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The Anglican Communion

The Anglican family consists of tens of millions of Christians who are members of 45 different Churches. These make up 40 Member Churches (also called Provinces) and five other national or local churches known as Extra Provincials, spread across the globe.

The [Anglican Communion](#) is one of the world's largest global Christian denominations.

- Tens of millions of members
- 39 Provinces (Member Churches)
- Over 165 countries

Each of these Provinces is autonomous, with its own system of governance. The most senior of the bishops or archbishops in each Province are known as "Primates".

The Anglican Communion is not held together by a formal constitution or international church law, but rather by a shared heritage, by ways of worshipping and by the relationships—the "bonds of affection"—between its members worldwide. These are strengthened when Anglicans meet, informally and at such formal gatherings as the [Instruments of Communion](#). President of these Instruments is the Archbishop of Canterbury who acts as a unique focus of unity.

The Archbishop of Canterbury also plays a leading role in nurturing the interdependent life of the Anglican Communion by visiting Provinces, arranging meetings, helping initiatives, and contributing to theological reflection.

In his ministry across the Anglican Communion the Archbishop is supported by a dedicated staff at Lambeth Palace as well as the Secretary General of the Anglican Communion and his staff at the [Anglican Communion Office](#) in London, England.

The Lambeth Conference

The Lambeth Conference is an meeting of Anglican Communion bishops from around the world, invited by the Archbishop of Canterbury and is one of the instruments of communion. The event takes place around every ten years. The next conference will be taking place in 2020. [Visit the Lambeth Conference website for more information.](#)

See also: [The Archbishop in the Anglican Communion: An Historical Note](#)

History of the Anglican Church

Anglicans trace their Christian roots back to the early Church, and their specifically Anglican identity to the post-Reformation expansion of the Church of England and other Episcopal or Anglican Churches. Historically, there were two main stages in the development and spread of the Communion. Beginning with the seventeenth century, Anglicanism was established alongside colonisation in the United States, Australia, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa. The second stage began in the eighteenth century when missionaries worked to establish Anglican churches in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

As a worldwide family of churches, the Anglican Communion has tens of millions of members in 40 Member Churches (also called Provinces) spreading across over 165 countries. Located on every continent, Anglicans speak many languages and come from different races and cultures. Although the churches are autonomous, they are also uniquely unified through their history, their theology, their worship and their relationship to the ancient See of Canterbury.

Anglicans uphold the Catholic and Apostolic faith. Following the teachings of Jesus Christ, the Churches are committed to the proclamation of the good news of the Gospel to the whole creation. In practice this is based on the revelation contained in Holy Scripture and the Catholic creeds, and is interpreted in light of Christian tradition, scholarship, reason and experience.

By baptism in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, a person is made one with Christ and received into the fellowship of the Church. This sacrament of initiation is open to children as well as to adults.

Central to worship for Anglicans is the celebration of the Holy Eucharist, also called the Holy Communion, the Lord's Supper or the Mass. In this offering of prayer and praise, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ are recalled through the proclamation of the word and the celebration of the sacrament. Other important rites, commonly called sacraments, include confirmation, holy orders, reconciliation, marriage and anointing of the sick.

Worship is at the very heart of Anglicanism. Its styles vary from simple to elaborate, or even a combination. Until the late twentieth century the great uniting text was *The Book of Common Prayer*, in its various revisions throughout the Communion, and the modern language liturgies, such as Common Worship, which now exist alongside it still bear a family likeness. Both *The Book of Common Prayer*, and more recent Anglican liturgies give expression to the comprehensiveness found within the Church whose principles reflect that of the *via media* in relation to its own and other Christian Churches.

Another distinguishing feature of the corporate nature of Anglicanism is that it is an interdependent Church, where parishes, dioceses and provinces help each other to achieve by mutual support in terms of financial assistance and the sharing of other resources.

To be an Anglican is to be on a journey of faith to God supported by a fellowship of co-believers who are dedicated to finding Him by prayer and service.

The Archbishop of York on being Anglican

For me having grown up in Uganda being Anglican has always been very important. Being Christian came first of course - I came to faith in Christ through the witness of lay people, and immediately became involved in the activities run by a very godly youth leader, Canon Peter Kigozi. My faith grew there and I was nurtured as a Christian surrounded by the liturgy, hymns, preaching and teaching, led by a Catechist - my father.

Even then belonging to the Church gave me a keen sense of both the local and the global. Later as a vicar in South London I knew my responsibility was towards everyone in the parish, not just those who came to church. But the global dimension was always there. Church was for me a window on the wider world. The missionaries and expatriates I knew brought with them qualities of selfless commitment and devotion to duty which I admired and still admire today. They introduced me to the idea of the church as a world-wide family, in St Paul's words, 'the body of Christ', a community of people where all need each other and where everyone is of infinite worth in the sight of God. This has always chimed, for me, with the wisdom of the African proverb: 'if a tiny toe is hurting, the whole body bends low to tend it'. The worldwide **Anglican Communion** is this kind of community today.

Our Anglican heritage is enriched and in many ways defined by the Book of Common Prayer, assembled in 1549 by Archbishop Thomas Cranmer. The notion of 'common' worship is important to me. The prayers of the faithful are not individualistic or self-indulgent - they are rooted in Holy Scripture and they rely on the presence of the Holy Spirit to make them live. The Prayer Book itself commits the church to engaging creatively with various times, seasons, and cultures, so it is right that people should worship in 'such a tongue as the people understandeth.' So the wide range of Anglican liturgies used around the world are still 'common prayer'.

Essential to Anglicanism is a sense of magnanimity/'moderation' - a holding together, often in creative tension, of different emphases or points of view, but always in a spirit of charity and appreciative enquiry.

In our theology and lived Christian experience revelation and reason are set side by side. Because of God's gracious invitation for 'all sorts and conditions' of men, women and children to come and participate in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, in our spirituality personal devotion and corporate expression are equally vital. In our church structures we prize the self-governing nature of provinces or national churches whilst at the same time treasuring both the level of mutual accountability and support we share, and the leadership exercised by bishops in council with clergy and laity.

We regard it as our calling to engage both with the individual and the corporate, and with the material and the political. As my friend Archbishop Desmond Tutu once said, he wondered which Bible people were reading if they thought religion and politics didn't mix. In fact our Anglican heritage demands of us a particular sense of responsibility, a critical, and at times prophetic solidarity, variously expressed in different contexts, with the political and constitutional life of the nation in which we live. In Cranmer's Prayer Book this is expressed in our regular prayers for Her Majesty the Queen and all those in authority.

With the tensions facing us in the church and in the world today we should rejoice in God's call to us, both in our diversity and in our common life, to remember our primary responsibility 'together to make Christ visible' in word and deed. Central to our Anglican calling are what we call the 'five marks of mission' which define our calling:

To proclaim the good news of the Kingdom

- To teach, baptise, and nurture new believers
- To respond to human need by loving service
- To seek to transform unjust structures of society
- To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and to sustain the life of the earth.

Of course many other church traditions would agree with these priorities.

Distinctive about the Anglican family of churches is what is known as the **Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral (1888)**: the four reference points of Anglicanism, namely the Holy Scriptures, the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds, the two Sacraments of Holy Baptism and the Holy Communion, and the historic episcopate. It would have been good if a fifth had been included: 'lived Christlike experience in his Body, the Church, and in his world.'

I am grateful for the Anglican family's apostolic, catholic, evangelical, and reformed tradition which in its local and international expressions is a spiritual home for so many people. Families often don't eat together these days. By contrast the Anglican family must continue to be one which gathers round the table for conversation, for generous and attentive listening, even at times for argument, but above all for fellowship in shared bread and wine. In doing we seek to look in two directions at the same time: towards God, worshipping him, and towards the world, infecting it with his goodness.

Archbishop John Sentamu

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