"High" and "Low" Church

"One holy Catholic and Apostolic Church..." and protestant, too. The Episcopal Church occupies a unique position, being both catholic and protestant, which to many Christians might seem a contradiction in terms. But it's true. When the Church of England separated from the Roman Catholic Church in the 1500s, it denied the authority of the pope, but it did not start a new church, as most protestant denominations did. The Magna Carta in 1215 had named the King of England as the head of the church in England, and the break with Rome simply confirmed this fact.

The Anglicans borrowed a term from Aristotle to describe their position between the extremes of Roman Catholicism and Puritanism. It is via media, which is Latin for "the middle way." Over time, it has resulted in the Episcopal Church being what the politicians call a "big tent." As the church developed in America after the revolution, one threat to the newly independent church was that it would split into two churches over two main issues: the role of the laity in church governance, and their view of other denominations. The New England branch of the Church, led by the Reverend John Henry Hobart of New York, saw no role for the laity, and felt that churches which did not maintain the Apostolic succession, the supposedly unbroken chain of bishops all the way back to the apostles, were to be shunned. This point of view came to be called the High Church. It was characterized by elaborate liturgies, use of vestments and candles, and emphasized the liturgy over preaching. The other side, led by the Reverend William Meade of Virginia, accepted lay participation in the church hierarchy, and emphasized similarities rather than differences with other Protestants. This Low Church felt that worship was properly done in modest surroundings and emphasized preaching, even omitting Eucharist in favor of Morning Prayer on many Sundays.

When the Episcopal Church decided to establish a seminary to train clergy properly, it was located in New York. Hobart, by then the Bishop of New York, insisted on controlling any church school in his diocese, and his assistant was appointed as the first professor of ecclesiastical polity (church organization), so it was pretty clear that the General Seminary, although for the whole church, was going to stress Hobart's high church doctrine.
Meade and his friend, the Reverend William Wilmer, responded by starting another seminary in Alexandria, Virginia, which would emphasize the low church, or evangelical, doctrine of the church. Wilmer served as the first professor of the school, which today provides the majority of our clergy in Virginia. Meade went on to become the Bishop of Virginia.

We still refer to "high" and "low" churches today, but the differences are more in accoutrements of worship than in doctrinal rigidity. While some churches use incense and Sanctus bells and others shun the use of Eucharistic vestments, we all accept candles and vestments, and we all see both other protestants and other catholics as brothers and sisters in faith The *via media* has held.

--Robert Thomas