



LUTHERAN

looks at...

EPISCOPALIANS

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INTRODUCTION

Why write a book about Episcopalians and have a Lutheran do it? There are good answers to both parts of that question.

In recent years, the Episcopal Church has been in the headlines. In 1997 the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Episcopal Church of the United States adopted a “full Communion agreement.” The agreement said that each recognized the other church as a true church. While they remained independent churches, they could now cooperate in joint ministries, join in worship and Communion, and allow the clergy from one church to serve in the other. That agreement became official in January 2001 and was celebrated in a joint worship service in the National Cathedral in Washington, DC, which is an Episcopal Church.

More recently, in 2003 the Episcopal Church created headlines by ratifying the consecration of an openly gay bishop, Rev. V. Gene Robinson, who had been elected bishop of the New Hampshire diocese. Robinson’s election as bishop sparked controversy inside and outside the Episcopal Church.

Perhaps you are acquainted with the Episcopal Church because of its image. Maybe it’s the familiar red doors of the churches, inviting people to find safety and refuge inside. Maybe it’s the familiar street sign that says “The Episcopal Church welcomes you” and then points in the direction of the local parish. Whatever the reason, the Episcopal Church is no stranger to Americans. It has been part of the American scene since the days of our Founding Fathers, and the roots of the church go back even farther than that.

But why have a Lutheran do the writing? The answer is partly that a Lutheran pastor like me does not view the

Episcopal Church as something foreign or unknown. When I look at the history of the Episcopal Church and the wider Anglican community to which it belongs, I am taken back to Reformation history. The Lutheran church and the Episcopal Church's parent body, the Church of England, can both trace their beginnings to the Protestant Reformation.

In addition, when I look at the Anglican liturgy, I recognize some Lutheran liturgical forms. But don't be misled by that. The Lutheran church and the Anglican Church sharing common worship forms does not mean they share the same beliefs in all matters. Worship forms are one thing; the content of worship forms is quite another.

This book is intended to give you an overview of the history and beliefs of the Episcopal Church. Its purpose is not to explain what the average member of the Episcopal Church believes. As will be demonstrated, that would be a difficult, if not impossible, task. I say that because the Episcopal Church wholeheartedly encourages independent thought. The Episcopal Church is not a confessional church like the Lutheran church, having confessions that bind and unite the faith of its members. While the Episcopal Church acknowledges confessional statements that are of Episcopalian or Anglican origin, it thinks of these statements more as historical documents than as confessions that bind the faith of its members. The confessions of the Episcopal Church today are the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds. Because the creeds describe Christian doctrine in general terms, the door is open for Episcopalians to view matters of faith in various ways. Because of that, there are no "average members." Rather, there are members who agree in some matters of belief, disagree in others, and find common ground in their worship life and heritage.

From the outset, I want to make it clear why the Episcopal Church is considered a Christian church. That is because it bears the marks of the church: it proclaims the gospel and administers the sacraments. Jesus Christ is held up as Savior. True, some

Episcopal Church clergy members say things that depart from historic Christian beliefs. But any church body can have clergy and laity that go beyond what the church officially professes.

Perhaps at this point a word about confessional Lutherans is in order. By confessional Lutherans I mean those who understand the Christian faith as explained in the Lutheran Confessions: the three ecumenical creeds, the Augsburg Confession, the Apology to the Augsburg Confession, the Smalcald Articles, Luther's Small and Large Catechisms, and the Formula of Concord. Confessional Lutherans subscribe to what the confessions uphold and what they condemn. In other words, confessional Lutherans believe there are *boundaries* to Christian faith and practice; people cannot believe or do whatever they want and still call themselves Lutherans. It is unfortunate, but many Lutheran church bodies that were confessional in the past have jettisoned the confessions to keep up with modern thought and to avoid the stigma of being politically incorrect. References in this book to confessional Lutheranism refer to Lutherans and Lutheran churches that still look to the Lutheran Confessions as a correct exposition of God's Word, and then follow the confessions in their beliefs and practices.

Throughout this book, I will make mention of a survey of Episcopal Church clergy. This was an electronic survey that I initiated in the summer of 2004 to prepare for writing this book. I am indebted to the many Episcopal clergy throughout the country who responded to the survey and explained their beliefs. I am also indebted to the clergy and laity of the Episcopal Church who gave me time for personal conversation. I am especially grateful to Bishop James L. Jelinek of the Minnesota Diocese of the Episcopal Church and Rev. Paul Rider of St. John Episcopal Church in Mankato, Minnesota, for the interviews they granted me, and to members of St. John Episcopal Church for participating in a focus group. Finally, I am grateful to Rev. Katharine Jefferts Schori, the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, for taking part in

an e-mail interview. I have used the information gathered from this research to paint what I hope is an accurate picture of the contemporary Episcopal Church.