

Mercer School for Ministry

Early Christianity: The First Fifteen Centuries

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Purpose: This is the first of four courses which aim to place the Anglican tradition in its historical context. This term we will focus on: the formation of a distinct Christian identity; the development of Christian ministries and institutions; major heresies and schisms; and major issues and personalities in the Church during the first 1500 years of the Common Era (C.E.). Throughout this program we will develop an Anglican approach to understanding and communicating the rich tradition of the Christian faith. Our purpose is to prepare you to use history pastorally in various ministries and settings.

Approach:

- Make you comfortable with the main themes, events, personalities, controversies, movements, and issues in the history of global Christianity from an Anglican perspective;
- Help you to become familiar with the basic tools needed for researching historical questions that may arise in your ministries and future studies and how to use them;
- Enable you to identify and assess the impact of various aspects of our history on current issues facing the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion.

Schedule: (*readings to be completed prior to each Session*)

1. **Session 1 (9/22):** Course overview and earliest “Christianities.” The rationale and requirements for the course and review of the syllabus. Based on the readings assigned in the emails sent prior to our first meeting, we’ll look at several aspects of the early Christian movement in the first and early second centuries CE. Discussion of *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* (emailed earlier). **Read:** Cooper, Part 1 “Why We Study Church History”; Mullin, Introduction (pp. xi-xiv) and Ch. 1. (*As you may not have the books assigned by our first meeting, all assignments will be emailed*)
2. **Session 2 (10/20):** Christian “unity amid diversity” in the second and third centuries. Regional styles of ministry and oversight. From marginality to significance; increased conflict with governmental authorities leading to persecution. Regional and cultural differences reflected in theological disputation and strife. **Read** Mullin, Ch. 2-4; Lyman, Ch. 1-5; Ignatius, *Letter to the Smyrnaeans* (emailed).
3. **Session 3 (11/10):** Western Christianity in the fourth to sixth centuries. The Christian movement progresses from marginalization, to toleration, to gradual acceptance and then -- in the late fourth century -- to “establishment” with the emergence of the “Imperial Church.” The first “ecumenical” councils. **Read** Mullin, Ch. 5-6; Lyman, Ch. 6-8. In the *Book of Common Prayer: the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds* and the two documents on pp. 864-5; Patricius. *Letter to the Soldiers of Coroticus* (emailed).
4. **Session 4 (12/15):** Western Christianity in the Early Middle Ages. Development of the papacy, Benedictine monasticism, and the Carolingian renaissance. **Read** Mullin, Ch. 7-8; the translation of the “Rule of St. Benedict” in *Wisdom from the Monastery*; David Knowles outline of the daily life of a monk (emailed).

5. **Session 5 (1/19): Western Christianity in the Central and Late Middle Ages**. New heresies and the Crusades, the mendicant orders, the Twelfth Century Renaissance, institutional decline and fragmentation of the Western Church. The Reformation(s) approach! **Read** Mullin, Ch. 9-10; short biography of John Wycliffe (emailed).

Required Texts:

Cooper, Derek. *Exploring Church History*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014.

Mullin, Robert Bruce. *A Short World History of Christianity, Revised Edition*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014.

Lyman, Rebecca. *Early Christian Traditions*. Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley Publications, 1999.

Barry, Patrick, et al, *Wisdom from the Monastery*. Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2005. [An accessible version of the Rule of St. Benedict. Given the wide influence of the rule in the Middle Ages and beyond, you should be familiar with it].

Recommended but optional text:

Limited calendar time makes it difficult to use a more comprehensive text on the history of Christianity. For those of you interested in more detail, the Mercer Library has a few copies of Irvin, Dale T. and Sunquist, Scott W. *History of the World Christian Movement, Volume I: Earliest Christianity to 1453*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001. I think this one of the best books to cover the whole range of what we will study in the first semester. I have mapped the pages in "I&S" to our five sessions below (you could skip over the bibliographic sections at the end of each Part, and the chapters on the church in the East and Africa in Parts V and VI):

Session 1: Part I (pp. 1-44);

Session 2: Parts II and III (pp. 47-152);

Session 1: Part IV (pp. 155-254);

Session 1: Part V (pp. 257-380);

Session 1: Part VI (pp. 383-504).

Other Sources:

You should also have handy a copy of the *1979 Book of Common Prayer* and become familiar with *Lesser Feasts and Fasts 2018* (<https://extranet.generalconvention.org/staff/files/download/21034>).

You can find texts for many of the documents and individuals referred to in the course at the Early Christian Writings website (<http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/index.html>).