

# How did we get here? A (very) short history of Anglicanism

**The Rev. Robert Browne**

In the year 596, a devout Benedictine monk named Augustine landed on the shores of southern England. He planted there the Christian church and established the See of Canterbury which would become the symbol of unity within the Anglican Communion. The English Church was primarily Roman Catholic until the 16th century when the winds of the Protestant Reformation blew in from continental Europe and created a climate for change.

While it is true that King Henry VIII had some marital problems with Rome, the forces of the reformation had a significant effect in turning the English church into an independent body free from Rome, but retaining both Catholic and Protestant influences. The great theologian Richard Hooker called it the “via media,” (the middle way). The term Anglican means of England, but it took on a larger meaning when the English church expanded overseas.

When the colonies in America revolted in 1776, the American congregations of the Church of England formed a free and independent church. In the first General Convention meeting in 1789 the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States was constituted. It adopted the Book of Common Prayer and a constitution in which the formularies for doctrine, discipline and worship were set forth. Much power was abrogated to local dioceses because of their former experience with lordly English bishops.

The new American church sought to remain in connection with the historic Anglican Church but insisted on complete autonomy from the See of Canterbury.

In short, Episcopalians are Anglicans in America bound to the larger Communion by a common heritage under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Anglicans in the United States are called Episcopalians because in 1789 they took the name Episcopal (from the Greek, *Episkopos*, overseer) which denotes a church under the authority of bishops in apostolic succession.

The Episcopal Church in the United States is one of 38 autonomous Provinces in the Anglican Communion worldwide.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, speaking to bishops, priests and laity in *The Challenge and Hope of Being an Anglican Today* said: “The only reason for being an Anglican is that this balance of Reformed, Catholic, and cultural and intellectual concern seems to you to be healthy for the Church catholic overall, and that it helps people grow in discernment and holiness.” (June 2006)

**Browne served as communication officer for the Anglican Consultative Council during the 1988 Lambeth Conference. This article is reprinted with permission from *The Texas Episcopalian*, March 2007.**