

Coming to St. Peter's  
from the  
Roman Catholic Church



St. Peter's Church is part of the Episcopal Church, in turn connected to the worldwide Anglican Communion. Many of us, however, did not start out as Episcopalians, and some of us would not define our faith with a denominational label. St. Peter's welcomes people from many faith backgrounds, as well as those without any prior church connection. The roominess of Anglicanism offers a particular welcome to folks from a variety of backgrounds. This booklet is designed to help those coming from the Roman Catholic Church to better understand the Episcopal or Anglican tradition.

### **A word about history**

In the sixteenth century, the western Christian world split into pieces—what is called the Reformation. The Protestant churches of today trace their traditions back to this split: Lutherans, Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Reformed, Baptist. In England the Reformation was less complete and doctrinal than on the European continent. King Henry VIII and his government wanted political independence from the Pope, but they were largely content with the spiritual traditions of the Catholic Church. Hence Anglicanism (the name comes from the Church of England) was born—a sort of *via media* or middle way between more radical Protestantism and Roman Catholicism.

Over the centuries many other traditions, Protestant and Catholic, influenced the Church of England and its children, including the American Episcopal Church. What has emerged today is Protestant in its respect for individual conscience and reason, the democracy of its structure at all levels, and its relative lack of centralized authority. It is Catholic in its preservation of the apostolic succession of bishops, priests and deacons (who are ordained by bishops tracing their ordination back to the ancient Church) and its liturgical worship, centered on the Holy Eucharist. (Officially, the Roman Church does not recognize Anglican Holy Orders. Unofficially, many Catholics believe this position needs to be reexamined by their Church. Anglicans and Catholics have been actively engaged in dialogue over disputed issues for many years, reaching agreement on most issues except the role of papal authority.)

### **What do Episcopalians believe?**

Unlike most Protestant churches, the Episcopal Church does not rest on specific articles of faith. We look to the traditional and universal Creeds of Christianity, allowing people to interpret these according to their

informed consciences. Some people at St. Peter's would have liberal interpretations of creedal doctrines, others conservative. Anglicanism recognizes three sources of authority: Scripture (the Bible), tradition (Church teaching through the ages), and reason (modern insights from such sources as science and experience). The Episcopal Church has no magisterium or central doctrinal authority like the Roman Church. Our bishops issue statements on doctrine, moral questions and public issues, but these are typically advisory rather than definitive and binding.

### **How is the Episcopal Church organized?**

At the “ground level” are congregations like St. Peter's, known as parishes (self-supporting) or missions (receiving aid from the diocese). Members of the congregation elect a lay Vestry or a “Bishop's Committee”, which runs the congregation's affairs. Included in the Vestry are two Wardens, who are the senior lay officials, a treasurer and a clerk (secretary). Congregations are all included in dioceses; in our case, the Diocese of New Hampshire, which has about 50 congregations throughout the state. Delegates elected from each congregation in turn elect the people who run the Diocese, including the Bishop and the Standing Committee (a body of six lay people and clergy). All this is fairly “Protestant.”

On the other hand, the Bishop has considerable authority over congregations, particularly when in times of conflict. He must approve the calling of a priest and other basic decisions in the life of a congregation. At least once every two years, the Bishop comes to visit each congregation; he is in close touch with clergy and lay leaders between visits and available for advice or help. Bishops have important teaching authority as well.

The hundred dioceses in the Episcopal Church in turn elect delegates to the national General Convention, held every three years, which serves as the legislative body for the Church. The bishops of the dioceses meet twice a year to deal with questions of national importance. At their head is the Presiding Bishop, who works with a staff based in New York City. There are also international bodies that meet regularly to deal with affairs touching all the Anglican churches, known as the Anglican Communion. The Archbishop of Canterbury, in England, is the symbolic and spiritual head of the Communion, but he has no direct legal authority over any of the member churches. His role is not like that of the Pope in the Roman Church.

### **Why do we worship as we do?**

Roman Catholics will feel quite at home on Sunday mornings at St. Peter's. Our worship services or liturgies, like those of other Episcopal congregations, trace back to the ancient forms of worship that grew out of the first centuries of Christianity. The principal liturgy on Sundays is the Holy Eucharist (called the Mass by Catholics). The forms we follow are centuries old and very similar to those of other "liturgical" churches, including the Roman, Orthodox and Lutheran. Like the Roman Church, we follow a liturgical year divided into seasons, each with its own color of vestments and theme: Advent (leading up to Christmas), Christmas, Epiphany, Lent (leading up to Easter), Easter and the Day of Pentecost, and the weeks after Pentecost devoted to the teaching and ministry of Jesus and our formation as his disciples.

At the Reformation, the Church of England translated Catholic texts into English, believing that all Christians should have access to these and to the Bible. Since that day, Anglican liturgies have been anchored in a Book of Common Prayer. Today we have in addition many supplemental worship resources. We would be glad to give any member a copy of the Book of Common Prayer to browse through and keep at home. It is a rich and beautiful source of prayer, ancient and modern at the same time.

### **What determines how we act during worship, such as standing or kneeling?**

The short answer is that *you* do—based on what feels right for you. Roman Catholics will be familiar with Episcopal practices in worship, except that we do not ask everyone to follow a particular practice. The worship booklets specify normative postures, such as standing for prayer, but you will notice a variety of practices among members of the congregation. There is no single right or wrong; do what helps you be reverent. Similarly practices such as crossing oneself, bowing or genuflecting, and how you receive Communion Bread and Wine are up to you. If you want to try crossing yourself, which may encourage "body participation" in the service, do it when the Presider does it or when he/she makes the sign of the cross over the congregation. (The sign of the cross is made by touching the fingers of the right hand to the forehead, the heart, the left shoulder, the right shoulder, and then back to the chest.) Bowing is a sign of respect to the Cross or Altar. Genuflecting (bending the right knee) is a sign of respect to the consecrated Sacrament on the Altar or in a Tabernacle. Episcopal

Churches often have a Tabernacle, more commonly called an Ambry, where the reserved Sacrament is kept. (St. Peter's does not have an Ambry.) At Communion the Bread is usually received in the hand; it may be dipped in the Cup, or you may drink directly from the Cup. (You may also receive only the Bread.)

### **How do Episcopalians interpret the Bible?**

Again, one would find a wide range of views about the Bible in the Anglican Communion. In general, however, Anglicans, like Roman Catholics, interpret the Bible as an inspired collection of texts, to be taken as a whole, read in context and with appreciation of their historical setting. We read the ancient texts with an eye to what they meant in the time they were written, and then try to apply their meaning to our situation in the world today. We believe the Bible must be interpreted in light of tradition and reason. We encourage dialogue and reflection, believing that Truth emerges in a community over time. The Episcopal Church uses a lectionary or table of readings that covers important parts of the Bible over a three-year cycle. Sermons are based on these readings, applying them to daily life and contemporary issues.

### **How do I become a member of St. Peter's?**

The Anglican Communion fully recognizes Roman Catholic baptisms, confirmations and ordinations. Any baptized person whose name is recorded on the parish rolls (which in practice means having the Rector fill out a membership form) is a member of the congregation. Many people do not go any further than this, but others choose to be formally confirmed or received by the Bishop. Speak to the Rector about what this entails.

While we at St. Peter's understand the Prayer Book injunction that any baptized person is welcome to share in Communion, we decided to have an "open altar." Anyone who yearns to be transformed and fed by God is welcome to receive the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ at the Lord's table. (Note that officially the Roman Church does not allow members to receive Communion in other Churches.) Because Communion is a solemn act, we expect those who receive to be penitent and reverent. In the Episcopal Church, it has become our custom to include infants in Communion from Baptism onward, helping them to grow into a fuller understanding of the mysteries of the faith as they grow to physical maturity.

The Episcopal Church does not offer first Communion, as we follow the ancient Church practice where Christians are eligible to receive the Sacrament once they are baptized – even if they are infants. Many parents choose to wait until their children are old enough to hold onto the bread themselves before they will receive; some parents wish for their children to be confirmed before receiving Communion. This is up to the individual.

### **What other differences and similarities are there between Anglicans and Roman Catholics?**

The most obvious differences are that Episcopalians allow married and women clergy, our congregations tend to be smaller and more intimate, we remarry divorced persons with the consent of the Bishop but without an annulment procedure, and we allow greater latitude for individual conscience. While the Virgin Mary is recognized as first among the saints, her role in Anglican piety is less prevalent than in the Roman Church. Like Roman Catholics, we have monks and nuns, the rite of Penitence or Confession for those who wish it, and we believe in the Real Presence of Christ in the Holy Eucharist.

### **Are Episcopalians Protestants or Catholics, Evangelicals or Pentecostals?**

The Anglican Church includes a wide breadth of Christianity within its fold. Some members would therefore identify themselves with one of these labels, others with another. In general Episcopalians try to resist labeling themselves, particularly when to do so would be to claim to be “better” than someone else. As a Communion, we seek to grow toward the fullness of Christ and to recognize the validity of many ways of seeking this goal.

### **A Glossary of Terms**

**Acolyte** – those who assist at the service, at St. Peter’s usually young people, vested in blue cassocks and white cottas.

**Alb** – the white under vestment worn by ministers at the Eucharist, symbolizing the purity of baptism.

**Altar** – the Holy Table at which the Eucharist is celebrated.

**Altar Guild** – a group of volunteers who prepare the vessels and vestments for services.

**Bishop** – a person ordained to have oversight for a Diocese; in the Episcopal Church, as in the Roman Catholic Church, ordinations are for life.

**Book of Common Prayer** – the red book with the cross on the cover. It holds all of the common worship services, or liturgies, of the Episcopal Church, along with the Catechism, Psalter, and historical documents. The Prayer Book is considered to be the foundation of Anglican/Episcopal identity, since our common bonds come not from a confession of faith (as in other Protestant churches), but in the act of worship. The BCP has its origins in the original Prayer Book first published in England in 1549; over the centuries and decades it has been revised several times.

**Chasuble** – the cape-like vestment worn by the Presider at the Eucharist.

**Chalice** – the cup containing eucharistic wine (based on ancient tradition and Scripture, the Episcopal Church requires the use of wine, not grape juice, for Communion).

**Diocese** – a subdivision of the national Episcopal Church, in our case comprising the state of New Hampshire.

**Eucharist** – (Greek for thanksgiving), the ritual liturgy celebrated on Sundays from the very beginning of the Church.

**Font** – the baptismal Font that stands by the entrance to the worship space.

**Intercessor** – the person who leads the Prayers of the People.

**Lay Eucharistic Ministers (LEMs)** – lay persons licensed by the Bishop to assist in administering Communion.

**Lectern (or Ambo)** – the Bible stand from which lessons are read.

**Lector** – the person who reads a lesson (gospel readings must be read by an ordained person).

**Presider** – the priest or bishop who presides at the Eucharist.

**Stole** – the scarf worn by an ordained person, symbolizing the authority of the Church.

**Vestry** – the elected body responsible for the temporal affairs of the congregation.

**Vicar** – the priest in charge of a mission or aided congregation.

**Warden** – the two senior elected lay officers of the congregation.

*Originally written for Church of the Holy Cross, Weare by The Rev. John McCausland, and adapted for St. Peter’s use with his kind permission.*

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