

## Church of England

### History and role



St Botolph's Church, Boston, England ©

The Church of England is the established or state church in England. It is divided into two provinces - Canterbury in the South of England and York in the North. Each province has a head or Primate - the Archbishops of Canterbury and York.

The Church of England is part of the Anglican Communion, which is a worldwide family of churches in more than 160 different countries. On any one Sunday more than a million people attend Church of England services, making it the largest Christian denomination in the country.

### The Established Church

The Church of England is the established church, meaning, amongst other things:

- the Monarch is the the Supreme Governor of the church (theologically Jesus is the head),
- the Church performs a number of official functions,
- Church and State are linked

### History

The Church of England traces its roots back to the early church, but its specifically Anglican identity and its links to the State date back to the Reformation.

Henry VIII started the process of creating the Church of England after his split with the Pope in the 1530s. Henry was anxious to ensure a male heir after his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, had borne him only a daughter. He wanted his marriage annulled in order to remarry. In 1534 after several attempts to persuade the Pope to grant an annulment, Henry passed the Act of Succession and then the Act of Supremacy. These recognised that the King was "the only supreme head of the Church of England called *Anglicana Ecclesia*". Henry adopted the title given to him by the Pope in 1521, that of *Defender of the Faith*.



Window in St Peter's, Hockwold, Norfolk ©

### **Role of the Monarch**

Today the Monarch retains the title Defender of the Faith and is still the Supreme Governor of the Church. He or she has to:

- approve the appointment of archbishops, bishops and deans (on the recommendation of the Prime Minister)
- formally open each new session (every five years) of the General Synod (the church's governing body)
- promise to maintain the Church in his or her coronation oath.

### **Legislative role**

The Church of England also has a law-making role in Britain. Twenty-six bishops (including the two Archbishops) sit in the House of Lords and are known as the Lords Spiritual. They are thought to bring a religious ethos to the secular process of law.

However, in an increasingly multi-cultural society, questions are being asked as to whether that role needs to be specifically fulfilled by Church of England Bishops. Future reform of the House of Lords could see the Lords Spiritual made up of a variety of Christian denominations and other faiths to reflect the religious make-up of Britain.

### **Civic duties**

The Church of England, as the established church, fulfils a civic responsibility too. Its bishops and priests are responsible for performing state weddings and funerals, acts of remembrances, memorial services as well as grand occasions like the coronation. After events like the Gulf War or major disasters, the country 'comes together' to mourn under the spiritual guidance of the Church of England.

In recent years, such occasions have become more ecumenical and multi-faith as the Church of England acknowledges Britain's changing religious landscape.