

Introduction to *A Prayer Book for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*<sup>1</sup>:  
A Pastorally Sensitive Plan  
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[excerpt – pages ix-xii]

*Resolved; the House of Deputies concurring, That this 71<sup>st</sup> General Convention direct the Standing Liturgical Commission to prepare a rationale and a pastorally sensitive plan for the next revision of the Book of Common Prayer, and report to the 72<sup>nd</sup> General Convention.*<sup>2</sup>

This is the charge given by the 1994 General Convention to the Standing Liturgical Commission. When the commission was set up by the 1928 General Convention it was charged to continue the work of liturgical revision, which they understood to be ongoing. Just as they realized that the 1928 prayer book was not to be a permanent and unchanging liturgy for the Episcopal Church, so we realize that neither is The Book of Common Prayer 1979 perfect and unchangeable. The work of liturgical revision remains ongoing. There are many reasons why this is so.

The first is that, although the Gospel does not change, the world in which we live does. What communicates well in one time and place does not necessarily do so at all times and in all places. Language changes. Culture changes. Our worship is conditioned by both and must change in order to remain the same. Christian worship is deeply rooted in the past, in the saving events of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and looks eagerly into the future, to the *eschaton* or *parousia*; yet it is always celebrated in the present, and if it is not available and accessible to those who live in the present, then they are denied participation in both the Christian past and the Christian future.

A second reason for liturgical change is that the Church's understanding of itself and its worship is constantly growing and unfolding. In the last twenty-five years, for example, we have grown into a new understanding of the centrality of baptism in Christian life and ministry, and this has led to suggestions for changes in the way we do ordinations and confirmation, as well as baptisms. A new awareness of the place of women in the Church and of the patriarchal bias of much that has become customary in the Church's life and worship has led to a call for other changes, including changes in the language of our worship.

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<sup>1</sup> From *A Prayer Book for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Liturgical Studies 3*, edited by Ruth Meyers for the Standing Liturgical Commission (New York: Church Publishing, 1996), pp. ix-xiv.

<sup>2</sup> Resolution A051a, *Journal of the 71<sup>st</sup> General Convention*, 1994, p. 758.

A third reason for liturgical change is to take advantage of the work that has been done by others since 1976. Not only have most of the other churches of the Anglican Communion produced new service books which contain much worthwhile material, such as *A New Zealand Prayer Book* (1989) and the *Canadian Book of Alternative Services* (1985), but other churches have issued significant new service books, of which the Lutheran *Book of Worship* (1978), the Presbyterian *Book of Common Worship* (1993), and the new translation of the Roman *Sacramentary* now in progress are examples.

It is important to recognize that in a real sense it is the success of what has already been done that produces the demand for more change. It is the changes already made in the 1979 prayer book which have brought about the recognition of the centrality of baptism and eucharist in the life of the Christian community, not merely as theological abstractions but as living realities. It is the emphasis which the 1979 prayer book places on the prayers of the people and the importance of offering the actual concerns of the worshipping congregation at the eucharist which causes us to criticize the formality and hierarchical bias of the forms of those prayers we most often use. It is the insistence of the catechism of the 1979 book that "[t]he ministers of the Church are *lay persons*, bishops, priests and deacons"<sup>3</sup> which has sparked the emphasis on total ministry.

In fact, there is little interest in abandoning The Book of Common Prayer 1979 for some new and different liturgy. The interest is in continuing and perfecting the work begun in 1928, continued in 1979 and still ongoing. This is work which by its very nature can never be completed before the *parousia*. Each generation comes to the work of liturgical revision and renewal with the recognition that there is much that remains to be done. Unfortunately, having completed a major revision, it often feels that it has accomplished all that needs to be done and that the "new liturgy," in our case the 1979 prayer book, should outlast the ages – or at least our own lives – and consequently it remains deaf to the cries for change which it once led.

It is inevitable, then, that the prayer book be revised. The first pastoral question is when this should be done. Prayer book revision in the Episcopal Church is a complicated process requiring the action of two General Conventions, entailing the affirmative vote of the bishops and of the clerical and lay deputies voting "by orders" both times.<sup>4</sup> The process is deliberately conservative,

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<sup>3</sup> BCP, p. 855, emphasis added.

<sup>4</sup> Article X, Constitution (of the Episcopal Church).

designed to put the burden on those desiring change. The process is also democratic and political. Liturgical experts do not have the authority to change the liturgy of the Episcopal Church. This is done by the bishops and elected deputies to General Convention. The process necessarily involves compromise and give-and-take. Rarely does any individual or group get exactly what they would like. By authorizing materials for "trial use" prior to their adoption, it is possible to increase the involvement of the ordinary worshiper in the process and insure that what is at least attempts to meet the needs of actual worshipping congregations.

The result of all this realistically is that a minimum of nine years is required from the beginning of the process to completion. If the 1997 General Convention were to ask to have texts ready for trial use in 2000 and those texts were actually adopted in 2003, then revision of the prayer book could become final in 2006. It is unlikely that this schedule could be met, especially with no one employed full-time on the project. Even if General Convention considered this to be its highest priority and were prepared to commit substantial money and personnel to it, the schedule would be difficult to maintain.

What this means practically is that to decide to begin the process is not to suggest that we stop printing 1979 prayer books. It is to decide to look realistically and systematically at ways to improve The Book of Common Prayer for the Church of the twenty-first century.