

# Worship at the Church of Bethesda-by-the-Sea

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Anglicans (we Episcopalians are Anglicans) have a wonderful phrase: “the law of prayer is the law of belief,” or to put it more simply “praying shapes believing.” Our worship is not intended simply to make us feel good or to comfort us but also to enable our spiritual growth and our learning the faith. In addition, Bethesda is a “big tent” wherein people from widely diverse backgrounds and experiences come together around the Lord’s table to share in our sacramental life.

Sometimes we fall into the very common habit of framing issues and decisions in our life in simple either/or terms. So it is with our liturgy that we sometimes describe simply as “high” or “low.” The Episcopal Church does not, however, simply have two approaches to liturgical practice. Rather, we have a broad range of liturgical traditions. As our culture has become more mobile since the turn of the last century, we have seen fewer and fewer places that can be clearly identified as “high” or “low.”

Our worship tradition shares roots with the Roman Catholic Church, as well as with the Protestant Reformation. When the Church of England began its journey toward autonomy, Queen Elizabeth I and her church leaders worked to form a worship life that would incorporate the best of both Roman Catholic tradition and the new Protestant thinking. They described a desire for a “via media” or “middle way” that would be as comprehensive as possible. They desired a church in which all persons, whether they leaned more catholic or more protestant would find their place—their spiritual home in the Church of England.

There have been movements over the last half-century that have pulled our Anglican tradition one way or the other in some places, but, throughout that history, this breadth and comprehensiveness has been one of the great gifts of Anglicanism.

I have heard some inaccurate and confused statements about what exactly characterizes “high” or Anglo-catholic and “low” or evangelical worship in the Episcopal Church.

If we were an Anglo-catholic parish:

- Our chapel would be dedicated to the Virgin Mary (though notice how many “catholic” pieces of artwork we have)
- Clergy would wear birettas in worship and cassocks around the close
- We would use incense every Sunday
- We would use sanctus bells

- We would kiss the altar
- We would bless the water before pouring it in the chalice
- We would genuflect often
- We would have a subdeacon serve in addition to the acolytes
- We would have services of benediction and adoration of the blessed sacrament
- We would have a confessional booth
- We would pray the rosary

If we were truly a low-church parish:

- We would not wear eucharistic vestments (at most a cassock, surplice, and stole for communion)
- Our principal service would be Morning Prayer, with communion monthly or quarterly
- We would have no candles
- We would have no artwork in the church (certainly not images of the Mother and Child)
- We would not have an altar, but a small table
- The priest would not stand behind the table but beside it
- We would not place much emphasis on seasons and feasts
- We might use “contemporary” music, a song leader, and Powerpoint to project the service
- We might not have an organ
- We would have 30-45 minute sermons as the sole focus of the service

Our broad Episcopal tradition includes:

- A desire to recover a more-ancient practice (as intended in our *1979 Book of Common Prayer*) than either catholic or protestant
- A recognition that liturgy, while grounded in ancient tradition, is living, not stagnant, and contemporary expressions of prayer have an important role
- A belief that many practices have a place somewhere throughout a parish’s liturgical practice
- A intention to worship within the framework of *The Book of Common Prayer*
- A belief that seasons and days have great value in formation and should shape liturgical practice; in other words, very solemn occasions should have a solemn liturgy
- A deep reverence for the sacraments as they mediate for us God’s grace in Christ
- Use of silent prayer, spoken prayer, and sung prayer in combination because each of these modes of praying opens us and moves us in different ways
- Appreciation for the beauty of art, music, vestments, and other adornments for our worship

- A desire for our worship to encompass and engage us in myriad ways, being both familiar and new, using all five of our senses, as well as our intellect and our emotions
- An intention to strive for reverent dignity that resists using our liturgy as a place to advocate for or identify with one side or the other of “either/or” issues, and that focuses on the unity we have in Christ

My intention is to enable Bethesda’s liturgy to live out of this broad, comprehensive Anglican/Episcopal history. We have the gift of being a community of faith with people from all over the world and with many different perspectives. We want to worship in a way that enables all those present to connect with their faith and with one another. We will not be the church that is identified as particularly “high” or “low” (or Republican or Democrat or on-island or off-island, or any other dichotomy that is not of the essence of our faith).

As *The Book of Common Prayer* states, the Holy Eucharist is the principal act of worship on the Lord’s Day. We will celebrate the seasons, feasts and fasts of our church year, designing a liturgy distinctive for each season and all within our broad Episcopal Prayer Book tradition. So, while music, texts, vestments, and other things will change season to season, they will be basically the same year to year within each season and feast.

We will pray together in silence, in speech, and in song and chant, finding the grace to be both comforted by the familiar and stretched by the unfamiliar.

We will use incense on a modest number of solemn occasions. When we plan to use incense, we will notify the congregation—and it will be no more than five times a year (Christmas Eve, Maundy Thursday, Easter Vigil, Pentecost, and All Saints). We will use incense that is made to be non-irritating, and we will use a moderate amount.

In all this, God’s grace in Christ, through the sacrament of the Eucharist is what binds us together.

A line from my favorite hymn (hymn 304) says,

*As Christ breaks bread and bids us share,*

*each proud division ends.*

*That love that made us makes us one,*

*and strangers now are friends.*

I believe one of the greatest gifts the Church can give is to practice this truth, to proclaim that we are bound together, not by common tastes, or backgrounds, or even convictions, but by that Love that made us and makes us one in Christ.

Would you like to read more? Here are some resources:

- Mitchell, Leonel L. *Praying Shapes Believing: A Theological Commentary on the Book of Common Prayer*. Harrisburg: Morehouse Press, 1991 ISBN 0819215538
- Galley, Howard E. *The Ceremonies of the Eucharist: A Guide to Celebration*. Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1989. ISBN 0936384832
- Hatchett, Marion J. *Commentary on the American Prayer Book*. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1995. ISBN 0060635541
- Here's the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's statement about the use of incense: <http://www.elca.org/Growing-In-Faith/Worship/Learning-Center/FAQs/Incense.aspx>