



Customs & Practices

*in
The Episcopal Church*



Entering any church for the first time can be daunting. It seems like everyone knows when to stand, sit, kneel, gesture, and bow.

This pamphlet offers insight into worship in The Episcopal Church. This includes general features of worship, along with common customs and practices—the reasons for them and tips about when you might encounter them in a service. But don't worry: there is no right or wrong way of worshiping as long as it is done in reverence to God and out of respect for other worshipers. What's important is that you've taken a step toward deepening your relationship with God in a community of faith.

As you might imagine, worship can be different in various settings. And, in the contemporary church, worship services are held not only in church buildings but also in places such as prison yards, community centers, and public parks. Yet there are some common features in most Episcopal worship as well as customs observed by worshipers in many congregations. While

these practices may be unfamiliar or even perplexing, there are reasons for them. Some are outward expressions of spiritual truths. Others enhance the beauty and reverence of worship.

Features of Episcopal Worship

Worship is *participatory*

In most Episcopal congregations, Holy Communion, also called the Holy Eucharist, is the primary weekly worship service and gathering of the community. The order of service for Holy Eucharist usually comes from *The Book of Common Prayer*. This Prayer Book was written so that all of God's people might join in the acts of corporate (that is, community) worship. All are invited to lift up their hearts and voices to God, joining in saying the responses and the creed and singing hymns and other service music heartily. Worshipers



say “amen” at the end of prayers, making them their own.

Worship is *biblical*

Episcopal worship is grounded in the Bible. Most worship services include at least a reading from the Old Testament, a Psalm, and a reading from the New Testament. The Episcopal Church uses a schedule for these readings, so that over the course of a three-year period, most of the Bible will be read aloud during worship services. Many of the prayers and other elements of services also come from the Bible, as does most of the content in *The Book of Common Prayer*. In most Episcopal churches, the Gospel reading is presented in the middle of the church—a physical manifestation of the idea of the word of God being brought to the people. Often worshipers will turn toward the priest or deacon as he or she reads the Gospel.

Worship is *focused on the altar*

Unlike some churches in which the pulpit is the focus of attention, the

Episcopal Church places the altar in the central position. This is because, as the place where Holy Communion is celebrated, it is a symbol of the presence of the living God. This reminds us that we do not come to church primarily to hear scripture or a sermon, to listen to the choir sing or to be entertained, but to encounter Christ. These things—and all we do in church—are means to make ourselves present to God.

Worship leaders wear *vestments*

Clergy, choirs, and acolytes usually wear special clothes called vestments. Clergy typically wear a white robe—an alb—for the service of Eucharist. White represents purity. Some wear a chasuble (similar to a cape) over the alb. Other times, service leaders wear a white vestment, called a surplice, worn over a darker colored robe, called a cassock. Clergy stoles (a long scarf draped around the neck and over the shoulders) and altar hangings (cloth that covers the altar) reflect the color of the church seasons. These colors offer a visual reminder of what we are experiencing