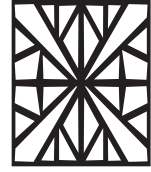


# Introduction: My Church Is Not Dying



A century and a quarter ago, the great British historian Edward Gibbon wrote these words as he began to unfold one of the most radical changes in all of human history: “In the second century of the Christian era, the empire of Rome comprehended the fairest part of the earth, and the most civilized portion of mankind. The frontiers of that extensive monarchy were guarded by ancient renown and disciplined valour. The gentle, but powerful, influence of laws and manners had gradually cemented the union of the provinces. Their peaceful inhabitants enjoyed and abused the advantages of wealth and luxury.”<sup>1</sup>

These are the first lines, as you may know, of Gibbon’s *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, and they capture a great civilization at its exalted peak, just before its decline and disappearance. What he wrote about—that decline and fall—had jarred the world, not just the inhabitants of Rome, but all of those whose lives were touched by Rome. It is indeed a startling thing when great and powerful institutions shift or shrink. Often what we feel in these moments of radical change is confusion and anxiety. How did it happen? What are we supposed to do in this strange new world? Where (as The Kinks would sing) have all the good times gone?

The Romans are, of course, far from the only group to be on top of the world, to enjoy wealth and luxury—and then to see the earth shift underneath their feet. American Episcopalians, members of one of the

wealthiest and most influential churches in our country's history, likewise find themselves in the place of having been at the pinnacle of modern life and now being something else, possibly something less, definitely something different. One could—if one wished—even speak of something like the Decline and Fall of the Episcopal Church. Certainly many people have, and still do.

Here's a telling fact: If you Google "episcopal church decline," you'll immediately (.22 seconds) call up 909,000 pertinent web pages. If, on the other hand, you search for "episcopal church resurgence," you come up with a tiny fraction of these results—many of which do not actually seem to be about any resurgence of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America, as the Episcopal Church officially is known. And yet, I think these two searches are bound up together, and one of the reasons this book needs to be written and read.

Yes, there are fewer Episcopalians than in the glory days of the Church. Yes, times are changing, and the institution cannot go on being the Church in the same way. And yes, strangely enough, I happen to get up in the morning thinking that the Episcopal Church is filled with life and light, and that it is and will continue to be a blessing to the world.

F. Scott Fitzgerald once remarked that to be able to simultaneously hold two contradictory ideas in your mind was the mark of a superior intellect. I'm going to ask you to demonstrate that trait as we explore both the idea of what the Episcopal Church was and is no longer, and some ideas about what it remains and may become. We are in a stretch of time some people call the end, but my experience with and within the Church suggests it is a new beginning. What the Church is going to be is being defined right now by individual congregations across the US (and others in our tradition in England, Australia, Wales, France, and elsewhere around the world), and by individuals who are both ordained people and laypeople, bishops in purple, and barristas in Episcopal coffee shops.

I've seen much of this change at close range. I'll be talking in some detail about churches in which I have served or been a parishioner, since I've observed them closely and had the opportunity to see firsthand what is working and what is not. In that sense, perhaps St. David's Episcopal Church in Austin, Texas; Calvary Episcopal Church in Bastrop, Texas; and St. James' Episcopal Church in Austin are over-represented (it was Henry

David Thoreau who explained in *Walden* that he was necessarily limited by his experience to writing about his own life), but I also think they represent positive examples of things happening all across the Episcopal world. I've also visited many other churches, and talked with many other Episcopalians and Anglicans who have shared their stories, their passions, and their dreams with me, and this book is the result of all those conversations, close by and far off.

Everyone who offered me their stories loves the Episcopal Church, loves their individual church, and sees an ongoing future for both, as do I. We may indeed be witnessing a crisis, but what I heard over and over from people in the research and writing of this book is that a crisis can actually be a good and necessary thing.

I have a coffee cup on my desk at Baylor University given to me by an ex-wife in a loving moment. It bears the Chinese ideogram, or *hanza*, for "crisis" on the front, and a short inspirational note on the back. John Kennedy, Condoleeza Rice, and Al Gore are just a few of the many people over the last sixty years who have also told my coffee cup's story that in Mandarin, the word for "crisis" is made up of the individual characters meaning "danger" and "opportunity." It turns out that this is not exactly true, but like Greg Rickel says of the Creeds in his foreword, many apocryphal stories, whether or not the facts fit, seem to be true in all the ways that count.

It's human nature that when we face danger, our fight or flight mechanisms go to work. Maybe we circle the wagons to fight off the opposing threat. Maybe we run for our lives, hoping to outdistance that threat. Maybe we pull the covers up over our heads and try to pretend we don't know about the threat; maybe if we don't see it, it won't see us!

But these moments of danger and potential destruction also offer clear opportunities for change, growth, and renewal. You probably know from your own life how difficult it is to make important, even necessary changes in the middle of day-to-day life. Often, it's not until things fall apart, in times when we must change or die, that we are able to do what we ought to have been doing long ago. And that seems to be the situation for the Episcopal Church as well. The crisis of the past decades became an opportunity to change, to grow, as well as to continue bringing the world some things it desperately needs.

Why change? Mostly because if we try to do business the way we always have, if we expect to survive just by opening our doors on Sunday morning and offering meaningful worship, we are done for. Beliefs have changed, our culture has changed, and the way that people relate to each other has changed.

What does it mean to be a church (or a Church) in the twenty-first century? That's the most meaningful question we can ask. How we respond to changing demographics, shifting views of faith and spirituality, and new ways of being community—while still remaining true to the mission of the Church—will dictate whether we indeed decline and fall, or whether we demonstrate a meaningful rebirth for however many people choose to be in some way a part of our journey.

My bishop, the Right Reverend Andrew Doyle, who serves the Diocese of Texas, says that the work of the Church is evangelism and mission. "Evangelism is sharing the Good News of Salvation through God in Christ Jesus with the world around us. Mission is doing that Gospel work through deeds. As Episcopalians we do both; it is not an either/or proposition. It is the very work of the Church to help people come to God."

If you accept this formulation of what the Episcopal Church is called to do—and as you'll see from this book, I do—the question shifts. How do we help people come to that awareness of God in a world where fewer people believe in God, fewer people attend formal church services, public respect for Christianity from non-Christians has plummeted, and people are simultaneously more connected and more alienated—from each other and from themselves—than at any time in history?

Beliefs have changed. Our culture has changed. Let's chart the extent of those changes by observing the height that a modern-day Gibbon might cite for the Episcopal Church before the supposed decline and fall. In the post-WWII years in America, it was widely expected that (if you weren't Jewish!) you would be in church on Sunday. In those days in a much smaller America, about three and a half million people called themselves Episcopalians. Today, the number is less than two million. Over the past fifty years, the Episcopal Church has clearly suffered a precipitous drop in attendance, as have other so-called "mainline" churches, including the United Methodist Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), Presbyterian Church (USA), and the Church of Christ.

This decline in attendance has led some (often people who are hoping for just this outcome), to extrapolate our slow but inevitable death.

Me? I laugh whenever someone tells me that the Episcopal Church is dying, because that phrase seems so at odds with my experience of both myself and of the Church. I actually first ended up attending the Episcopal Church in the early 2000s, in the midst of the cultural struggles we'll discuss in a later chapter.

I didn't know about these battles until later, and I didn't care. I came to church because I was dying. Literally. Chronic, serious depression, which had been sapping my strength since I was a teenager, had taken me over like a cancer. I was dying slowly at that precise moment, but I had experienced some narrow escapes, and I knew that if left to my own spiritual and emotional resources, I was likely to step off the planet in a big hurry sometime soon.

It was in the midst of my own turmoil that I walked in the door of St. James' Episcopal Church in Austin, Texas. I had never been in an Episcopal Church, but a long and mostly unaccountable set of coincidences had put it on my radar and something—somebody—had told me that I needed to go there. So I walked in the door, took a seat in the last row, and I sat and shivered while people tried to make me feel at home.

It was on that first Sunday morning at St. James' that I heard the Reverend Greg Rickel (now the Right Reverend Greg Rickel) pronounce from behind the altar the words that may have saved my life: "Wherever you are in your walk of faith, you are welcome at this table."

As I said, I didn't know then about the local, regional, and national fights over women's ordination and human sexuality that were sending many Episcopalians out of their churches and out of the denomination. I didn't know that most American denominations were in decline, with the so-called mainline denominations among the most deeply wounded. I didn't even know about the hordes of Americans leaving Christian faith altogether (the so-called "Nones," for "None of the Above") because of their negative perceptions about how Christianity was being lived out in the public square, or their perception that Christianity was somehow irrelevant to their lives.

All that is to say, when I walked into St. James', I didn't know I was coming into what many were calling a dying Church. I just knew that I was

dying—and if I couldn't find life in this place, I couldn't find it anywhere. I don't suppose there's much suspense about what happened next—I mean, I am writing these words in 2014, over a decade later. I survived. No, more than that; I thrived. I was brought back to life, set on my feet again, offered hope and community, and surrounded by beauty and by understandings of the world, of God, and of myself that made sense to me.

Simply put: I am alive today because I was rescued by one particular Episcopal church in East Austin, a community that manifested hospitality, compassion, and social justice as the expressions of its faith. I became an Episcopalian officially because I discovered it to be a welcoming tradition that valued art, beauty, intellect, questions, and service to others. After my rescue, I was encouraged by my church to attend the Episcopal seminary in Austin (which I did full-time for three years, earning my Master of Divinity degree), and I even offered myself for the Episcopal priesthood at a time when some people told me there might not be an Episcopal Church when I graduated from seminary.

The Church and I agreed ultimately that ordination for parish ministry was not going to be my path, but I continue today to serve as an Episcopal preacher, teacher, retreat leader, and theologian because I have found a home in the Episcopal Church, because for me it is the very best place to try to be a faithful person, even in a world that is rapidly leaving Christian faith behind.

We talked earlier about danger and opportunity. I can tell you from experience that facing death makes you realize things. You realize that you can't go on the way you have been. You realize that if you're going to continue living, you've got to reclaim or foreground the things that make existence worthwhile.

I found that true in my own life, and I think those truths apply to the Episcopal Church as well. We have been, for some time, taking stock, but eventually, if we're going to go on, we have to pull the trigger on some big decisions stemming from those big questions:

What does it mean to be Episcopalian in the twenty-first century?

What does the Episcopal Church stand for in an age when people continue to claim our church—and maybe all Christian churches—are dying?

Why would anybody want to become—or remain—Episcopalian in this environment?

Why are some Episcopal churches (including the one I currently serve, St. David's Episcopal Church in Austin, Texas) and some dioceses adding members even in the midst of all these doubts and questions?

What does the Episcopal Church have to offer a broken world—and how can we make the world aware of those gifts?

This is a book that seeks to wrestle with those questions and to suggest some helpful and hopeful answers. It is a book for practicing Episcopalians and Anglicans who might wonder what our tradition still has to offer an increasingly complex and secular world, and for Episcopal church leaders (lay and ordained) who want to remind themselves or discover anew the treasures and possibilities open to those of us who claim descent from the Church of England but who live out our lives in these United States.

It is a book that takes seriously both my experience as Professional Church Person (seminarian, preacher, lecturer, consultant) and as a Person in a Pew (which is where I spend most Sundays, with my family).

It is a book that supplements my personal experience of the Church across the country and around the world with the stories, dreams, and hopes of leaders and worshippers, from the Most Reverend Katharine Jefferts Schori, presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church USA, and the Most Reverend Rowan Williams, past archbishop of Canterbury, to people in the pews, and even to some outside the walls of the Church. These many thoughts about what it means to be Episcopalian today are a vital part of the book, for those I quote offer new and real insights into how God might be moving in the world and how we might respond to that movement. These hundreds of suggestions, questions, and affirmations from across the Church make this book far more valuable than if I were only offering my own suggestions, questions, and affirmations.

It is a book that asks who we are today, who we might be tomorrow, and how we might get from one place to the other. As Tom Brackett, a consultant for the national church, asks, how can we “molt out of the old shells that once defined and now inhibit us”?<sup>2</sup>

It's also a book that suggests that maybe many of us are already doing that, stepping out of some of our old clothes that don't fit so well anymore, while holding onto those fashions that will never go out of style.

All of those things are about our present and our future. But to see who we are and where we might be going, it's also necessary to take

a step back and reflect on our past. Episcopalians have always been a small group—in America we now represent less than 1 percent of the population—and if people know about us, chances are they don't always know us very well. They may not know where we came from, what we stand for, or who we are. As Bishop Wayne Wright of Delaware told me, Episcopalians spend too much time trying to explain what we aren't, and not enough celebrating what we are.

My Grandma Irene—admittedly from a small town in Oklahoma without an Episcopalian near—asked me after I was confirmed into St. James' if "Episcopals believe in Jesus." She honestly didn't know. And my guess is that plenty of others don't know about us, because I didn't know about us either, and I had gotten thousands and thousands of miles away from that small town in Oklahoma. Before I became an Episcopalian, what I thought I knew was that Episcopalians drank and played golf. It's a misunderstanding just true enough to be funny, but hardly a rounded portrait of our denomination and its adherents.

Even when people do know something about Episcopal and Anglican Christians, their perceptions may be skewed by our past, or by those recent headlines about our faith that don't capture the whole picture—by our past battles over gay bishops, or about homosexual blessing, or legal wrangling over church property. So another of the tasks of this book is to pause for a moment and fill in the details, both for people coming to the tradition anew and for those of us who fill the pews some Sunday mornings or serve the homeless some Sunday afternoons. Not all of us know where we came from either.

"How did we get here?" is always a seminal question. As novelist William Faulkner—himself a sometime adherent who lies buried in the churchyard of St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Oxford, Mississippi—used to say, "The past isn't dead. It isn't even past."

Whatever people think they know about the Episcopal Church shapes their reaction to it—and their participation in it. So here in the Introduction, let's take a moment to explore where we came from, who we've been, and where we seem to many to be going. In the process, we'll refute some simple misunderstandings, acknowledge some past failings, and, in the process, pick up some wisdom for the journey.

How did we get here? Like this:



It's true. We are at least partly the product of a disagreement about divorce between the pope of the Roman Catholic Church and England's King Henry VIII, once a young lion who fought for the purity of the Catholic faith, later a rotund serial monogamist seeking the Church's legitimization of a wife—any wife!—who would bear him a male heir. Visitors touring the apartments of Henry's Hampton Court Palace today can hear a ghost (okay, more probably a tape loop) whispering the spooky and disgusting litany of the Six Wives of Henry the Eighth: "Divorced. Beheaded. Died. Divorced. Beheaded. Survived."

That roll call of selfish ambition doesn't seem a propitious way to start any great endeavor, maybe most especially a Church. The whole business seems more than a little sordid, and also more than a little mercenary. The king's later grab for the incredible wealth and land controlled by the Roman Church and its monastic establishments wouldn't reflect well on anyone, and represents one of the worst acts of religious vandalism in all of history.

But Henry's divorce is only a part of our story, the presenting issue. We are also the product of decades of struggle involving faithful scholars, priests, kings and queens, who sought an authentic way of being the catholic body of Christ in England—and heirs of the centuries of British and Celtic Christianity that predated Henry's disputes with Rome.

From the soap-opera headlines, the martyrdoms and executions and hypocrisy and apostasy, we gained an understanding that Christianity has to be about something other than what we say we believe or what political party we favor. Those determinants only lead us into conflict, not concord, and so a vital part of the Anglican endeavor became the attempt to find a way for Christians to get along—and stay together—that revolved around more than accepted dogma. In later chapters, we'll explore how this hard-won wisdom that emerged from bloody British history still informs Episcopal ways of worship, community, and hospitality, and could be a vital offering we make to a world filled with conflict and division.

Despite the violence and discord we associate with the founding of the Church of England, something beautiful emerged. Set aside portly King Henry for a moment; we are also partly the brilliant idea of Thomas Cranmer, a scholar whom Henry made the archbishop of Canterbury, the leader of the Church of England.

The king wanted Cranmer to engineer his divorce from his wife of eighteen years, Catherine of Aragon, but the archbishop proved to be much more than a reliable religious flunky. Cranmer understood that an English Church needed an English way of worship and a distinctly English way of prayer, and so he reworked traditional Latin prayers drawn from a liturgy that the English Catholic Church had used for centuries (the Sarum Missal, employed at Salisbury Cathedral) into an English prayer book that anyone could employ in daily worship.

Cranmer's Book of Common Prayer went through several revisions as succeeding generations fought about how Catholic or Puritan it should or shouldn't be, but that idea of daily prayer for all is the particular genius of the Anglican tradition, handed down from Cranmer directly to us. "These daily offices derive from the monastic orders when people withdrew to commune with God," says the Reverend Canon Liz Hendrick, who serves at the American Cathedral in Paris. "Their goal was to draw closer to God, so they removed all distractions."<sup>3</sup> From the monastic tradition of hourly prayer, Cranmer distilled morning, noon, and evening prayers, making it possible for people who had jobs or children to nonetheless be involved in a daily life of the Spirit. For the first time, one didn't have to be a monastic to live a life of prayer.

What the Reverend Mary Earle, a retired priest and writer from San Antonio, says she loves most about the Anglican tradition is "everyday practice," and in the prayers, or in the saying of the Daily Office from the prayer book, Episcopalians can find themselves drawn into prayer alongside millions of other Anglicans around the globe.

For well over 450 years, some version of the prayer book has marked the hours for us (the 1662 edition continues to be in use in England 350 years later), and done so with language and metaphor that have become familiar to most people, even if they don't know their origin. Cranmer perhaps did not know that he was writing and compiling one of the most enduring works of English literature in addition to creating a functional prayer book, but if the gifts of the Anglican tradition had stopped with the Book of Common Prayer, they would still be worth celebrating.

Literary critics like my Baylor colleague Alan Jacobs have written about its beauty and influence, both of which are immense. As James Woods, who wrote an introduction for Penguin's edition of the Book of

Common Prayer, observed in *The New Yorker*, “the acute poetry, balanced sonorities, heavy order, and direct intimacy of Cranmer’s prose have achieved permanence, and many of his phrases and sentences are as famous as lines from Shakespeare or the King James Bible.”<sup>4</sup> Some scholars in fact opine that the English language has been metaphorically frozen in place over the past five hundred years by the concurrent greatness of Shakespeare, the King James Bible, and the Book of Common Prayer. Just compare our ability to read their English and Geoffrey Chaucer’s English; Chaucer was writing only two hundred years before Shakespeare, but his Middle English is impenetrable to us today. Most of Shakespeare, the Bible, and the Prayer Book, however, read to us like modern English. With a few archaic exceptions, we understand it well, and are often moved by the beauty of its expression and the richness of its language.

People who have never opened the prayer book know the phrases “Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust” from the burial service, or “to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do us part.” Cranmer’s words and rhythms have become part of us like a much-loved song or a famous speech. Even non-Episcopalians are a tiny bit Episcopalian because of it. We’ll return to the prayer book—which remains the defining element for Anglicans and Episcopalians—in our chapters on the Anglican way, worship, beauty, and justice. It’s that important, and it cuts across almost all of the facets of Anglican and Episcopal life.

Besides Cranmer’s prayer book, Henry’s desire for a truly English church, and generations of debate and struggle to worship together, we are also partly the brilliant idea of an American elite: the wealthy planters, the bankers, the purveyors of culture, the Founding Fathers. For centuries, in any town where we had a church presence we were a power to be reckoned with, and while we were always small in numbers, the Episcopal Church exerted an outsized influence. Over half of those who signed our nation’s formational documents were Episcopalians. Since then, eleven United States presidents (most recently Gerald Ford and the first President Bush; George W. Bush was raised Episcopal but it didn’t stick), over 30 percent of all Supreme Court justices (Sandra Day O’Connor and David Souter among them), an inordinate number of people in Congress (including Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison from Texas, Senator John McCain from

Arizona, and the retired senator from Missouri, John Danforth, who is an Episcopal priest), and plenty of other luminaries have been Episcopalians. Because of this history and these connections, Episcopalians have exerted more influence on our politics and culture than any other similarly sized group (with the possible exception of American Jews, who actually outnumber us).

We should acknowledge the obvious corollary truth—that members of the Episcopal Church boast among the highest per capita incomes of those in any faith group. That's why the stereotypes of limousine rides and martinis on yachts—not to mention my golf-playing, single-malt-drinking Episcopalian—emerge. Some Episcopalians are wealthy and powerful. Plenty of us, of course, are not. I do not own a mansion; I do not drive a Cadillac or ride in a limo; my parents are neither wealthy nor from distinguished families; my kids are not in exclusive private schools; I don't get my picture in the society pages just for showing up. Like many others, I am an Episcopalian not because I was born into it, but because I chose it, and I chose it for reasons having nothing to do with wealth and power—mine or the Church's.

But our presence in the halls of power has shaped us in positive ways as well as some obvious negatives. The democratic polity of our national church—an assembly with an upper and lower house—is based on the United States Constitution, which many Episcopalians read and signed in its original form. Like the United States, our leaders, including our national leader, the presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church, are elected (not, say, chosen by a committee and later confirmed by the queen, as is the archbishop of Canterbury). The bishop who will replace our current presiding bishop, the Most Reverend Katharine Jefferts Schiori—the first female primate or head of a national church in the Anglican world—will be elected by a vote of the next General Assembly at the 2015 Episcopal General Convention.

Episcopalians—while we are certainly not perfect at tolerance and welcome—can model a democratic melting pot of diverse cultures, beliefs, social classes, and political parties as we come together in common worship. St. James', Austin, was one of the first truly multicultural institutions I had ever seen. That historically African American church had opened its doors to gay and lesbian people, to mixed-race couples, to people from

Africa and Asia, and even to depressed white straight males like me, and it celebrated all of us as essential parts of the body of Christ. As the Reverend Mary Certain Vano, a priest from Arkansas, points out, at our best the Episcopal Church can model “an open-minded faith that places our love for Christ and one another above like-mindedness.” Austin layperson Diane Owens seconds those thoughts: “The Church embraces different cultures, different views, and different values.” In our chapters on community, the culture wars, and reaching out to others, we’ll explore how our desire to be a diverse community mirrors America’s story, and how we can help remind our culture what is best about the American dream.

A part of our story is about failure and fracture. As I mentioned earlier, headlines in both secular and religious media sound the death knells of the Episcopal Church (and practically every other church): Millennials are leaving the Church! Boomer believers are dying like flies! The “Nones” (the religiously unaffiliated, or None of the Above) are the fastest growing demographic in America! A Baptist minister actually asked me recently if I thought the Episcopal Church was going to survive, and my first answer was, “I think everybody who was going to leave has already left.” Then I stopped, reflected, and offered a more useful answer: “Of course the Episcopal Church is going to survive. But it’s going to be different.”

It’s going to survive. But it’s going to be different. That response could be applied to almost all of the Protestant mainline denominations. All of us have trimmed budgets and reevaluated assets and operations. We have all had to trim or sell off subsidiary ministries—church conference centers, publishing houses, real estate. Whatever the mainline denominations look like going forward, they will look very little like the towering powers of the mid-twentieth century.

The days when Episcopalians (and other denominations) could assume that if they simply opened the doors of their churches, people were culturally conditioned to attend are over. But our contention with decline—and our contention with the persistent conflicts that have in some cases worsened the exodus from our denomination—have had their bright sides as well. We’ve learned that we have to be about something more than open doors—and we’ve had to wrestle with what it means to call something “church.” We’ll discuss that in our chapters on worship and community.

But this too is true: Some of us have actually been brought *into* the Church by the tolerance and progressive theology that led to our great conflicts. I know this for a fact, since I am one of them. After years of scorning Christian involvement, I chose to be formally affiliated with the Episcopal Church *because* of its loving stance toward gay and lesbian Christians and its embrace of women as full partners in the sacramental life of the Church.

Jason van Borssum, a postulant for holy orders in the Diocese of Los Angeles, argues that the Episcopal Church has actually benefited from the hard experience of the last decades, even though it cost us members, because it has put us in a better place to address the post-Christian culture that America is becoming. Because we've already dealt with issues other churches are still trying to navigate, he suggests, we can be authentically welcoming to generations who feel put off by years of Christian moralizing and infighting, and can welcome everyone we encounter, without fear of further division in our churches.

This goes for gays and lesbians in the pews and in ministry; it also goes for women. Lory Hunt, minister of youth at an Episcopal church in Paris, Texas, went to a Baptist seminary. After graduation, she found ministry prospects limited in her own denomination. Many churches were still unready to employ a female pastor, still unsure about putting a woman in the pulpit. When I asked the Facebook world one morning what they were celebrating about the Episcopal Church, Lory's response was short and heartfelt: "I love that I can pursue my full and true calling, not having to settle for something less than I've been called to do and be." On the far end of the culture wars, as we will see in our chapter called "Living Together," is a place where we are more ready, perhaps than any other group of contemporary Christians, to reach out to today's world.

The agreement of those of us who have made it through the Episcopal Wars is very simple: We are still here, together, on a journey toward God, and it isn't so much about being right or wrong as it is being here, together. We're all searching for answers—but are suspicious of anyone who feels she or he *has* all the answers. The Reverend Erin Jean Warde, who serves as college chaplain to Baylor University, puts it beautifully: "I'm an Episcopalian because the Episcopal Church is about discernment over dogma. The primary punctuation of the Episcopal Church is a

question mark, not a period.” And Marcy McKay, a lay leader in Amarillo, Texas, seconds the sentiment: “I love the Episcopal Church because I do *not* have to check my brain at the door.”

Our willingness to live into a life of community oriented toward God, our willingness to welcome a diverse group of others to share our journey, our willingness to live out the questions in our daily lives in the world are all part of what it means to be Episcopalians. We’ll consider these in detail in the chapters on living the questions, living together, touching other lives, and telling the world about our faith.

So yes, we are the Church of schism and controversy, but we are also the Church of welcome and acceptance. We are the Church of power and privilege, but we are also the Church of racial and economic justice. We are the Church of the frozen chosen, but we are also a Church who loves beauty and feels deeply. We have been a Church that ostracizes, but we can also be the Church that reconciles.

We have deserved many of the bad things that people have believed about us—and we have manifested so many good things that people don’t even know about.

So here is the truth about the Anglican/Episcopal tradition, and why some of us have given our lives to worshipping and serving within it: Granting every perceived—or actual—negative about who we are, where we came from, or what we are at our worst, at our best we are something equally powerful, totally positive, and absolutely worth sharing with the world. The Reverend Stephen Kidd, who ministers in Gulfport, Mississippi, brings many of the strains of this opening meditation together when he reflects on why he is an Episcopalian:

The Episcopal Church welcomed me when others wouldn’t have me, and honored my questions when others simply sought to dismiss them. Its sacramental life spoke to parts of my soul that the fundamentalism of my childhood couldn’t touch; worship felt ancient, holy, and real in ways I didn’t expect. Fifteen years later I am still amazed at the depth and breadth of our tradition, and I appreciate all the more our peculiar vantage point at the intersection of the Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox corners of our Christian family. The Episcopal Church isn’t perfect, far from it, but for me, it is home.

The Episcopal Church is a place where you can participate in Evensong, a sung version of the evening prayer service in which Christians have been participating since the second century—and an event that may induce you to tweet, pin photos, or Facebook it so that the world can know what a powerfully transformative experience you find it.

The Episcopal Church is a place where every Sunday, priests recite liturgy that Christians have been repeating for the last two thousand years, and, in their sermons, they may discuss hip-hop, commercials, sporting events, and the news of the moment.

The Episcopal Church is a place where every Sunday we eat the bread and drink the wine in memory of Jesus—but every week we are reminded in our liturgies that communion is intended to fuel us to live out Jesus' mission in our own world in the coming week.

The Episcopal Church is a place where day in and day out, priests and parishioners reach out to each other as members of a loving community—and day in and day out, they reach out to the world in love and service, building homes, feeding the hungry, and serving those who suffer because that is what we are called to do.

The Episcopal Church is changing, and it is life-changing. It is made up of saints and of imperfect people like myself. And for me, as for Stephen, Erin, Tom, Jason, Mary, Greg, Marcy, Andy, Diane, Lory, and so many more of us—the Episcopal Church is our home.

If you want to experience life in abundance—and express to others how and where they might find it—then I invite you to follow me deeper into conversation. Perhaps, as Jesus says, Our Father's House does have many mansions, but for me and over a million other saints, this is our dwelling place. And maybe you will discover that you, too, could make our house a home. If the Episcopal Church is your home, if you would like to think that it could be, or if you would like to imagine how any faith tradition could be, I would love to be your guide as together we explore the Episcopal Church of the twenty-first century, a place of ancient wisdom and modern practice.



## Questions for Discussion

1. What draws you to read this book? What is your own history of engagement with the Episcopal tradition?
2. What does it mean to say a tradition is in decline? Is size the only meaningful metric for a church or denomination, or do other elements factor into such a measurement?
3. How do you think churches need to change to engage an increasingly secular culture? What practices of your own church (or of churches you have observed) seem to be reaching people?
4. What do you think about the idea that Americans in general are less drawn to communal activities? Have you seen evidence of that in your own life? What would it take to draw you into a group or new community?

## For Further Reading

John R. H. Moorman, *History of the Church in England* (New York: Church Publishing, 1980).

Moorman was an English scholar who also served as an Anglican priest and bishop, and his classic history of Christianity in England from the Romans to the late twentieth century has substantial sections on the English Reformation and the creation and growing pains of the Church of England.

Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2012).

Tickle, an Episcopal laywoman who served as the first religion editor for *Publishers Weekly*, draws from her years of reading and her wide observation to discuss the massive five-hundred-year shift she sees happening in Christianity, and to assess the dangers and opportunities awaiting the Church in the twenty-first century.

Christopher Webber, *Welcome to the Episcopal Church: An Introduction to Its History, Faith, and Worship* (New York: Morehouse, 1999).

A priest and writer, Webber offers this accessible introduction to the Episcopal Church, briefly but thoughtfully laying out our history, liturgy, and beliefs, and offering readers questions for discussion and further thought.