

✠ ST. STEPHEN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Beyond The *Red* Door



CUSTOMS, TRADITIONS, ETC.

By E. Ray Walker

This is the first of what will be an occasional series spotlighting the customs and traditions of the Episcopal Church, some straight from the Bible; others quaint and curious.

The information below was gathered from various sources, including the Episcopal Handbook and online searches.

That said, let's get started. Warning: It gets curiouser and curiouser.

ABOUT THAT RED DOOR

Why is the front door of St. Stephen's painted a bright red instead of, say, a respectable and dignified burgundy and gold?

Red doors are a common tradition in many — but not all — Episcopal churches, symbolizing a variety of concepts. Primarily, they represent the Blood of Christ, his sacrifice and the Holy Spirit. Historically, they signified sanctuary, offering refuge and safety to those seeking it.

Other meanings for red doors through the ages include red being a reminder of the Passover and God's covenant with the Israelites. The Old Testament cites putting the blood of a sacrificed animal on the door frame to be protected from the Angel of Death.



Additionally, red doors can be seen as a symbol of forgiveness, healing and reconciliation within the church community.

The tradition of red doors originated in England during the Middle Ages, when it was a sign of sanctuary. If you were being pursued by someone, you would be safe if you could reach the church door. No one would dare commit violence on holy ground. Further, the church didn't have to abide by civil law. Pursuers could proceed no further, and victims knew that the red doors meant sanctuary, refuge and safety. The person who claimed sanctuary could state his case to the priest and ask for justice to be served.

The red doors also represented protection from spiritual evil. In the beginnings of cathedral architecture, red was painted on the north, south and east doors of a church, making "the sign of the cross," which ultimately marked the church as a safety zone from spiritual dangers in addition to protection from physical harm.

All Saints' Church in Wittenberg, Germany, the church where Martin Luther posted his 95 theses, is thought to have had red doors, so red may symbolize a church of the Reformation.

Other stories say that if church doors were painted red, it meant their mortgage was paid off. This is not confirmed.

Today, many Episcopal, Lutheran, Methodist, Roman Catholic and other churches paint their doors red to symbolize that they are a haven for emotional and spiritual healing and a place for forgiveness and reconciliation. Their red doors are an invitation to visitors to enter a space filled with the Holy Spirit.

Bright red doors shine with welcoming warmth. They gleam like fire and show the way to the Holy Spirit to all who walk through them.

An aside: The bright red paint on the St. Stephen's front door is not just any bright red. Specifically, it's a blend of red, green and blue. RGB values represent the intensity of red, green and blue light that make up a specific color. The values for the door's color are 191-13-62, also known in some techy color circles as #bf0d3e. However, to the rest of us, "Episcopal Red" is perfectly acceptable.

Paint maker Sico uses a slightly different recipe. The red-green-blue values are 139, 71, 124 and the HEX code is #8B477C. The LRV for Sico 3052-53 Rouge Episcopal is 11.47. The LRV stands for light reflection value and measures the percentage of light that a color reflects.

Thus ends today's lesson in color-ology. Class dismissed.

CROSS OR CRUCIFIX?

In the Episcopal Church, crosses and crucifixes are used and neither is a universal standard. While some parishes favor crucifixes, particularly those with Anglo-Catholic leanings, others use plain crosses. Ultimately, the choice between a cross and a crucifix is a matter of local preference and tradition. St. Stephen's leans toward the cross.

Each parish or church makes its own decision between the two. A church that chooses to go with crosses would typically call itself a Resurrection church, and a crucifix church would be a Good Friday church. A church that chooses both values the entire journey. Or, none of that really matters and only the aesthetic of the worship space might be the choice.

Individual Episcopalians make personal choices about which symbol they prefer. Some favor the simplicity of a cross, and others find deeper meaning in the crucifix.

It's your thing; do it your way.

WHY DO EPISCOPALIANS BOW TO THE CROSS?

In the Episcopal Church, the act of bowing to the cross is a sign of reverence and respect for the symbol of the crucifixion. In general, the act of bowing to the cross is a way for Episcopalians to express their faith and devotion to God and to commemorate the life and teachings of Jesus Christ.

Bowing to the cross is usually accompanied by a prayer or recitation of a creed, which serves to reaffirm the faith and beliefs of the congregation. It is also a reminder of the sacrifice Jesus made on the cross for the salvation of mankind.

Bowing is a common physical expression of reverence, such as bowing to the altar when entering or leaving the church or when the cross passes in a procession. However, Father Trent Moore, the St. Stephen's rector, explains: "It's more nuanced than simply the cross when arriving. Some will certainly do that, while others will bow to the altar, and some to the real presence of Christ that remains in the tabernacle (an ambry for some) upon the blessed elements of the Sacrament of Communion represented by the flame of the altar candles. It's all permissible and up to the individual, yet not a forced one-size-fits-all for everyone."

The specific customs and practices regarding bowing at the cross may vary from one church or congregation to another.

Related to bowing is ...

Genuflection, involving touching a knee briefly to the floor while holding the upper body upright, and then returning to a standing position. It is not required by the Prayer Book at any time.

Why do many of the people bow or genuflect upon entering or leaving their pew?

The altar is the place on which Jesus comes to us in the elements of consecrated bread and wine. The altar is therefore a symbol of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ upon the cross just as the American



flag is a symbol of our country and those who sacrificed their lives to keep our country free. Just as we salute the flag by placing our hands over our hearts, we also “salute” the altar by bowing our heads toward it.

UP, DOWN, KNEEL; UP, DOWN, KNEEL ...

A frequent comment from first-time visitors to an Episcopal Church concerns confusion about when to stand, when to sit and when to kneel.

“Jumping jacks,” they snark.

It can be baffling. The short answer is stand to sing, sit for instruction, kneel to pray. Of course, there’s more to it than that.

Standing is often for singing, praising or proclaiming the Gospel. Sitting is for listening to readings and the sermon, while kneeling is generally for prayer and expressing humility. Many churches also allow for bowing or making the sign of the cross.



—**Standing:** Episcopalians stand to sing hymns, offer praise, and affirm their faith (e.g., during the Nicene Creed). They also stand when the Gospel is proclaimed, as it’s a moment of honor and celebration.

—**Sitting:** Sitting is typically for listening to readings from the Bible (Old Testament and Epistles), the sermon, and sometimes during choir anthems.

—**Kneeling:** Kneeling is often a posture of prayer and humility, especially during the Confession and Absolution, the Eucharistic Prayer, and the post-Communion prayer.

Many also kneel when returning to their pew after receiving communion.

Episcopalians are encouraged to participate in worship in ways that feel comfortable and meaningful to them. While there are general guidelines, personal piety and comfort are valued.

IMPORTANT: There is no pressure to conform to a specific posture if it’s uncomfortable.

AN EPISCOPAL ROSARY?

Yes, but it’s called the Anglican rosary, which is a bit different from the rosary our friends at Precious Blood use.

The Anglican rosary, sometimes called prayer beads, was developed in the 1980s as a tool for Anglican spirituality. It consists of a cross, an invitational bead, four cruciform beads, and four sets of seven beads called “weeks.” Rather than focusing on set mysteries, as in the Catholic rosary, the Anglican rosary encourages users to pray with scriptures, pre-written prayers, or their own prayers, often using the structure to quiet the mind and focus on God.

The Catholic rosary has a crucifix, a single decade (10 beads) for each mystery, and a different arrangement of the beads.

The Catholic rosary has a much longer history, rooted in the medieval period.

SILENCE IS GOLDEN

“The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him.” (Habakkuk 2:20)

It is traditional at Episcopal churches to remain quiet prior to the start of the service. This is a time of prayer and meditation for many. If you need to speak, be respectful of others.

