

From Scratch: Explaining Anglican / Episcopal

by [Anna Olson](#) on March 23, 2016

A few times a month for most of the last eight years, I have led a Bible Study at Century Regional Detention Facility, Los Angeles County's main jail for women. It's an environment where just about nobody knows what an Anglican / Episcopalian is. I pass through nine locked doors and a security checkpoint, arrive in my assigned unit, and gather whoever is in the mood for Bible Study (or an hour out of her cell...). Fifteen to forty women sit in a noisy circle and wait for me to start. I have to explain Anglicans / Episcopalians, every time, completely from scratch.

Here's my spiel. I vary it a little each time, but the basic points seem to work pretty well:

- The Anglican / Episcopal Church is a Christian Church. We believe in God and in Jesus and in the Bible. If you're familiar with Catholic Church, our worship services look pretty similar. If you're more familiar with Protestant churches, you will easily recognize the way we place a lot of emphasis on the Bible as the living Word of God, and draw on scripture to try to understand how we should shape and change our lives so that everything we do points towards God.
- Here are some things that set us apart from a lot of churches you may have experienced. We really try hard to be a church that has room for everyone. That means that our leaders and our members are men and women, people who are married and not married, have kids and don't have kids, people who are gay and straight, people of different races and different languages and cultures, people with different kinds of mental and physical abilities. When you hear us criticized, it's usually because someone thinks we have the doors open a little too wide. But we truly believe that God love us all and has placed gifts in all of us, and that the church is the richest when it can receive all those gifts and make space for people to use them.
- We're not a church with a lot of rules. That makes some people suspicious. But God really just gave us two jobs to do, love God and love each other. God could have said, "Judge one another, as I will judge you," but judging isn't actually in our job description. God kept that one for Godself. So we try to let God be God and get about the business of doing our job: love.
- Being good at our job takes practice. Anything you want to do well takes practice. If you want to learn to play the piano, you're not going to play something beautiful the first time you sit down. It's true of anything hard: braiding hair, speaking a new language, learning to read, or learning to draw. If you want to do it well, you have to practice, and you have to be willing to make a lot of mistakes along the way. That's why Jesus talks so much

about forgiveness as being part of love. God shows love for us by forgiving our mistakes, and we have to find it in ourselves to forgive other people.