

Church Terminology

The long history of the Church has led to the accumulation of many terms that one seldom if ever otherwise hears. Some members of the church delight in using these words, but they really do not mean to confound you by doing so: many of them simply have no satisfactory substitute. The good news is that once you've learned a few of them, you can join in the fun as well! The following list should answer all but the most obscure questions, but if you really want to get into the most impenetrable corners with an exhaustive glossary, we recommend that you visit the [Episcopal Church web site](#).

Acolyte

A person, usually but not always, a youth in a simple white vestment, who lights the altar candles and assists the priest in the service.

Altar

A table, usually of wood or stone, on which the Eucharist is consecrated.

Altar Guild

A group that takes care of the maintenance and preparation of a church's altar and its furnishings.

Anglican

A member of one of the churches descended from the Church of England. The

Episcopal Church is one of these (see also Anglican Communion). As an adjective, Anglican describes traditions or teachings associated with those churches.

Anglican Communion

The 38 provinces around the world, plus extra-provincial churches, that are in communion with the See of Canterbury. Member churches are independent but share a common heritage concerning Anglican identity and a commitment to scripture, tradition, and reason as sources of authority.

Anglican Consultative Council

The most comprehensive gathering of the Anglican Communion. The purpose of the council is to provide consultation and guidance on policy issues, such as world mission and ecumenism, for the Anglican Communion. The president of the council is the Archbishop of Canterbury.

Anglo-Catholics

Episcopalians who identify with Roman Catholic teaching and liturgical practice and hold a high view of the authority of clergy and tradition. Anglo-Catholics are sometimes called “high church” because of their emphasis on the divine nature of the church as the mystical body of Christ.

Apostolic Succession

The doctrine that the authority and the mission given by Jesus to the Apostles have descended in a direct and unbroken line of bishops to the bishops of today.

Archbishop of Canterbury

The primate of the Church of England; the honorary spiritual head of the entire Anglican Communion.

Archdeacon

A clergy person appointed by the bishop to provide administrative assistance and other leadership to congregations and church organizations in the diocese.

Assessment, Diocesan

The amount that each congregation pays to the diocese to fund the diocese's annual budget.

Assisting Clergy (Curate, Assistant, Associate)

Parish priests selected by the rector, who serve under the authority and direction of the rector.

Baptism (Holy)

Holy Baptism is full initiation by water and the Holy Spirit into Christ's Body the Church. The bond which God establishes in Baptism is indissoluble. In the Episcopal Church, anyone who has been baptized may take Communion.

Bishop

Chief pastor of a diocese and guardian of the faith of the Church.

Bishop, Assistant

A bishop appointed by the diocesan bishop to assist the diocesan and to serve under the diocesan's direction.

Bishop, Assisting

A bishop appointed by the diocesan bishop to provide short-term assistance with episcopal duties in the diocese.

Bishop, Coadjutor

A bishop elected to succeed the diocesan bishop.

Bishop, Diocesan

The primary bishop of the diocese, as described under Bishop above. Sometimes referred to as the "Diocesan"; less often as the "Ordinary" (see Canon to the Ordinary). In the Episcopal Church and some other Anglican Churches the diocesan bishop is elected by the Diocesan Council. In other Anglican Provinces, bishops are either appointed from outside, or are chosen by existing bishops.

Bishop, Suffragan

A bishop elected by the Diocesan Convention to assist the diocesan bishop and to serve under the Diocesan's direction. Unlike a Bishop Coadjutor, a Bishop Suffragan has no automatic right of succession to the diocesan bishop.

Book of Common Prayer

The collection of prayers, readings, psalms, devotions, and services that together

make up the official liturgy of the Episcopal Church. Nearly all services in any Episcopal Church are printed in this book. In a church in which there is a wide range of interpretation of doctrine and of liturgical style, the Book of Common Prayer provides a unifying glue that places it at the heart of who we are both as Episcopalians and as part of the wider Anglican Communion. The first English Book of Common Prayer was published in 1549; the classic version, which remained in use in England with minimal changes until well into the 20th century, was completed in 1662.. The Episcopal Church revised its version of the Book of Common Prayer in 1928, and then essentially rewrote it, amid considerable controversy, in 1979. Some services from the 1928 prayer book have been retained in the current prayer book as “Rite I” services. Although each province of the Anglican Communion now has its own Book of Common Prayer, the similarities between them are far greater than their differences.

Candidate

The next step beyond postulancy for a person who has been recommended by the Bishop and accepted by the Standing Committee as a Candidate for Holy Orders.

Canon

1. An ecclesiastical rule or law adopted by General Convention or by Diocesan Convention.
2. A member of the clergy, or less often a lay person, on the staff of a cathedral or of a bishop

Canon to the Ordinary

A canon who is specific to the Bishop's office; a staff officer who performs tasks as assigned by the Ordinary, or Diocesan Bishop.

Canonical Residence

The connection with a diocese that a member of the clergy acquires by ordination in and for that diocese or by transfer to the diocese and acceptance by its bishop.

Canterbury

Refers to the see of Canterbury, England and to the Archbishop of Canterbury (see above).

Catechism

A commentary on the creeds, printed in the Book of Common Prayer and intended for use by parish priests, deacons, and lay catechists as an outline for instruction. Not meant to be a complete statement of belief and practice, but a point of departure for the teacher. The Catechism also provides a brief summary of the Church's teaching for an inquiring stranger.

Cathedral

The church that contains the bishop's throne (cathedra) – the seat of the bishop.

Catholic

Literally, "universal" or "found everywhere." Usually a reference to the Roman Catholic Church, although the term also includes Anglican, Syrian, Greek, Coptic,

Russian and other churches. The Episcopal Church is a catholic church with a small “c.” Catholic churches generally accept the teachings of tradition as well as scripture, and usually accept the validity of one or more ancient creeds as the summary of the Christian faith.

Celebrant

The bishop or presbyter (priest) who presides at the Eucharist.

Chalice

The stemmed cup or other vessel used to hold the Communion wine.

Chancel

The part of a church that is around the altar and between the altar and the nave.

Chapel

A house of worship, often small in size, owned by a diocese or by a parish, and removed from the main church. Also, a room or recess in a church for meditation, prayer, and small religious services.

Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral

A four-point articulation of Anglican identity, that also describes the Anglican Communion’s ecumenical principles. The four points are:

1. The Holy Scriptures, as containing all things necessary to salvation;
2. The Creeds (specifically, the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds), as the sufficient statement of Christian faith;

3. The Sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion;
4. The historic episcopate, locally adapted.

Chrism

Consecrated oil used in the administration of Baptism, confirmation, ordination, etc.

Church

This word may designate a building or a place of Christian worship, the membership of a particular denomination, or all Christians considered together.

Church of England

The church that resulted from the split of the English Church from Rome in the 16th Century; also known as the Anglican Church. The formal head of the Church of England is the reigning monarch; its spiritual head is the Archbishop of Canterbury. All other member churches of the Anglican Communion trace their origins to the Church of England. (see also Book of Common Prayer)

Clergy

All individuals in Holy Orders.

Cleric

Any member of the clergy (see above).

Clericus

A local gathering of clergy.

Close

The grounds of a cathedral.

Collect

A short form of prayer in three parts- an address to God, a petition (special request), and a conclusion- and associated with specific occasions and liturgical seasons.

Colors, Liturgical

By tradition, various colors are used for the vestments and altar hangings for the different seasons and feasts of the Church Year. In western use the tradition is:

- Red – on Pentecost, Feasts of Martyrs, and during Holy Week.
- White – on Feasts of our Lord, Feasts of Saints who were not martyrs, Feasts of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and in some places at the Burial of the Dead.
- Green – on the Sundays and Ordinary days of the Year after Epiphany and Pentecost.
- Blue -in some places used during Advent.
- Purple or Violet – for penitential occasions, during Lent, at Requiems or the Burial of the Dead, and Advent.
- Black – in some places for the Burial of the Dead and Requiems.
- Lenten Array – in some places used during Lent in place of purple (see Lenten Array).

Communion, Holy

See Eucharist

Communicant

Anyone, baptized or confirmed, who has communicated (i.e., received Communion) at least three times during the preceding year.

Confirmation

The opportunity for those baptized at an early age to make a mature public affirmation of their faith, to commit to the responsibilities of their Baptism, and to receive the laying on of hands by the bishop. The Book of Common Prayer states: “Those baptized at an early age are expected, when they are ready and have been duly prepared, to make a mature public affirmation of their faith and commitment to the responsibilities of the Baptism and to receive the laying on of hands by the Bishop.” (BCP p. 412)

Congregation

A parish or a mission. A parish is headed by a rector; a mission differs from a parish: it is normally headed by a vicar or priest-in-charge who is appointed by the Bishop, and has an advisory board called the bishop’s committee instead of a vestry.

Consecration of a Bishop

The liturgy in which a priest becomes a bishop.

Council, Diocesan

The decision making body of the Diocese. Normally meeting once a year in November, its voting members comprise clergy who are canonically resident and ministering within the Diocese, together with between one and five lay delegates from

each congregation, depending on the number of each congregation's communicants-in-good-standing.

Creeds

Ancient and universal statements of Christian faith. Those ordained for use in the Book of Common Prayer are the Apostles Creed (spoken by the congregation in Morning and Evening Prayer) and the Nicene Creed (spoken by the congregation in the Holy Eucharist). Many Anglican churches also include the Athanasian Creed among their statements of faith.

Crossing

In church architecture, the main intersection of aisles at the front of the church; if viewed from above, these aisles form a large cross. Sometimes the altar is located at the crossing. In a service, crossing refers to a hand gesture of making a cross pattern on one's body; also a gesture made by a priest or bishop over a congregation or upon a person at death or baptism.

Curate

A deacon or other person not fully ordained who receives a fee for working in a small parish; the parish a curate works with is his "cure;" often a curate is the newest assistant to a senior minister at a large parish. Curates generally work under the supervision of a senior minister and do not have full responsibility for their parish.

Cure

The spiritual charge of a parish, or the parish itself, formerly called the Cure of Souls.

Deacon, Vocational

A cleric ordained to the Sacred Order of Deacons or Diaconate, one of the three Holy Orders. Deacons are called to fulfill a vocation, as well as a ministry, in the world under the direction of the bishop. While in the world, a deacon interprets the needs of the world, and then communicates such needs to the bishop and the greater church at large. In turn, a deacon ministers to the world as directed by the bishop. Liturgically, a deacon reads the Gospel, sets the table, leads the Prayers of the People and dismisses the congregation.

Deacon, Transitional

A postulant to the priesthood who is ordained to the Sacred Order of Deacons as part of the process of progressing to ordination as a priest.

Deacon of the Mass or Eucharist

Either a deacon or priest performing the liturgical function of deacon at a Eucharist.

Dean

The rector of the cathedral, the leader of a seminary, or a designated leader of a group of clergy, such as a clericus.

Diaconate

See Deacon, Vocational

Dismissal

The words said or sung by the deacon (or celebrant) at the conclusion of the Eucharist

(see BCP, 339 or 366). The response to the dismissal is “Thanks be to God” (during the Fifty Days of Easter, “Thanks be to God, alleluia, alleluia.”).

Diocese

A territorial unit of administration, consisting of a number of individual parishes, under the pastoral oversight of a bishop.

Episcopal

An adjective meaning “of or pertaining to bishops.” From the Greek word “episcopos” (overseer). The “Episcopate” is the office of a bishop, the period of time during which he or she holds the office, or bishops as a group.

Episcopal Church

The Episcopal Church (TEC), of which the Diocese of New York is part, is the Anglican province in the United States. It has more than one hundred dioceses, and is divided into nine geographical provinces. See also its website.

Episcopalian

A noun referring to members of the Episcopal Church or to Christians who believe in an episcopal form of church government.

Epistle

The lesson at the Eucharist preceding the Gospel taken from one of the Letters of the New Testament, the Acts of the Apostles, or the Book of Revelation; also any reading from the Bible other than the Gospels or Psalms.

Eucharist

The central act of Christian worship and commemoration of the central events of Christian faith – also known as The Lord’s Supper, Communion, The Great Thanksgiving, and the Mass – in which bread and wine are consecrated by the celebrant and distributed to the people as the body and blood of Christ.

Evangelicals

Episcopalians who identify with the teachings of Protestantism and the reformed tradition, emphasizing Scripture and the importance of individual conscience. Evangelicals are sometimes called “low church” because they believe Christ allows great freedom in organizing the church and its liturgical practices. Within Anglicanism, the term does not have the same meaning it has within American Protestantism, where the term usually refers to Christians who emphasize salvation and conversion.

Evensong

Sung Evening Prayer (BCP, 6]ff. or 1]5ff.); an evening worship service; evening prayer; and evening prayer service featuring a choir.

General Convention

The national triennial meeting of the Episcopal Church; dioceses send “deputies” or official representatives to General Convention.

Gospel

The final lesson in The Word of God taken from one of the four Gospels in the New

Testament. It is normally read by a deacon or priest, and as a sign of reverence, the people and assisting ministers stand when the Gospel is proclaimed (see BCP, 326 or 357).

High Church

A designation of a church emphasizing theological or liturgical formality; a church with several vested assistants and many fine utensils used in the service; a church that sings or chants its service rather than reading or speaking it; a church that celebrates the Eucharist every Sunday [though most Episcopal Churches do this now]. Such churches sometimes appear to be more “catholic”. See also Low Church.

Holy Orders

The sacrament of ordination, which marks the entry of the candidate into the ordained ministry. The orders of bishops, priests and deacons are termed Holy Orders.

Holy Spirit, The

The third person of the Holy Trinity, also called the Holy Ghost. Jesus promised his followers, the Apostles, that he would send the Holy Spirit after his Crucifixion and Resurrection. The Spirit came to the disciples of Jesus on Pentecost.

Host

The consecrated bread in the Eucharist. Literally, a “sacrificial victim.”

House of Bishops

All the bishops of the Episcopal Church sitting as a legislative and judiciary body of the church.

House of Deputies

The lay and presbyter delegates to a general convention sitting as a legislative body.

Intercession

To ask for something on someone's behalf. The Calendar of Intercession is a daily reminder to intercede with the Almighty on behalf of the person or entity on the list and to remember their needs in prayer.

Interim Pastor

A priest trained for interim ministry to serve either full-time or part-time while a search for a new rector is being conducted.

Intinction

A manner of receiving the Eucharist, in which the Eucharistic bread is dipped into the wine and so administered.

Laity

The baptized people or members of a church, as distinct from the clergy.

Lambeth Conference

A meeting of the bishops of the Anglican Communion once every 10 years at the

invitation of the Archbishop of Canterbury, and originally held at his palace at Lambeth in London. Now held at the University of Kent. Though it is one of the Communion's four "instruments of unity," it has no binding authority over any province of the Communion.

Lay Minister

A person who is not ordained, but who works closely with a church or religious program. Some lay ministers are unpaid volunteers; some are paid staff members of a church.

Lay Reader

Any non-ordained person who participates in reading part of a church service.

Laying on of Hands

That part of the ordination service in which hands are laid on the head of the ordinand to manifest the giving of the Holy Spirit and empowerment for ministry.

Lectionary

The appointed lessons and psalms for use at the Eucharist and Daily Offices.

Available online [here](#).

Lent

The period of fasting, sobriety and meditation following Ash Wednesday; in the past Lent was widely associated with denial.

Lesson

Also the Epistle; any reading from the Bible except the Gospels or Psalms; usually read on the opposite side of the church from where the Gospel is read; in older practice the Lesson was read from the “Epistle Side”—the right side facing the altar, while the Gospel was read from the “Gospel Side”—the left side facing the altar. Current practice in many Episcopal churches does not conform to this older pattern; also the first reading from scripture at the Eucharist; also, the scripture readings at the Daily Offices or at other liturgies.

Liturgical Colors

See Colors, Liturgical

Liturgy

The prescribed set of forms, and other activities associated with formal worship service

Low Church

A church that is less formal; a church that does not chant or sing its service; a church that alternates Morning Prayer with Eucharist; such churches sometimes appear to be more “protestant.”

Mass

The Roman Catholic name for the Christian sacramental meal but sometimes used by Anglo-Catholics to refer to Holy Communion or Eucharist; The celebration of the Holy Eucharist.

Minister

All members of the Church are ministers: Lay people, bishops, priests and deacons.

Ministry

The Christian vocation to serve.

Mission

Proclaiming and witnessing to the Kingdom of God.

Mission, Organized

A local church that is not a parish. See Congregation.

Narthex

A vestibule leading into the nave of a church.

Nave

The central part of a church from the narthex to the chancel, flanked by aisles. The congregation sits in the nave during worship services.

Offertory

In the Eucharist, the worshippers' offering of bread, wine, and alms at the altar.

Ordination to the Diaconate/Priesthood

The liturgy in which a person is made a deacon or a priest.

Ordinary

An ancient and now bemusing term used to refer to the diocesan bishop. Survives most often in the wonderful job title Canon to the Ordinary.

Parish

A local congregation that is in union with the diocese.

Parson

Now rare in Episcopal usage. Any priest or minister; often a reference to low-church or non- Episcopal clergy. Sometimes a term of affection for an older clergyman especially of rural background.

Pastor

A full-time or part-time priest elected by the vestry with the bishop's approval. A pastor has the full authority of a rector, except tenure. A pastor is in a contractual relationship with the vestry and the bishop. This contract cannot be broken without the consent of two out of the three parties. A pastor is eligible to become rector, pending the bishop's assessment of the congregation's ability to support and sustain a tenured priest.

Peace, The

Also known as Passing the Peace; a ritual in the Episcopal Church in which members of the congregation, including the clergy, greet one another. The priest says, "The Peace of the Lord be always with you." The congregation responds, "And also with

you.” Immediately after these words people shake hands or speak or sometimes embrace in the church.

Postulant

A person admitted by the bishop into the formal preparation for the ordained ministry.

Preaching Station

A local chapel or church that is not organized as a mission. Its assets are held by the Board of Managers, it is usually unable to have an internal organizational structure (Advisory Board), and it often does not gather for worship every Sunday.

Presbyter

See “Priest.” The term “priest” is a contraction of the term “presbyter.”

Priest

A presbyter. A cleric in one of the three orders of ordained ministry. The ministry of a priest is to represent Christ and his Church, particularly as pastor to the people; to share with the bishop the overseeing of the Church; to proclaim the Gospel; to administer the sacraments; and to bless and declare pardon in the name of God.

Priest-in-Charge

A priest retained full-time or part-time with a contract, by annual appointment of the bishop, who is responsible for liturgy, pastoral care, and administrative tasks as negotiated with the vestry. A Priest-in-Charge is not normally eligible to become the rector unless specified in his or her contract, and serves in a parish that is not actively

engaged in a search process. The precise role of the Priest-in-Charge is determined by the contract.

Presiding Bishop

The elected episcopal head of the Episcopal Church; the chief administrator and spiritual head of the Episcopal Church. The Episcopal Church does not refer to its head bishop as an archbishop.

Primate

The bishop with pastoral and administrative responsibility and authority for a group of dioceses that constitute a Church. A primate is sometimes called a metropolitan. The Presiding Bishop in the case of the Episcopal Church, and the Archbishop of Canterbury in the case of the Church of England and the Anglican Communion.

Proper

The part of the Eucharist and daily services that changes according to the festival or ecclesiastical season. The proper includes the collect, Scripture readings, and prefaces of the Communion service.

Province

An organizational and geographical unit of the Episcopal Church consisting of several dioceses. The Diocese of New York is part of Province II which also includes the Convocation of American Churches in Europe.

Reason

One of the three equal cornerstones of the Anglican Faith, the others being Scripture and Tradition. Anglicans hold that in questions of faith no one of these three holds all of the answers all of the time. The inclusion of Reason here is a distinctly Anglican feature.

Rector

The priest in charge of a parish. Typically, a rector is the priest in charge of a self-supporting parish, and a vicar is the priest in charge of a supported mission. The rector is the ecclesiastical authority of the parish. The term is derived from the Latin for “rule.” The rector has authority and responsibility for worship and the spiritual jurisdiction of the parish, subject to the rubrics of the Book of Common Prayer, the constitution and canons of the church, and the pastoral direction of the bishop. The rector is responsible for selection of all assistant clergy, and they serve at the discretion of the rector. The church and parish buildings and furnishings are under the rector’s control. The rector or a member of the vestry designated by the rector presides at all vestry meetings.

Rectory

The residence provided for the rector.

Rite I

A portion of the Book of Common Prayer which contains worship services using the older, traditional language of the 1928 edition of the prayerbook.

Rite II

A portion of the Book of Common Prayer containing worship services which use more modern language.

Sanctuary

The part of a church around the altar.

Scripture

The Bible – one of the three equal cornerstones of the Anglican faith, the others being Tradition and Reason. Anglicans hold that in questions of faith no one of these three holds all of the answers all of the time.

See

The authority, jurisdiction, position, or official seat of a bishop.

Seminary

A school or college for the training of ministers.

Standing Committee

A committee of clergy and laity elected by the Diocesan Convention to be a council of advice to the bishop, and to carry out canonically defined duties regarding transfers of property, approval of candidates for the ordained ministry, election of bishops, and other matters of diocesan concern.

Subdeacon

Traditionally a secondary order of deacons who assisted diocesan deacons in their duties and carried out certain functions at the altar, including reading the epistle of the day. Today the subdeacon is usually a lay person, often a licensed lay reader and chalice bearer, who reads the epistle and may lead the intercessory prayers in the absence of a deacon. The normal liturgical vestments of a subdeacon are an alb and tunicle.

Supply Clergy

A priest employed on a per diem basis to officiate at liturgies and to provide limited, specified pastoral care. A priest who serves as supply clergy during an interim period is not eligible to become the rector.

Synod

A council of church officials, lay and ordained. Some dioceses and provinces in the Anglican Communion have periodic Synods rather than Conventions.

Tradition

One of the three equal cornerstones of the Anglican Faith, the others being Scripture and Reason. Anglicans hold that in questions of faith no one of these three holds all of the answers all of the time.

Transept

The two wings of a cruciform church.

Trinity, The

A fundamental symbol of the Christian faith and a very important doctrine in catholic Christianity; refers to the oneness and essential unity of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Vestments

The distinctive clothing worn by leaders of liturgy especially priests and deacons.

Vestry

The rector, wardens and vestry members of a parish. The wardens and vestry are the official representatives of the parish in the absence of a rector. The wardens have special roles and need the firm support of their vestry colleagues.

Vicar

A priest, serving full-time or part-time, with charge and responsibility for a mission or aided parish, appointed by the bishop for a period of one year, renewable. A vicar is eligible to become rector when the mission becomes a parish, or when the parish becomes financially independent of the diocese for basic expenses. Under the bishop, a vicar has the same responsibilities as a rector, but does not have tenure.

Warden or Churchwarden

Parish by-laws provide for the election of two wardens. Both wardens are members of the vestry. The wardens are generally ranked “senior” and “junior.” The mode of selection and duties of the wardens are determined by state law, diocesan canon, or parish by-laws. The senior warden is usually the primary elected lay leader of the

congregation. The senior warden typically presides at vestry meetings in the absence of the rector, and the junior warden presides at vestry meetings if both the rector and the senior warden are absent. In case of clerical vacancy, the senior warden may be the ecclesiastical authority of the parish for certain purposes. In some parishes, the senior warden is known as the ‘priest’s warden’ and the junior warden is known as the “people’s warden.” Historically in the Church of England, one warden was named by the priest and the other chosen by the congregation.