



NEW TO CHURCH? A BEGINNER'S GUIDE

Maybe you've never been inside an Episcopal church or are not even sure you could be called a Christian. Perhaps you've walked past our church and wondered what goes on inside, or you've heard about religious people from the media and you're wondering if what you've heard is representative of Christianity as a whole. (A lot of it isn't. The extremists at both edges get most of the publicity, while the Episcopal Church sits somewhere near the middle of the spectrum.)

This is not a comprehensive guide to Christian belief. We hope to give you some background information on Episcopalians so that you'll feel comfortable enough to come along to a service at the Episcopal Church of the Epiphany and begin finding out more about us. We welcome visitors; coming along for a look doesn't commit you to anything.

This is part of the website of epiphanyaz.org, but most of the information here is applicable to all Episcopal churches, and much of it applies to all mainstream Christian churches.

Who can come to a Epiphany church service?

Anyone! You don't need to be an Episcopalian or even a Christian to come along. Attending a service doesn't commit you to anything. We will try to be friendly, but that's all.

We don't charge membership fees. (We're always after donations, but whether and how much you contribute is up to you, and entirely private.) There's plenty of ceremony in our church, but we don't have secret initiation rites or anything else scary or sinister. We don't even have a dress code - people normally dress tidily for church, but you don't have to wear a suit or a big flowery hat.

Audience participation at Epiphany isn't particularly strenuous. The words of the service are provided on a piece of paper we call a "bulletin" which an usher will hand you as you arrive. If you're not familiar with the liturgy, just sit near the back and do what everyone else does. You can stay in your place when people go up to the altar for Communion if you don't want to take part in this section of the service. If you do want to join us for Communion, you are welcome.

Who are Episcopalians?

The Episcopal Church has its roots in the Church of England, which is the mother church of the Anglican Communion. The Episcopal Church is loosely part of this Communion, identified by the fourfold ministry of laypersons, bishops, priests, and deacons, and by a beautiful form of worship found in the Book of Common Prayer. Anglicans and Episcopalians are characterized by a loyalty to Christian tradition, while embracing a wide range of people and views. They hold in tension the authorities of tradition, reason, and the Bible.

The most vocal Christians are often the minorities who hold extreme views, and so the general public view of Christianity is not necessarily accurate. (Most Episcopalians are actually nice, sensible people, and Epiphany is an inclusive, welcoming community.) Please read on - we hope you might be pleasantly surprised by what you find. You are also invited to peruse the website of The Episcopal Church.

What is the Church for? Why not be a Christian in private?

The Church fulfills three important functions. Worship is one of them. We don't worship God because we have to, or because we're afraid of what God might do to us if we don't. We worship God because we believe that God is a being who fully deserves our respect and love. Worshipping God is simply the most appropriate behavior for the beings God has created, and a church service is an effective and time-honored way of carrying out this behavior.

The second purpose of the Church is teaching. Partly this is something we do to each other; passages from the Bible are read out in church, and sermons comment and enlarge on them and other issues, and relate Christianity to real life. But Christians also have a responsibility to make their own insights about God available to the rest of the world, and an organized Church can attempt to do this in ways that individual Christians cannot.

Our third purpose is fellowship; we are an inclusive and welcoming community of people with a common goal, supporting and strengthening each other as we work towards that goal. An important part of Christian teaching is the need to have compassion for others, and so this, too, is an external as well as an internal activity. The Church provides material support for the needy, and it attempts to promote social justice to the rest of society.

What do Christians Believe?

There are two important parts to Christian belief. First, Christians believe in a God who is an all-powerful intelligent being, existing independently of the physical universe and responsible for its creation. We also believe that God cares deeply about the universe and all of its inhabitants. This belief is common to many major religions. Jews, Muslims and Christians all worship the same God, in different ways. Second, most Christians believe that Jesus of Nazareth (c. 6 BC to AD 27) was a manifestation of God on Earth, and that His teaching as recorded in the Bible is therefore a direct insight into God's wishes for humanity.

There are several good reasons we believe this.

First, Jesus taught a path of self-denial and caring for others and followed these teachings himself.

Second, he was clearly not a construct of people's expectations. The Jewish people of the time had prophecies concerning a Messiah, but they were expecting an Earthly ruler - although with God's authority - who would kick out the Romans and make Israel great again. Jesus was not at all what they had expected. Later theologians had great difficulty in finding Old Testament 'prophecies' which actually seemed relevant. And yet - without once commanding an army or any material wealth - Jesus became the most influential person in recorded history.

Finally, Jesus rose from the dead shortly after His execution, and appeared to hundreds of his followers before (we assume) returning to God. Whether you believe this or not depends on how much weight you give to these eyewitness accounts and to the simple fact of Jesus' continuing, dramatic influence on history through the people who had known him.

So what did Jesus teach?

Jesus came not to form a new religion, but to reinforce and improve people's existing relationships with God. His main commandments were to love God and to care for other people. He said that God has very high standards - but that God understands that we usually can't live up to them and loves us nonetheless. God is always willing to forgive and let us make a clean start, as long as we keep trying.

The very presence of Jesus shows that the God who created the universe, and who probably knows the position and state of every subatomic particle, also cares deeply about individual humans, and wants us to love God and live fulfilling lives in accordance with good moral principles.

Christians believe that Jesus opened the door for us to become more closely connected with God.

Where does the Bible come in?

The Bible is the record of humanity's gradually increasing knowledge of God, culminating in the Gospels - four accounts by different writers of the life of Jesus.

Is every word of the Bible true? Do Christians believe that the Earth was created in seven days? Some do, but this is not a common view in mainstream churches. Christians believe that the Bible was inspired by God. However, different parts of it were written for different audiences and not all of it is intended as literal history. Episcopalians take the teachings of Jesus, as recorded in the Gospels, very seriously indeed. We do not take ourselves seriously at all.

Is Christianity incompatible with science?

No. It can't be, because science is a self-correcting method of finding truths about the universe, and we believe that Christianity is one of these truths. As a general principle, science tells us 'what' and 'how' and religion tells us 'why'.

What about life after death?

Christians believe that human consciousness doesn't cease when we die. We don't know what life after death is actually like; it's probably something well beyond our current capacity for understanding. We believe we have a permanent existence in the presence of God, in a form fuller and richer than our current experience would indicate.

What is the Trinity?

The short answer is, we don't know. Many Christians see God as having three aspects, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (that aspect which is still interacting directly with human beings). We do not believe that God is a sort of committee; the idea is more that a single God appears in different forms for different purposes. In the past, theologians have attempted to explain and codify the idea of the Trinity, but in fact it's something which remains a Mystery.

What Happens in Church?

The core of an Episcopal service is Holy Communion, also known as Eucharist. This is a ceremony derived from the supper which Jesus held with his followers on the night before his arrest and execution. Christians believe that this ceremony creates a special sort of contact with God, which helps to strengthen us as Christians.

What actually happens?

Holy Communion involves the giving out of bread and wine which has been consecrated, or made holy, with special prayers. Normally the members of the congregation walk up to the front of the church and kneel or stand before the altar, receiving the bread from the priest in cupped hands. The chalice, the ceremonial goblet containing the wine, is dispensed by a chalice bearer. Blessed non-alcoholic wine (grape juice) and gluten-free bread are available upon request.

Won't I catch horrible diseases from sharing a cup?

Probably not, as alcohol is a disinfectant and the rim of the chalice is wiped between uses. If you are concerned, you can hang on to the bread or wafer and dip this into the wine instead of drinking directly from the chalice. If you would rather not receive the actual bread and/or wine, cross your hands over your chest and you will receive a blessing instead.

Does anything weird happen when you receive Communion?

Mostly, no. People do have mystical experiences, but they are not a normal part of Communion in most churches. (Some branches of Christianity actively encourage them; the Episcopal Church tends to be suspicious of this sort of thing.) In general, Communion strengthens your relationship with God in the same way as you can get to know people well by spending a lot of time with them over many years.

Can anyone take part in this ceremony?

Officially, you have to be baptized in order to receive Communion. At Epiphany we welcome everyone, without exception, to Christ's table.

The ceremony of Confirmation (a deliberate reaffirmation of the vows of baptism, made when we're old enough to know what we're doing) still exists in the Episcopal Church, but it's no longer necessary to go through this process before you can receive Communion.

Will I go to Hell if I don't receive Communion regularly?

Certainly not! Holy Communion, like most of the Church's activities, is a means to an end rather than an end in itself. However, the Episcopal Church believes that Communion is a valuable component of our relationship with God.

What else happens in a church service?

Episcopal services are extremely varied and flexible. At Epiphany we use words which are available in the Book of Common Prayer as well as other approved sources.

There are specific words to accompany Communion, and the Lord's Prayer will always find its way into Epiphany's service. There will be a Creed said in unison, a formal statement of basic Christian beliefs. (If you choose not to say it, that's okay.) Our 10:30 am service includes hymns, which may be either traditional or modern. There will be prayers; some of these will be in set words, but we also pray about current issues. Services also include readings from the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. At our 10:30 am service on Sunday (except during the summer), you will hear beautiful motets and anthems sung by our choir during the offertory (collection) and communion.

And a sermon?

Yes. We're fully aware that sermons have a reputation for inducing sleep. This doesn't have to be the case. Some preachers are very good speakers, adept at making Christianity relevant to everyday life. We try to keep our sermons to under 15 minutes in length.

And . . . ?

Yes, we admit it. There will normally be a collection. We need to meet running costs and pay salaries, and the Episcopal Church is also a major social service organization. No one will pay attention to how much you're dropping in the basket, and you don't have to make a contribution at all. If you see any value in what we're doing, you'll probably want to help if you can.

Why do priests wear funny clothes?

Like many of the details of our worship, this is a historical accident. A priest's robes are based roughly on the garments worn by Roman officials in the early days of the Church.

We've added Christian symbols to them, but (being Anglicans by tradition) we haven't actually changed anything much.

Where do I Go from Here?

Newcomers are always welcome at any Episcopal church, and most especially at Epiphany. There are no membership fees and you don't have to fill in any forms. However, it would really be helpful if you would complete the yellow Newcomer card in the pew rack, so that we can greet you and put you on our mailing list.

Where and when?

You will see our service times at the center of our Home Page, and they can also be found under the Worship tab on our menu. If you are traveling, a Google search will turn up Episcopal churches in your area. Most churches have a notice board outside listing service times and contact numbers.

What if I like what I see?

There are two ceremonies relevant to becoming a fully functional Episcopalian. The first is Baptism, and the second is Confirmation.

Baptism is a ceremony representative of spiritual cleansing, 'renewing' a person upon entry into the Church. Originally the recipient was fully immersed in water; a modern baptism in the Episcopal Church involves a ceremonial sprinkling of water on the head, and special prayers.

Some people are baptized as babies. This is an indication that the parents have decided to bring up their child as a Christian. In this case, people can be Confirmed when they are old enough to make their own decision to be part of the Church.

You can take part in the activities of the Church without going through either of these procedures, and there are no rules about how soon, or how late, you should make a formal commitment. Talk to your parish priest about it some time.

What can the Church do for you?

The Church can bring you closer to God. We believe this is more important than anything in 'ordinary' physical existence. It can also help teach you to become a better person by living in a more 'God-like' way. The Church answers our human need for something greater than ourselves in which to believe and gives our lives a sense of meaning. The Church also provides community with fellow humans, all working towards a common goal.

What can you do for the Church?

Many Christians become involved in the life of their Church in ways other than simple attendance. Many functions in a church service, such as reading lessons from the Bible, can be undertaken by any member of the congregation. Our church also has a choir, an altar guild, ushers, chalice bearers, and acolytes - all of whom will train anyone who is interested in helping.

Epiphany also offers groups which operate outside the confines of Saturday/Sunday services. These include youth groups, studies and courses, and community service organizations.

Individuals can also become qualified as deacons and priests. Becoming a deacon or priest requires several years of study and a deep commitment to Christianity. However, all Christians have a part to play, using their own individual talents in their everyday lives to further the work of the Church and bring the world a little closer to the way God wants it to be.