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**Online Resources and Suggestions for Further Reading:**

The Episcopal Church Website

Ecumenical and Interreligious Webpage

The Book of Common Prayer (Online)

The Lectionary Page

Christopher L. Webber, *Welcome to the Episcopal Church: An Introduction to Its History, Faith, and Worship* (Morehouse, 1999)

Leonel L. Mitchell, *Praying Shapes Believing: A Theological Commentary on the Book of Common Prayer* (Winston Press, 1985)

Lucinda Mosher, *Toward Our Mutual Flourishing: the Episcopal Church, Interreligious Relations, and Theologies of Religious Manyness* (Peter Lang 2012)

*Episcopal Questions, Episcopal Answers* (Morehouse, 2014)

# YOUR NEIGHBOR:

## *The Episcopal Church*

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The Episcopal Church is a Christian denomination in the Anglican tradition—valuing scripture, tradition, and reason. A member of the Episcopal Church is called an *Episcopalian*.

## We Episcopalians call our local congregations parishes.

Within a parish, you will find lay people and clergy (women and men ordained for special ministry). Most parishes are served by priests; some are also served by a deacon. Lay people also play significant roles in parish ministry—which includes worship, caring for church members, and community engagement.

**Parishes are grouped together regionally as a diocese** (group of parishes and missions). Episcopal means “having to do with bishops” (overseers). Each diocese is headed by a bishop—whom it has elected to be its spiritual overseer and to work alongside other bishops for the welfare of the church. Episcopalians believe there to be a line of succession from the very first Christian ambassadors and overseers directly to their bishops today.

**Governance of the Episcopal Church as a whole rests with its General Convention, which meets every three years.** Other bodies conduct necessary business during interim years. The Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church—the pastoral head of the denomination—is elected by General Convention for a nine-year term.

**The Episcopal Church is a member of the worldwide Anglican Communion**—a global fellowship of 39 national or regional Churches all connected to the Archbishop of Canterbury, who serves not as a pope like in the Roman Catholic Church, but rather as first among equals and chief representative of the Communion. The member Churches are both autonomous in their governance and interdependent in their relationships with one another.

## Episcopalians worship according to The Book of Common Prayer

—which contains texts for daily and Sunday worship, plus other rites such as baptism, confirmation, marriage, ordinations, ministry to the sick and the dying, funerals. The Eucharist is the principal form of Sunday worship, and may be conducted daily. It includes the Liturgy of the Word (reading of Scripture, preaching, hymn-singing) and the celebration of Holy Communion (the ritual of sharing of bread and wine that for us becomes the Real Presence of Jesus).

**Episcopal core beliefs are derived from three sources—Scripture, Tradition, and Reason—in conversation with each other.** By Scripture, Episcopalians mean the Bible—a collection of ancient books that are holy because God inspired their human authors and because God still speaks through these books. By Tradition, Episcopalians mean wisdom of generations past: the historic Creeds (particularly the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed); our form of worship; and the sense of direct connection to the apostles who first proclaimed the Resurrection of Christ Jesus. By Reason, Episcopalians mean the gifts of the Holy Spirit that enable each member to explore and comprehend God’s works and to make responsible moral decisions under the guidance of Scripture, the church’s leaders, and in response to sincere prayer.

**To understand what Episcopalians believe, pay heed to Episcopal worship.** Anglicans—and that includes Episcopalians—like to say that “praying shapes believing.” For Episcopalians, worship is 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 learn and share faith with others.

The Episcopal Church’s worship is **liturgical**—which means we have formal rites and instructions for public worship, we follow a special calendar that divides the year into seasons related to the Christian story, and the Scripture readings during worship come from a lectionary (lists of lessons appointed for daily, weekly, and holy-day use).

**Episcopalians understand God as Triune**—known to us in three personas, yet absolutely One. Episcopalians often pray to God the Father, through God the Son, in the power of God the Holy Spirit. We may also use other language to express this mystery of God’s absolute Oneness-Yet-Threeness—such as “Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer” or “the Lover, the Beloved, and the Love They Share.”

**Episcopalians are radically incarnational:** in our creeds, formal prayers, and hymns, we celebrate that, through Jesus of Nazareth, God assumed humanity. (That is, in Jesus of Nazareth is one who is uniquely and simultaneously fully human and fully divine.) We believe that Jesus’ birth, ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection is a radical act of salvific love for all humanity.

**Episcopalians are taught that the Holy Spirit is the manifestation of God’s power of love moving within and among human beings (Christian or not) in mysterious and unexpected ways.** Our response to that love is to love others and the world God has created.

**For Episcopalians (as for most Christians), the Church is the people of God.** The sign of membership is Baptism—a ritual during which water is poured over the candidate (or, during which the candidate is immersed) and is marked as Christ’s own forever. While Episcopalians believed that everyone baptized in the name of Triune God are members of the Body of Christ, one becomes a member of The Episcopal Church by being confirmed or received by a bishop.

Since the mid-20th century, the Episcopal Church has been intentional in furthering positive interreligious relations. The Episcopal Church has contributed to Anglican Communion documents and theological statements on interfaith understanding—the main ones being:

- Christ and People of Other Faiths (1988)
- Jews, Christians and Muslims: The Way of Dialogue (1988)
- Generous Love: the truth of the Gospel and the call to dialogue—an Anglican theology of inter faith relations (2008)
- An open letter from Archbishop Rowan Williams entitled “A Common Word for the Common Good: To the Muslim Religious Leaders and Scholars who have signed A Common Word Between Us and You and to Muslim brothers and sisters everywhere” (2008).

As a founding member of the National Council of Churches of Christ, USA, the Episcopal Church played a major role in crafting and promulgating that organization’s Policy Statement: Interfaith Relations and the Churches (1999). The Episcopal Church is a member of the World Council of Churches and actively engaged in Religions for Peace.

In 2009, the Episcopal Church officially approved a Theological Statement on Interreligious Relations (now sometimes called Toward Our Mutual Flourishing). This document is now the official Episcopal Church theological rationale for openness toward and collaboration with neighbors of other faiths.