sacramental understanding of worship.

The Episcopal catechism defines a sacrament as "an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace given to us". Episcopalians believe that sacraments are material things that God uses to act in human lives.

The BCP identifies Baptism and the Eucharist as the "two great sacraments of the Gospel".

Confirmation, ordination, holy matrimony, reconciliation of a penitent, and unction are identified as "sacramental rites".

Private confession of sin is available in the Episcopal Church, though it is not as commonly practiced as in the Roman Catholic Church. This is in part due to the general confession provided for in Episcopal services.

The prayer book specifies that the Eucharist or Holy Communion is "the principal act of Christian worship on the Lord's Day".

The service has two parts. The first is centered on Bible readings and preaching. At each service, four scripture passages are read from the Old Testament and the New Testament. The readings are organized in a three-year cycle during which much of the Bible will have been read in church. The second part of the service is centered on the Eucharist. The Episcopal Church teaches the real presence doctrine—that the bread and wine truly become the body and blood of Christ. However, it does not define how this happens, which allows for different views to coexist within the church.

Often a congregation or a particular service will be referred to as *Low Church* or *High Church*. In theory:

High Church, especially the very high Anglo-Catholic movement, is ritually inclined towards the use of incense, formal hymns, and a higher degree of ceremony such as *ad orientem* in relation to the priest and altar. In addition to clergy vesting in albs, stoles, and chasubles, the lay assistants may also be vested in cassock and surplice. The sung Eucharist tends to be emphasized in High Church congregations, with Anglo-Catholic congregations and celebrants using sung services almost exclusively. Marian devotion (*external pious practices directed to the person of Mary, mother of God, by members of certain Christian traditions*), is sometimes seen in the Anglo-Catholic and some High Church parishes.

Low Church is simpler and may incorporate other elements such as informal praise and worship music. "Low" parishes tend towards a more "traditional Protestant" outlook with its emphasis of Biblical revelation over symbolism. A few "low" parishes even subscribe to traditional Evangelical theology (see Evangelical Anglicanism). The spoken Eucharist tends to be emphasized in Low Church congregations. Altar rails may be omitted in this type.

Broad Church indicates a middle ground. These parishes are the most common within The Episcopal Church. However, unlike the Anglican Church in England, most Episcopal "broad church" parishes make use of a liturgy that includes eucharistic vestments, chant, and a high view of the sacraments, even if the liturgy is not as solemn or lacks some of the other accoutrements typical of Anglo-Catholic parishes. Unlike many Roman Catholic churches, the altar rail has usually been retained and communion is usually served kneeling at the altar rail similar to a Tridentine Mass, because the Episcopal Church teaches, through its Book of Common Prayer, a theologically high view of the church and its sacraments, even if not all parishes carry this out liturgically.

The Book of Common Prayer also provides the Daily Offices of Morning and Evening Prayer. The daily offices can be said by lay people at home.

The veneration of saints in the Episcopal Church is a continuation of an ancient tradition from the early church which honors important people of the Christian faith. The usage of the term "*saint*" is similar to Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions. There are explicit references in the 1979 Book of Common Prayer to invoking the aid of the prophets, patriarchs, saints, martyrs and the Virgin Mary as in an optional prayer in the committal at a funeral. In general *Anglicans pray with the saints in their fellowship, not to them*, although their intercessions may be requested.

Belief and practice

At the center of Episcopal belief and practice are the life, teachings and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. The doctrine of the Episcopal Church is found in the canon of scripture as understood in the Apostles' and Nicene creeds and in the sacramental rites, the ordinal and catechism of the Book of Common Prayer.

Some of these teachings include:

- Belief that human beings "are part of God's creation, made in the image of God," and are therefore "free to make choices: to love, to reason, and to live in harmony with creation and with God."
- Belief that sins, defined as "the seeking of our own will instead of the will of God," has corrupted human nature, "thus distorting our relationship with God, with other people, and with all creation," resulting in death.
- Belief that "sin has power over us because we lose our liberty when our relationship with God is distorted," and that redemption is any act of God which "sets us free from the power of sin, evil, and death."
- The doctrines of the Incarnation and Resurrection of Jesus Christ; Jesus Christ is fully human and fully God.
- Jesus provides forgiveness of sin and the way of eternal life for those who believe and are baptized.
- The Trinity: God the Father, God the Son (Jesus Christ), and God the Holy Spirit are one God in three distinct persons, collectively called the Holy Trinity ("three and yet one").
- The Holy Scriptures, commonly called the Bible, consist of the Old Testament and the New Testament and were written by people "under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit." The Apocrypha are additional books that are used in Christian worship, but not for the formation of doctrine.
- The Bible contains "all things necessary to salvation" and nothing can be taught as pertaining to salvation which cannot be proven by scripture.
- Sacraments are "outward and visible signs of God's inward and spiritual grace." The two necessary sacraments are Baptism and Holy Communion (the latter is also called the Eucharist, the Lord's Supper, and the Mass). Infant baptism is practiced and encouraged. Holy Communion is celebrated each Lord's Day (Sunday) and is open to all baptized persons.
- Other sacraments are confirmation, ordination, marriage, confession, and unction. Regarding these other sacraments the Book of Common Prayer states "Although they are means of grace, they are not necessary for all persons the same way that Baptism and the Eucharist are."

- A general belief in an afterlife of Heaven and Hell. Heaven is defined as the resurrection of the faithful to eternal life in the presence of God. Hell is defined as "eternal death" due to a willful rejection of God.
- Emphasis on the contents of the Sermon on the Mount and on living out the Great Commandment to love God and to love one's neighbor fully.
- Belief in an episcopal form of church government and in the offices and ministries of the early church, namely the threefold order of bishops, priests and deacons; both men and women are eligible for ordination to the clergy. Clergy are permitted to marry.
- Apostolic Succession: the belief that the Episcopal and wider Anglican bishops continue the apostolic tradition of the ancient church as spiritual heirs to the Twelve Apostles of Jesus Christ.
- Strong emphasis on prayer with specific reverence for the Lord's Prayer both in its original form and as a model for all prayer; principal kinds of prayer include adoration, praise, thanksgiving, penitence, oblation, intercession, and petition.
- Observance of the ancient Church Year (Advent, Christmas, Easter, Lent, etc.) and the celebration of holy days dedicated to saints.
- Belief that grace is "God's favor toward us, unearned and undeserved," by which God "forgives our sins, enlightens our minds, stirs our hearts, and strengthens our wills," and is continually conferred to Christians through the sacraments, prayer, and worship.

In practice, not all Episcopalians hold all of these beliefs, but ordained clergy are required to "solemnly engage to conform" to this doctrine. The Episcopal Church follows the *via media* or "middle way" between Protestant and Roman Catholic doctrine and practices: that is both Catholic and Reformed. Although many Episcopalians identify with this concept, those whose convictions lean toward either evangelical Anglicanism or Anglo-Catholicism may not.

This balance of scripture, tradition and reason is traced to the work of Richard Hooker, a 16th-century apologist. In Hooker's model, scripture is the primary means of arriving at doctrine and things stated plainly in scripture are accepted as true. Issues that are ambiguous are determined by tradition, which is checked by reason.

Comedian and Episcopalian Robin Williams once described the Episcopal faith as "Catholic Lite – same rituals, half the guilt".

History

"The Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America" and "The Episcopal Church" are both official names specified in the church's constitution. The latter is much more commonly used. Until 1964, "The Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America" was the only official name in use.

The Episcopal Church has its origins in the Church of England in the American colonies, and it stresses continuity with the early universal Western Church and claims to maintain apostolic succession. The first parish was founded in Jamestown, Virginia in 1607, under the charter of the Virginia Company of London. Although no American Anglican bishops existed in the colonial era, the Church of England had an official status in several colonies, which meant that local governments paid tax money to local parishes, and the parishes handled some civic functions.

More than any other denomination, the War of Independence internally divided both clergy and laity of the Church of England in America, and opinions covered a wide spectrum of political views: patriots, conciliators, and loyalists. While many Patriots were suspicious of Loyalism in the church, about three-quarters of the signers of the Declaration of Independence were nominally Anglican laymen, including Thomas Jefferson, William Paca, and George Wythe. Of the approximately three hundred clergy in the Church of England in America between 1776 and 1783, over 80 percent in New England, New York, and New Jersey were loyalists. This is in contrast to the less than 23 percent loyalist clergy in the four southern colonies. Many Churches of England clergy remained loyalists as they took their two ordination oaths very seriously. Anglican clergy were obliged to swear allegiance to the king as well as to pray for the king, the royal family, and the British Parliament. Starting July 4, 1776, Congress and several states passed laws making prayers for the king and British Parliament acts of treason. The patriot clergy in the South were quick to find reasons to transfer their oaths to the American cause and prayed for the success of the Revolution. By 1786, the church had succeeded in translating episcopacy to America and in revising the Book of Common Prayer to reflect American political realities. Later, through the efforts of Bishop Philander Chase (1775–1852) of Ohio, Americans successfully sought material assistance from England for the purpose of training Episcopal clergy. The development of the Protestant Episcopal Church provides an example of how Americans in the early republic maintained important cultural ties with England. In 1789 representative clergy from nine dioceses met in Philadelphia to ratify the church's initial constitution. The Episcopal Church was formally separated from the Church of England in 1789 so that clergy would not be required to accept the supremacy of the British monarch. A revised version of the Book of Common Prayer was written for the new church that same year. The Episcopal Church thus became the first Anglican Province outside the British Isles. On 17 September 1792 Thomas John Claggett was elected the first bishop of Maryland. He was the first bishop of the Episcopal Church ordained and consecrated in America and the fifth Bishop consecrated for the Episcopal Church in the United States.

19th Century

In 1856, the first society for African Americans in the Episcopal Church was founded by James Theodore Holly. Named The Protestant Episcopal Society for Promoting the Extension of The Church Among Colored People. The current Union of Black Episcopalians traces its history to the society. Holly went on to found the Anglican Church in Haiti, where he became the first African-American bishop on November 8, 1874. Episcopal missions chartered by African-Americans in this era were chartered as a Colored Episcopal Mission. All other missions (white) were chartered as an Organized Episcopal Mission. Many historically Black parishes are still in existence to date. Samuel David Ferguson was the first black bishop consecrated by the Episcopal Church, the first to practice in the U.S. and the first black person to sit in the House of Bishops. Bishop Ferguson was consecrated on June 24, 1885.

During the Gilded Age (*era extending roughly from 1870 to 1900. It was a time of rapid economic growth, especially in the Northern and Western United States*), highly prominent laity such as banker J. P. Morgan, industrialist Henry Ford, and art collector Isabella Stewart Gardner played a central role in shaping a distinctive upper class Episcopalian ethos, especially with regard to preserving the arts and history. These philanthropists propelled the Episcopal Church into a quasi-national position of importance while at the same time giving the church a central role in the cultural transformation of the country. It was during this period that the Book of Common Prayer was revised, first in 1892 and later in 1928.

Eras of Change (1958-1990s)

At the 1958 general convention, a coalition of liberal church members succeeded in passing a resolution recognizing "the natural dignity and value of every man, of whatever color or race, as created in the image of God". It called on Episcopalians "to work together, in charity and forbearance, towards the establishment ... of full opportunities in fields such as education, housing, employment and public accommodations". In response, the Episcopal Society for Cultural and Racial Unity (ESCRU) was founded in December 1959 in order to eliminate racial, ethnic, and class barriers within the Episcopal Church. Opposition from southern church leaders prevented the Episcopal Church from taking a strong stand on civil rights prior to 1963. One prominent opponent of the movement was Charles C.J. Carpenter, the Bishop of Alabama. By 1963, many church leaders felt more comfortable speaking out in support of racial equality. That year, Presiding Bishop Arthur Lichtenberger wrote a pastoral letter urging Christians to work "across lines of racial separation, in a common struggle for justice", and the House of Bishops endorsed civil rights legislation.

In 1967 John Hines led the Episcopal Church to implement the General Convention Special Program (GCSP). The program was designed to redirect nine million dollars over a three-year period (a quarter of the church's operating budget at the time) to fund special grants for community organizations and grassroots efforts facilitating black empowerment in America's urban ghettos. The effectiveness of the GCSP was limited due to the reluctance of conservative bishops in southern dioceses, who objected to the awarding of grants to groups perceived as radical. The GCSP drew opposition from the recently formed Foundation for Christian Theology, a conservative organization opposed to "involve the Church in the social, political, and economic activities of our times". The Special General Convention also witnessed protests of the Vietnam War. During this time period, African-American clergy organized the Union of Black Episcopalians to achieve full inclusion of African Americans at all levels of the Episcopal Church.

Women were first admitted as delegates to the church's general convention in 1970. On July 29, 1974, a group of women known as the Philadelphia Eleven were irregularly ordained as priests in the Episcopal Church. On September 7, 1975, four more women (the "Washington Four") were irregularly ordained. In the wake of the controversy over the ordination of the Philadelphia Eleven, the General Convention permitted the ordination of women in 1976 and recognized the ordinations of the 15 forerunners. The first women were canonically ordained to the priesthood in 1977. The first woman to become a bishop, Barbara Harris, was consecrated on February 11, 1989. Women have been ordained as priests in all 110 dioceses of the Episcopal Church in the United States.