

**Some Widely Held Rituals and Traditions of the Episcopal Church:**

Prepared by the Evangelism Task Force of St. John’s by the Campus Episcopal Church and Student Center (2006)

1) Amen – the word “amen,” which occurs at the end of every prayer, is meant to be said by every member of the congregation. It means, “so be it,” and is a way of making the prayer one’s own, as well as expressing the fact that we are engaged in corporate rather than private worship.

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2) Bowing Heads – a) to the altar on entering and leaving the church; b) to the processional cross as it passes; c) at the name of Jesus Christ in the Nicene Creed (or any other time); d) at the words “for us and for our salvation” in the Nicene Creed. These are acts of respect, reverence and honor, similar to those of people standing and removing their hats when the flag passes by.

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3) Bowing at the Waist or Solemn Bow – Parishioners may do this as an act of respect or honor to the consecrated bread and wine on the altar before and after going to receive

communion and at the words “became incarnate from the Virgin Mary” in the Nicene Creed.

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4) Entering Church – It is customary to kneel immediately after entering the pew, greeting God reverently and thanking God for the privilege of worshipping in God’s House.

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5) Genuflection – An act of reverence in which one kneels so that the right knee touches the floor. Parishioners may do this when passing by a tabernacle or aumbry in which the reserved sacrament is being kept, before and after going to receive communion, and at the words “became incarnate from the Virgin Mary” in the Nicene Creed.

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6) Keeping of Silence – In the period before the service, we commend the keeping of silence. It may be used as a time for quiet preparation, meditating on the holiness, power, and mercy of God, reading the Gospel, collect, and/or the words of the opening hymn.

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7) Kneel, Stand, Sit – We kneel or stand for prayer because we believe these to be appropriate positions in which to approach God. Both are traditional, humble positions of the creature before

the Creator. We stand to sing our praise and recite our creed, and we sit for instruction.

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8) Leaving Church – It is customary to kneel for a moment in prayer, asking God to let His light shine forth in us during the coming week.

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9) Passing of the Peace – Usually a handshake or a hug is exchanged with those in our immediate vicinity. It is a sign of our oneness in the Holy Spirit and our willingness to make peace with others before we approach the altar to make our offering.

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10) Seasons of the Church Year – The first Sunday in ADVENT is the beginning of the Christian year. Advent means the coming of our Lord and his kingdom. The color is purple, due to the theme of repentance and solemn preparation. CHRISTMAS, the Feast of the Nativity of our Lord, extends from December 25 to January 6. The color is white, symbolizing purity, happiness and joy. EPIPHANY, which means literally “showing forth” or “manifestation,” is the season when we celebrate Christ’s divine power and glory revealed for all people. It begins on January 6, and the color is green, symbolizing hope, life and growth.

The first day of LENT is called Ash Wednesday, when we remember the ancient custom of burning the palms blessed on Palm Sunday the previous year and placing the ashes on the foreheads of the faithful in the form of a cross as a reminder of mortality and repentance. The color is purple, as we observe special acts of discipline and self denial. The seven days before Easter are known as HOLY WEEK, the first day of which is Palm Sunday, commemorating Christ's triumphant entry into Jerusalem. The color is purple because it is still a time of penitence. EASTER is the "Queen of feasts" and the apex of the Christian year. Easter Day is always the first Sunday after the full moon that occurs on or after the spring equinox on March 21. The color is white, signifying God's power and triumph, and our confidence and joy, through the resurrection of the Lord. Easter lasts 50 days, ending with the Day of Pentecost. On the Day of Pentecost we celebrate the fact that our Lord sent the Holy Spirit to reinforce the faith of the Apostles. During the season of PENTECOST we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit as the birth of the church. The color of the season is red, symbolizing the tongues of fire. Pentecost extends to the first Sunday of Advent.

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- 11) Sign of the Cross – A manual act which makes us mindful of the cross and our claim that we experience now "all benefits of Christ's passion." The most common form of this act by the parishioner involves using the right hand to touch the forehead, diaphragm, left shoulder and right shoulder with the fingertips. It is done by the congregation as they are being blessed by the celebrant to show their acceptance of the blessing. It may also be done as a manual "Amen" at other times, especially at the naming of the Trinity by person, at the end of the Creeds, and at the "bless us also" phrase in the Eucharistic Prayers. Some find this sign meaningful to use when going to receive communion and/or immediately before and/or after receiving the bread and the wine.

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- 12) Standing After Gospel Reading – It is customary to remain standing after the reading of the Gospel until the priest has reached the pulpit and completed an opening prayer to the sermon.

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Sources of information: A New Dictionary for Episcopalians by the Rev. John N. Wall, Jr.; "Church Customs Every Episcopalian Ought to Know" and "Seasons of the Church Year," by Forward Movement Publications; "Discovering the Episcopal Church," by the Rev. Charles W. F. Smith; and Fr. Al Aiton.