

Episcopal Identity

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What does it mean to be an Episcopal School? This is something that I get asked all the time. Doesn't it just mean that we are a Christian school? Well yes, we are a Christian school, but being an Episcopal school is more than that. Being an Episcopal school means that we are rooted in the faith of the Episcopal Church. It means that we live by worship, study, social outreach, and justice in its many forms. Being an Episcopal school means that we are willing to wrestle with big questions, and that we are ok living with the tension of not always having the answers.

The best explanation that I have ever heard of Episcopal Identity comes from The Rt. Rev. Robert C. Wright, who is the Bishop of Atlanta.

"Episcopal identity at its core is about who God is. We understand God to be really big, creative, patient, loving, and wise. A big God with a really big family that includes all of us: the bees, the trees, the seas, the manatees, the neutrons, and the quarks."

We understand and teach that love is the authentic and central message of this big God, and that no one group or religion has all the answers. We talk in terms of a human family, not a human race. It means that we teach that truth is complex and takes a lifetime to understand, so we proceed gently and respectfully with people who have different interpretations than us. We teach that my

piece of the truth needs your piece of the truth to really be truth.

We teach that it is possible to have met God in the face of Jesus Christ, and to stand alongside people of other faiths as brothers and sisters on a journey, and not as people competing for religious market share. Together, really, in appreciation — with celebration — not just tolerance. When we say faith we mean an extension of the heart and our brains. For us, science and faith are siblings and not perpetually opposing forces."

But what does being an Episcopal School look like at St. Mark's? Here are a few examples.

At St. Mark's the chapel is the center of our life together. It is here that we gather for worship every week, celebrate our academic achievements, and gather to mourn our losses. Our worship centers us as a people who take seriously the place of God in every part of our lives.

At St. Mark's we take seriously the spiritual formation of our students in the classroom, on the playground, and out in the world. We understand that spiritual formation doesn't just happen in chapel and religion class, it happens in all aspects of our community life. In science class questions of God and science are not pushed aside, they are encouraged. When reading a novel in language arts or

learning about major world events in history, the religious identity of people and events are embraced as integral to the understanding of the content being studied. We are spiritual beings, and the spiritual part of our lives doesn't happen in isolation, it goes with us into all the varied parts of our lives.

Being an Episcopal school means that we talk about God and Jesus without hesitation, but it also means that we don't just learn about the Christian faith, we learn about all faiths. We live in a world where people understand God in lots of different ways, and we understand that our faith is not threatened by learning about other faiths, it is strengthened through understanding and embracing the varied faiths around us. We encourage all of our students to embrace their faith whether Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Jewish, Sikh or one of the many other faiths practiced by our St. Mark's families.

Being an Episcopal School means many things, but at its heart being an Episcopal school means that we live in and are surrounded by the love of God. God's big, expansive, love seeps into everything that we do. It is the lens that helps us to embrace the uniqueness of every child, and the framework that we use as we serve the community around us.

1 Evening Prayer sermon from NAES Conference 2018