

# A Brief Overview of Anglican History

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## PREVIEW

- When Did Anglicanism Begin?
- How Did Anglicanism Spread?
- What Is the Significance of Apostolic Succession?
- How Is Anglican Church Leadership Structured?

## WHEN DID ANGLICANISM BEGIN?

### The Early Church and Celtic Christianity

The church was in England long before there was a Church of England; in fact, the church was there before there was even an England! The word *England* derives from the word *Angles*, which was a Germanic tribe that first arrived in Britain (the Roman name of the island) sometime in the third century. Due to Britain's distance from the continent, a distinct form of the faith called Celtic Christianity began to grow and spread.

- Some believe Christians first appeared in Britain as early as the late first century, most likely through Roman soldiers or merchants. We do know that three bishops from southern Britain attended a synod in southern France in 314, eleven years before the Nicene Creed was adopted.
- St. Patrick was born in 390 in Britain, and is taken to Ireland by pirates at the age of sixteen. Six years later he escapes and returns to his homeland. He soon has a vision to preach the gospel to Ireland, and so he eventually returns as a missionary. From 432 to 461 he works in Ireland and manages to make the island a strong center of Celtic Christianity.
- Within a century of St. Patrick's work, the structure of the church in Ireland was monastic, missionary-minded, more egalitarian, and agricultural. Consequently, a wave of missionary activity was launched.
  - St. Columba was the apostle of Scotland as Patrick was the apostle of Ireland. In 563, on the island of Iona, he founded a monastery that became a center for the evangelization of Scotland.
  - From Iona, St. Aidan carried the gospel to the Angles of Northumbria in Britain. Others founded monasteries as far as Germany and Switzerland.

## St. Augustine and the Influence of the Roman Church

In 590, Gregory the Great, a promoter of monasticism, was the first monk to become pope. He heard about the Christian Angles in Britain, and so decides to send St. Augustine there to assess the state of the church and to introduce Roman-style Christianity. Augustine later becomes the first Archbishop of Canterbury.

- Tensions begin to surface between Celtic Christianity and Roman Christianity, as the Roman-style begins to slowly replace the Celtic way. This is formalized in 664 with the Synod of Whitby.
- Even so, many local customs had become firmly established in English faith and practice. For example, because of the distances and dangers of travel in the ancient world—it could take four years to get correspondence back and forth between England and Rome—British kings were given great power in ecclesiastical matters. So from the beginning, a certain tension between conformity to Rome and independence characterized English Christianity.

## The English Reformation and the Modern Church of England

For centuries leading up to the English Reformation, the church in England leaned toward independence from Rome. This leaning, combined with its geographical distance from the pope himself, created a climate conducive to the political events in England in the sixteenth century that eventually gave rise to the Church of England.

- 1525—Queen Catherine turned forty. King Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon had six children, but only one—a daughter named Mary—survived infancy. Henry believed, as did the rest of England, that a legitimate male heir must follow him to the throne. Henry makes a case to Pope Clement VII that his marriage to Catherine should never have been granted, and so asks for an annulment.
- 1527—Charles V of Spain, emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, sacks Rome and takes Clement VII as prisoner. Note: Catherine of Aragon was Charles' aunt.
- 1534—King Henry VIII passes the Acts of Succession and Supremacy. The Church of England had finally reclaimed its independence almost 900 years after it had ceded it to Rome at the Synod of Whitby in 664.
  - The Act of Succession declared the marriage of Henry and Catherine null and void (just in time to legitimize the birth of their child, Elizabeth).
  - The Act of Supremacy made the King of England the supreme head of the Church of England.
- Over the next 125 years, the Church of England struggles to find its identity. Will it become the English Catholic Church or will it fully embrace Reformed Protestantism? In time, the Church of England ultimately attempts to merge the best of both worlds into the *via media*, the middle way between Protestantism and Catholicism. See the attached historical charts 28, 29, 30, and 32 as well as chapter 27 from Bruce Shelley's *Church History in Plain Language*.

## HOW DID ANGLICANISM SPREAD?

### The Roman Empire and the Roman Catholic Church

The Roman Empire in the West was born in 27 BC with the rise of Emperor Augustus and fell in 476 AD at the hands of barbarians. At its greatest extent in 117 under Emperor Trajan, the Roman Empire covered the entire Mediterranean world.



It was during this time that the church grew and developed rapidly, eventually becoming legalized in 313 under Emperor Constantine. By the century's end, Emperor Theodosius declared Christianity the religion of the empire. As the Roman Empire eventually declined and finally collapsed, it left the church in its place, allowing what would become the Roman Catholic Church to eventually develop and spread throughout the world.

### The English Empire and the Global Anglican Communion

In much a similar fashion, the Anglican Church spread throughout much of the world today. As the British Empire rose to global prominence in the 17th and 18th centuries, so went the Church of England. As the British Empire receded, and native lands took back their independence, many peoples had adapted and contextualized the Anglican way into their own those cultures, leaving a global Anglican church in its place.



## WHAT IS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF APOSTOLIC SUCCESSION?

Apostolic succession is the spiritual lineage of bishops, representing the unbroken relationship of today's church with Christ's twelve apostles. It is an important symbol that points to the faith once delivered to the saints as it is faithfully passed down from one generation to the next.

### What Apostolic Succession Does Not Mean

- Bishops are always right and never make mistakes.
- Bishops are incapable of going astray.
- Bishops are closer to God than everybody else.
- Bishops are not under authority.

### What Apostolic Succession Does Mean

- God never leaves his church without anointed leaders.
- God gives certain leadership roles to the church, and he blesses the church when it submits to those authorities.
- God gives bishops the responsibility of guarding the faith of the apostles and teaching the church according to that faith.

## HOW IS ANGLICAN CHURCH LEADERSHIP STRUCTURED?

### Orders of Ministry

While it is true that the church is an organism rather an organization, it is also true that organisms require structure to survive. Anglican churches are firmly within the mainstream of Christian tradition in that they recognize the following four orders of ministry, people being brought into each of these holy orders through various types of ordination.

- **Laypersons**—the most important and foundational of all Christian orders is that of the layperson, making up the far majority of the church and doing the majority of the ministry. Anglicans fully affirm the belief in the priesthood of all believers. The “ordination” of a layperson occurs in confirmation. Lay people are represented at the parish level by an elected vestry, whose members are “vested” with the responsibility of running the day-to-day operations of the parish.
- **Deacons**—the deacons’ high calling is to serve the poor in body and spirit. In liturgical settings, the sign of their office is a stole pulled off to the side as a symbol of their readiness to serve without hindrance or distraction.

- **Priests**—a priest (or elder or presbyter) is called to care for the needs of the local church as Christ shepherds his flock. They are to lead the local church, but not “lord it over” them. They are commanded to exercise humility as they pray for the people, anoint the sick, teach God’s Word, equip the saints, administer the sacraments, and run the parish.
- **Bishops**—a bishop oversees a group of parishes called a diocese, serving as a pastor to the pastors and guarding the faith and unity of the church. Only bishops can confirm, ordain deacons and priests, and join in the ordaining of other bishops.

### **Administrative Groupings**

At the group level, Anglicans typically recognize four major types of administrative units, each governed by its own bylaws or constitution and canons.

- **The Parish**—a local church, led by a pastor called the rector, who is an ordained priest, though there might be other priests on staff. The congregation elects representatives to serve on the vestry to help take care of various administrative and business duties. The vestry hires the rector who is then typically responsible for hiring the rest of the staff with the financial approval of the vestry.
- **The Diocese**—parishes are typically linked to one another as members of a diocese, which is led by a bishop. He is the pastor of the diocese. The diocese may have assistant bishops, along with priests, deacons, and others on staff as well. There are committees that serve the diocese, including one that acts very much like the vestry of a parish.
- **The Province**—Anglican dioceses are members of a province, which is a collection of dioceses, organized together, and independent of other Anglican provinces. Provinces are associated with large geographic areas, usually countries. A primate, usually called the archbishop, leads each province and most have a term limit. Archbishops are answerable to the remaining bishops in their province.
- **The Communion**—the Anglican Communion is made up of these independent provinces, each with its own primate. The primates together, along with several committees, help to maintain relationships within the communion. The primate of England is called the Archbishop of Canterbury. He has no direct power over other provinces, but he does have historical influence.

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