

Worship in the Episcopal Church: What to Expect

Episcopalians worship in many styles, ranging from formal, ancient, and multi-sensory rites with lots of singing, music, fancy clothes (called vestments), to informal services with contemporary music. Yet all worship in the Episcopal Church is based in *The Book of Common Prayer* (BCP), which makes worship familiar, no matter where you go.

Worship in the Episcopal Church is “liturgical,” literally meaning “work of the people”, where all people are involved in worship as we find the presence of God in the gathered community.

What to Expect When You Visit St. Christopher’s Episcopal Church

Going to an Episcopal Church, or any church for the first time, may feel strange and even intimidating, so we want you to relax as we invite you to participate as you choose.

Here is a guide what you can expect when you come to worship with us.

We recommend arriving a few minutes before the service so you can get yourself settled. We also use silence before worship to center ourselves in prayer to connect with the Holy Spirit.

There are ushers to welcome and provide you with an order of worship. In the pew rack in front of you you’ll notice two books: *The Book of Common Prayer* (or Prayer Book) containing the services of the Episcopal Church. You will also find *The Hymnal 1982* which contains music for worship. A new Song and Praise Book will be introduced very soon.

For your convenience, the worship service is printed. However, sometimes we ask that you use your Prayer Book to follow along. In the order of worship, these pages are marked “BCP”. The same goes for hymns. Please use the Hymnal, or if we use supplemental music that is not in this hymnal, you’ll find it printed in order of worship.

The Procession

In most Episcopal churches there is a procession of acolytes, choir members and priests down the aisle as worship begins. You’ll notice that people bow when the cross passes them. This is an acknowledgement that Christ is with us during worship as well as after worship as we go out into the world.

Once the processional hymn is finished, the priest and the congregation say the Opening Acclamation, a statement of praise to God said together. Then there is a short piece of music called the Gloria or Song of Praise. (Music like this is called Service Music and is designated with an “S-“preceding the page number. These can be found in the front of the hymnal.)

1. The Liturgy of the Word

The remainder of the service is divided into two parts: the *Liturgy of the Word* and the *Liturgy of the Table*. The Liturgy of the Word contains readings from the Bible, the sermon, statements of our faith (The Nicene Creed), and Prayers of the People. All of the biblical readings used in an Episcopal service are part of a “lectionary” which assigns readings for every Sunday on a three year

cycle. Other Protestant denominations and the Roman Catholic Church also follow the same set of readings. Members of the congregation usually read the first two readings and the Psalm.

You'll notice that the reading of the Gospel (meaning "Good News") gets special attention. This is because the four Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, contain the stories of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and are central to our faith. Normally a song between the New Testament reading and the Gospel is sung as the Gospel book is brought into the middle of the assembly and read by an ordained person. Everyone stands for this reading and turns and faces the person reading the Gospel account. Following the Gospel is the sermon. The sermon is meant to apply what we have just heard to the varied experiences of our lives.

After the sermon, we stand and reaffirm the faith that has been handed down to us from centuries past stated in the Nicene Creed. This ancient statement of faith, used by most Christian churches, binds us together with Christians all over the world. After the Creed a member of the church comes forward to read the Prayers of the People. These are petitions that include prayers for the Church, the world, the nation, those who are sick, and those who have died. The priest concludes these prayers with a 'collect.' A Collect is a prayer that 'collects' all of our thoughts and prayers together and is prayed by the priest on behalf of all present.

After the Prayers of the People we say the Confession. The Confession is an opportunity to confess together the ways we have not loved God or others. At St. Christopher's, we kneel for the confession as a sign of penitence. At the conclusion of the confession, the priest stands and says the Absolution, pronouncing God's forgiveness.

The priest then bids "The Peace." This can be an awkward moment for people who are new or visiting. Ritually, what we are doing is enacting our need to be in right relationship with one another before we go to communion. We do this by saying "Peace be with you" and greeting the people around us. Sometimes at St. Christopher's the Peace can be a little more exuberant so you may see people actually leaving their seats to exchange the Peace with people in the rows around them. This is fine, but remaining in your pew is acceptable as well.

2. The Liturgy of the Table

This portion of the service has as its focus the celebration of the Eucharist or Holy Communion. It includes the collection of the offerings of our life and labor to the Lord with a spirit of gratitude. We then prepare the Altar for Communion, pray the Eucharistic, and then share the meal of the bread and wine together as the Body of Christ. At this time, the priest (or bishop, if present) is known as the Presider, as she or he Presides at the Altar.

The Offertory

During this portion of the Liturgy of the Table, you'll see a priest receive the gifts of the earth (bread and wine), from members of the congregation who bring them forward. Then the priest (or Deacon is present) sets the table for communion while the Ushers pass offering plates to collect our gifts and offerings (hence, 'Offertory'). A piece of music is sung or played during the Offertory. It is fine for you to put whatever amount of money in the plate or to put in nothing at all (many members give

automatically through their bank, rather than bring their offering to church).

The Eucharistic Prayer

At the Eucharist, the Presider prays an extended prayer on behalf of God's people. It starts with a dialogue between the priest and people called the Sursum Corda (Latin meaning "Lift up your hearts"). The Celebrant then praises God for God's action in our lives. This selection concludes with the Sanctus (Latin for "Holy"), "Holy, holy, holy", is a response normally sung by all the people. The prayer continues with a retelling of the story of the Last Supper and the Celebrant asking the Holy Spirit to come into the bread and wine and into us. The people stand at the beginning of the Eucharistic Prayer. After the Sanctus the people continue standing or kneeling.

At the end of the Eucharistic Prayer everyone prays the Lord's Prayer. Then the Presider breaks a piece of the bread, symbolizing Christ's sacrifice on the cross for us. After this symbolic breaking, some more practical preparations are made which might include pouring additional chalices of wine, breaking the bread into pieces for distribution, etc. Words, called the Fraction Anthem, are either spoken or sung at this point that reflect the actions taking place. Once the bread and wine are ready the Presider invites people to the meal by saying, "The Gifts of God, for the People of God."

Receiving Communion

People generally come forward and stand or kneel at the altar rail to receive communion. Youth acolytes will tell you when it is time for your row to go up to the altar. This is a good time to watch what others are doing and follow their example. The tradition in the Episcopal Church is that all baptized people may receive communion. If it is not your wish to receive communion, you can remain in your seat, or you can come forward and cross your arms over your chest. The priest will offer you a blessing instead of communion.

If you would like to receive, hold out your hands palms crossed and the priest will place the bread in your hand. Another minister will then offer the cup of wine (and it is wine!). There are a few choices here. You can eat the bread when it is put in your hand and then take a sip of wine from the cup. It is helpful for you to touch the cup and help guide it to your lips. If you don't want to drink from the cup you can dip the bread in the wine instead. It is also fine to receive only the bread or only the wine; either is considered a full receiving of communion. Once you have received, simply return to your seat. Often music is sung during or near the end of communion.

When everyone has received communion and have returned to their seats, the Eucharist ends with the prayer after communion, said together. The priest then pronounces God's blessing upon everyone. A final hymn is sung by everyone as the acolytes, ministers and priests, process back down the aisle and out of the church. At the very end the people are dismissed by a deacon or a priest and sent out into the world empowered to do God's work. This is called the Dismissal. The worship service has concluded and we hope to see you again very soon!