

It's no fun feeling like a stranger. You feel out of place, unaccustomed to the people and the traditions of the place. You may not recognize the language. You have no friends. The bottom line is, when you are a stranger you are alone, even in a crowd.

So when people are in a new land and want to make it feel like home they set about making things seem familiarlike home. Well, like home only better. And that's what our foremothers and fathers did here in this strange land in the 16 and 1700s.

When the first Anglicans were setting up the fledgling Episcopal church that's what they had in mind too: A church that felt like home, like the Church of England only better. And so, they set about forming a church government that mirrored the new democratic government of the new republic.

Now, hundreds of years later, Every province in the Anglican Communion, all over the world, has set up their independent church to feel like the English colonial church with which they are comfortable but that has their own stamp on it; their own form of polity, we call it. In some provinces that looks more like the traditional Roman Catholic hierarchy with a more strictly clergy run church, but here in the United States, the Episcopal Church is a lot more democratic than you might imagine.

Before 1776 our church was the Church of England in the colonies. But once we won our freedom in the War of Independence, we couldn't very well be called the Church of England any longer. You may see in some churches, old Prayer Books from England in which the words, " We beseech thee also to save and defend all Christian Kings, Princes, and Governours; and specially thy Servant *George* our King;" have been scratched out. Trinity Church in Newport, RI is one parish which has one of those historic prayer books on display.

We didn't want to be a strange church in a strange land any more. The colonists wanted the church to be home.

About 1780 the name Protestant Episcopal Church started to become the common name for our church. *Protestant* to differentiate it from the Roman Catholic Church and *Episcopal* to designate that we are a church of Bishops (episcopos in Greek). The first General Convention of the new Episcopal Church, with all the dioceses attending, was held in 1789 in Philadelphia in two separate sessions. It was at this time that the fragmented dioceses finally all were able to come to an agreement about how bishops would be ordained and about the form of government that would make up our polity. This is also when the first American prayer book was ratified and came into usage. The preface of this, our first prayer book is found in our current prayer book on page nine.

It was agreed that all legislation must be voted on in the General Convention which would meet every three years. It was to be composed of two legislative houses: the House of Deputies which includes both the clergy and the laity, and the House of Bishops. They agreed on a process for ordinations and a chief executive that would be a first among equals – the Presiding Bishop. Power was to be delegated to the dioceses and very decentralized. Bishop White specifically stated that the best government is the least government. And so our church was born; a church democracy within our American democracy.

So, this very decentralized form of polity which lets us keep our independent nature is mirrored in the diocese as well. We rugged New Englanders value our Independence in all forms. But our readings for today, Independence Day, do not stress independence, but rather interdependence. Our readings from Deuteronomy, Paul's letter to the Hebrews and the Gospel of Matthew all stress something that is meant to let us see that we are all one on this planet, and we are all need each other: Because we are all strangers or have been strangers, or will be strangers.

But it took some wrangling for all the people who had strong opinions about how the new Episcopal church would look to reach an agreement. Just like here in Lime Rock when the strangers came in – the race track – it took a while before everyone could feel comfortably at home with each other.

I blessed the cars over at the race track yesterday. It's a sure sign that church and race track now feel at home with each other. We help and support each other. And, hopefully soon we'll be playing softball together too!

“You shall love the stranger for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” We hear from Deuteronomy. Of our foremothers and fathers Paul says, “They were all strangers and foreigners on the earth.” “For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have.” God sends rain and sunshine on both those whom we love than those we don't love, and those we don't even know. We are all in this together. This is not easy though, is it. Jesus asks a hard thing of us to love everyone. But it does mean that we welcome our neighbor, all our neighbors, and treat them with respect and kindness. We will never be perfect, of course, but Jesus just asks us to strive for perfection. Jesus means us to try to the best of our ability to love and respect the friend, the stranger and the neighbor. As a favorite hymn says, “No more a stranger or a guest, but like a child at home.”