

# CHURCH HISTORY

## An Introduction

Adult inquirers are likely to be familiar with the proposition that the Anglican way is a “via media” or middle way between Catholic and Protestant and to be aware that the Episcopal Church is a part of the Anglican Communion and stems from the Church of England. In two sessions devoted to church history, it is the aim of this curriculum to build on these understandings and to deepen them. Session One is on the English heritage and Session Two on the American Church. In both sessions, the emphasis is on what is distinctive about Anglicanism, not on what is held in common with all other Christians. The central lesson of both sessions is that the Anglican *via media* is not merely a compromise, but a distinctive approach to living the Christian life. Throughout these sessions, the recurring themes are those of balancing competing claims and living in the tension between opposites: English and Catholic, Protestant and Catholic, community and individual.

Anglican theology comes in many flavors: Anglo-Catholic, Evangelical, Liberal, and Broad Church are some of the terms that have been applied to these different perspectives. These different perspectives are all contained within Anglicanism but are mediated by and through common prayer. The first thematic principle for these classes is that for Anglicans prayer shapes belief: *lex orandi, lex credendi*. And Anglican prayer is common prayer. The Church for Anglicans is not held together by a common confessional statement or by the theology of a particular leader but by community in worship according to a *Book of Common Prayer* “in a language understood of the people.”

The second thematic principle to be seen throughout the history of the Church in England and America is its distinctive emphasis on incarnational theology, centered in the Christian belief that “the words was made flesh and dwelt among us.” This is expressed in the importance of the Sacraments in worship, but also in the Anglican view of nature as revelatory of God and in a positive understanding of the engagement of the Church in this world. Anglicans are not separatists seeking a community of the pure or the saved, but committed participants in the political and social struggles of a messy world that God loves and works to redeem. We are so because we see the world in sacramental terms.

Thirdly, Anglicans value history and historical continuity. Our theology emphasizes continuity with the teachings of the apostles, and our polity stresses the value of the historic episcopate as a symbol of that link down through the centuries. Anglicans do not regard the sixteenth century Protestant Reformation as the beginning of their Church, but see the Church of today as extending in a direct line back to Christ and His Apostles.