

# Welcome to St. Stephen's!

## Dear Visitor,

We're glad you could come to see us. All of us had our own first visits here, and we know a new place can be a little strange. Sometimes a short FAQ can help!

## What is this place?

St. Stephen's Episcopal Church. We're part of the national Episcopal Church, which in turn is part of the Anglican Communion, one of the great divisions of the world Christian community.

## Who's Stephen?

Stephen was chosen as one of the first Deacons of the church, and is regarded as the first Christian martyr. He exemplifies both the ministry of caring for the poor and helpless, and of love and forgiveness for those who hurt us.

You might take a moment to look at the banners on the rear wall of the church.

## What happens now?

There's often a printed bulletin with an order of service. If there isn't, you'll be referred to a page number in the *Book of Common Prayer* in the book rack in front of you. That book has orders of worship for our normal weekly services, and also for those marking life's great transitions - Baptisms, weddings, and funerals, especially.

## Which book is it?

You should see a red *Book of Common Prayer*, together with a black Bible and blue (traditional) and dark green (recent) hymnals. In the 10:00 a.m. Sunday service, many people pick up the blue hymnal first.

## Will someone tell me when the service starts?

The signal is usually the playing of the processional hymn, or the entrance of the clergy at the front, and the congregation stands up for the opening words. Sometimes there's no one at all up at the altar at first. Don't be concerned - we approach the altar with some reverence and formality, and you're likely to see a procession of crucifer (carrying a tall cross), acolytes, choir, and clergy during the opening hymn. During the six weeks of Lent before Easter, the procession is done in solemn silence.

## Standing and Sitting?

Watch the crowd. Some lifelong Episcopalians do it automatically, and the clergy and bulletin provide polite prompts. Generally we stand for praise (singing, Gospel, some prayers, and creed) and sit for instruction (scripture readings, sermons, announcements). Most visitors stand when the rest of the congregation does, although it's well understood that not everyone can.

## *Kneeling* (I'm not so sure about this!)?

Episcopal and Catholic tradition includes kneeling for prayers on the kneeling benches provided. Many of us do so immediately on entering the church, just as one first greets the host in any home. Kneeling is not easy for everyone and is a matter of individual choice.

**Am I supposed to join in the service, or may I just sit and watch?**

That's your decision. Typically the congregation joins in singing the hymns, reading a Psalm aloud, and in the responses to the various prayers. At the same time, we welcome visitors from all faiths or no faith, and do not for one moment ask you to recite or sing language to which you cannot subscribe in good conscience. We hope you will take this opportunity to think about how God might work in many different places.

**Am I supposed to cross myself?**

You are likely to see some individual gestures of devotion, such as the sign of the cross or bowing at particular moments, such as mentioning the Trinity or the Resurrection, or when the cross passes. These are by no means required, and we would far rather you feel comfortable and take an active interest in the service than feel under any such obligation.

**Am I supposed to hug people?**

Typically the officiant will say at some point "The peace of the Lord be always with you." and the congregation responds "And also with you." It is usual to shake hands and exchange the same greeting (often informally condensed to "Peace") with those standing near you. Hugging is never required, but is definitely permitted when two people both feel like hugging.

**What's this in the bulletin about "Communion of the People"?**

At this point, members of the congregation are invited to walk up to the altar rail, where most kneel, to receive a small wafer and sip of wine as the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. This is the profound central moment of the service and emphasizes God's individual love for each of us. Not everyone chooses to come forward, and no one from the church will ask why or why not. Receiving communion is an act and acknowledgement of Christian faith, and you should feel no obligation to do so simply to follow the crowd.

**I'm a little unsure of the etiquette for communion...(?)**

Understandably so - even profound moments have traffic issues. You may notice that the choir receives communion first (they have an anthem to sing right afterward), then the church youth (they have a program starting immediately), then the general congregation as directed by the ushers. We usually walk up the center aisle in two lines and return to our seats by the side aisles.

You will be offered the wafer by one person and the wine by a second. You may:

- consume the wafer and then sip the wine, or
- hold the wafer, dip it into the wine, and then consume it, or
- simply consume the wafer and decline the wine.

You may ask for a nonalcoholic alternative, and if you're uncomfortable with the two steps up to the altar rail, mention this to an usher or stand in your place and we'll bring communion to you just before or after it's served to those at the altar rail.

**I don't want to be rude, but don't you have germs from the common cup?**

We thought of that. Microbiologists tell us the practice (which includes careful wiping of the cup and turning it between each communicant) is fully acceptable.

**How do I know the service is over?**

The clergy, choir, and others leave the altar, but the actual end is a dismissal ("Go in peace...") and response ("Thanks be to God.") and the extinguishing of the altar candles. At that point most people move quietly to the rear doors, where the clergy always like to greet you

**How do I find out more?**

We're at [www.ststephenstroy.org](http://www.ststephenstroy.org), and if you give us an address we'd be happy to add you to the list for our newsletter. You are very welcome whether you're making a single visit to the area or are looking for a spiritual home – joining officially is very easy once you make that decision. We celebrate newcomers and love to hear your story.