

Many people are confused by the similarities they see between Anglicans and Roman Catholics. An Anglican service of the Holy Eucharist, or “Mass,” is almost identical to a Roman Catholic one. With the Romans, we have maintained the three orders of ordained ministry: deacons, priests, and bishops. Unlike them, however, in the Episcopal Church we will ordain both women and men to any of these orders. Our clergy can also be married or gay—or both.

Anglicans generally leave matters of personal conscience to the individual. Questions of family planning and the use of contraceptives, for instance, are left to you to decide. We are tolerant of divorce, even though we don’t exactly encourage it. In matters of doctrine, we tend to hold fast to the councils of the early church, but then disagree vehemently about most things of more recent vintage. In this, we affirm broad and fundamental theological principles, rather than some of the medieval accretions that led to the Reformation. The important thing is for us to be able to worship together—not to agree on every last theological jot and tiddle.

Here’s an example. Most Anglicans would decry describing the Eucharist as merely a memorial meal, and would instead affirm the real presence of Jesus in the sacrament. We would generally agree that the bread and wine become for us the Body and Blood of Christ. At the same time, however, there is no official stance on *how* this happens. We leave that up to God.

We are governed not by one central figure, but by different political structures within each of nearly forty autonomous churches. The Episcopal Church’s ultimate authority is the General Convention, a group of clergy and lay people that gathers every three years. The structure of our General Convention resembles that of our national government, which is no coincidence. Some of the same people wrote both constitutions! We have two houses: a House of Bishops and a House of Deputies. Legislation must pass both houses to take effect. Just imagine if the Pope needed the support of lay people from every diocese to promulgate the latest bull!

Anglicans honor and respect our traditions, yet we also seek ways to move forward to address current issues. This is but one way we live out the *via media*, or “middle way.”