

Episcopalians: Who Are We?

Who on earth are we? Catholics in disguise? Protestants who like pomp and ceremony? The Establishment in England? "Those crazy Episcopalians," as some have referred to us?

Anglicans, as well as Episcopalians, are an international fellowship of self-governing churches scattered over 164 countries. There are about 70 million of us, most of whom are black. At my former parish, the Anglican/Episcopal Church of Christ the King in Frankfurt, Germany, you will meet people from other churches of our "Anglican Communion." There are English folk from the Church of England, Nigerian Anglicans, Australian Anglicans and American Episcopalians, to name just a few. The word Episcopalian just means "with bishops" or *episkopoi*, as opposed to Presbyterian for example, which means having *presbyteroi* or elders, another form of church government.

And for the record, Episcopalian is a noun. Episcopal is the adjective. So, once confirmed or received, you become an Episcopalian. On the other hand, this is an Episcopal church and I am an Episcopal priest.

Many of the members of that congregation in Germany do not come from an Anglican background at all. Many of us here at St. Bartholomew's also come from other denominations. Nowadays, Christians of most denominations or branches of the church tend to worship wherever they feel welcome, are encouraged and taught the faith and like the hymns. Probably that's fair enough; it is more important to encounter Jesus Christ within a living spiritual community than to be bound by denominational loyalties.

But there are some things to cherish about being an Anglican:

1. **You don't need to leave your brain at the church door.** Our Anglican Communion sets great store by three principles: scripture, tradition, and reason. That means that the Bible can only be properly understood when we bring understanding, research, and scholarship to its pages. Read with an open, questioning mind, it yields its treasures. Likewise, tradition needs reason. A custom is not necessarily good because it is old! However hallowed and venerable our traditions (like only ordaining men or denying divorced people remarriage in church, for example), they are not set in stone. The freedom of generations of enquiring hearts and minds and the development of knowledge cannot be thwarted. Thus we are saved from "the-Bible-says" fundamentalism and from a slavish adherence to "the way it has always been done." Fanaticism is somehow un-Anglican, but moral and intellectual courage are not. At our best (Desmond Tutu, for example), we can still get up and declare forthrightly, "Thus says the Lord!"

2. **You don't need to be all brains, either.** Our worship is quite a rich experience of colors and sounds and tastes, and sometimes even smells. Our bodies are involved, standing, sitting, kneeling, walking to the front, greeting others, singing and reciting. Symbols are everywhere in church, symbols to look at, symbols to touch, symbols to *do*. And liturgy is like a kind of formal dance. There are patterns in our communion service, a clear structure, and it is reassuringly much the same from week to week like a familiar dance. The year itself has a pattern, too, waiting in Advent on the birth of the Redeemer, his coming at Christmas. Then his baptism and temptation, his suffering, dying and rising, and his Ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit. Year by year from Advent to Pentecost we pattern our worship on the events in the life of Jesus, who gives shape and identity and meaning to our lives.
3. **You can be as weird as you like.** Of all churches, the Anglican Church is among the gentlest and most tolerant. Indeed it prides itself on not having hard edges, closing issues or excluding people. Its members are accorded great freedom to explore belief and the limits to which the tradition can be pushed, and some of them do. There is a characteristic humility in this, which is often mistaken for weakness. Anglicanism is loath to pin down its doctrines, define its God or intrude into the personal consciences and practices of its people. God is far too great to talk about except provisionally, people are more or less inconsistent and inevitably sinful, and many moral issues are too complex for sweeping judgments. "Just come along to church," says the typical Anglican when asked to explain exactly what he or she believes, "and you'll see from our worship what we're like."
4. **You can be as ordinary as you like.** My first experience of the Episcopal Church came in my early twenties, when I was a university student. I learned to sing the Psalms using Anglican chant. I listened to the traditional, beautiful words of the liturgy said reverently by the people, sometimes kneeling. The sermons did not bash me over the head with a list of do's and don'ts, but made me think about my relationship with God all over again. The people were sincere in asking questions and voicing their doubts and at a time when I had plenty of both, that was enough for me.

As the author of "A Is for Anglican," on which this writing is based, put it: "I was not the first and will certainly not be the last to discover in this un-emphatic, spacious tradition a God of loving kindness and a healer of wounds."

The Rev. Allan Sandlin adapted this piece for publication on the St. Bartholomew's website. It is based on "A Is for Anglican," written by the Rev. John Turner, pastor of St. George's Church, Berlin, 1994-96. Sandlin is interim rector at St. Bartholomew's, Atlanta, 2016-present.