

## The Church of England – Colonialism

Skipping over several hundred years of very interesting history, including the execution of Charles I, the period when Oliver Cromwell served as “Lord Protector,” a civil war, and something called the “Glorious Revolution” in England, we turn to the North American continent.

The Church of England was the first denomination to come permanently to any of the original thirteen colonies. The settlement of Jamestown, Virginia, in 1607 marks the formal beginnings of Anglicanism in America. Did you know that the house of the first Anglican church in Bermuda, which was founded that same year, still exists? Virginia was among the colonies where the Church of England was “established,” or the official state church. (New Jersey, which was not united into a single royal colony until 1702, secured religious freedom under Director-general Peter Stuyvesant, when it was still the Dutch colony of New Netherland in 1664.) A typical Virginia parish had three or four churches, and usually a farm (which was run by the priest!). The objective was to place a church within easy riding distance (not more than six miles) from every home in the colony. Each parish was governed by a group of laymen (yes, *men*—always white and always male, and almost always very wealthy), and they met in the only room the church had other than the worship space, the vestry. (This is why the governing board of an Episcopal Church is called the “Vestry” to this day.) These early Virginia vestries were immensely powerful; they levied taxes, hired the clergy, managed the welfare system—as there was no such thing as a separation of church and state back then.

In New Jersey, the English church flourished alongside the Dutch Reformed, Quakers, and other denominations. In the 1720s, only about 600 colonists (out of a population as high as 20,000) attended Anglican services. St. Mary’s Church in Burlington was the first parish in New Jersey organized under the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (S.P.G.), a missionary group from England. Anglicanism was a kind of liturgical and imperial alternative to Puritanism, Quakerism, Congregationalism, and Reformism.

What the colonies especially lacked was a bishop. The Church of England in all thirteen colonies was under the jurisdiction of someone called a “commissary,” a priest who reported to the Bishop of London. To become ordained, one had to travel to London—an expensive and perilous journey by sailing ship. Of fifty-one candidates seeking ordination during a period of forty years, ten died, either at sea, at the hands of pirates, or from illness related to the journey. Before the Revolution, Communion was infrequent, and Confirmation unknown. Most Anglicans on these shores—like colonial Americans in general—treasured their freedom from kings and bishops alike.

The most famous S.P.G. missionary was a man named John Wesley, who had his heart “strangely warmed” and then founded the Methodist movement. An Anglican priest, Wesley imagined the Methodists as a group within the Church of England, but after his death they formed a separate denomination. His “method” was that of strict and literal devotion to the Book of Common Prayer, and early Methodist meetings were characterized by lay preaching, spontaneous prayer, and much singing. They came back to the Church of England for Sacraments. There’s an old joke: “Do you know why there are 6.8 million Methodists in this

country, but only 2.4 million Episcopalians? Simple. The Methodists went west on horseback, but we Episcopalians waited for the parlor car.”