

CHURCH HISTORY: PART I

THE ENGLISH HERITAGE

I. Gathering

Hymn

- God is working his purpose out, *The Hymnal 1982* #534
- Singing songs of expectation, *The Hymnal 1982* #527

Collect for the Day

O God of unchangeable power and eternal light: Look favorably on your whole Church, that wonderful and sacred mystery; by the effectual working of your providence, carry out in tranquility the plan of salvation; let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made, your sson Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Invite the participants to share something of their own family history and what they know of the religious affiliations of their ancestors on both paternal and maternal sides. How did their family background relate to their own interest in Anglicanism?

II. Illumination

1. English Christianity existed as a distinctive branch of the trunk of the apostolic Church from the earliest times of the Christian era. It synthesized Celtic practices and Roman practices into a distinct *Ecclesia Anglicana* long before the Reformation.

2. The first British Christians were Romans, but with the withdrawal of the Romans from England in the Fifth century, Christianity survived in the Celtic areas of the west of England, Ireland, and Scotland. In the centuries during which Celtic Christianity was separated from Roman, the Celts developed a distinctive form of monasticism and church polity and a spirituality centered on creation and the cross.

3. In 597, when Pope Gregory the Great sent Augustine of Canterbury to evangelize the English, there was a centuries-old Celtic church flourishing in Ireland and Scotland. In 664 at the Council of Whitby, the King of Northumberland accepted the Roman date for Easter rather than the Celtic, and the two branches began to grow together in Great Britain. During the next centuries, monasteries adopted a characteristic Benedictine spirituality.

4. From the Norman conquest of 1066 to Henry II's controversies with his Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Becket a century later, to John's confrontation with Archbishop Stephen Langton that led to the Magna Carta, to Henry VIII's displeasure with his Chancellor Thomas More, the relationship of Crown to Church was never easy, but the distinctively English character of the Church was never in question.

5. The Sixteenth-Century Reformation in England was different in character from the Continental Reformation—neither Lutheran nor Calvinist, though affected by both. In England, the Reformation was a political event, expressive of an emerging English national feeling. The Parliament in 1534 passed the Act of Supremacy making the King the Head of the Church in England as the culmination of a series of laws rejecting various claims to entitlement of the Bishop of Rome.

6. Henry VIII did not favor Continental Protestant ideas, and did not start the Church of England; he considered himself an English Catholic. His Archbishop Thomas Cranmer was affected by Lutheran ideas, but during Henry's reign (1509-47) was able to persuade the King only to authorize the writing of the Great Litany in English and the placement of an English Bible in churches. The mass remained in Latin and priests remained celibate.

7. Lutheran and Calvinist ideas did have their day during the brief reign of Edward VI, Henry's son, and it was during this period the first English *Book of Common Prayer* (1549) was issued, making worship uniform throughout the realm. The Protestant direction of the Edwardian reform was halted with the accession in 1553 of Mary, who returned England to the Latin mass and allegiance to the Pope.

8. When Mary died and Elizabeth I inherited in 1558, the distinctively Anglican *via media* or middle way was an expression of her policy. Elizabeth maintained the continuity of apostolic succession through the consecration of her Archbishop Matthew Parker. A national English Church outside the authority of Rome or Geneva survived. The Anglican Settlement of Elizabeth is more important in shaping modern Anglicanism than anything done by Henry VIII.

9. One important religious and cultural monument of the Reformation that does owe a good deal to Continental Protestant influences was the translation into English of the Bible. From John Wyclif and William Tyndale to the various translators of the Reformation era, and finally to the Authorized Version or King James Bible of 1611, the English Bible emerged as a literary masterpiece and cherished national treasure of the English Church.

10. In the 1580's Richard Hooker offered the classical defense of the Anglican middle way in his work *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, holding that the English Church, continuous with the apostolic Church, was both Catholic and reformed and rejecting the claims both of Rome and of the increasingly influential Puritans. Hooker offered the English a way of understanding Church authority as based on Scripture, Tradition, and Reason.

11. Under the early Stuart kings James I and Charles I, Puritanism grew and increasingly challenged royal authority in ecclesiastical as well as legislative and financial affairs. The influence of Calvinism led the Puritans to understand the Church as a gathering of the elect and to reject episcopacy. These challenges culminated between 1642 and 1649 in a civil war between the Puritan-led Parliament and the forces of Charles I. For a time in the 1650s, the Puritans under Oliver Cromwell abolished the episcopate as well as the monarchy, substituting a Presbyterian form of government for the Church and a Commonwealth for the king. However with the restoration of the monarchy under Charles II in 1660, the historic episcopate and the Anglican settlement were restored as well.

12. Through these troubled times, the English Church moved back and forth in response to the political changes, but its continuity was never broken and the Elizabethan *via media* endured. Stemming from its multivalent past, a national Church of England held together faithful believers with many convictions ranging from Anglo-Catholic ("High Church") to Evangelical ("Low Church"), but an English national Church continued to govern itself through bishops and worship together according to the *Book of Common Prayer*.