

## PART I

# SURVIVING THE WELCOME

“The Episcopal Church Welcomes You.” You’ve likely seen that iconic red, white, and blue sign half-obscured by overgrown vegetation with two parallel rust lines running down the front. Sometimes this is true and sometimes it feels like false advertising—at least to anyone who’s ever stood by himself at coffee hour waiting for someone to welcome him to St. Whatever.

For a brief time the Episcopal Church tried to change the slogan to “We’re Here for You” which, to me, sounded more like the tagline for an insurance company. Fortunately this attempt at “rebranding” was abandoned but, despite our best efforts, we still welcome people with mixed results.

## Church Shopping Red Flags

Entering a new church for the first time is not easy. There are several indicators to look for when determining whether this might be the place to put down roots and eventually end up in the columbarium. While I dislike the term “church shopping” since it feeds into the consumer mentality that’s already so prevalent, it’s how people find their new church. And guess what? It’s a buyer’s market!

As you consider your options, remember that you hold all the chips. If you are under the age of forty, you will be treated like a rock star. If you have young kids, people might actually drool on you. Coffee hour can make you feel like the cool kid at the fraternity rush party everyone is trying to woo (pick us! pick us!).

My wife, Bryna, and I had this experience when I was in seminary as we spent the first year checking out and experiencing parishes throughout the Diocese of Chicago. Some newcomer committees would swoop down on a young couple like it was a rare species they’d never before encountered. It was nice being treated like a celebrity, but it only lasted until they learned I was a seminarian and we wouldn’t actually be joining the parish, at which point they’d drop us like a bad transmission.

If you’re older, don’t think you’ll be left on the outside of this party looking in. You’ll be popular because you might become a big contributor one day and, boy, we could use some extra money to fix the plumbing in the women’s bathroom. Not that anyone would check to see what kind of car you drove up in, but just in case use the jalopy the first few Sundays.

As you try out some different congregations, here are a few red flags to be aware of on your journey.

1. If they still have Christmas services listed on their website and it’s now July, don’t bother. You can learn a lot from a parish

website—like how much the community cares about Santa Claus’s off-season schedule.

2. If finding the front door of the church from the parking lot feels like a well-guarded secret, there may be a reason for this. There’s nothing like sending the message that “we already have all the parishioners we need, thanks.”
3. If they seem desperate, they probably are. Some parishes all but ask you to become the next senior warden at your first coffee hour. Welcoming is good; desperation is bad.
4. If someone glares at you for sitting in “my pew” and then tells you to get out, go ahead and get out. And never return.
5. If the sermon is nothing more than a venting/therapy session for the preacher, send a bill to the church for the local hourly therapy rate.
6. If the alto section falls asleep during the communion hymn, the organist may need to pick up the tempo.
7. If the Peace takes longer than coffee hour, stay home and drink coffee.
8. If the ushers send a mob bag-man vibe while taking up the collection, be passive aggressive in return and write a check you know will bounce.
9. If the priest doesn’t look at you when shaking your hand in the receiving line, because he/she is looking behind you to greet a big donor, don’t look back as you head to the parking lot.
10. If no one talks to you at coffee hour for more than three uncomfortable, awkward minutes, they probably won’t. Start Googling other churches in the area.
11. If the coffee is tepid Folgers in Styrofoam cups with nondairy creamer, never return. In fact, don’t ever drive by the church again.

# How to Join the Church

I'm often asked, "How do I become a member of the church?" Now, this is more complicated than you might think. I wish I could simply say, "Step into the sacristy and we'll give you the official tattoo. Arm, ankle, shoulder, or where your backside meets the pew?" And that would be it. "You're in!"

It used to be, if not easy, then at least clear. Receive communion at least three times a year and be "known to the treasurer" and you were considered a Communicant in Good Standing. This included amazing perks like being allowed to vote at the Annual Parish Meeting and waxing about the irony of being "in good standing" even while kneeling at the communion rail.

It's certainly easy enough to join a fundamentalist denomination: pledge to take the Bible literally and give us 10 percent of your income. If you believe in evolution, you're out. We like to be fuzzy about such matters unless you were baptized as an infant in which case you're considered a "cradle Episcopalian" and given a trust fund.

In practice, the first step is filling out the newcomer card you'll find in the pews. You'll recognize them because they've all been scribbled on by bored toddlers. It would also appear that Episcopalians have an affinity for miniature golf since those little pencils are usually somewhere in the pew rack. Once you fill it out with the pertinent information like blood type and the name of your first pet, drop it into the collection plate as the usher passes by and then someone from the parish will reach out to you. Or not.

I've filled out newcomers cards in the past with mixed results. Once, someone invited me out for coffee while several other parishes never responded. At one service, when I just wanted to sit in the back row and be left alone, an usher compelled me to fill one out and I didn't want to appear impolite. When I returned home, there was a loaf of bread waiting for me with a note. While some might find

this gesture warm and welcoming, I felt like I was being stalked and never went back.

These days most clergy will tell you that if you show up and participate in the life of the community, you're considered a member. If you really want to commit, you'll allow your name to go into the parish directory. Oh, and there's this dirty little word called pledging which we don't like to say out loud but maybe, if you feel so moved and it's not too inconvenient, you could one day think about actually contributing to the financial well-being of the parish. But let's not rush into things.

The true gateway drug to becoming a member is joining a church committee. It starts innocently enough with an invitation to bring muffins to coffee hour and the next thing you know you've been appointed chair of the brass polishing committee. Yes, getting involved is really about discipleship and living out your faith in the context of Christian community but joining the flower guild, or some other group, is the first step. What, you don't think Jesus insisted on having beautifully arranged calla lilies on the table at the Last Supper?

Whether or not you end up officially joining the church or just showing up regularly for twenty-five years, you're in for a wild ride. Like most things, you get out of it what you put into it—which doesn't mean you can take more out of the collection plate than you put in (“One for you, two for me”). And if you end up sitting on that tattoo during the sermon, please keep it to yourself.

## What's in a Name?

If you want to stir things up at a gathering of Episcopalians, refer to them as “Episcopals.” You’ll face the full wrath of righteous indignation (all in the name of Jesus) while simultaneously receiving a lecture on appropriate forms of ecclesiastical address. As a pastoral gesture intended to save you from such a tongue lashing, I will take a moment to explain how this fits together.

It all starts with the word “Episcopal.” People who belong to the Episcopal Church are called Episcopalians. They are decidedly not, as often seen in the secular media, “Episcopals.” I am an Episcopal priest but don’t ever refer to me as an Episcopalian priest. That’s easy enough, right?

Small “e” “episcopal” refers to the ministry of a bishop. Thus an “episcopal visitation” means a bishop is visiting a congregation. There is no such thing as an “Episcopal visitation” unless you mean a bunch of Episcopalians came over to your house for a visit.

The official name of the denomination is The Episcopal Church, often abbreviated as TEC. The *official*, official name is the “Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America.” This is what you’ll see in the preamble to the first American Book of Common Prayer. This mouthful (even the acronym PECUSA is unwieldy) was eventually changed, informally, to the Episcopal Church in the United States of America, or ECUSA, as those with more catholic tendencies objected to the word “Protestant” in the name. Still with me?

For many years people have affectionately referred to the national headquarters of the Episcopal Church as “815,” a nod to the offices being located at 815 Second Avenue in New York City. This is evidently now taboo (“we’re people, not a number!”), but you’ll still hear it. Nonetheless, I live at 176 Main Street and you’re welcome to refer

to me as “176” if you’re not comfortable with “Tim” or “Father Tim” or “Father Schenck” or “Lent Madness guy.”

As long as we’re on the topic, while you can address a letter to The Rev. Remington Steele, don’t ever call an Episcopal priest “Reverend.” He/she will look around for the Baptist minister who must be in the same room.

And, finally, never bring up Matthew 23:9 around a male priest: “And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven.” We have many methods of countering this verse and justifying our hard-earned title, but it’s best not to poke the dragon.

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## “Did You Really Just Call Me a Primate?”

Here’s a bit of background and a quick primer on the organizational structure of the Episcopal Church. You will find nary a reference to King Henry VIII (okay, just a single, brief oblique reference), but if you don’t know the rhyme to remember the fate of his six wives, it’s “divorced, beheaded, died, divorced, beheaded, survived.” You’re welcome.

The first thing to know is that, being derived from the Church of England, we are part of the worldwide Anglican Communion. This is a confusing term to many because they envision a giant communion wafer the size of, say, Australia. In this instance “Communion” shouldn’t be confused with “communion.” One was instituted by Jesus at the Last Supper, the other had something to do with a divorce.

The titular head of the Anglican Communion is the archbishop of Canterbury who is appointed by the queen of England. Most people don't pay much attention to the ABC (that's the cool kid lingo) unless he's officiating at a royal wedding or crowning the next monarch. When this happens, people *ooh* and *ahh* at the glorious vestments and revel in the pomp before sending the archbishop back to Lambeth Prison, I mean Palace.

The archbishop of Canterbury is a symbol of unity for the 85 million people in 165 countries who identify with our particular way of worship and polity. Every ten years the over 800 bishops of the Anglican Communion gather at the Lambeth Conference to wear purple, argue, and pray. The head bishop of each country or province is called, and I'm not making this up, a primate. All I'll say about this is that some have evolved more than others.

The Episcopal Church is the American branch of the Anglican Communion, which is why you'll hear Episcopalians referred to as "Anglicans" even though we don't have funny accents, eat bangers and mash, or use words like "blimey," "knickers," and "toff." Basically, our ecclesiastical forebears came over from England and wanted to continue worshipping in a familiar manner. Of course, the pilgrims left to get away from the Church of England so they probably weren't too psyched when a bunch of them showed up with their trusty Book of Common Prayer.

It became rather awkward around the time of the American Revolution since the Prayer Book mandated the king be prayed for at every service. It's tough to prove your patriotic street cred when you're drinking tea and praying for King George. A lot of these folks fled to Canada, which seemed a better option than getting tarred and feathered.

After the Revolution, the ones that remained realized they had to do something about that king issue, so they formed their own branch of Anglicanism with an American version of the Prayer Book and the "worldwide" Anglican Communion was born.

This meant creating their own structure for church governance and so they created the bicameral legislative process that still exists.



Hmmm. Bicameral. Where did we hear that word before? Oh, right, sixth-grade civics class. Why reinvent the wheel when you have a bunch of awesome forefathers to steal ideas from?

Thus we ended up with a House of Bishops as the “upper house” and the House of Deputies (comprised of clergy and laity) as the “lower house.” A “constitution” was adopted and the governing body was a General Convention set up to meet every three years, just as it does today.

The chief pastor and administrator of the almost two-million-member Episcopal Church is called the presiding bishop. The presiding bishop is elected by the House of Bishops and confirmed by the House of Deputies for a nine-year term.

In other words, if every Episcopalian buys this book, it would end up on the *New York Times* Bestseller List. And wouldn't that be a great way to spread the word about our fabulous, if sometimes confusing and maddening, faith tradition? I will personally see to it that every single one of you makes a cameo when it's turned into the blockbuster movie of the year.

There are 109 dioceses (and three regional areas) in The Episcopal Church located in the United States and seventeen other nations, each led by a duly elected bishop. You may be surprised to learn that here in America, bishops are not appointed by the queen. Each diocese elects a bishop at an electing convention made up of all the clergy in the diocese and two lay representatives from each congregation. This is a much more democratic process (USA! USA!) than the way many bishops throughout the Anglican Communion are chosen. Many are simply appointed by other bishops with little or no lay participation in the process.

There are about 7,000 congregations in the Episcopal Church. If each congregation were to purchase a single copy of this book, it would not make the *New York Times* Bestseller List nor would you get a cameo alongside Brad Pitt who would play me.

Priests, usually called rectors, lead congregations, sometimes assisted by deacons who are the citizen-soldiers of the church. In

other words, they have “real jobs” in addition to their parish functions. The temporal authority of a parish is the vestry made up of elected leaders and led by wardens.

This is all very cursory and I encourage you to use our friend and colleague, Google, for more in-depth information on our communal governance and ministry. The upshot here is that the altar guild really runs the Episcopal Church.

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## Liturgical Faux Pas

Here is a short list of things you should never do during a church service. I’m providing these gems as a special service to anyone who might be new to the Episcopal Church or is just visiting because your mother-in-law has forced you to attend under duress. Please read through this list carefully to avoid humiliating yourself since, as everyone knows, we like to stare at and judge people who clearly have no idea what they’re doing. As they say to rookies who score their first NFL touchdown, act like you’ve been there before.

- After the choir sings a stunningly beautiful offertory anthem, clap loudly and yell “encore!”
- Stand when everyone else is kneeling.
- Kneel when everyone else is standing.
- Join the procession because, well, everybody loves a parade.
- Ask for seconds at the communion rail.
- Ask the usher for change after you drop a \$5 bill into the collection plate.
- Yell “Amen!” during the sermon. The ushers will have you removed.

- Respond “Thanks be to God” after the lector says “Here endeth the lesson.”
- Raise your hand during the sermon to ask a clarifying question.
- Bring a picnic brunch to eat during the psalm sung to Anglican Chant.
- Do interpretive dance to help others conceptualize the sermon.
- Actually greet people with “a holy kiss.”
- Pray extemporaneously.
- Raise your hands above your head and wave your arms around during the Lord’s Prayer.
- Say “ay-men” instead of “ah-men.”

If you avoid doing these things people will assume you belong, and isn't that what you really want?

