Isn’t a shield a form of body armor?

Not always! A shield can also be a symbol that represents something. Our Episcopal shield is shaped like a shield that one may use as body armor, but there is a difference! Let’s dig in to understand it better.

The Episcopal shield is like a history lesson for our church. This shield was adopted in 1940. The Episcopal church was founded a REALLY long time ago—in 1789. It was founded as a separate group from the Church of England.

Why is the shield red, white & blue?

To show that we are an American church, the shield is made up of the same colors as our American flag—red, white and blue. Did you know that many of our presidents were Episcopalians? George Washington, James Madison, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Gerald Ford & George H.W. Bush... just to name a few.

What do all of the symbols represent?

The white field with a red cross is St. George’s Cross. St. George was the patron saint of the Church of England (we must remember our roots!). Then, there are the nine white miniature crosses. These are not just symbols of our faith, they symbolize the nine original dioceses established in 1789. The “X” formation is in remembrance of St. Andrew’s Cross. St. Andrew was the patron saint of Scotland. This reminds us that Scotland ordained Samuel Seabury as the first American Bishop in 1784.
What exactly is a Diocese?

As defined above, the diocese is a geographical area. Our geographical area is named the Diocese of Alabama. Our diocese is divided into 7 convocations (not conversations!) which start in the northern most tip of the state and extend down to right below Selma. A convocation is sort of like what a county is to a state. These 7 convocations have 92 different churches, chaplaincies & worshiping communities, all which make up our diocese.

An Interesting Factoid:

Our diocese is named the Diocese of Alabama, but it only includes a portion of our state! In the 1970’s the southern part of the state split off into another Diocese. They are now called the Diocese of the Central Gulf Coast which includes counties south of Montgomery and the panhandle of Florida.
Diocese (DAhy-uh-sis):
an ecclesiastical district under the jurisdiction of a bishop

Action Item!

Check out this map of the Diocese of Alabama. First, see if you can find your convocation. Outline your convocation in BLUE. Then, color your county RED. Color all of the other counties of your convocation YELLOW. Put a GREEN STAR where you think your church lies within your county.
Bishop (bish-uh-p):
a person who supervises a number of local churches or a diocese, being in the Greek, Roman Catholic, Anglican, and other churches - a member of the highest order of the ministry

The bishop is the chief priest (also known as the shepherd) of our diocese. Bishops are charged with serving as a pastor to our clergy and the shepherd that protects our faith and the word of God through our church. Our bishop is the authority of our diocese to act in Christ’s name. Bishops visit each church to baptize and confirm members.

An Interesting Factoid:
Bishops are often referred to as “shepherds” since the Greek word for bishop, Episkopos, is translated “overseer” or “to watch over”.

So what exactly does a bishop do?

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Vestment (vest-muhnt): an official or ceremonial robe

Why does the bishop always wear a cape?
Actually, the bishop has two very special wardrobes...formal and informal. Often you will see a bishop wearing more formal attire which is pictured on the page to your left. This attire is made up of a **cope** and **miter**. The **cope** is a cape that is worn when the Holy Eucharist is celebrated. The **miter** is a symbol of the bishop’s authority. It is a pointed hat with lappets that drape down the back of the neck. The lappets are to remind us of the flames of the Holy Spirit. In the ancient church, bishops were generally older men who needed a hat to keep their heads warm. Today, the miter is symbolic of the bishop’s office and it generally matches the cope.

An Interesting Factoid:
The color purple is always worn by a bishop to distinguish the bishop from traditional clergy who always wear black.
Vestment (vest-muhnt): an official or ceremonial robe

What about the bishop’s informal wardrobe?

The informal wardrobe is made up of several colorful layers. First, they put on a PURPLE robe called a cassock. Over the cassock, there is a special WHITE cover called a rochet. The rochet has billowy sleeves that are gathered and closed with RED wrist bands. Then, over the rochet, the bishop wears a long RED vest that opens in the front, called a chimeře.

To complete the outfit, the bishop wears a stole draped around his or her neck.

Whew?! Do you think the bishop ever gets hot in all those layers?

An Interesting Factoid:
The bishop has different colored stoles for the different seasons of the church.

Action Item:
See if you can color the different vestments based on the description above.
Crosier (kroh-zher):
a staff surmounted by a crook or cross, carried by bishops as a symbol of pastoral office

Why does a bishop carry a crosier?
A bishop carries a crosier to symbolize that he is the shepherd of his flock. The crosier’s shaft is a walking stick symbolizing a bishop’s call to travel near and far to preach the Gospel. The curled end of the crosier symbolizes the bishop’s role in guiding the flock and the pointed end symbolizes the bishop’s role in defending the flock.
Cross (Kros):
a figure of two intersecting lines resembling the historical structure
upon which persons such as Jesus were put to death - used as a
Christian emblem, badge, etc.

An Interesting Factoid:
This is the actual size of the bishop’s pectoral cross!

What’s the difference between a pectoral cross & the many other kinds of crosses?
The pectoral cross is usually a big cross hanging from the neck by a cord or chain that reaches far
down on the chest. It is worn by the bishop and is different from the small crosses worn on necklaces
by many Christians. Most pectoral crosses are made of precious metals (platinum, gold or silver) and
semi-precious gems.
The pectoral cross is distinguished by its size (up to six inches...WOW!) and is worn in the center of the
chest below the heart. Do you think you could wear a cross that big? It would be really heavy!
Ring (ring):
a typically circular band of metal or other durable material, especially one of
gold or other precious metal, often set with gems, for wearing on the finger as
an ornament, a token of betrothal or marriage, etc.

What is the purpose of a bishop’s ring?
Like a wedding ring, the bishop’s ring symbolizes the bishop’s commitment to the Church and the people under his or her care. Most bishops’ rings are set with a purple stone called an amethyst since purple is the bishop’s special color. Bishops, as successors of the apostles, wear the purple stone ring as a reminder that they, too, are empowered by the Holy Spirit.

An Interesting Factoid:
The bishop uses his ring to make a wax seal on ordination documents for clergy. Centuries ago, the seal was used to prove the authenticity of a letter from the bishop. Historically, when a bishop died, the ring was smashed into bits so that no one could communicate in the bishop’s name.
Cathedra (kuh-thee-druh):
the seat or throne of a bishop in the church

Is the bishop like royalty?
Well, not exactly... but, in some churches a special chair or “throne” is reserved for the bishop to sit in. The formal name for the “throne” is the cathedra.

Action Item:
Ask if your church has a cathedra.
If so, see if your rector will let you sit in it!
What is the difference between a shield and a seal?
A shield is what represents the Episcopal Church as one whole body. The seal of our diocese represents our individual diocese.

What makes our seal unique?
The seal for our diocese has symbols on it which remind us of who we are. Look closely at the seal to the left. Around the outside of the seal is our name, Diocese of Alabama. Inside it has a miter, crosier and a set of keys. The miter represents our diocesan bishop, the crosier reminds us that we are part of God’s flock and the keys represent the “keys to the kingdom” for which we all possess since we are Christians.

In what ways do the people of our diocese work together?
Each year, our diocese has an important meeting known as the Diocesan Convention. This meeting is presided over by our bishop, but the decisions made are voted on by both clergy (the folks that wear the collars) and lay people (people like you and me). There are a variety of departments and committees made up of people throughout the diocese. Some examples of committees are the Youth Department and the Department of Christian Formation. These two departments oversee childrens programs from birth through high school.
Help the bishop find his way to your church...
Follow the maze to help the bishop find the way from his office at Carpenter House to your church!

An Interesting Factoid:
The Carpenter House is where the bishop works when he is not at your church. It is located in downtown Birmingham.