

Common Worship in the Church of England: Of the Braiding of Many Bridges There Is No End

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Imagine visiting three Anglican churches within two miles of one another in Birmingham, England.

At Church A there is an 8 a.m. Mass, a 10:30 a.m. Parish Mass and Sunday school, and a 6:30 p.m. Choral Evensong (followed by Benediction on festival days). The church uses *Common Worship* Order 1, in traditional language, and provides an in-house booklet. Incense is used, and bells are rung at the appropriate moments in the eucharistic prayer. The church has a strong choir which sings at two services each Sunday. Since it is on the Anglo-Catholic end of the Church of England, full eucharistic vestments are worn.

Church B advertises three main services (called celebrations) on a Sunday, at 9:15 a.m., 11 a.m., and 6:30 p.m., with an additional monthly 3 p.m. service. These vary between a Service of the Word and Communion, and use modern language. A worship leader and band provide the music with a range of instruments, including an organ, and modern and traditional hymns are sung. They do not use prayer books, but the words for the music and liturgy are projected onto screens. Worship leaders do not wear ecclesiastical dress. It is a charismatic-evangelical church, and is known as a very lively and active worshipping community.

Church C has three Sunday services: 8 a.m. Holy Communion (in modern language), 10 a.m. Morning Worship, which is usually Communion but once a month is a Service of the Word, and 6:30 p.m. Evening Worship, usually Evensong but once a month a Eucharist. At the modern language services an in-house booklet is used, sometimes a general one, sometimes produced as a one-off for a particular service. Roughly monthly the Evensong is fully choral. There is a choir at

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the 10 a.m. service and occasionally in the evening who sings a range of traditional and more modern hymns, drawing especially from the Iona community. Clergy wear cassock or cassock-alb and stole for the Eucharist. It is described as being of central church tradition.

A casual visitor at each of these churches would find much that was held in common among them, but would also observe clear differences in their underlying theology and ethos. They are all within the Deanery of Edgbaston, a grouping of thirteen parishes ranging from inner-urban to affluent middle-class, from white outer-council estates to diverse, racially mixed areas. The worship in all the churches differs depending on the tradition of the church, the social context in which it is set, the level of formality or informality that the church's own ethos dictates, as well as what the service is actually advertised to be. The deanery reflects the breadth of worship across the Church of England. In some places the celebration of the Holy Eucharist will be virtually indistinguishable from Roman Catholic worship and in other places the service will resemble free-church worship. The variety of practice might cause us to ask if common prayer is a reality in the Church of England or not.

All Church of England clergy and authorized lay ministers make the Declaration of Assent at their ordination or commissioning. After a preamble the following words are said by the candidate (brackets indicate words not said by authorized lay ministers):

I, A B, do so affirm, and accordingly declare my belief in the faith which is revealed in the Holy Scriptures and set forth in the catholic creeds and to which the historic formularies of the Church of England bear witness; and in public prayer [and administration of the sacraments], I will use only the forms of service which are authorized or allowed by Canon.¹

The reason for restriction is clear. The phrase *lex orandi, lex credendi, lex vivendi* (the law of prayer, the law of belief, the law of life) reminds us that prayer has an underlying theology. It forms our beliefs, in that if we say something enough we will believe it and then live it. An institutional church will feel the need to put boundaries around what is acceptable in worship that goes out under its name. Worship reflects

¹ The preface to the Declaration of Assent and its response can be found in *Common Worship: Services and Prayers for the Church of England* (London: Church House Publishing, 2000), xi.

and feeds doctrine. The Church of England's worship rules are relatively permissive, but they do have limits. However, the phrase "allowed by Canon" allows for variation and creativity.

The preamble to the declaration refers to the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*. This book was the one worship resource for the Church of England up until the early twentieth century and remained the only officially authorized text until the early 1960s, when liturgical revision began in earnest. This revision culminated in the creation of the library of books known as *Common Worship*. The 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*, however, remains permanently authorized as a standard for worship.

The philosophy of *Common Worship* moved from a single volume containing authorized services to the idea of a panoply of resources for different services and types of worship, introducing far more variety of texts and encouraging use of seasonal variation. It also introduced the idea that the underlying structure of the service is the key, and texts can be added into this structure from different sources. There are two key rubrics: *Using these or other authorized words* and *Using these or other suitable words*.

The requirement for authorized words is primarily in the eucharistic prayers, forms of absolution, and the words accompanying the distribution of the elements. In other places the worship leader is free to choose what is "suitable" theologically, sociologically, and pastorally. Thus prayers with a good fit for local culture can be used. This will include borrowing from resources of other churches within the Anglican Communion, from other denominations, and from Christian communities such as Taizé and Iona. It is likely to include prayers crafted by worship leaders and other participants, particularly but not exclusively in the creating of intercessions. Trust is placed in the church leadership that this task will be carried out with integrity, remaining true to the declaration they have made. Leaders of worship are able to draw from any source for hymns, choruses, and anthems and it is very often in the choice of music that the greatest variety among churches will be experienced.

The creation of a vast array of resources and the freedom to borrow freely from other "suitable" sources is a significant move away from the original concept that all was contained in one book with a standard service (albeit imbued with the flavor of the church in terms of its particular tradition, ritual, and music). Nowadays as we see from the three churches outlined above, there may be much greater variety.

A further important development has been the increasing use of computers. It is easy to create high-quality resources tailored either on a service-by-service or season-by-season basis. It is therefore rare for churches to give out the *Common Worship* book itself. A side effect of this is that the congregation may not know or recognize, without careful study of copyright notices, what comes from *Common Worship* and what is taken from elsewhere.

I would like to reflect on the two churches in which I have served as parish priest since the *Common Worship* series of resources was brought in. Both sit within the broadly central band of Church of England worship. Both retain some elements of *Book of Common Prayer* services, but both had, before my arrival, embraced elements of liturgical revision through use of the *Alternative Service Book*² and other modern sources.

Between 1999 and 2005 I served in a village parish of some fifteen hundred people. The church sought to serve the whole community and offered a range of worship. There was a weekly early morning Communion from the *Book of Common Prayer*. There were two evening services a month, one traditional Evensong and one a free-format, usually lay-led, prayer and praise service. At 10 a.m. a different Sunday service was offered each week of the month. There was a modern language Family Communion, a *Book of Common Prayer* Matins, a more formal Sung Communion, and a non-eucharistic Family Service. Some involved handing out a book, others a booklet created in-house, and still others used projector and screen. But at the heart of each was an Anglican ethos defined partly by the worship and partly by the setting and leadership. This meant that many different tastes and preferences could be catered for and the church could truly aim to be the church for most of the community. This is very important for the Church of England, where the parish system defines us and our mission, reflecting the sense of calling to the whole nation. The side-effect was that some people only came on the Sunday when “their service” was happening, while others were more open and able to appreciate the breadth that was offered, and even to see the good in services they might have dismissed as “old-fashioned and boring” or “not traditional enough.” Worship that was common to all, but not a “lowest common denominator,” became a possibility as people began

² Church of England, *The Alternative Service Book* (London: Church House Publishing, 1980).

to see that the church offered worship which was enriching and in which God spoke to people, albeit in very different ways.

In urban areas, where travel is easier and more congregations have a significant number of worshippers who are gathered from farther than the parish boundary, the situation can be a little different, though the primary sense of serving the parish still remains paramount. My current parish is Church C in the introduction above. The parish is set in a typical English suburb. There are very expensive houses and social housing, with much between the extremes. It is mainly white but with a significant number of people from Asian and Black communities, some Christians, others coming from diverse religious groups. Unemployment is low and the largest declared occupation fits within lower management occupations.³ The make-up of the congregation reflects the area quite well, though, as with many churches, it is on average older than the population. Over the years the worship in this church has favored traditional hymns and language, though they moved to modern languages for most services when *Common Worship* came out. While retaining that central ethos, we have adapted our worship over time, seeking to be more creative and to take advantage of the breadth of resources available.

Once a month, for example, our main morning service is Morning Praise. This service is an attempt to offer something to enable both the irregular worshipper and long-term worshippers a different way into worship. We aim to create worship which relates to people's lives and remains faithful to our worshipping roots, as well as to our desire to be open to the needs and aspirations of others.

We use the format of A Service of the Word. In *Common Worship* this is not an authorized text, but a structure and series of notes defining what should be included. It is described in this way:

A Service of the Word is unusual for an authorized Church of England service. It consists almost entirely of notes and directions and allows for considerable local variation and choice within a common structure. It is important that those who prepare for and take part in A Service of the Word should have a clear understanding of the nature of worship and of how the component parts of this service work together. Leading people in worship is leading people into mystery, into the unknown and yet the familiar. This

³ Source statistics derived from 2001 census figures held by the Church of England Birmingham, 1 Colmore Row, Birmingham B3 2BJ.

spiritual activity is much more than getting the words or the sections in the right order. The primary object in the careful planning and leading of the service is the spiritual direction which enables the whole congregation to come into the presence of God to give him glory. Choices must be made responsibly by leaders of this service or by groups planning worship with them, whether the service is an occasional one, or a regular one which may use a service card. The notes and the text of *A Service of the Word* should be read together as they interpret one another.⁴

This is far away from the concept of an authorized book remaining the same week by week with only minor variation. Here there is huge permission to work worship out in ways appropriate for the context.

We begin with the seasonal theme or a reading, sometimes but not always following the lectionary. There are certain elements we are careful always to include. A confession, an affirmation of faith, a collect, and the Lord's Prayer will form part of the service, there will always be reading from scripture, and there will be some form of address, though this is sometimes intertwined through the service. There will always be opportunity for some form of corporate prayer. We will usually share the Peace; this is primarily because when we do not the congregation misses the opportunity of interaction and says so! There has often been opportunity for people to create something or reflect on their lives in new and particular ways. The balance between authorization and creativity lies at the heart of the planning process. The question we have to ask ourselves is whether what we are thinking of is right for this congregation at this time.

Each year we offer people the chance to place their Remembrance Day poppy in a cross of sand at the front of the church. When this was introduced, we were unsure how people would react to leaving their poppy behind. We found that most people engage happily and that the symbolism of an array of poppies in a sandbox offers a powerful evocation of loss and the futility and pain of war. The bringing together of the secular poppy and the religious symbolism of the cross makes connections between people's experience outside worship and allows people to imagine and reinterpret both their experience and the liturgy itself. Each acts as a lens through which to interpret the other. In another service we each took time to model a

⁴ "A Service of the Word: Introduction," in *Common Worship*, 21.

small clay thumb pot, reflecting the themes both of God as potter and ourselves as clay, and being formed into vessels to be filled by God's Spirit. We were able to take these pots home as a powerful visual reminder of the service and its themes. Each of these rituals offered people an action point, a way to engage with God in worship which on one level was unfamiliar but which resonated with their lives and with the readings and prayers that were being woven together for that worship experience. To offer worship which challenges people to reflect on their daily lives and to bring life into worship and worship into life is a constant challenge. It is easy to fall back on the standard service, and the familiarity of that is comforting, but it is also good to push outside that from time to time.

On one level our services are profoundly Anglican, resting on words authorized as well as words that are chosen or written specially for the occasion. The worship in our church may be different from the worship in the church next door, but we are drawing on many of the same resources and ideas. Again, the setting, leadership, ethos, and intention of the worship keep it Anglican. It may appear a circular argument to say that our worship is part of the common heritage of Church of England worship because we declare and intend it so to be, but there is an aspect of that.

Elizabeth Johnson talks about the need to "braid a footbridge between the ledges of classical and feminist theological wisdom."⁵ Although the context of her discussion is about the interaction between feminism and theology, this image of a footbridge can be brought firmly into the world of liturgy and worship as well. Worship can be described as the "shop window of the church." By this is meant not a crude consumerist philosophy, but the idea of worship as an aspect of mission, a way of connecting people with the reality and mystery of God in a form and language they understand. A bridge is being braided between the life they experience Monday to Saturday and the worship they offer on Sunday. When those who are relatively unchurched come into a church for worship, perhaps on a sudden whim or as a consequence of a life-event, a bridge needs to be braided on which they feel safe and secure. Thus the worship in a parish which has a relatively non-book, modern music culture overall will be braiding a bridge that looks very different from worship centered on a uni-

⁵ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, tenth anniversary edition (New York: Crossroad, 2002), 12.

versity and immersed in a tradition of classical music. A church where the underlying ethos is Anglo-Catholic will in theology and practice be very different from the charismatic-evangelical church down the road. None is wrong, none can have the last word, each can be an appropriate expression of the ethos of the Church of England, and each can be a place in and through which people can find and hear the word and wisdom of God.

We can draw on a concept of “family likeness.” Our worship is stamped with that, even if at the opposite ends of the ecclesiastical spectrum the likeness may be hard to see and the similarities with cousins in other denominations seem more prominent. The bridges we braid are many and varied: some reach across cultural divides to encourage those from outside the Christian faith to find a home, others offer those with a greater need for the traditional a place in which they can feel safe. But there is also the bridge that God braids, the bridge which the weaver creates in order to enable people to find their rest and faith in the God who is worshipped whatever the church and whatever the tradition. The true commonality of worship comes in discovering a God with an open door whose welcome is for all.