

From The Anglican Domain (<http://anglican.org/church/index.html>)

About Our Church

In the United States and Scotland it is called *Episcopal*, and in most of the rest of the world it is called *Anglican*. What is it?

There are many churches around the world that have the word *Anglican* in their name, and virtually all of them are indeed Christian churches in the Anglican tradition. In some sense these are all Anglican churches, and most of them are part of the Anglican Church. We very much like the short essay on the web site of the Anglican Church of Canada entitled "[The Anglican Church Welcomes You](#)", and we refer you to it for a better answer than we could write. While it is written for a Canadian audience, it speaks to everyone.

Sometimes churches agree on issues of faith and doctrine and tradition, and sometimes they do not. There is no central administration of the Anglican Church. There is no Pope or President or chief executive. The Anglican Church is instead unified by tradition, belief, and agreement. The coordination of that unity is achieved through something called [The Anglican Communion](#). Some churches use the word "Anglican" or "Episcopal" in their name, but are not part of the Anglican Communion.

No Central Authority?

The worldwide Anglican Church does not exist—at least not in the form that one might think. There are millions of Anglicans, many thousands of parishes, and hundreds of dioceses. There are nearly 40 independent Anglican national churches, none of which has authority over any other. But there is no central administration: no Pope, no Patriarch, no overall director. There is no Parliament or Congress. There is certainly a [Church of England](#). But there is also the Church in Wales, the Church of Ireland, and the Scottish Episcopal Church, none of which is governed by the Church of England.

The Anglican church was originally spread to other countries through English colonization. As the colonies became independent from England, so did their churches. After the end of the colonial era, the Anglican church continued to spread via missionary work. There was never a postcolonial attempt to regenerate a central administration with actual authority over the churches outside England. During the Colonial era the overseas churches were held to be under the jurisdiction of the Bishop of London, but when they got their own bishops, they could be independent.

There is a structure for doctrinal centralization, but in the absence of central authority the doctrine is followed by consensus and not by mandate.

The doctrinal centralization is based on a concept and organization called [the Anglican Communion](#), of which a church either is a member or is not. There is a set of beliefs, and if a church holds those beliefs and meets certain other requirements, it is welcome to be in the Anglican Communion. The administration associated with the Anglican

Communion is in the [Anglican Communion Office](#) in London. It is closely affiliated with the [Archbishop of Canterbury](#), and manages the paperwork, the press releases, and the meetings every ten years of bishops from around the world. The Anglican Communion Office maintains the "Instruments of Unity": The Lambeth Conference, The Primates Meeting, The Anglican Consultative Council, and the Archbishop of Canterbury, who is more the media spokesman for the church than its leader. The [official description of the role of the Archbishop of Canterbury](#) explains that he is *primus inter pares*—first among equals—of the various Primates of the Anglican Communion.

The Archbishop of Canterbury is [selected by the government of Great Britain](#) rather than by any unified church process.

The Anglican Communion

In today's world, *The Anglican Church* is taken to mean those tens of millions of people who worship in churches that are part of the Anglican Communion. Some churches whose name contains the word "Anglican" are part of the Anglican Communion and some are not. The web site that you are now reading, [The Anglican Domain](#), is devoted solely to those member churches, provinces, and dioceses that *are* part of the Anglican Communion. The Anglican Communion Office in London is its administrative headquarters, and that office has [its own web page](#).

The Anglican Communion inherits many centuries of catholic and apostolic tradition, especially that part which began in the British Isles. Although Christian missionaries had reached England by the time of the Council of Jerusalem in 50 AD, the foundation of the Anglican Church is often described as having begun with the arrival in 597 AD of St. Augustine, first Archbishop of Canterbury.

When the Romans withdrew from Britain in 407 AD, they left a legacy of Christianity among the Celtic people. Those Celtic Christian churches were largely still in existence when Augustine arrived two centuries later, though they had become isolated from Rome. In particular, they survived in Wales, Ireland, and Scotland, and they helped to ensure that, from its beginnings, the Anglican Communion was not exclusively English in origin.

When the English people settled the British Empire they took their religion with them and thus the [Church of England](#) spread overseas. Eventually these overseas parishes became autonomous provinces of the Communion. These churches, while autonomous in their governance, are bound together by tradition, Scripture, and the inheritance they have received from the Church of England. They together make up the Anglican Communion, a body headed spiritually by the Archbishop of Canterbury.

If an Anglican church is a member of the Anglican Communion, it is said to be "in communion", or "in communion with the See of Canterbury". Otherwise it is said to be "not in communion." Generally, Anglican churches that are not in communion with the See of Canterbury have withdrawn because of doctrinal differences. In recent years those

differences have included the ordination of women priests and the attitude of the church towards sexuality.

Church Administration

Individual Anglican or Episcopal churches form *parishes*. Parishes are a subdivision of *dioceses*. Dioceses, which are the fundamental unit of church administration and governance, combine administratively to form *provinces*, though church members are rarely aware of administrative divisions between their diocese and their national church.

Sometimes these provinces are autonomous and sometimes they combine to form *national churches* which are autonomous. What it means for a province or national church to be "autonomous" is that there is no larger administrative unit that supervises it: no pope, no cardinals, no patriarch. Many parishes have only one parish church; some have more than one. There are many historical variations to this basic administrative scheme. Sometimes a diocese is divided into *deaneries*, or *archdeaconries*, and sometimes it is divided into archdeaconries which are in turn divided into deaneries. These divisions are not very important.

At the very center of the Anglican church are its *bishops*. Every Anglican bishop has been consecrated by other bishops, who were in turn consecrated by other bishops. This process forms a chain that, according to legend, leads back to the 12 apostles, who were the first bishops. There is no historical proof of this, nor does our faith depend on it. Historians have traced the succession of bishops back to the early 2nd century AD.

The bishops are the spiritual successors of the Apostles, and the chain of consecration is called *Apostolic Succession*. The Greek word for Bishop is *episkopos*, which is the origin of the word "Episcopal", and, for that matter, of the word "bishop": in Latin it became "episcopus", in Old English it was "biscop", which came to be pronounced "bishop" and later spelled that way, too.

Worldwide there are some 900 living Anglican bishops.

The primary unit of organization and governance of the Anglican church is the *diocese*. Presiding over each diocese is a bishop, who is called the *diocesan bishop*. Some dioceses have, in addition, other bishops, with titles such as *Suffragan*, *Coadjutor*, or *Assistant Bishop*.

When dioceses are combined into provinces or national churches, there is another administrative layer. This next level is administered typically by an *Archbishop* or *Presiding Bishop*. New Zealand in 1998 changed the title of its primate from Archbishop to Presiding Bishop; perhaps this is a trend in the former colonies. However, the important point is not the name, but whether the presiding bishop has metropolitan powers, i.e. some jurisdictional rights over the bishops in his province and their dioceses, or whether he is only the chairman of meetings of bishops. Another recent and controversial trend has been for presiding bishops not to have any diocese of their own.

Each province or national church has a periodic meeting of its bishops, which event has a name like "General Synod" or "General Convention". At these events the church forms its rules, elects its officials, and unifies its doctrines. The details of those rules and how they are applied are discussed on the [Church governance](#) page.

Church Governance

There is no central governance of the Anglican Church. Each of the member churches or provinces of the Anglican Communion is governed independently. The rules under which a church is governed are called *canon law*.

The structure of canon law is not altogether unlike that of modern civil law. A parish has rules or bylaws, which must conform to the rules or canons of the diocese of which it is a member; that diocese in turn must stay within the canons of its province or national church. The provinces and national churches, by choice, have inherited the canons of the Christian church dating back to its earliest days. This accumulation of canons over the centuries and throughout the world is collectively referred to as Anglican Canon Law.

Some of the member churches of the Anglican Communion have placed their constitutions and canons online; so have many dioceses and even a parish or two. You can find these by using a search engine and the key words 'Anglican' 'Canon' 'Law' and whatever other modifier you like.

Every 10 years there is a [Lambeth Conference](#) at which all of the bishops of the Anglican Communion gather to debate issues of doctrine. Doctrine can indirectly affect church governance, but resolutions passed at the Lambeth Conference are not binding on any member churches unless they choose to modify their own canons to be bound by them. However, a church that rejects too much of the doctrine of the Anglican Communion may find itself unwelcome to be or remain part of that Communion.

Church History

The name "Anglican" means "of England", but the Anglican church exists worldwide. It began in the sixth century in England, when Pope Gregory the Great sent St. Augustine to Britain to bring a more disciplined Apostolic succession to the Celtic Christians. The Anglican Church evolved as part of the Roman church, but the Celtic influence was folded back into the Roman portion of the church in many ways, perhaps most notably by Charlemagne's tutor Aidan. The Anglican church was spread worldwide first by English colonization and then by English-speaking missionaries.

The Anglican church, although it has apostolic succession, is separate from the Roman church. The history of Christianity has produced numerous notable separations. In 1054 came the first major split from Roman administration of the church, when the Eastern Orthodox church and the Roman split apart.

The conflict of authority in England between church and state certainly dates back to the arrival of Augustine, and has simmered for many centuries. The [murder of Thomas a Becket](#) was one of the more famous episodes of this conflict. The [Magna Carta](#), signed by King John in 1215, contains 63 points; the [very first point](#) is a declaration that the English church is independent of its government..

Discontent with Roman administration of the church.

The beginning of the sixteenth century showed significant discontent with the Roman church. [Martin Luther's famous 95 Theses](#) were nailed to the door of the church in Wittenburg in 1517, and news of this challenge had certainly reached England when, 20 years later, the Anglican branch of the church formally challenged the authority of Rome. Henry VIII dissolved the monasteries and abbeys in 1536.

There is a public perception, especially in the United States, that Henry VIII created the Anglican church in anger over the Pope's refusal to grant his divorce, but the historical record indicates that Henry spent most of his reign challenging the authority of Rome, and that the divorce issue was just one of a series of acts that collectively split the English church from the Roman church in much the same way that the Orthodox church had split off five hundred years before.

Defining the new church

The newly-separated Anglican church was given some formal structure in 1562 during the reign of Elizabeth I. That structure is not a management process or governing organization. What binds us together is not common administration but shared tradition and shared belief. Our belief is written down in the Holy Bible and the Articles of Religion; our tradition is in part embodied in our Book of Common Prayer. The first Book of Common Prayer was produced in 1549. In it the Latin liturgy was radically simplified and translated into English, and for the first time a single 'use' was enforced throughout England. It has been revised numerous times since then, the most significant revision being the first, in 1552. All revisions since then, before the modern era, were very conservative revisions. The [1662 English Book of Common Prayer](#) forms the historical basis for most Anglican liturgy around the world. While several countries have their own prayer books, all borrow heavily from the English tradition rooted in Cranmer's original work.

Further Information

Church history has been an important part of the cultural history of every nation, and through the centuries thousands of books have been written about it. Every library and every encyclopedia will cover it to some degree. An informative online starting point for learning more about the history of the Anglican Church is [The Anglican Timeline](http://justus.anglican.org/resources/timeline/) found at <http://justus.anglican.org/resources/timeline/>), produced by the American physician Ed Friedlander, MD. It lists several hundred notable events in the history of the Anglican church, with large numbers of links to reference materials and primary sources.

For More Information

The most extensive (but unofficial) collection of information about the Anglican church worldwide is [Anglicans Online](#), the weekly Internet news page. You can find the various official web pages by following our "[Find official web sites](#)" link. You can find out about various Anglican churches that are not part of the Anglican Communion by looking in the "[Not in Communion](#)" section of [Anglicans Online](#). And our "[Inquiries about our faith](#)" section (a subsection of "[Getting more help](#)") has more information about what we believe.

The [Anglican Canon Law](#) site is the very last word that is online on the topic of Anglican church governance, and its bibliographic links can guide you to the off-line material that exists in university and seminary libraries around the world.

Of the numerous links listed in [Anglicans Online](#) on the topic of church history, our favorite is the [Anglican Timeline](#) produced by Ed Friedlander, MD, a pathologist in the United States.

The final word on the Anglican Communion Office is [its own web site](#).