

An Abridged Episcopal Glossary

This is a brief listing of some of the terms that may be unfamiliar to those who are new to the Episcopal church. Some terms will be familiar to Roman Catholics while others will be familiar to protestants. For a much more comprehensive listing, see <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/library/glossary>.

Acolyte

In contemporary Anglicanism, a general term which covers not only servers, torchbearers, and lighters of candles but also crucifers, thurifers, and banner-bearers.

Altar

The structure, also known as "the Lord's Table," "the Holy Table," and "the Table," where the offerings are presented and the elements of bread and wine are consecrated in the eucharist.

Anglican Communion, The

Churches in communion with the See of Canterbury throughout the world. Member churches exercise jurisdictional independence but share a common heritage concerning Anglican identity and commitment to scripture, tradition, and reason as sources of authority.

Antiphon

A verse sung before and usually after a psalm, canticle, or hymn text. It is often drawn from scripture (especially the psalms) and is appropriate to the liturgical season or occasion.

Apostolic Succession

The belief that bishops are the successors to the apostles and that episcopal authority is derived from the apostles by an unbroken succession in the ministry.

Archdeacon

A clergyperson with a defined administrative authority delegated by the diocesan bishop. Originally the chief of the deacons who assisted the bishop, the archdeacon is now typically a priest who serves as the bishop's administrative assistant.

Aumbry

A cupboard or secure receptacle in the side wall of the sanctuary or sacristy. Aumbries traditionally have been used to keep sacred vessels, books, reliquaries, and oils for anointing. Aumbries may also be used for the reservation of the Blessed Sacrament.

BCP

See [Book of Common Prayer, The](#)

Bells and Smells

A colloquial term for the elaborate ritual style common in many Anglo-catholic parishes. In this expression, "bells" refers to the ringing of bells at various points during the eucharist. "Smells" refers to the use of incense. This term is used pejoratively by some, playfully by others.

Bishop

One of the three orders of ordained ministers in the church, bishops are charged with the apostolic work of leading, supervising, and uniting the church. Bishops represent Christ and his church, and they are called to provide Christian vision and leadership for their dioceses.

Book of Common Prayer, The (BCP)

Official book of worship of the Episcopal Church. The BCP provides liturgical forms, prayers, and instructions so that all members and orders of the Episcopal Church may appropriately share in common worship.

Canon

The word is derived from the Greek *kanon*, a "measuring rod or rule." It has several different meanings in the church.

1. [Scripture] The canon of scripture is the list of inspired books recognized by the church to constitute the Holy Scriptures.
2. [Church Law] Canons are the written rules that provide a code of laws for the governance of the church.
3. [Ecclesiastical Title] A canon may be a member of the clergy on the staff of a cathedral or diocese. A canon on a cathedral staff assists the dean, and a canon on a diocesan staff assists the bishop. Members of the clergy and laity have at times been made honorary canons of a cathedral in recognition of significant service or achievement.

4. [Liturgy] The canon designates the fixed portion of the Great Thanksgiving or the prayer of consecration at the Holy Eucharist, including the institution narrative. The canon does not vary with the liturgical season.
5. [Church Music] A musical composition, with a note-for-note imitation of one melodic line by another that begins one or more notes later than the first, also known as a round.

Celebrant

The bishop or priest who presides at the eucharist and at baptism, and at other sacramental and liturgical occasions such as the Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage, Ministration to the Sick, and Thanksgiving for the Birth or Adoption of a Child.

Chancel

The area of the church set apart for the altar, lectern, pulpit, credence table, and seats for officiating and assisting ministers. It may also include the choir.

Chasuble

The sleeveless outer vestment worn by the celebrant at the eucharist.

Clerk (Vestry)

The clerk or secretary of the parish vestry records minutes of the vestry meetings. These minutes are approved by the vestry and kept in the permanent records of the parish. The clerk may or may not be a member of the vestry.

Crozier, or Crosier

The pastoral staff of a Bishop. It was originally a walking stick and later acquired the symbolism of a shepherd's crook. It is a sign of pastoral authority.

Deacon

Deacons are members of one of three distinct orders of ordained ministry (with bishops and presbyters). In the Episcopal Church a deacon exercises "a special ministry of servanthood" directly under the deacon's bishop, serving all people and especially those in need.

Easter Vigil

The liturgy intended as the first (and arguably, the primary) celebration of Easter. It is also known as the Great Vigil.

Epistle Side

See [Gospel Side](#).

Eucharist

The sacrament of Christ's body and blood, and the principal act of Christian worship. The term is from the Greek, "thanksgiving." Jesus instituted the eucharist "on the night when he was betrayed.

Evening Prayer

One of the principal Daily Offices. Evening Prayer has been the title for the Evening Office in Anglican worship since the 1552 revision of the Prayer Book. It was previously called Evensong or Vespers.

Evensong

See [Evening Prayer](#)

Gospel Side

An archaic term referring to the left side of the altar, and that side of the church building, as viewed by the congregation from the nave. The gospel was read from this side of the altar in the low mass of the Roman Rite. The epistle was read from the opposite side of the altar, which was known as the "Epistle Side."

Great Vigil of Easter

See [Easter Vigil](#).

Holy Eucharist

See [Eucharist](#).

Host (Eucharistic)

The consecrated bread of the eucharist.

Incense

When burned or heated, usually over charcoal, certain woods and solidified resins give off a fragrant smoke. Both the materials and the smoke are called incense. There are congregations where incense is used at the Easter Vigil and other major feasts, and some parishes use it regularly on Sunday. We do not normally use incense at All Saints of the Desert.

Intercession

Prayer for another or others.

Intinction

Administration of the consecrated bread and wine of the eucharist at the same time, typically by dipping the bread in the wine and placing the moistened host in the mouth. Depending on local practice, this may be done by the communicant or the one who administers the wine.

Junior Warden

See [Wardens of a Parish](#).

Lectionary

An ordered system for reading the Holy Scriptures at the eucharist and the Daily Offices. It is usually presented in the form of a table of references for the psalms and readings for the various days of the liturgical year, although it may be a separate book containing the actual texts of the readings.

Lectionary Cycle

The Lectionary in the BCP and other contemporary lectionaries use a three-year cycle, referred to as Years A, B, and C. Year A begins on the First Sunday in Advent in years evenly divisible by three (e.g., 2001).

Liturgy

The church's public worship of God. The term is derived from Greek words for "people" and "work." The church's public worship of God is the work of the Christian people.

Mass

A term for the Holy Eucharist. It is primarily used by Anglicans, Roman Catholics, and Lutherans.

Miter, or Mitre

Liturgical headgear and insignia of bishops and other prelates. It is typically worn by bishops in procession and when pronouncing episcopal blessings.

Morning Prayer

One of the principal Daily Offices. It was previously called Matins.

Narthex

An entry space, foyer, or anteroom of a church between the door and the nave.

Nave

The place in the church building for the congregation. It is between the sanctuary and the narthex or entry of the church building.

Officiant

The person who leads the Daily Office or another church service. The term may indicate a member of the clergy or a lay person.

Paschal Candle

A large candle that symbolizes the risen Christ. It is often decorated with a cross, symbols of the resurrection, the Greek letters Alpha and Omega, and the year.

Presiding Bishop

Chief Pastor and Primate of the Episcopal Church. The office evolved originally from a rule of the House of Bishops in 1789 making its presiding officer the senior member in terms of date of consecration.

Rector

The priest in charge of a parish. Typically, a rector is the priest in charge of a self-supporting parish, and a vicar is the priest in charge of a supported mission. The rector is the ecclesiastical authority of the parish.

Rite

A form for religious ceremony. It includes both what is said and what is done in the religious observance. Rite expresses the church's relationship with God through words, actions, and symbols. It orders the church's common worship.

Rite 1, Rite 2

The 1979 BCP provides the services of Morning and Evening Prayer, the Holy Eucharist, and the Burial Office in both traditional language and contemporary language rites. The traditional language rites are known as Rite 1, and the contemporary language rites are known as Rite 2

Rubric

A ceremonial or other direction given in the BCP, now typically printed in italics.

Sacristy

The room adjoining a church where vestments, altar hangings and linens, sacred vessels, and liturgical books are kept until needed for use in worship. Clergy typically vest in the sacristy.

Sanctus, The

From the Latin for "holy," a hymn of adoration and praise which begins, "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Hosts." It typically follows the preface in the eucharistic prayer. It is sung or said by the celebrant and people.

Search Committee

A group charged to identify candidates for the position of bishop, rector, or other ministry in the life of the church. It may be the responsibility of the search committee to clarify the job description and identify the qualifications that are needed for the job.

Senior Warden

See [Wardens of a Parish](#).

Stewardship

Our personal response to God's generosity in the way we share our resources of time, talent, and money. Stewardship reflects our commitment to making God's love known through the realities of human life and our use of all that God has given us.

Thurifer

The server or acolyte who carries and swings the thurible in which incense is burned during the eucharist and other liturgies. The thurifer, the celebrant, the deacon, or other ministers may use the thurible in the ceremonial censuring of people or objects such as the gospel book or altar.

Verger

A lay minister who assists the clergy in the conduct of public worship, especially in the marshaling of processions.

Vespers

See [Evening Prayer](#)

Vestry

The vestry is the legal representative of the parish with regard to all matters pertaining to its corporate property. The number of vestry members and the term of office varies from parish to parish. Vestry members are usually elected at the annual parish meeting. The presiding officer of the vestry is the rector. There are usually two wardens. The senior warden leads the parish between rectors and is a support person for the rector. The junior warden often has responsibility for church property and buildings. A treasurer and a secretary or clerk may be chosen. These officers may or may not be vestry members. The basic responsibilities of the vestry are to help define and articulate the mission of the congregation; to support the church's mission by word and deed, to select the rector, to ensure effective organization and planning, and to manage resources and finances.

Wardens of a Parish

Officers of a parish. Two wardens are typically selected to serve with members of the vestry. The wardens are generally ranked "senior" and "junior." The mode of selection and duties of the wardens are determined by state law, diocesan canon, or parish by-laws. The senior warden is usually the primary elected lay leader of the congregation, and serves as a principal liaison between the parish and the rector. The junior warden is often given responsibility for the upkeep of the parish buildings and grounds. The senior warden typically presides at vestry meetings in the absence of the rector, and the junior warden presides at vestry meetings if both the rector and the senior warden are absent. In case of clerical vacancy, the senior warden may be the ecclesiastical authority of the parish for certain purposes.