

Way of Discipleship Small Groups

What are the gifts of the Church of England?



Touching base (5 minutes)

Open in prayer as is helpful for your group.

If this is your first session take time to introduce yourselves and set any ground rules you want to for your time together.

If you met previously take the opportunity either as a group or in pairs to check in with each other about how your response from last time has gone.



Opening question(s) (5 minutes)

Introduction: this session is quite “informational” about being in the Church of England, with no specific Discovery Bible Study, but aims to help us see the gifts and the vision of being Anglican.

Discuss: What have you experienced as the gifts of being in the Church of England?



Understanding the information (35 minutes)

Share these thoughts in your own words or read them together:

If you belong to a Church of England (or Anglican – meaning “of England”) community, you are part of an expression of God’s church with features which have the potential to help us be a great blessing together for these reasons:



Being a blessing by being set up to serve the whole country.

The Anglican Church’s mission has a geographical reach, with the country being divided up at various levels to ensure everyone can be served. These areas are the result of historical decisions, and, while the idea of splitting the country up continues, the shape of some of these areas will be changing to respond to, for example, changes in population.

There are two provinces, north and south, based in Canterbury and York.

Between them, these provinces are divided up into 41 areas, based around cities with cathedrals, known as dioceses. Each diocese has a bishop, who oversees the ministry of the church within it. There are often other area bishops (known as suffragans) within a diocese. In Birmingham we have a Bishop of Birmingham and a (suffragan) Bishop of Aston. The Bishop is supported by an Archdeacon (“servant-leader”) who is his/her “eyes on the ground”. In Birmingham there are two.

Each Diocese is divided up into smaller areas named deaneries. Each deanery has someone who oversees and serves it called an “Area Dean”. In Birmingham we have six. And each deanery is divided up into parishes. The parish serves a local area, and usually has one or more church buildings within it. Historically, every home in the country is in a parish, and every person has a parish church and priest.

We live in a time in which there is rapid change in how this parish vision is experienced, as resources and populations change.

Overall, throughout England there are 16,000 church buildings (12,500 of them are “listed” meaning they have architectural value and protection) organised into 13,000 parishes, with around 10,000 clergy (3,000 of whom are self-supporting) and about 6,600 licensed Readers. Weekly attendance at services is just under one million and there are 42 Cathedrals with around 10 million people visiting them each year. (The Diocese of Birmingham was formed in 1907, serves a population of around 1.5 million, has 188 church buildings and one cathedral, organised into 150 parishes, and about 15,000 regular worshippers).

Being a blessing by having an emphasis on serving those who are not “members”.
The Anglican Church has a legacy of serving the wider community, and the whole community, whatever the circumstances. This can be seen in various ways:

A commitment to all...Anglican churches give financially towards the diocese, instead of simply paying their own way (through a “Share”). This means the church can seek to be a blessing by being able to offer a presence in every area, whether rich or poor.

A loose sense of membership...Anyone can be on a list of people who can elect various parish officers every year (the list is known as the “electoral roll”.) Apart from that there is no official membership of an Anglican church.

Investing in the good of the community... Before the NHS, many Anglican churches employed medical staff for the community. Before the Education Act many Anglican churches ran schools outside of the government provision. A legacy of this is that the Church of England remains heavily involved in providing education across the country. There are 4,700 C of E Primary and Secondary Schools with approximately 1 million pupils. Around 15 million people alive today went to a C of E school. 1 in 4 primary schools is a C of E school and 1 in 16 secondary schools. (In Birmingham there are 48 C of E Primary schools 2 Secondary schools).

These commitments reflect the original meaning of the word “parish”, as a place of refuge for those on the outside.

Being a blessing by seeking to be open and diverse.

While acknowledging we still have a long way to go in order to be truly diverse, the Church of England is part of a wider global family of churches (known as the “Anglican Communion”) with a shared identity.

There are 38 provinces in the Anglican Communion active in 165 countries, with 77 million members. This means that the average Anglican is a black woman in her 30s, an evangelical, who has at least 3 children and is someone who lives on less than a pound a day.

As well as this geographical and cultural reach, the character of being Anglican offers a breadth which might be a blessing to a large variety of people by holding different things together in being:

Continuous and new: Those who founded the Anglican church in the 16th century did not see themselves as leaving the “one, holy, catholic and apostolic” church, but were seeking a fresh expression of its life. We continue to be “Reformed and Catholic” – seeking to change but also drawing from our roots.

This balance can be very difficult to hold together but is helped by the fact the language and traditions we use for worshipping together are the main source of our shared identity than any formal statement of belief.

Rooted and varied in worship: The first Anglicans looked to the earliest Christian churches to shape its worship - Anglican worship has a lot of resonances with Eastern Orthodox traditions. It is also rooted in Scripture – almost all the liturgy (written down worship) we use is drawn from the Bible, and we can commit to reading through the Bible together through using a pattern of readings (a lectionary).

At the same time there is creativity and flexibility. Our worship can be expressed sacramentally to different degrees, holding the experience of Eucharist with God’s word.

Our worship can be both formal and spontaneous. Because the readings and words we use reflect different seasons of the year, they can give room for many different life experiences and emotions to be brought before God.

Led and democratic: The Anglican church has “mixed leadership”, meaning there can be a sense of direction but also involvement from a lot of people. This means while some decisions can be made in the moment, other, more significant decisions are made over time and with discussion.

This is done through a combination of bishops, who lead on the ground in their dioceses, and elected groups of people called synods. There are around 41 Diocesan Bishops and 74 Suffragan or Area Bishops. The main synod (which means “people together on the way”) is called the “General Synod”, with people (bishops, clergy and “lay”) elected from each diocese. It meets twice a year and people stay on it for 5 years.

Being a blessing by being rooted in everyday life.

Anglican worship has a great emphasis on everyday life – with services and provision for many stages of life – and for everyday people. The first prayer book was for “common prayer” and was designed to put the kind of praying that had previously been done in monasteries into language that could be used in the world of daily work.

Anglican worship celebrates both the world that God has made and the way He is redeeming it. This valuing of God’s creation has inspired a lot of creative art and poetry. The Church of England also has a legal relationship with the state. While this creates some tensions, it is a sign that Anglicans want to be engaged in the world.

Finally, Anglican ministers are set apart to serve in churches, but also in many other contexts, being a blessing by engaging people where they are – there are around 1000 Chaplains in prisons, the armed forces, in education and hospitals.

Discuss: What inspires you about the Church of England? What challenges you?

Responding to God’s leading (5 minutes)

Give people an opportunity to think about, “What might God be showing me and how might I respond?” They may like to write this down and/or share it with the group and/or share it with one other person. A friendly question is to ask each other, “Is there anything that would be helpful to ask you next time?”



Group prayer (5 minutes)

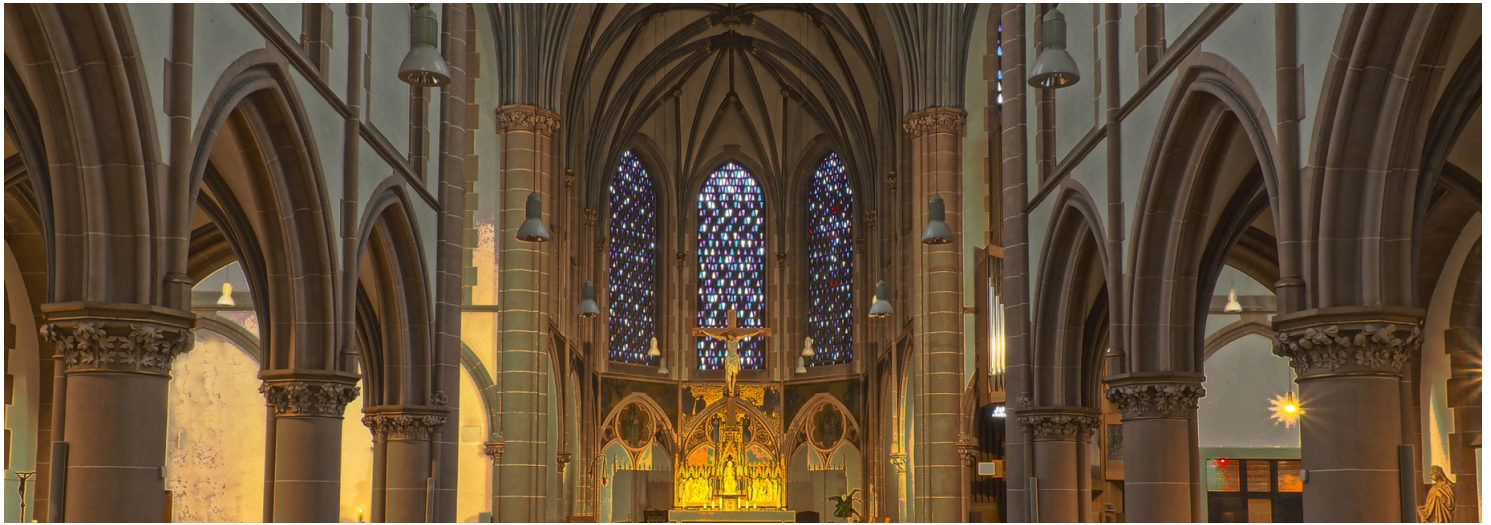
Holy Spirit, sent by the Father,
ignite in us your holy fire;
strengthen your children with the gift of faith,
revive your Church with the breath of love,
and renew the face of the earth,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.





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