

Revising the Episcopal Church's *Book of Common Prayer* (1979): Liturgical Theologians in Dialogue

SCOTT MACDOUGALL,* RUTH A. MEYERS,** AND LOUIS WEIL***

Introduction

by Scott MacDougall

At the 78th General Convention of the Episcopal Church, held in Salt Lake City, Utah, in 2015, the House of Bishops' Legislative Committee on Prayer Book, Liturgy, and Music offered resolution A169, directing the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music (SCLM) to develop and propose to the subsequent General Convention, to be held in 2018, "a plan for the comprehensive revision of the current Book of Common Prayer."¹ The SCLM took up this task. Approximately eighteen months later, the commission announced that it would fulfill its charge by proposing to the 2018 convention "four possible paths" the Episcopal Church might follow with respect to the question of revising the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer*. Instead of proposing a specific plan for prayer book revision, as the resolution directed, the SCLM decided that it would offer the General Convention a menu of ways in which the convention itself might decide to proceed. The four potential paths the SCLM will suggest to the 79th General Convention are:

- (1) *Full and comprehensive revision* of the 1979 Book of Common Prayer beginning after the 2018 General Convention;

* Scott MacDougall is Assistant Professor of Theology at the Church Divinity School of the Pacific in Berkeley, California.

** Ruth Meyers is the Hodges-Haynes Professor of Liturgics at the Church Divinity School of the Pacific in Berkeley, California.

*** Louis Weil is James F. Hodges and Harold and Rita Haynes Professor Emeritus of Liturgics at the Church Divinity School of the Pacific in Berkeley, California.

¹ The full text and legislative history of this resolution can be obtained at www.episcopalarchives.org/cgi-bin/acts/acts_resolution-complete.pl?resolution=2015-A169.

- (2) Creation of comprehensive *Book(s) of Alternative Services* and no revision of the 1979 Book of Common Prayer, with work beginning after the 2018 General Convention;
- (3) *Intensive church-wide conversation* between the 2018 and 2021 General Convention about whether a revision of the Book of Common Prayer is needed or desirable; to what extent; and whether, if revision is not desirable, the Episcopal Church should instead develop significant supplemental liturgical resources, such as a Book of Alternative Services;
- (4) A step back from efforts toward comprehensive liturgical revision or creation of new liturgies, and an accompanying commitment to deepening the collective understanding of—and engagement with—the theology of our current liturgies.²

The SCLM notes that the General Convention may opt “to combine path #2, #3, or #4 with another option, which is to develop ‘technical fixes’ to the 1979 Book of Common Prayer. Technical fixes are adjustments in grammar, punctuation, and word choice that do not change the theology, poetry, or intended meaning of the text.” The SCLM will provide for the convention’s consideration a fuller definition of what is meant by “technical fixes” and will supplement it with “a list of specific examples.”³

In the time since the General Convention’s initial directive to the SCLM, the question of prayer book revision has been the subject of much discussion. Opinions have ranged from an enthusiastic embrace of the idea on the one hand, to outright rejection of it on the other, with a whole spectrum of intermediate positions spanning the two extremes characterizing the majority of the attitudes expressed. This debate has been taking place informally in parochial and diocesan contexts and on social media platforms, and somewhat more formally in Episcopal publications, such as *The Living Church*,⁴ and Episcopal digital spaces, such as *The Living Church’s* Covenant blog⁵ and on the

² Devon Anderson, “Four Possible Paths for the Book of Common Prayer,” Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music, December 2, 2016, <https://standingcommissiononliturgyandmusic.org/2016/12/02/four-possible-paths-for-the-book-of-common-prayer/>.

³ Anderson, “Four Possible Paths.”

⁴ See <http://livingchurch.org/prayer-book-revision>.

⁵ See <http://livingchurch.org/covenant/category/necessary-or-expedient/>.

Episcopal Café.⁶ Engagement with this question in scholarly journals, however, has not been particularly vigorous.⁷

For this reason, it seemed appropriate to ask two of the Episcopal Church's foremost liturgical theologians, Ruth A. Meyers and Louis Weil, to offer their views on the issue of revising the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer* in the near term and to publish this dialogue in the *Anglican Theological Review*. Meyers is the Hodges-Haynes Professor of Liturgics at the Church Divinity School of the Pacific in Berkeley, California. Weil is James F. Hodges and Harold and Rita Haynes Professor Emeritus of Liturgics, also at the Church Divinity School of the Pacific. Both are longtime priests in the Episcopal Church and are renowned scholars in the field of liturgical studies who have published numerous books and articles on Anglican liturgy. They have served with distinction over many years on a number of committees and task forces—both in the Episcopal Church and in the ecumenical context—focused on matters related to worship. The hope animating the dialogue between these two theologians is that bringing their expertise to bear on the highly sensitive and deeply contested matter of prayer book revision will provide valuable perspectives that contribute meaningfully to the deliberations of Episcopalians throughout the church generally and also of the 2018 General Convention specifically. All of the stakeholders in this crucial question should benefit from considering Meyers's and Weil's views as they think through whether and in which way(s) prayer book revision ought to proceed at this time.

Their individual and joint contributions to this process of church-wide discernment with respect to prayer book revision were offered in two stages. First, Meyers and Weil each wrote brief responses to the SCLM's four potential paths for prayer book revision. After reading each other's work, they then met for an in-person exchange of ideas in Berkeley. The position papers they produced follow immediately after these introductory remarks. The final item presented here is my report on their subsequent conversation, having served as its moderator.

⁶ See www.episcopalcafe.com/tag/prayer-book-revision/.

⁷ Notable exceptions include: Bryan Cones, "The 78th General Convention of the Episcopal Church and the Liturgy: New Wine in Old Wineskins?" *Anglican Theological Review* 98.4 (Fall 2016): 681–701; and Robert W. Prichard, "William Reed Huntington and the Revision of the Book of Common Prayer in the General Convention of 1886: A Cautionary Tale," *Anglican and Episcopal History* 85.4 (2016): 429–448.

Time for Prayer Book Revision?

by Ruth A. Meyers

A few years ago, in response to a question about when the Episcopal Church would have a new prayer book, I quipped, “In 2089, when the paschal tables run out.”⁸ So at the 2015 General Convention, I was quite surprised when the Committee on Prayer Book, Liturgy, and Music drafted a resolution calling for a plan for a comprehensive revision of the *Book of Common Prayer*, and even more surprised that the convention adopted the resolution. Yet although I had not anticipated the convention’s action, I can readily identify several matters prompting calls for revising the prayer book.

The Need for Revising the Prayer Book

Inclusive and expansive language. Work on inclusive-language liturgical texts began in 1985, just six years after the prayer book was adopted. For the first decade, the project was widely debated, but since the 1997 General Convention authorized *Enriching Our Worship 1*, which provides texts for use in the Rite II daily offices and eucharist, the controversy has largely subsided. Subsequent General Conventions have re-authorized the material with little or no debate. In addition, the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music has over the past two decades produced four additional volumes in the series, and General Convention has authorized use of this material under the direction of the diocesan bishop.⁹ The later volumes not only incorporate inclusive and expansive language, they also address theological and pastoral concerns that have arisen since 1979.

However, because *Enriching Our Worship* remains supplemental to the prayer book, its texts do not have equal status with those in the BCP. Episcopalians point to the prayer book as the core expression of our belief, and the language about God in that book is predominantly masculine. As long as expansive language continues to be provided

⁸ “Tables for Finding Holy Days,” *The Book of Common Prayer* 1979, 879–885.

⁹ *Enriching Our Worship 1: Morning and Evening Prayer, The Great Litany, and The Holy Eucharist* (New York: Church Publishing, 1998); *Enriching Our Worship 2: Ministry with the Sick or Dying; Burial of a Child* (New York: Church Publishing, 2000); *Enriching Our Worship 3: Burial Rites for Adults, together with a Rite for the Burial of a Child* (New York: Church Publishing, 2006); *Enriching Our Worship 4: The Renewal of Ministry and the Welcoming of a New Rector or Other Pastor* (New York: Church Publishing, 2006); *Enriching Our Worship 5: Liturgies and Prayers Related to Childbearing, Childbirth, and Loss* (New York: Church Publishing, 2009).

in supplemental liturgical resources, it remains peripheral, a less significant expression of faith than the masculine images and metaphors in the BCP. Moreover, because the texts require the authorization of the diocesan bishop, the resources are not used in every diocese, and expansive language is thus not part of the common worship of the Episcopal Church.

Creation. The 1979 *Book of Common Prayer* gives much stronger emphasis to creation than any previous book. New canticles for Morning Prayer offer more ways to praise God for creation, and new eucharistic prayers acknowledge God as Creator, something Anglican eucharistic prayers had not heretofore done. Concerns for care of creation appear in some forms of the prayers of the people, a recognition of the environmental movement that emerged after the 1962 publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*.

Since 1979, environmental concern has grown ever stronger as the degradation of our planet's resources has accelerated. Revising the prayer book would be an opportunity to attend to this issue in a variety of ways. Because Christian action is a response to God, new liturgical texts might enrich the ways we acknowledge God as Creator and praise God for the wonders of creation. Only two collects in the 1979 BCP address God as Creator: the collect for Holy Saturday and one of the Rogation Day collects. The only Sunday collect with reference to creation is appointed for the Second Sunday after Christmas, which addresses God "who wonderfully created, and yet more wonderfully restored, the dignity of human nature."¹⁰ None of those collects appeared in earlier Prayer Books.

The Baptismal Covenant, which is anthropocentric in the questions about practices of faith, might be expanded to include commitment to care for all creation. Prayer for stewardship of creation and for the healing of the planet might be added to the categories required for the prayers of the people in the eucharist, rather than subsumed under the more generic title "the welfare of the world." Robust forms of confession and lament might acknowledge the human role in the destruction of our environment.

In response to a General Convention resolution proposing a season of creation, the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music, working with scientists in order to take account of contemporary scientific knowledge, developed liturgical materials honoring God in

¹⁰ *The Book of Common Prayer* 1979, 214.

creation. The 2015 General Convention authorized these resources, but without any plan for publication.¹¹ Even more than the texts in *Enriching Our Worship*, these new resources stand apart from the core expression of faith in the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer*.

Marriage. After forty years of grassroots change and official General Convention action, the 2015 convention authorized for trial use two alternative rites for marriage, and a change to the marriage canons makes these available to any couple, whether different-sex or same-sex. “Trial use” means that these rites are being considered for inclusion in a revised prayer book. The rites could continue in trial use for several triennia, or the 2018 General Convention could adopt them and thus update this section of the BCP.

Although the new marriage canon allows a couple to use any rite authorized for use in the Episcopal Church, the prayer book describes Christian marriage as a covenant between a man and a woman, reflecting the commonly accepted understanding of marriage in the 1960s and 1970s. As long as that description remains in the prayer book, it remains as a primary statement of the teaching of the Episcopal Church.

Revise the Prayer Book?

Given the matters I have outlined, one might expect that I am in favor of the proposal that the 2018 General Convention direct the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music to begin a comprehensive revision of the Prayer Book. But I do not advocate this path. Rather, I favor the third recommendation, that the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music foster “intensive church-wide conversation between the 2018 and 2021 General Convention about whether a revision of the Book of Common Prayer is needed or desirable; to what extent; and whether, if revision is not desirable, the Episcopal Church should instead develop significant supplemental liturgical resources, such as a Book of Alternative Services.” The process leading to the 1979 prayer book is instructive.

¹¹ The materials are included in the report of the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music to the 2015 General Convention, which can be downloaded from the Digital Archives of The Episcopal Church: www.episcopalarchives.org/e-archives/gc_reports/reports/2015/bb_2015-R048.pdf. The introduction to the resources was revised at General Convention; the text is included in Resolution 2015-A058: www.episcopalarchives.org/cgi-bin/acts/acts_resolution.pl?resolution=2015-A058.

When the 1928 General Convention adopted a new prayer book, it also created a Liturgical Commission to study and preserve material bearing upon future revisions of the *Book of Common Prayer*. In doing so, the convention recognized that liturgical revision is an ongoing process. After the church adopts a new prayer book, congregations implement new and revised texts and rubrics. Over time, some elements are widely embraced, while others are virtually ignored, and new understandings and practices begin to emerge, eventually leading to revision of the prayer book, which incorporates some of the new understandings and practices.

During the mid-twentieth century, a grassroots liturgical movement swept through the Episcopal Church, and practices gradually changed. Leaders of the movement urged congregations to place the celebration of the eucharist at the heart of parish life, and to understand the vital connection between liturgy and daily life. Through conferences and publications, the vision of the liturgical movement gradually spread. In some congregations, the eucharist began to be celebrated more frequently, even every Sunday, and baptism began to be administered as part of the principal Sunday service. These practices were incorporated into the revised prayer book and so became normative.

Liturgical scholarship provided important foundations for the liturgical movement. Discoveries of ancient documents led to new understandings of worship in the earliest centuries of Christianity and yielded new insights into the meaning of worship. In the late 1940s, the Standing Liturgical Commission began to develop "Prayer Book Studies," which included proposed revisions for study, along with introductory material that provided historical background and rationale for the proposal. These studies, issued beginning in 1950, introduced many Episcopalians to liturgical scholarship and the possibility of prayer book revision.

To facilitate the revision process, the Standing Liturgical Commission introduced an amendment to the Constitution of the Episcopal Church allowing for trial use of a proposed revision to the book or any portion of it. After prayer book revision got underway in the late 1960s, the commission developed an elaborate process for gathering feedback from congregations that used proposed rites, and these responses informed the commission as it worked to perfect the new rites. Congregations that participated in this process had the opportunity to

become familiar with new structures and new texts, and to learn the rationale for the changes.

Thus, the process leading to the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer* was one of significant ferment, as the liturgical movement encouraged new practices and liturgical scholarship gave new insight into the historical development of liturgy and its meaning. By the time the 1967 General Convention authorized a comprehensive revision of the prayer book, Episcopalians had been considering the possibility of revision for over two decades.

Since 1979, understanding and practices of liturgy have continued to evolve in the Episcopal Church. New liturgical materials have been produced in the *Enriching Our Worship* series, *The Book of Occasional Services* has been expanded with additional rites, and more recently the General Convention authorized marriage rites for trial use. The Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music took account of new liturgical scholarship in brief "Occasional Papers" published during the 1980s and in a series of book-length "Liturgical Studies," each exploring liturgical practices in the Episcopal Church in light of liturgical scholarship.¹² I became acutely aware of ongoing developments in liturgical scholarship when Church Publishing asked me to update Leonel Mitchell's commentary on the 1979 BCP, *Praying Shapes Believing*, originally published in 1985. I began with the expectation that I could write a brief addendum to each chapter, noting key developments in scholarship and commenting on liturgical materials produced since 1979. But I realized that I could only honor the original work by thoroughly revising the book, incorporating Mitchell's

¹² *Occasional Papers of the Standing Liturgical Commission* (New York: Church Hymnal, 1987); Ruth A. Meyers, ed., for the Standing Liturgical Commission, *Baptism and Ministry*, Liturgical Studies 1 (New York: Church Hymnal, 1994); Ruth A. Meyers, ed., for the Standing Liturgical Commission, *How Shall We Pray? Expanding Our Language about God*, Liturgical Studies 2 (New York: Church Hymnal, 1994); Ruth A. Meyers, ed., for the Standing Liturgical Commission on Liturgy and Music, *A Prayer Book for the 21st Century*, Liturgical Studies 3 (New York: Church Hymnal, 1996); Mark L. MacDonald, ed., for the Standing Liturgical Commission on Liturgy and Music, *The Chant of Life: Inculturation and the People of the Land*, Liturgical Studies 4 (New York: Church Publishing, 2003); Jennifer M. Phillips, ed., for the Standing Liturgical Commission, *Ambassadors for God: Envisioning Reconciliation Rites for the 21st Century*, Liturgical Studies 5 (New York: Church Publishing, 2010).

original insights while also introducing understandings from more recent liturgical scholarship.

A Way Forward

The 2015 General Convention resolution calling for a plan for comprehensive revision of the prayer book came from within the General Convention. Because it had not been discussed in the church before the convention, it reflects primarily the mind of the convention. However, the prayer book represents our common worship, and decisions about revising that book ought to reflect as broad a consensus in the church as possible.

Intense church-wide conversation would offer an opportunity not only to take stock of changes in understanding and practice of worship since 1979, but also to consider these changes in context. The 2015 resolution directed that the “plan for revision utilize the riches of our Church’s liturgical, cultural, racial, generational, linguistic, gender, and ethnic diversity in order to share common worship,” reflecting an awareness of our diverse membership and a recognition that worship always interacts with the culture.

As the Episcopal Church considers the possibility of revising the prayer book, mission should be a primary consideration. How well does the 1979 BCP address the needs and concerns of the church now, four decades after its adoption? How well does it support common worship in our diverse communities? How might a process of prayer book revision enable the Episcopal Church to live more fully into its participation in the mission of God? How might new liturgical resources, whether a comprehensive revision of the BCP or a book of alternative services, strengthen and enrich our common worship, so that it speaks in and to our twenty-first-century world?

Pre-revision Priorities

by Louis Weil

Prayer book revision? It is important to begin by noting what question is being addressed, since the question is not *whether?*—but *when?* I suggest that the present time is problematic for the Episcopal Church to begin a revision of its *Book of Common Prayer*. This is not in opposition to future revision of the prayer book, but rather

to suggest that there are important tasks—pre-revision priorities—to which the church might direct its resources before such revision is undertaken.¹³

Revision itself is not in question. The history of the *Book of Common Prayer* reveals an ongoing work of revision, albeit these have not been frequent. A perspective from the time prior to the invention of printing reveals the impact of that invention upon the evolution and stabilization of liturgical rites.

Prior to that development, two things are of special significance. First, liturgical books were the domain of the clergy. Many of the laity were illiterate, since the ability to read seldom extended beyond the clergy and the ruling class, and in a clericalized church the texts of the sacred liturgical rites, not to mention Holy Scripture as well, were off limits for laity in general.¹⁴ Second, during the centuries when liturgical books were written by hand, there was a natural organic development of these documents. If we look at such documents, we often find that the name of a pope or bishop has a line run through it, being replaced in the margin with the name of his successor. The same process would take place with a monarch. Changes to these liturgical books evolved naturally. Printing, of course, put an end to this natural evolution, and the liturgy became fixed in a way that was without precedent.

This background offers us an important perspective to the achievement of Archbishop Thomas Cranmer in his creation of the *Book of Common Prayer* as a new form of liturgical book, one which was based upon an understanding of the church and its corporate prayer that embodied the sense of ecclesial prayer predating the clericalization that had restricted official prayer in the church for centuries as the work and duty only of the ordained. The basic principle of Cranmer's work was the recovery of a liturgical sense in which corporate prayer was the identifying activity of the whole People of God. The fact that the rites would henceforth be prayed in the vernacular was an inevitable consequence of that basic principle.

Anglican prayer book rites have, of course, undergone a continuing evolution during the centuries since Cranmer's time. The factors which shaped that evolution are diverse, and although Cranmer's two

¹³ See Louis Weil, "Pre-liturgical Priorities," *Nashotah Review* 11 (1971): 97–103.

¹⁴ Cyrille Vogel, "An Alienated Liturgy," *Consilium* 72 (1972): 11–25.

books of 1549 and 1552 set the framework of prayer book evolution for four centuries, from the middle of the twentieth century the conviction emerged that a new path was imperative. The *Book of Common Prayer* 1979 was the first embodiment of that new path. Having served the Episcopal Church for almost fifty years, it is not inappropriate to ask if a revision is now due.

Twenty years ago, a collection of essays was published in 1997 that called for a revision of the prayer book and proposed imperatives for that revision. The only essay in *Leaps and Boundaries: The Prayer Book in the 21st Century* suggesting that the time was not right for such a revision was written by J. Neil Alexander, then a professor of liturgical studies at the General Seminary and later Bishop of Atlanta. Bishop Alexander made an observation in his essay that continues to apply to our situation some twenty years later: "We are nowhere near being finished with what this book is calling us to do."¹⁵

Twenty years before Bishop Alexander wrote his essay, I was the Professor of Liturgics at Nashotah House, teaching a course in sacramental theology to third-year seminarians in the fall term of 1979. I remember vividly saying to them, shortly after the General Convention had given final approval to the 1979 BCP, that it would take the Episcopal Church fifty years to embody the pastoral and theological implications of that book.

Now, almost forty years later, that statement continues to be true. Although the 1979 book is in general use in the church, and has for many of our members played an important role in their lives of faith and prayer, for many laity as well as a significant number of clergy the rites are celebrated through the filter of a theology and a piety that were characteristic of the prayer book of 1928. This claim should not be a surprise to anyone. Christian liturgical piety is shaped over a long period of practice in the church's life, that "practice" being formed in the members through their ongoing participation in the corporate prayer of their parish or community, preeminently in the experience of the Sunday eucharist, week after week and year after year. That is as true of the clergy as it is of the laity.

¹⁵ J. Neil Alexander, "Embrace the Happy Occasion: Prayer Book Revision in Light of Yesterday's Principles, Today's Questions, and Tomorrow's Possibilities," in *Leaps and Boundaries: The Prayer Book in the 21st Century*, ed. Paul V. Marshall and Lesley Northup (Harrisburg, Pa.: Morehouse Publishing, 1997), 183.

I remember the impact of this “new mentality” upon me as a young priest and doctoral student. A deepened understanding of the historical evolution of the liturgy and of sacramental theology conflicted with my own piety, which had taken form during the previous years as a member of a parish. I learned firsthand that any significant challenge to my own liturgical norms did not so much affect my intellectual understanding as it did my visceral experience as a worshiper and as a priest who had been ordained, in the words of the 1928 ordination rite, as “a steward of the sacraments.” I experienced this shock in my own life, and I have observed it countless times in the lives of others—laity, seminarians, and clergy. It is an important aspect of the impact of liturgical change which requires more pastoral attention than it has been given.

Yet the response to this reality cannot be a demand for an absolute fixity of our prayer book rites. Liturgical change has often elicited the cry that “we have always done it *this way*,” whereas in reality, the liturgical prayer of the church had been undergoing development throughout Christian history. As noted earlier, it was the invention of printing in the fifteenth century that led to a fixity of texts, which in turn generated an aura of the liturgy’s unchanging character.

This is what I had in mind when I told my class that it would require a half-century for the unprecedented developments of our 1979 BCP to take root in the experience and understanding of both laity and clergy. This would require a commitment to what I have called “adult formation” in liturgical experience and programs of education, for both laity and clergy. This commitment has been lacking to a significant degree, so that now, almost forty years after the 1979 book was authorized, like Bishop Alexander I feel that this pre-revision work in our seminaries and in our parishes must first be undertaken with a serious commitment at all levels of our corporate life.

Without that work, we will expend a great deal of time and money to produce “a new prayer book” that will perpetuate the problem that I have seen in our implementation of the 1979 book. The preparation of a new prayer book attracts attention, both pro and con. The hard work of serious adult formation does not attract such attention. It is the quiet and faithful ministry of enabling people, whether laity, seminarians, or the ordained, to encounter, assimilate, and embrace a “new mentality” with regard to liturgical understanding and practice.

That requires more on the part of church leadership than merely the authorization of a new prayer book.

Like many people, I did not at first realize how complex this work can be. It does not involve only didactic aspects, such as liturgical and sacramental history, but also the deeply personal dimension of one's piety. We need to acknowledge the power of experience: whatever the model of liturgical prayer individuals may have experienced in their lifetime, this experience plays an integral role in their life of faith. To substitute a new liturgical form for a familiar one, without sensitive attention to this dimension of experience, sets up an adversarial conflict with the new form from the start.

In the work of Christian education, clergy have often centered their attention upon matters of secondary importance. For me, this began early in my own life, when I was drawn to the Episcopal Church while in college. My pre-confirmation preparation focused on such practical and ritual considerations as "finding your way through the prayer book," and how to perform basic ritual actions, such as making the sign of the cross. Sadly, real substance about the Christian faith was lacking, but providentially a friend asked her rector to talk with me. For him, the emphasis was on the substance of the faith; his focus was on what Christian faith is all about. His impact on me continues to this day.

I was reminded of my own experience soon after the 1979 BCP was authorized, when I was now a priest and a teacher of liturgical and sacramental studies myself. In the early 1980s, one of my students came to me with a request that I spend some time with his wife. She was Jewish, and had been baptized and confirmed at the time of their marriage. But now, living in a seminary community, she was, he said, troubled and confused about Christianity.

When I met her, I asked her about her preparation for baptism, and she told me about the sessions with their parish priest. When I asked what aspects of Christian faith were discussed in her preparation, she found it difficult to remember, but then said, "He talked a great deal about King Henry the Eighth." Since I was not a fly on the wall at those sessions, I cannot know what was taught, but that day I did learn what she remembered. What does a discussion of the king's marriages and the fact that the English Church had remained a part of the Catholic Church have to do with the priorities in a preparation for

baptism? My point is not that knowledge of church history is unimportant or unworthy of attention, but that in the hierarchy of priorities in the context of baptismal preparation it is the wrong focus—yet that is what she remembered, and it is no wonder that she was confused.

This incident also points to the fact that often the content of seminary courses flows over into the parish context, where it is not the appropriate content for basic Christian formation. It also suggests that the priest had never received that fundamental experience in his own pre-seminary days as a member of a parish. It is commitment to this level of formation that I see to be urgent as a pre-revision priority.

During the quarter-century of my life in California, while a member of the faculty at the Church Divinity School of the Pacific, I have also been a member of a parish, and far more involved in parish life than I had been earlier. That has often included for me the offering of sessions on a wide range of questions as part of the education program. As was my experience while teaching adults each Sunday at a parish in Milwaukee during my final three years in Wisconsin, I found also in Berkeley that many laity are hungry for an opportunity to reflect on all dimensions of Christian faith and practice. Often they have participated for many years in the worship life of the parish, but they have basic questions that have never been addressed pertaining to the challenge of living a Christian life in the context of an indifferent society. What difference does their faith mean for the ethical choices they must often make?

I have observed over the years that, even with the best of intentions, this link has not been made in ordinary parish life, with the result that religious faith is separated from daily life in the so-called real world. Ethical issues, as well as matters of faith, need to be addressed patiently over a period of time in order to enable Christians to claim the link between their profession of Christian faith and the ethical choices of their daily lives. The normative purpose of preaching at the Sunday eucharist is not essentially didactic. A complementary ministry of adult formation is fundamental for our living the Christian life of faith.

There is yet another question to ask in relation to prayer book revision: Has the time of our being a one-prayer-book church come to an end? As far back as thirty years ago, an official of the Church Hymnal Corporation surprised me by saying that perhaps the days of a single, printed book would soon give way to a parochial reliance on

internet resources that would take final form through the participation of the members, including both laity and clergy, with oversight from the diocesan office. Whereas the American Episcopal Church has remained a one-book church, this has not been true of some other provinces of our Communion.

On this question, honesty requires us to admit that although the one-official-book model has been given at least lip service throughout the Episcopal Church, there have been local variations, sometimes quite extensive, in which so-called traditional elements were added to the rites of the 1979 BCP. Think, for example, of the *American Missal*, which added these elements to its eucharistic rite, or the so-called *Knott Missal*, which was used in some Anglo-Catholic parishes in England and included extensive borrowings from the Roman rite. In our current situation, however, with an overabundance of diverse materials easily available on the internet, it would require substantial training in liturgical studies to distinguish the best of these resources from the trash.

While absolute prayer book conformity has not existed in the Episcopal Church for over a century and perhaps longer, the one-prayer-book claim has, however, served us as a “unifying myth.”¹⁶ The heart of the issue which the proposal of prayer book revision presents to us is: What next? Should we accept the *de facto* diversity which is found among the liturgical practices of the Episcopal Church, and thus move away from a single book to a model in which the local leadership develops the liturgical uses of a parish, perhaps theoretically drawing primarily upon Anglican resources?

A Lutheran pastor who studied with me many years ago commented that “the Lutheran Church has a hankering after episcopacy, but the Episcopal Church has a hankering after congregationalism.” If we give up the ideal of one liturgical book as a sign of our unity, then we shall, it seems to me, be taking a definitive step in a congregationalist direction. Is that really the mind of our people? I think not, and if not, then we need to do the work of reclaiming the important place which common norms for liturgical worship play in supporting a more comprehensive and catholic understanding of the church as one Body.

¹⁶ Louis Weil, “A Perspective on the Relation of the Prayer Book to Anglican Unity,” in *With Ever Joyful Hearts: Essays on Liturgy and Music Honoring Marion J. Hatchett*, ed. J. Neil Alexander (New York: Church Publishing, 1999), 321–332.

Sharing common texts has been one of the hallmarks of the ecumenical movement for embodying our baptismal unity in Christ. How much more, then, does that apply to our unity as an ecclesial tradition? For that unity to be realized, more is required of us than the preparation of a new book. We must undertake the catechetical work which is the soil that nourishes our ecclesial identity with its providential gifts.

Continuing the Conversation
by Scott MacDougall

Perhaps the first thing to be said about Ruth A. Meyers's and Louis Weil's positions is also the most obvious: neither of them advocates for the SCLM's first two potential paths. Neither thinks that now is the time for the Episcopal Church to undertake the revision of its current *Book of Common Prayer* (path 1), nor do they assert that it is advisable to create "comprehensive *Book(s) of Alternative Services*" (path 2). In fact, the steady proliferation of liturgical resources—authorized and unauthorized—that Episcopal parishes employ is a matter that they maintain any process of prayer book revision would have to address directly. Meyers and Weil, therefore, are not in favor of embarking on revising the *Book of Common Prayer* in the near term or of supplementing it with even more alternatives.

Meyers and Weil agree that prayer book revision will occur. It is inevitable. Periodic liturgical revision is characteristic of Anglicanism, and this process is only speeding up and intensifying as global Anglicanism further diversifies in expression. They are in no way opposed in principle to change where worship is concerned. They do agree, however, that the 2018 General Convention is not the appropriate time to authorize liturgical change at that scale in the context of the Episcopal Church.

It should be noted that their reluctance does not stem from the concerns that are often expressed when the possibility of revision is raised. Meyers, for example, does not agree with the common view that revising the prayer book would almost inevitably split the church. She recalls the same claim was made when the process resulting in the 1979 BCP was underway. While there was, indeed, some sharp disagreement and not a little pain involved in making the move to the new rites, doing so did not divide the Episcopal Church. Even

so, as Weil points out, the pastoral component of letting the old book go and transitioning to the new one was quite insufficient. Space was not made to, in his words, “acknowledge the death” of the 1928 BCP and to mourn the loss of the rites that for so many had been the very embodiment of their relationship to God. Meyers and Weil agree that when the time comes to introduce a new *Book of Common Prayer* to the church, it must be done carefully, with great sensitivity, and after a significant process of preparing clergy to assist those in their care through the difficulty of praying their way into comfort with the new forms of worship.

One reason Meyers and Weil contend that the time has not come for the Episcopal Church to revise its *Book of Common Prayer* is that, in their view, the church has insufficiently mined the depths of the current book. Weil centers his perspective squarely on this contention, which is why he specifically advocates for the SCLM’s fourth path: “A step back from efforts toward comprehensive liturgical revision or creation of new liturgies, and an accompanying commitment to deepening the collective understanding of—and engagement with—the theology of our current liturgies.” Meyers expresses the same sentiment but does so by advocating a different approach. She champions the SCLM’s third path, an “intensive church-wide conversation” about the advisability of revision. Such a conversation, she notes, may or may not result in a recommendation to the 80th General Convention in 2021 to launch a revision process. A vigorous, church-wide discussion about the current prayer book during the 2018–2020 triennium will reveal whether the mind of the church is to continue its engagement with the 1979 book or to proceed with the work of revising it. Meyers offers some reasons in her paper that the church might wish to pursue revision at that time. Yet, neither in her paper nor in the subsequent dialogue with Weil does she pre-judge the outcome of the conversation that would take place if the convention opts for the third path in 2018.

Meyers does think, however, that undertaking this conversation would almost certainly bring the church to awareness of the riches of the 1979 book and of the multiple ways in which its theology has not been sufficiently understood theologically or embodied practically. The rites of the 1979 BCP benefited from the fruits of the liturgical renewal movement that spanned the twentieth century, all of them (save the daily offices, as Meyers points out) marked by significant

structural, linguistic, and rubrical changes underwritten by a number of theological developments. These were designed to transform the character of Episcopal worship and the theological imagination that it shapes. Yet, as both Meyers and Weil readily agree, too often the church prays the words of the 1979 BCP with the ethos of the 1928 book.

What does this mean? It points to the fact that the ecclesiological implications of the current *Book of Common Prayer* have not yet been completely grasped and embodied. While the rites themselves mark a massive redirection of the church in embracing a baptismal ecclesiology that emphasizes the priesthood of all believers—lay and ordained—in the life of Christian discipleship, what this means liturgically and ecclesologically is not always fully understood or enacted. For example, the prayer book's emphasis on baptism as full Christian initiation stands in tension with both current practice and the church's canons in some cases. Some churches do not maintain baptism before eucharistic participation as the theological norm, for example, and the canonical directive that only the confirmed may hold particular leadership positions in the church signals that baptism is not full and sufficient Christian initiation. In addition, preaching and catechetical formation often neglect to emphasize the role of eucharist as the reconstitution of the Body of Christ, into which all those participating in the rite have been initiated and incorporated by dying and rising with Christ in the baptismal water. Clearly the promise of the 1979 prayer book's shift to a baptismal ecclesiology has not been fully realized, and Weil maintains that this fact alone is sufficient reason to forestall authorizing prayer book revision in the near term. Meyers contends that the fact that the church has not had an opportunity to voice its mind on revising the *Book of Common Prayer* is an even more pressing reason for not pursuing the SCLM's first path in 2018. Meyers notes that there is no reason why, in theory, the process of prayer book revision could not itself be the occasion for the church's deeper engagement with the 1979 prayer book. Again, however, she observes that whether this could be realized in concrete terms is a determination to be made only after serious conversations about revision involving as broad a segment of the Episcopal Church as possible.

The process of church-wide conversation that Meyers extols would not be envisioned or framed as a first step in prayer book

revision, though it could retroactively end up being precisely that, should it result in the church opting to proceed with revision in 2021. And regardless of the timeline of the eventual revision that both Meyers and Weil agree will occur, this three-year period of deeper engagement with the prayer book would certainly inform the revision process when it is authorized. More immediately, it would also provide an occasion for the church to reflect upon and assess both the 1979 BCP and the rites in the *Enriching Our Worship* series, and to perceive more clearly the theological richness and limitations of the prayer book as it currently stands.

This is why Weil understood his initial view, focused on deeper engagement with the prayer book, to be complementary to Meyers's call for conversation, and it is also why, during their exchange, he expressed enthusiasm for her proposal. As he put it, he often hears the call for the Episcopal Church to think "outside the box" liturgically, but this call often comes from those who "don't know what's inside the box!" Conversation designed to take a closer look at what is in the box will, Meyers and Weil contend, provide an understanding of what Episcopalians currently share in terms of worship and liturgical ethos and where there are differences; what "common worship" means for us here and globally; what needs the church must face urgently; and how the resources of the prayer book allow us to meet current needs and when they do not.

Meyers and Weil agree that the current book does have limitations. Precisely what those limitations are and how they might best be addressed, however, can only be determined by precisely the sort of church-wide conversation that must precede the formal process of prayer book revision. By what means and through what process will the Episcopal Church honor its commitment to truly inculturated liturgy? For example, how and at what point will the church authorize Spanish liturgies written in Spanish by Spanish-speaking liturgists instead of continuing to translate English texts into Spanish for use in Spanish-speaking contexts? Can we agree as a church on whether we wish to be a one-prayer-book church or whether there should be various modes of authorized worship offered in parallel, as in the Church of England? How should liturgical material from outside the authorized rites of the church be incorporated into Episcopal worship, if, indeed, it should be at all? How will church leaders meet the hunger of many Episcopalians for deeper catechetical and formational

engagement around these and other issues, a formation that has to include greater awareness of the prayer book tradition, the histories and meanings of the rites we pray, the theologies they embody, and the function of symbol and ritual that gives them energy and significance? On its own, a process of prayer book revision cannot address these crucial matters. Yet, these are precisely the sorts of questions (the list is illustrative, not exhaustive) that must be asked and answered, Meyers and Weil argue, before a formal revision process is launched.

Meyers and Weil both observe that a significant obstacle to having the church-wide conversation envisioned by the SCLM's third path is the fact that there is no longer a staff member at the national level responsible for matters of liturgy and worship in the Episcopal Church. Their view is that such a role needs to be reinstated, *not*, be it understood clearly, in order to drive such a conversation from the center, but in order to coordinate the many conversations pertaining to these matters that must take place at the regional and diocesan levels. This person would be equipped to provide those in charge of such conversations with the resources they need to have those dialogues and to enhance catechetical and formational work in their locales. Such a person would also coordinate the effort to assess how the current rites are "praying" in the churches, collating survey and interview data regarding what is working and what is not, where there are emerging needs and where previous ones have been successfully addressed. If the General Convention were to pursue the SCLM's third path, it would therefore need to adequately resource the endeavor, given the tremendous scope and far-reaching implications of the work.

The conversation about the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer* and the possibility of revising it that Meyers and Weil undertook in writing and furthered with an in-person exchange must continue. Such a conversation is likely to include them, as respected theologians of the Episcopal Church on liturgical matters. This continued conversation, however, must, in their view, open to include the *entire church*, for the reasons they have elucidated. Only following that, in their opinion, will the time be right to honor the Anglican heritage of prayer book revision by creating the next version of the Episcopal Church's *Book of Common Prayer*.