

What to expect when you visit an Episcopal church

Visitors and Newcomers are welcome

We extend a cordial welcome to you to worship with us, and offer this document as a brief introduction to the Episcopal Church and its ways.

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

Episcopal church services are congregational. 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.

Receiving Communion

The Gifts of God for the People of God.

In the Episcopal Church, Holy Communion is open to all baptized Christians, including baptized children.

Take them in remembrance that Christ died for you, and feed on him in your hearts by faith, with thanksgiving.

If you wish to receive communion, approach the rail from the center aisle and fill the rail from right to left. Although most people kneel to receive communion, it is also acceptable to stand.

The Body of Christ, the bread of heaven. Amen.

The priest will place the consecrated bread in your open palm. The bread may be consumed at this point, or it may be left for the priest to dip into the wine and place in your mouth. The latter form of reception is called intinction.

The Blood of Christ, the cup of salvation. Amen.

Sharing the common chalice is a powerful symbol of community greatly cherished by Episcopalians for over 400 years.

To receive wine from the cup, assist the chalice bearer by guiding the cup to your lips to sip the wine. Lipstick should be blotted before coming to the altar rail. If you do not wish to receive the cup, you may decline by crossing your arms across your chest.

Baptized children of any age are welcome to receive communion. If your child is receiving the consecrated bread, please make sure he or she consumes it at the altar rail before returning to the pew.

After receiving communion, pause at the rail until the person to your left has received. Then rise and return to your pew by the nearest side aisle.

Almighty and everliving God, we thank you for feeding us . . . We hope that everyone present in the assembled Body of Christ will be fed by the Risen Christ in peace and thanksgiving.

Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us;
Therefore let us keep the feast.

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.

You will find the services of the Episcopal Church beautiful in their ordered dignity, God-centered, and yet mindful of the nature and needs of human beings.

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

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. Deacons wear the stole over one shoulder, priests and bishops over both shoulders.

At the Holy Eucharist a bishop or priest frequently wears a chasuble (a circular garment that envelops the body) over the alb and stole. The deacon's corresponding vestment has sleeves and is called a dalmatic. Bishops sometimes wear a special headcovering called a mitre.

Stoles, chasubles, and dalmatics, as well as altar coverings, are usually made of rich fabrics. Their color changes 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.

You Will Not Be Embarrassed

When you visit an Episcopal church, you will be our respected and welcome guest. You will not be singled out in an embarrassing way, nor asked to stand before the congregation nor to come forward. You will worship God with us.

Should you wish to know more about the Episcopal Church or how one becomes an Episcopalian, the pastor will gladly answer your questions and suggest the way to membership.