



BEING EPISCOPALIAN

*Questions and Answers
about the Episcopal Church*

WINFRED B. VERGARA

INTRODUCTION

There are two persons who motivated me to write this booklet: Angela, my wife and Genevieve Rivera, a young adult member of St. Michael & All Angels Episcopal Church in Seaford, New York. In 2010, after years of mulling it over, Angie decided to become a U.S. citizen. She was given a booklet with 100 Citizenship Questions and Answers, and after reading it, she said to me, "Why don't you write a booklet with 'Questions and Answers about The Episcopal Church' similar to this Citizenship Booklet?" On that same day, Gen asked me, "Father, what are the basic beliefs and practices of The Episcopal Church that make us unique or distinct from other religious denominations?"

Being sensitive to the prompting of the Holy Spirit expressed through the two ladies, I decided then and there to write this booklet. I want it to be simple, readable and understandable like the U.S. Citizenship Questions and Answers. I want it to be user-friendly, to be an easy tool for church members to use as informational material, an evangelistic tract as well as basic guide for new members seeking baptism, confirmation or reception into The Episcopal Church.

The Episcopal Church does not teach that we are the only true Church. We do not teach that outside our church there is no salvation. However, we claim that we are

part of the undivided, universal Church of Jesus Christ. We are an integral part of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. We are a constituent member of the worldwide Anglican Communion and the World Council of Churches. Alongside other mainline churches, we participate in the work of saving the lost, freeing the oppressed and reconciling the world to God in Christ. We are committed to ecumenism and interfaith dialogues. We are engaged in transforming unjust structures in society.

So we do not claim uniqueness as much as we do claim commonality with Christians all over the world. Our prayer book is called "Book of Common Prayer" because of the prayers we share in common with the universal Church in the language of the people. Our liturgy is our gift to the world. We are often called the "bridge church" because of our tendency to seek to be "both and" rather than be "either or." We are both catholic and protestant, both ancient and modern, both conservative and liberal---always trying to be balanced, fair and just---even as we remain faithful to the essence of the Christian faith.

Our theology is often called "via media" or middle ground or middle way. We are an inclusive Church, welcoming all people unconditionally. Our churches are houses of prayer for all people as expressed by our sign, "The Episcopal Church Welcomes You!"

Many of the questions and answers that follow are based on the Episcopal Catechism, or Outline of the Faith, which can be found on pages 843-862 of the Book of Common Prayer (Church Hymnal Corporation, 1979). Please note that the Book of Common Prayer states that the catechism "is a commentary on the creeds, but is not meant to be a complete statement of beliefs and practices; rather, it is a point of departure for the teacher" (BCP, p. 844).

It is in that same spirit that I present the responses to the questions that follow. They are not offered as definitive answers, but rather as general background information on the traditions and customs of The Episcopal Church, meant to encourage further discussion. And if there are interpretations that are not congruent to the official stand of The Episcopal Church, that will be my sole responsibility. I am not a "cradle Episcopalian" but rather one who has come full circle in tasting many denominational flavors. In my own religious travelogue, I learned that Christianity is like a "diamond with many facets" and have decided to settle with the facet of The Episcopal Church.

I believe that as Episcopalians, we must be ready at all times to justify our existence and presence in the world today. If people inquire about what we believe, we must be ready to give them the basic tenets of our

faith. Christianity is a living religion because it interacts with contemporary world. Like Christianity itself, the Church as a living organism must engage people from all walks of life and must seek to understand the context in which they find themselves. If they would ask what good would it be if they join The Episcopal Church, we must be ready to share our story and give an account of the hope that is in us.

I believe that this booklet can help you “read, mark, learn and inwardly digest” what “Being Episcopalian” is all about. Like an appetizer to the main dish, I hope this booklet can whet your appetite and inspire you to study more about the Bible, Christianity, The Episcopal Church and its teachings.

I am grateful to the Most Rev. Katharine Jefferts Schori, our Presiding Bishop for giving me helpful advice and for Canon Mark J. Duffy, Archivist and Director of the Archives of The Episcopal Church. I am indebted to Sarah Johnson of the Communications Office for her help in editing the original manuscript. This booklet is an updated version of that which was published in December 1, 2010. To God be the glory!

Winfred B. Vergara

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HISTORY

What is The Episcopal Church?

The Episcopal Church is a “constituent member of the Anglican Communion, a Fellowship within the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church, of those duly constituted Dioceses, Provinces, and regional Churches in communion with the See of Canterbury, upholding and propagating the historic Faith and Order as set forth in the Book of Common Prayer.” (Constitution and Canons, 2006)

Is The Episcopal Church known by any other name?

Since the adoption of the United States Constitution in 1787, Episcopalians in America have called ourselves in our Constitution as “the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America” (PECUSA). In the 1960’s, there was a movement (which began as early as the 1920’s) to expunge the word “Protestant.” In response, the General Convention adopted a resolution adding a Preamble to the Constitution that declared the PECUSA “otherwise known as The Episcopal Church.” It is important to note that the word “The Episcopal Church” is not a shortened version but an “alternate expression” of its official name. We are an international Church

present in 17 countries and so it is appropriate to refer to its alternative name of "The Episcopal Church," sans the USA.

In what seventeen (17) countries is The Episcopal Church visibly present?

The Episcopal Church is visibly present in the United States of America including Puerto Rico, Guam and the Mariana Islands (i.e., Church in Micronesia); Taiwan; Micronesia; Honduras; Ecuador; Columbia; Venezuela; Curacao; Haiti; Dominican Republic; British and US Virgin Islands; Austria; Belgium; France; Germany; Italy; and Switzerland. In other countries such as Mexico and the Philippines, former missionary districts of The Episcopal Church have become autonomous provinces in the Anglican Communion.

What is the legal and corporate name of The Episcopal Church?

The "Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society of the PECUSA" is the legally incorporated entity. The DFMS acts as the public, corporate arm of the church, allowing the Church to hold property and carry out missionary work in other countries or in places where it must be a registered entity. The first constitution of "The DFMS of the PECUSA" was adopted in 1821 and its legal incorporation was completed in 1846.

Where did The Episcopal Church originate?

Early English settlers established the Church of England in some of the original colonies of the United States, and in 1789, after the American Revolution, an assembly met in Philadelphia to unify all Anglicans in the United States into a single national church. A constitution was adopted along with a set of canonical laws, and the English Book of Common Prayer of 1662 was revised, principally by removing the prayer for the English monarch. Samuel Seabury was ordained in Scotland as the first American bishop. The Episcopal Church became “the first Anglican Province outside the British Isles.”

Why was the name “The Episcopal Church” chosen?

The Greek word *episcopos* means “bishop” or “overseer.” The Episcopal Church is governed by bishops in partnership with laity and clergy.

Who is the head of The Episcopal Church?

The General Convention, comprised of the House of Deputies and the House of Bishops, is the governing and legislative body of The Episcopal Church. The Presiding Bishop is the Chief Pastor and Primate of the Church. The current Presiding Bishop is the Most Rev.

Katharine Jefferts Schori, who is not only the first female presiding bishop in The Episcopal Church, but also the first female primate in the worldwide Anglican Communion.

What is a primate?

A primate is the chief bishop or archbishop of one of the thirty-eight churches of the Anglican Communion.

What is the Anglican Communion?

An international association composed of over 80 million people in 44 regional or national churches all in full communion with the Church of England and, more specifically, in communion with both the Archbishops of Canterbury and of York.

Who is the current Archbishop of Canterbury?

The Most Rev. and Rt. Hon. Justin Welby. He was appointed last January 13, 2013 and enthroned as the 105th Archbishop of Canterbury on March 21, 2013. Formerly the Bishop of Durham, he now shares the primacy of the Church of England with the Archbishop of York and is considered the symbolic head of the worldwide Anglican Communion.

What are the four Instruments of Communion in the Anglican Communion?

Unlike the Roman Catholic Church where the Pope is the solitary head, in the Anglican Communion, there is no one single authoritative leader. The Archbishop of Canterbury is the "symbolic head" of the Communion and the "first among equals" among the Primates of the Anglican Communion. Some Anglicans, however, understand that there are four (4) bodies involved in providing leadership across the Anglican Communion, which are: the Anglican Consultative Council, the Primates Meeting, the Lambeth Conference and the Archbishop of Canterbury. The Episcopal Church is a full participating member in the decision making bodies of the Anglican Communion.

THEOLOGY

What does theology mean?

The word comes from *Theologia*, from the Greek words *Theos* (θεός), meaning God, and *logia* (λογία), meaning utterances, studies or discourses. So theology literally means the discourse or study on God.

What do you mean by the “three-legged stool” of faith-understanding in The Episcopal Church?

Scripture, tradition, and reason are the three dynamic legs that provide a balanced way of discerning the will of God. The source of this metaphor is generally attributed to the Rev. Richard Hooker (1554-1600), an Oxford University scholar who wrote: “What Scripture doth plainly deliver, to that the first place both of credit and obedience are due; the next whereunto, is what any man can necessarily conclude by force of Reason; after this, the voice of the church succeedeth.”

What do you mean by “Scriptures?”

The Holy Scriptures, commonly called the Bible, are the books of the Old and New Testaments; other books, called the Apocrypha, are also included in the Bible. (BCP, p. 853).