

A Reflection on Liturgical Renewal and the Internet

By The Rev. Dr. Clayton L. Morris

National Church Officer for Liturgy and Music

The arena of liturgical renewal is currently fraught with the pressure of demands from every side. As an awareness of rapidly increasing diversity in the population develops, communities seek to express the particularity of their world-view in worship. The orderly and basically conservative process of official prayer book revision can't keep up.

Interest in diversity certainly includes racial and cultural specificity, but it also encompasses generational issues, concerns expressed geographically and distinctions between rural and urban, large and small congregations.

In the absence of comprehensive developmental work from the denomination as a whole, a resource like *The Worship Well* is of extraordinary value to liturgical planners who are constantly on the search for revised, renewed or newly composed materials.

But the prospect of a free-for-all system for sharing locally produced materials along with materials more or less officially developed for particular circumstances is frightening. Are these materials authorized for use in public worship? How do we know that the materials are of sufficient quality to be useful?

The description of the process for submitting materials to *The Well* indicates that materials will be reviewed by staff, who will choose things to be posted. That is probably important, but more to maintain clarity and order than to engage in censorship.

The process of prayer book revision has been ongoing in the Episcopal Church since 1789. To date, there have been four Books of Common Prayer in the life of the Episcopal Church. The first book was approved in 1789. Revisions of the book were approved in 1882, 1928 and 1979. In every case, two principles guided the reviser.

1. The structure of rites, rather than the particularities of language, has always been seen as the protector of the tradition.
2. It has, perhaps obviously, been necessary to engage in experiment beyond the forms currently approved, in order to move forward. Rites don't just flow onto the page. Rather, they develop in repeated use.

While there is some risk in encouraging liturgists working locally to share their work broadly, the risk of limiting that possibility is greater. Having said that, the obvious caution that needs to accompany this process is in realizing that materials posted do not necessarily conform to the rubrics of the Book of Common Prayer, which serve as the guide to orthodoxy in liturgical planning. It is wise, as well, to remember that the diocesan bishop serves as its liturgical officer and is, thus, the final authority in the approval of material to be used in public worship.

Thus, if *The Worship Well* exists as a place to entertain new ideas, the local planning team, the priest in charge and the bishop remain responsible for monitoring the inclusion of experimental materials in public worship. With this balance in place we are free to wonder what new insights might be brought to the worship experience.

Clayton L. Morris

December 2004