

The Founding of the Episcopal Church

Anglicans on these shores had a hard time during and just after the American Revolution. At Trinity Church, Boston, they had omitted prayers for the King during the Revolution, thinking this better than shutting down the church. Many Anglican clergy emigrated north to Canada to escape scorn and even persecution.

In 1784, a priest named William White, from Philadelphia, gathered with other Anglicans in New Brunswick for the annual meeting of the Society for the Relief of Widows and Orphans of Clergymen. (Our Rector is a member of this same society, and his spouse will receive a modest annual stipend from it after his death.) They realized that organizing a church politically separate from the Church of England was essential if Anglicanism was going to survive. They had met several times in Philadelphia's Christ Church and prepared the first American prayer book, which was published in 1786. These meetings have ever since been known as the General Convention, which now meets every three years.

The revision simplified the services of the Church of England, but some still felt the revision was too conservative. The Rector of King's Chapel in Boston, for instance, wanted to remove all references to the Trinity. When the convention of Anglicans refused to do so, his congregation issued its own prayer book, thus becoming the first explicitly Unitarian church in America.

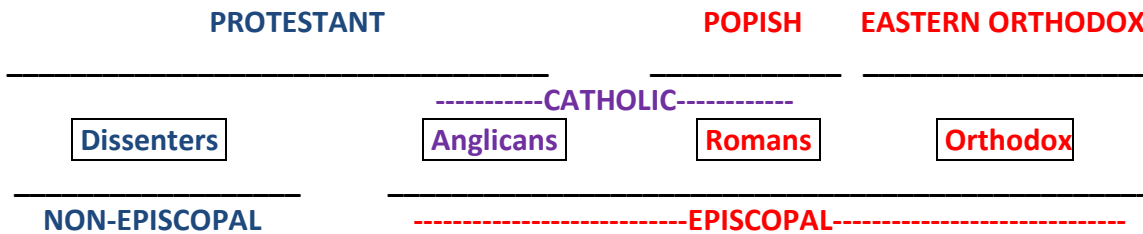
The problem, still, was a bishop. While it was easy enough to find sympathetic bishops in England to ordain the first American bishop, British law required that one first take an oath of obedience to the British monarch—obviously something that a bishop of the newly independent United States would not be willing to do. So Samuel Seabury, a priest from Connecticut, traveled abroad and was ordained a bishop by other bishops in the Scottish Episcopal Church 1784. (The "Church of Scotland" is Presbyterian, but the "Scottish Episcopal Church" is an Anglican one.) This is among the reasons we originally chose the name "the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States."

Soon after this, the English Parliament amended their laws, and three more American bishops were ordained in England: William White, Samuel Provoost (then Rector of Trinity Church, New York), and James Madison (no, not *that* James Madison, but a professor at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia). This was especially important, as tradition requires a minimum of three bishops to participate in the ordination of another bishop. Next, William Smith was elected as bishop of Maryland, but because of his reputation for consumption of alcohol, he was unable to gain consent of General Convention. In 1792, Marylanders elected a second candidate, Thomas Calggett, and he became the first bishop to be consecrated on American soil.

Thus, by 1792, the Episcopal Church was finally configured and organized as an American denomination. With a governing body (known as General Convention), a prayer book, a national constitution, and a mechanism for the creation of its own new bishops, the church could survive on its own.

That we were called "Protestant Episcopal" was no mistake, although some historians suggest we almost became the "Reformed Catholic Church in America." (The word "Episcopal," by the way is from the Greek, meaning of or having to do with bishops.) So, we were to be a

“Protestant,” or reformed, church, in that we continued many reforms of the sixteenth century, including allowing clergy to marry, worshiping in a language people know, and repudiating any ultimate authority on earth. We were also to be an “Episcopal,” or catholic, church, in that we continued the three-fold ordained ministry of bishops, priests, and deacons; held to early-church doctrines; and keeping a local structure called a “diocese” (a group of nearby individual congregations, gathered together under the leadership of a bishop). Thus, Christianity can be construed to look something like this:



The term “dissenters” refers to those Protestant church bodies separate from the established Church of England, and would thus include Baptists, Congregationalists, Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians, and others.¹ By this reasoning, we Anglicans are both catholic *and* protestant, seeking to maintain the best of both streams of Christianity; we are both reformed *and* episcopal, shedding Medieval accretions but keeping to the apostolic tradition of bishops.

The word *Anglican* originates in *ecclesia anglicana*, a medieval Latin phrase dating to at least 1246 meaning *the English Church*. Adherents of Anglicanism are called *Anglicans*, and this includes members of the Episcopal Church. It was not until the nineteenth century that other independent churches derived from the Church of England were named “Anglican,” such as the Anglican Church of Australia.

¹ See Robert W. Schoemaker, *The Origin and Meaning of the Name “Protestant Episcopal”* (1959).