Anglican Watch
Unofficial watchdog of the Episcopal Church
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RESOURCE GUIDE / CHOOSING A CHURCH

Finding a new church

A practical guide to observing a parish and deciding when to leave

For the first year: Do little. Listen much. Do not get “volunteered” for anything.

A new church can offer friendship, meaningful worship, and a place to belong. Give yourself time to learn how it actually operates before accepting responsibilities that make leaving difficult.

Our advice is to spend a full year observing. Listen for gossip, bullying, power plays, and the excuses people make for them. Watch the priest closely. An ordinary mistake deserves room for repair; repeated troubling conduct is your cue to leave.

For people exploring a church, returning after time away, or starting again after harm. The same questions apply across denominations.

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The first-year boundary and two-incident rule are *Anglican Watch* recommendations. They are not diagnostic tests, church law, or a requirement to remain anywhere that feels unsafe.

Protect your first year

Attend worship. Listen to the conversations afterward. Visit ordinary public events and get to know people outside the official welcoming committee. See the parish through a full cycle of holidays, routine Sundays, fundraising, and leadership decisions.

For that first year, accept no volunteer assignments. No committee, vestry seat, teaching schedule, fundraising job, technology rescue, or “temporary” vacancy. Do not let someone put your name on a list and announce that you have agreed. An invitation is not an assignment.

This boundary protects your judgment. Once you run the nursery, hold the keys, or become the only person who understands the website, leaving acquires a list of supposed consequences. “Is this a healthy church?” becomes “Who will cover Sunday?” Preserve the freedom to answer the first question.

Give only what you freely choose. Avoid major financial commitments made under pressure, and keep friendships and sources of support outside the parish. You do not owe anyone an account of your finances, family difficulties, or previous church experiences to establish that you belong.

Have an answer ready

- “I spend my first year getting to know a church. I am not taking on volunteer roles.”
- “Please take my name off the schedule. I did not agree to that.”
- “I have already answered. Please stop asking.”

Use the answer that fits. You do not need to produce an excuse someone can negotiate away. If declining a task leads to guilt, repeated lobbying, public embarrassment, or a sudden cooling of the welcome, take that seriously.

> **A healthy welcome survives the word no.** You should be able to attend, receive pastoral care, and build relationships without first supplying free labor.

A year is an observation period, not an endurance test. Leave earlier when you see a problem. Reaching the anniversary does not obligate you to join, pledge, or start volunteering.

Watch your priest

Pay particular attention when the priest is inconvenienced, contradicted, or dealing with someone who has little influence. Notice how staff, junior clergy, volunteers, and parishioners are treated when an important donor is not watching.

Everyone gets one ordinary mistake. People miss appointments, speak clumsily, or misunderstand a request. Look for a direct acknowledgment, a useful correction, and changed behavior. An apology followed by the same conduct has not solved anything.

> **If you see two or more instances of bullying, disparaging parishioners, dishonesty, unauthorized leave, excessive superficial charm, or other sketchy conduct, leave. Then and there.** The incidents need not be identical, and you need not be the target.

- **Bullying:** humiliation, intimidation, shouting people down, threats, or treating disagreement as disloyalty. “That is just how Father is” describes the problem.
- **Disparaging parishioners:** mocking someone’s intelligence, finances, marriage, health, sexuality, or supposed spiritual failings. A confidential pastoral relationship should not become your introduction to parish entertainment.
- **Dishonesty:** material accounts that change with the audience, promises repeatedly denied, or misleading statements about money, decisions, and responsibilities.
- **Unauthorized leave:** time away contrary to actual approval arrangements, deception about absences, or knowingly abandoning agreed coverage. Approved vacation, sabbatical, medical, and family leave are legitimate. An empty office alone establishes nothing, and medical details are private.
- **Excessive superficial charm:** instant special friendship, relentless flattery, premature intimacy, pressure to share personal information, or warmth used to secure loyalty and favors. Ordinary friendliness is welcome. Watch what happens when the answer is no.
- **Other sketchy conduct:** pressure to conceal misconduct, blurred personal or financial boundaries, favoritism, retaliation, or pressure to ignore something you plainly saw.

Do not reset the count because the priest is an excellent preacher, the choir is wonderful, or the next conversation is charming. You do not need a personality diagnosis or a disciplinary ruling to decide this is the wrong church.

Serious abuse gets no free first incident. An assault, credible threat, sexual misconduct, or serious child-safety breach is reason to get to safety and seek appropriate help immediately. Our two-incident rule is a firm departure boundary for repeated concerning conduct, never an instruction to wait for more harm.

Listen to the parish culture

The priest is only part of the picture. Watch the congregation's habits and the influence of prominent families, donors, and longtime insiders. A new rector may inherit an old culture; a pleasant rector may tolerate a thoroughly unpleasant power structure.

- **Gossip:** private information traded as entertainment, insinuations disguised as prayer requests, or newcomers recruited to dislike someone they have never met.
- **Power plays:** decisions settled before meetings, access controlled by a small circle, special exceptions for wealthy members, or warnings not to upset a particular family.
- **Bullying by lay leaders:** volunteers ordered around, staff treated as servants, people excluded after disagreement, or cruelty excused because someone "does so much for the church."
- **Scapegoating:** every former employee was incompetent, every departing member was unstable, and every complainant was trying to hurt the church. Notice who never seems to bear responsibility.
- **Spiritual pressure:** demands for obedience, silence, money, or unpaid work presented as proof of faith. Be wary when forgiveness becomes a demand that the harmed person surrender boundaries.

Listen for the excuses as carefully as the conduct: "He is under a lot of stress." "She means well." "We cannot afford to lose him." Stress and a staffing shortage do not turn mistreatment into acceptable ministry.

Reporting harm is not gossip

Someone describing abuse, seeking support, or warning you about mistreatment is doing something different from passing around another person's confidences for amusement. Do not let "we do not gossip here" become a rule that protects the powerful from scrutiny.

Listen without interrogating the person or defending the institution. Respect their privacy, share their account only with their consent or when needed for an appropriate safeguarding report, and do not promise absolute secrecy. The Church of England's guidance on receiving safeguarding concerns emphasizes careful listening, factual notes, and avoiding amateur investigations.

> **Watch what happens after someone objects.** A church's response to a concern gives you something more useful than its welcome slogan.

For a wider warning-sign inventory, see our companion guide, Recognizing a toxic church. The question here is whether you want to become invested in the culture you are observing.

Ask practical questions

Look beyond the website and the first conversation. Read available policies and annual reports, speak with ordinary members, and compare explanations with what you observe. Respect privacy; you are choosing a church, not demanding access to personnel files.

- **Who handles a concern about the priest?** Ask for the name and contact details of someone outside the priest's own supervision. Find out how a complaint can be made without first confronting the person involved.
- **How are children and adults protected?** Ask about screening, training, supervision, private messaging, transport, and responses to concerns. Find out who checks that the rules are followed. A certificate on the wall is a starting point.
- **Can members understand the finances?** Ask to see the annual budget, financial report, and latest audit or other review. Ask who approves spending and how conflicts of interest are handled.
- **Can lay leaders actually challenge the priest?** Ask how the governing body is chosen, how decisions are recorded, and what happens when its members disagree.
- **What does welcome mean in practice?** Ask about women's participation, treatment of gay and transgender people, racial inclusion, and opportunities for people with limited money. Get specific answers about sacraments, membership, relationships, and leadership.
- **Can you participate comfortably?** Consider theology, worship, travel, service times, mobility access, bathrooms, hearing and communication needs, and whether requested assistance is offered respectfully.
- **Why have people left?** Speak with former members or employees if they freely wish to talk. Look for specific accounts and corroboration without turning a survivor into your research assignment.

The Episcopal Church provides Safe Church resources covering policies, boundaries, training, screening, supervision, and responding to concerns. Ask which policies the parish has adopted and how they work locally.

Search the church's and priest's names, including previous placements, in reliable news and available public records. Distinguish allegations from findings. A clean search is not a certificate of good conduct, and a search result is not automatically proof of wrongdoing.

Look for ordinary evidence of health

Good signs include a refusal accepted without fuss, a mistake corrected without blaming the person affected, staff treated respectfully, questions answered plainly, and practical access needs taken seriously. Look for consistency across people and situations. A parish should be able to remain welcoming after discovering you have limits.

Keep your judgment clear

After a troubling encounter, make a brief private note of the date, what happened, and any words you can accurately remember. Separate what you observed from what someone reported and what you inferred. Keep relevant messages; do not build or circulate a rumor file.

Ask someone outside the parish to help you assess the conduct. Describe the incident before supplying all the reasons the priest was having a difficult week. You do not need to prove every concern to everyone else before deciding where to spend your Sundays.

Leave without asking permission

When the second concerning incident occurs, act on the boundary you set. Do not wait until the end of the year, the next stewardship campaign, or the priest's promised improvement. An apology does not obligate you to remain available for a repeat.

Leave promptly and safely. You do not owe the priest a private confrontation, an exit interview, or a meeting intended to change your mind. The Church of England's spiritual abuse guidance specifically warns against directing someone to confront their abuser.

> "I have decided to worship elsewhere. Please remove me from volunteer schedules and routine contact lists. I am not available for a meeting about this decision."

Send a message only if it helps you. If returning keys or arranging other practical matters is necessary, use a safe method or a trusted intermediary. Preserve your records and seek support beyond the people whose conduct concerns you.

In the United States, call **911** for immediate danger. Report suspected crimes and child-protection concerns to the appropriate civil authorities; USAGov's reporting guidance explains where to start. A church process does not replace those routes. Do not wait for clergy permission.

Before making a commitment

- Have I seen this congregation through ordinary weeks as well as its best occasions?
- Can I say no, question a decision, or request help without being punished?
- Do clergy and influential members face the same standards they apply to others?
- Am I choosing freely, or staying because I feel useful, indebted, frightened, or responsible for fixing the place?

If you have already become deeply involved, you have not forfeited your right to leave. Take the next step you can take safely. You can keep your faith, take a break, or continue looking without accepting another parish job.

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Sources

The observation period, refusal scripts, and two-incident departure rule are *Anglican Watch's* editorial recommendations. The resources below provide safeguarding context and practical companion guidance. Links checked November 26, 2026.

Church of England: Spiritual abuse. Updated November 4, 2026. Explains coercion in religious settings, healthy church culture, and why survivors should not be directed to confront an abuser.

Church of England: Responding to and reporting safeguarding concerns. Updated November 4, 2026. Guidance on listening, recording observations, privacy, and avoiding amateur investigations. Its local reporting arrangements apply in England.

The Episcopal Church: Safe Church. Model policies and training resources addressing boundaries, bullying, screening, supervision, and responses to concerns.

USAGov: Report a crime. United States guidance on emergencies, local law enforcement, and reporting suspected child abuse.

Recognizing a toxic church. Our broader guide to patterns of unhealthy power, manipulation, secrecy, and retaliation.

Normative behaviors in faith communities. Our practical standards for consent, truthful communication, fair disagreement, and accountability.

Serving on your vestry. Responsibilities, oversight, financial questions, and the relationship between clergy authority and lay governance.

Church accessibility and **Church inclusion**. Companion guides to full participation, equal dignity, race, national origin, and shared power.

Pastoral response that actually helps. Practical guidance on support, survivor choice, follow-up, and care after harm.