The 78th General Convention of the Episcopal Church and the Liturgy: New Wine in Old Wineskins?

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The 78th General Convention of the Episcopal Church generated a significant number of resolutions related to the church’s liturgy, most of which passed both Houses, including resolutions authorizing preparation of the revision of the 1979 Book of Common Prayer and The Hymnal 1982. A review of the resolutions related to liturgy and music, however, raises fundamental questions about the kind of liturgical reform the church may undertake and how it may integrate growing appreciation for linguistic and cultural diversity in the church, including the insights of feminist, postcolonial, and LGBTQ theological reflection and those produced by theologians of color. This essay argues that serious engagement with these questions suggests a completely reimagined liturgical “center of gravity” that integrates the insights of liturgical scholarship and practice since the authorization of the 1979 Book of Common Prayer and The Hymnal 1982, while providing the flexibility to respond to the church’s current diverse contexts.

The 78th General Convention of the Episcopal Church, held in Salt Lake City, Utah, in July 2015, produced substantial developments in the areas of liturgy and music that will likely have profound effects on Episcopal assemblies in coming years. The resolutions directing preparation for substantial revisions of both The Hymnal 1982 and the 1979 Book of Common Prayer (BCP) headline the liturgical news of the 2015 convention. These and other liturgical resolutions—almost all of which passed, with some rare exceptions1—suggest

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1 All resolutions mentioned in this essay passed both the House of Bishops and the House of Deputies unless otherwise noted.
exciting avenues for the next steps in our church’s liturgical development but also raise a fundamental question of what kind of liturgical revision the church imagines for itself. At one end of the pole lies an editorial resampling of the historic Anglican liturgical heritage combined with newer and more diverse contemporary texts and music; at the other lies a complete reimagining of the liturgical resources of the Episcopal Church; and there are many points in between. At stake is the vital connection between the liturgy of the church and the liturgy of the world, with all its joys and sorrows, hopes and failures, which the gospel is meant to address.

*Common Prayer in Uncommon Languages*

The resolution with the widest reach (along with that related to hymnal revision) is Resolution A169, which directs the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music (SCLM) to “prepare a plan for the comprehensive revision of the current Book of Common Prayer” and to present to the 79th General Convention a plan that will “utilize the riches of our Church’s liturgical, cultural, racial, generational, linguistic, gender and ethnic diversity,” while also taking into consideration “the use of current technologies which provide access to a broad range of liturgical resources.” Curiously, the resolution does not provide an explanation, such as the one accompanying the resolution directing the revision of the hymnal, discussed below.

The resolution text itself notes some concerns of the drafters, and, one hopes, the church as a whole: namely, that the current BCP insufficiently utilizes the church’s “riches,” particularly the riches of human difference captured in the many-layered “diversity” the resolution commends. Whatever the church needed in the early 1970s when the major work on the 1979 BCP was completed, the church’s current reality and mission demand a wider array of liturgical materials drawn from more diverse sources that reflect both the actual and hoped for gathering of blessed human difference in the liturgical assemblies of the Episcopal Church. Notably, other than liturgical diversity—a term that is hard to interpret but perhaps captures the range of low-to-high church “styles”—all the rest of the terms suggest human difference in both body and culture. Notably almost all of

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2 General Convention 2015 resolutions may be found at www.generalconvention.org/gc/2015-resolutions.
these differences (particularly race, ethnicity, and gender, though not limited to these) have been subject to oppression or marginalization of various kinds.

Another BCP-related resolution, A068, takes up the issue of linguistic diversity, directing translations “of portions of the Book of Common Prayer and/or other authorized liturgical resources into French, Creole, and Spanish, according to the principles outlined in Canon II.3.5.” These translations will be guided by principles of “dynamic equivalence,” rather than the “formal equivalence” of previous translations. The explanation for the resolution notes that such work represents “a major opportunity for inculturation and evangelism for a multicultural Church.”

While acknowledging the helpfulness of new translations in the interim as the church awaits a plan for revision, the idea of translating BCP texts themselves should give pause when held in the context of a comprehensive revision that utilizes the church’s linguistic diversity. Why not instead seek the creation of new texts—inspired by the BCP if that is helpful—but nevertheless composed anew in the native language of whatever Episcopal church needs them and by those who will use them? Such a move would require reframing (and perhaps even abandoning) the language of “inculturation” in a way that acknowledges that all liturgical texts—including the inherited texts of the BCP and the Latin and other linguistic sources that preceded them—are contextual and “inculturated.” Privileging one contextual expression of Christianity over another risks perpetuating a kind of ecclesial colonialism based solely on provenance.3

Beyond either the translation of this or that liturgical text from English into a different language, or new liturgical compositions in a variety of the current languages of the Episcopal Church, a contemporary project aimed at new and authentic contextualizations of the liturgy itself also provides an opportunity to reevaluate the helpfulness of monolingual liturgy as such. Given the increasingly diverse cultural and linguistic realities of the Episcopal Church, and the privilege accorded to English in both its sixteenth-century form in Rite I of the current BCP and late twentieth-century U.S. forms in Rite II,

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3 Recent scholarship has highlighted the connection between historic colonialism and the liturgy, including in its contemporary forms. See, for example, Michael N. Jagessar and Stephen Burns, *Christian Worship: Postcolonial Perspectives* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2011), and Cláudio Carvalhaes, ed., *Liturgy in Postcolonial Perspectives: Only One Is Holy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).
a broader exploration of the use of diverse human languages in the liturgy could well be a fruitful direction for liturgical reform of the current resources. In my own Diocese of Chicago, it has become *de rigueur* for diocesan level celebrations to include substantial portions of the liturgy in Spanish—a reflection of the presence of a large number of Spanish-speaking members of both U.S. and other national and cultural backgrounds in our churches and among lay and ordained leadership. A collection of renewed liturgical resources could explore the place of multiple languages in a single liturgy and encourage their use by providing models for celebrating with them.

Take, for example, the well-known fixed and repeatable texts of many Episcopal liturgies: the Collect for Purity, the *Sanctus*, the “words of institution” in the eucharistic prayers, and various forms of the Lord’s Prayer, to name just a few. A revised liturgical resource might well include selections of these basic liturgical texts in various languages to be used in a variety of local contexts, just as *Wonder, Love, and Praise* already includes a few Spanish and English/Spanish bilingual options for the *Sanctus* and Fraction Anthem.⁴ Given that most Episcopalians know these texts in their own native language, there is little to prevent them from learning to pray their meaning through a different one.

Such a project would not be without its pitfalls—including the dangers of “ecclesial colonialism” noted above—and it would require renewed liturgical formation for those who prepare and shepherd liturgy in the Episcopal Church and for the assemblies that celebrate it. Yet such models would go a long way toward suggesting that Christian liturgy (and the Christian life it shapes) is multilingual and multicultural in nature, and that part of the ministry of the liturgical assembly is to learn to pray at least some of the prayer of the whole church in a language other than one’s own and other than the culturally dominant language. Indeed, given the fraught debate around difference in the surrounding culture—from political controversies related to immigration, to the Black Lives Matter movement and the racial and economic injustices that have energized it, to the need to acknowledge and atone for the ways white cultural dominance, its history of

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⁴ See, for example, the *Sanctus/Santo* (WLP 854) and *Cordero de Dios/Lamb of God* (WLP 869) from Joel Martinson’s bilingual *Missa Guadalupe*, along with Roy A. Prescod’s *Cordero de Dios* (WLP 870), in *Wonder, Love, and Praise: A Supplement to The Hymnal 1982* (New York: Church Publishing Incorporated, 1997).
injustice, and the preference for English have been perpetuated in the liturgy—these steps may offer rich opportunities for a more robust connection between the liturgy of the church and its mission in the surrounding culture.

Along these lines, Ruth Meyers, in her Missional Worship, Worshipful Mission, notes that “enacting reconciliation” is a key component of the connection between liturgy and mission, drawing on a number of examples of liturgical responses to concrete acts of violence and/or injustice, such as the funeral of Brother Roger of Taizé. To her examples we might add the broader cultural work of reconciliation around the issues noted above, which admittedly lead us somewhat beyond the particular issues of language as such. Yet attention to language as a bearer of culture, and to preference for “English” in both its linguistic and cultural dimensions, might well encourage a wider conversation about how cultural privilege of various sorts is operative in the prayer of the church, thus leading to new forms of prayer that both seek forgiveness and lay the foundation for reconciliation.

Given the historic use of the BCP and its English Reformation provenance as a touchstone for what it means to be Anglican all over the world, however, this shift in liturgical consciousness away from a single-language source text toward equally-valued contextualizations of the liturgy would surely be challenging. At the same time, it suggests an exciting opportunity to provide liturgical resources for the contemporary church. Given that the Episcopal Church is already a multicultural and multinational reality both institutionally (for example, the churches of Province IX and the Convocation of Episcopal Churches in Europe) and within congregations and dioceses, a truly comprehensive liturgical reform might produce a library of resources that both presumes and celebrates a church in which the diversity of language and cultural expression is an integral element of good liturgy, though with the caution against a “false multiculturalism” Juan Oliver and others have warned against.

Rather than a largely monolingual English-language document, a renewed Episcopal liturgical library, looking to the example of A New

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Zealand Prayer Book for inspiration, could be truly multilingual and therefore also multicultural, with original texts composed in the many human languages that comprise both the membership and the mission field of the Episcopal Church. Such a resource would do much to propose, through the liturgy, patterns of justice across human cultural difference that we hope for in the world. Indeed, a robustly contextualized collection of liturgical resources may be an even finer tribute to the original English reformers than a preservation of the original product, especially given that Thomas Cranmer’s core project might well be described as a contextualization of the ancient and late medieval Roman and other liturgies to the early modern context in which he lived and worked.7

Making Justice More than “Occasional”

A further issue with similar ramifications regards the influence of theological feminism on the next stage of liturgical renewal. The Enriching Our Worship series (EOW) took steps toward responding to feminist theological insights (especially the problematic dominance of masculine imagery in liturgical language) by modeling and encouraging “expansive” language in their supplementary texts. Given that the texts of EOW remain marginal to the BCP—not approved for use in every diocese, published as flimsy paperbacks, never incorporated into altar books, and often most readily available as electronic documents—it is hard to argue that the movement toward expansive language has had wide-ranging effect, especially with the relative if historically understandable lack of expansive language found in the BCP itself. If as a church we agree with William Seth Adams that expansive language is “a matter of justice,”8 then more work on this front is in order.

As if recognizing the work still to be done in this area, the curiously titled Resolution D046 to “Authorize Liturgical Materials Honoring the Female in God and Man” proposes the trial use of prayers from the third edition of Janet Morley’s All Desires Known,9 texts that

are deeply rooted in feminist sensibilities, perhaps for eventual inclusion in a revised edition of the *Book of Occasional Services* (BOS). Also proposed, in Resolution D036, is the addition of a “Rite for Claiming a New Name” into the BOS, which, the drafters of the resolution argue, “would signal the powerful opportunities that congregations have to walk with their members as they navigate life transitions and to help them discern how God may be calling them in the midst of those changes,” especially for transgender members. The sponsors further argue “the placement of such a service in the BOS would signal in a theologically and pastorally concrete manner the support that The Episcopal Church has previously declared” and would “serve as a powerful sign of encouragement, invitation, and incorporation.”

There are many political and practical reasons for these changes to be appended to the BOS (whose continuing revision is commended in the passed Resolution A059), but at heart is the question of whether the theological insights of women, as articulated in feminist, womanist, *mujerista*, and other scholarship, and the theological reflections of gender and sexual minorities will inform the comprehensive reform of the BCP—or if they will be “occasional” concerns relegated to the margins of the church’s liturgical life. That is not to say that every liturgy imaginable must appear in the BCP or whatever primary resource might emerge from further revision. Yet a reform that draws on all the “riches” of the church would hopefully include robust attention to the ways in which the church’s historic liturgies have relied almost exclusively on masculine, heteronormative imagery in reference to God and the church, thus masking and diminishing the presence and participation of women and sexual and gender minorities in the church’s life and inscribing their position in society. The church now has a new opportunity to learn from the insights of feminist and queer theological reflection, not least regarding revisions that fall under the heading “Holy Matrimony” but certainly not limited to these, as the resolution directing attention to the liturgical needs and participation of transgender Episcopalians indicates.

Beyond issues related to gender and sexuality, similar concerns might also be raised about the relative inattention to the inherent dignity, value, and eternal destiny of creation itself, which undergird human dignity in all its difference. This concern is expressed in Resolution A058 to “Authorize Liturgical Materials for Honoring God in Creation,” which seeks also to include these materials eventually in the BOS. A renewed theological understanding of creation is already
making its way toward inclusion in the current BCP, as directed by Resolution C015, which seeks to add the question, “Will you cherish the wondrous works of God, and protect the beauty and integrity of all creation?” to the Baptismal Covenant, drawing on a change already made by the Anglican Church of Canada.10

Granted, liturgical revision along these lines is complicated to say the least. As an example, integrating feminist insights regarding how to speak of the Trinity in the liturgy has profound ecumenical implications, beginning with the preference across the churches, and notably among the numerically large Catholic and Orthodox11 churches, for the traditional titles of the three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Feminist and other scholars have for decades been training attention on the patriarchal dimensions of traditional trinitarian language, with Elizabeth Johnson’s foundational *She Who Is*12 put forward as one of a new library of theological knowledge that must be engaged. Johnson’s work is but one example of what is now a wide-ranging theological discipline; her study is noted here for its date of publication, 1992—well before *Enriching Our Worship*, well after the completion of the BCP. It is but one signal in the shift begun decades ago and now well underway toward the as yet unrealized full inclusion of women’s voices, theological reflection, and ordained ministry that needs expression beyond “supplements” to the church’s official liturgy. Among contemporary examples of similar work with possible ramifications on liturgical revision is M. Shawn Copeland’s *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being*, in which she argues as an African American woman and theologian of color that “the sacramental aesthetics of Eucharist, the thankful living manifestation of God’s image through particularly marked flesh, demand the vigorous display of difference in race and culture and tongue, gender and sex and sexuality.”13 Ongoing liturgical revision can only be enriched by attending to these voices and their insights, not only regarding questions of gender and sexuality

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10 See Resolution C001 of the 2013 Joint Assembly at http://jointassembly.ca/delegates/acc/cc/resolutions/c001.html.

11 Among the more specific and wide-ranging products of Anglican-Orthodox theological dialogue is “The Church of the Triune God,” www.anglicancommunion.org/media/103818/The-Church-of-the-Triune-God.pdf, which briefly engages “The Use of Gender Language in Theology,” 51–52.


but also as related to the demands of racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity referenced above.

Like the ordination of women and the marriage of same-gender couples—which despite ecumenical objection the Episcopal Church has changed to accommodate—modifying centuries of speech about God is bound to be fraught with difficulty. Yet despite the challenges, there are some relatively easy steps on the path forward. Following *Enriching Our Worship*’s preference for “expansive language”—which after all does not preclude the use of the traditional “three”—along with the preference, as then-Presiding Bishop Frank Griswold put it in his preface to EOW, for “the prayer experience of women, and the desire to honor that experience while remaining faithful to the constituent elements and norms of liturgical prayer as this Church has received and understood them,”¹⁴ there remains a good deal of low-hanging fruit that might produce a new liturgical resource appropriate to a church in which women are now admitted at least in principle to all orders of church ministry without completely upsetting the ecumenical apple cart.

First among these must be the psalter found in the BCP, with its relentless masculine imagery for the God of Israel in countless repetitions of male singular pronouns in various forms. The 1997 General Convention authorized both Gail Ramshaw and Gordon Lathrop’s *Psalter for the Christian People*¹⁵ and the Roman Catholic *The Psalter: A Faithful and Inclusive Rendering*¹⁶ for “study and occasional use” in Episcopal liturgy,¹⁷ both of which made major strides toward an expansive English-language psalter. The fact that these psalters, like the texts of EOW, lie outside the BCP itself renders them—and the preference for “the prayer experience of [some] women”—outside the authoritative liturgical canon of the church. Though less of an issue in the collects of the BCP, with their preference for “God” (though with a generous use of “Lord”) for the first person of the

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Trinity, there is little in that collection of prayers that would suggest anything other than a preference for masculine imagery for the divine within the BCP itself.

This critique extends to the four Rite II eucharistic prayers, with its many references to the first person of the Trinity as “Father” or “Lord,” though “Ruler of the Universe” (Prayer C), “Fountain of Life” (Prayer D), and “Creator” (Prayers A and B) all point to other possible ways of naming the God of Jesus Christ. EOW’s eucharistic prayers avoid the title “Father” completely and deliberately, offering some non-patriarchal alternatives: “all-holy God, source of life and fountain of mercy,” “gracious God, creator of the universe and giver of life” (Prayer 1); “holy and gracious God, source of life abundant,” “holy and living God,” “O God of all creation” (Prayer 2); “our true and loving God,” “Holy One of Blessing,” “Creator of all,” “our God and Creator” (Prayer 3).\(^{18}\) It is reasonable to expect that a revised resource might well take into account both the need for ecumenical continuity in the naming of the Trinity in its historic (masculine) forms, as well as the need to correct the long historic failure of the churches to name God in other, equally biblical ways, along with names marked by robust feminine imagery. The two need not be mutually exclusive.

Two notable examples of recent liturgical revisions in companion churches take two directions that provide some guidance for reflection. Our Anglican Communion partner, the Church of England, included reference to the “Father” in all eight of its authorized eucharistic prayers, while our common mission partner, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, included reference to “Father” in but five of the eleven eucharistic prayers included in Evangelical Lutheran Worship.\(^{19}\) Whatever route the Episcopal Church may take in its path to liturgical revision, however, Griswold’s counsel that “expanding our vocabulary of prayer and the ways in which we name the Holy One bear witness to the fact that the mystery of God transcends all categories of knowing, including those of masculine and feminine”\(^{20}\) is well worth heeding.

Given the vital importance of the concerns raised by these resolutions—the dignity of differences of gender and sexuality, and the

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\(^{18}\) See Enriching Our Worship 1, 57–65.


\(^{20}\) Griswold, Preface to Enriching Our Worship 1, 5.
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integrity of creation itself—comprehensive reform of the BCP, then, raises questions also about the Book of Occasional Services itself. Its current form as a collection of liturgies not imagined by the framers of the BCP—such as rites related to the catechumenate, as well as all liturgical texts in languages other than English—reflects the relative procedural ease with which the BOS can be altered and amended, as opposed to the BCP. At the same time, it also serves as a marginal limbo for new material—and for those Christians whose life and experience are addressed by it—from which it is difficult pass to a more central place in the church’s liturgical life.

A new moment in the reform of the church’s liturgical resources offers the chance for a more naive questioning about why the Episcopal Church has something called a Book of Occasional Services at all, recognizing the inevitable marginalization of liturgies that get placed in that collection. There are, after all, other models of liturgical reform in the Anglican Communion that do not rely on the “book” model of common prayer, opting instead for a library of resources, such as that found in the Common Worship series of the Church of England.

Preparations for a reform of the BCP, if it is to be more than mere editorial revision, ought to include serious thought about the current relationships of the BCP to the BOS and the materials found within them, and how the relative prominence granted to the liturgies found in the collections shapes our understanding of the dignity and place of human difference in the church’s life and in the world in which we live. Surrendering the historical heritage of something called “The Book of Common Prayer” will indeed mark the end of something that has been helpful in the past, but it may be a necessary step toward a liturgy for our present and future church.

A New Song for the Lord

If the resolution directing preparation for the revision of the BCP was light on explanation, Resolution D060 to “Establish a Process for the Revision of the Hymnal 1982” painted a picture of widespread theological and esthetic dissatisfaction with the current hymnal, calling its limitations “particularly acute” and identifying a wide range of issues, from the use of “masculine pronouns to denote the whole people of God” and of “language that has fallen out of common usage and syntactic structures that are increasingly incomprehensible” to the images used for God that “lack the breadth and freshness one
finds in recent hymnology and liturgy.” The explanation further noted that “the atonement theology of some of the hymns conflicts with our present theology and even with that of the Rite Two Eucharistic prayers.” These are all critiques, incidentally, that might just as easily be applied to the current BCP.

The drafters of the resolution acknowledge that, regardless of electronic technologies that make drawing on diverse sources easy to accomplish, the Episcopal Church has “preferred to have a single resource for our prayers and liturgies, our beloved Book of Common Prayer; so too many prefer a common hymnal.” Recognizing the inherent marginalization of music found in hymnal “supplements”—where one is most likely to find hymns in languages other than English, hymns drawn from the African American musical heritage, and hymns inspired by feminist theological reflection or written by women—the drafters argue that “those songs that have found wide use in our hymnal supplements should not stand outside the hymnal for too long a period; they should be incorporated into our common hymnal.” Again, the parallel concerns with the prayer book and supplemental liturgical resources ought not be overlooked here.

As if in answer to some of these concerns, Resolution A060 continued the work of the Congregational Song Task Force, specifically requesting funding for an online resource of curated world music to respond to the Province IX churches in Latin America, which expressed in the 2010–12 triennium Hymnal Revision Survey a need “for affordable musical resources suitable for their contexts” and also to answer the desire of “non-European-American clergy and musicians . . . to have culturally appropriate musical resources included in the official hymnal of the Church.” Resolution A060 responds to this need by seeking funding for the development of an online resource accessible through Church Publishing’s Music Rite Away online resource.

Notwithstanding the issues related to the representation of cultural difference in official liturgical resources already noted above, hymnal revision itself raises the question of the relationship of music and liturgy. Revising the hymnal before establishing parameters for the revision of the BCP itself risks putting the cart before the horse. As conflicts between clergy and choirmasters across the church suggest, the relationship between music and liturgy, and ultimately which one is at the service of the other, is not a question upon which there is wide consensus, at least in mixed company of liturgists and musicians.
At heart is what kind of song the assembly needs to celebrate its liturgy, and whether historic forms, mostly derived in the European and even more specifically English contexts, are still suitable—and not just in the churches of Province IX. Hymnal revision that does not tackle these questions, or a revision pursued without regard to the wider question of BCP revision and liturgical reform, may produce a better, more diverse collection of “hymns,” but not necessarily better liturgical music for the assembly to sing its liturgy as full and active participants. As in the case of the BOS and BCP, a key question will be how musical resources are arranged and made available, even whether a single hymnal is the best path forward.

Mending and Minding Fences

The 78th General Convention delivered mixed responses to proposed changes to liturgical discipline. The three resolutions—two defeated, one passed—touch directly on the question of initiation. The simplest resolution—and the one that passed—was Resolution C050, which authorized the study of the possibility of allowing presbyters to “celebrate the Sacramental Rite of Confirmation for adults as part of those adults’ baptismal liturgy.” The drafters explained that this change seeks to address the “ecumenical anomaly of refusing to Anglican presbyters the sacramental capacity that is accepted if performed by Lutheran, Orthodox or Roman presbyters.” Of concern to the drafters is that “most licensed ministries in our Church are restricted to the confirmed, limiting small, isolated or linguistic minority communities where the rite of Confirmation may be infrequently celebrated or unavailable in the language of the people, from fully incorporating the gifts of ministry from all members.” For the drafters, delaying confirmation limits full participation in the mission of the church, despite the fact that “our theology and liturgy stress Holy Baptism as full initiation into the Body of Christ.”

The two resolutions that failed for lack of support from the House of Bishops both touched on the communion of those not baptized. Resolution C010 directed the creation of a body “to study and facilitate church-wide dialogue concerning the practice of inviting all persons, baptized and unbaptized, to receive Holy Communion,” in consultation with the appropriate church-wide bodies. The other, C023, noting in its explanation that many Episcopal parishes are in violation of current canons and technically subject to disciplinary
action, proposed an amendment of Canon I.17.7 to provide for exceptions to the prohibition of the communion of those not baptized, and so get such congregations back in the good graces of the canons, proposing: “(a) The unbaptized person must be receiving communion with the intent of beginning or strengthening a relationship with Christ and eventually being baptized, and the clergy in charge of the congregation in which the person is receiving shall provide counsel as needed; (b) Congregations inviting the unbaptized to receive communion must do so as a part of an evangelistic plan to welcome all people to Christ’s table and to strengthen them in their relationship with Christ and the Church.”

Argument about the conflicting theologies of confirmation and debates about the Open Table aside, all three resolutions point to continuing theological uncertainty, or at least openendedness, about the theology of initiation found in the BCP, the history it embodies, and its reception in practice. The oft-repeated claim that Holy Baptism is “full initiation” into the body of Christ is hardly universal in practice—unless the communion of infants at their baptism has become as widespread in Episcopal churches as it is among the Orthodox and Eastern Catholics. If baptism is indeed full initiation, then diocesan legislation requiring confirmation for licensed ministries would seem theologically out of date, and withdrawing it an easier remedy than allowing presbyters to confirm adult candidates.

After all, the practice of confirmation varies widely in “churches of the catholic order”: in Orthodox churches it is simply the chrismation that follows the baptism of any person, regardless of age; Roman Catholics continue to debate the disruption in the traditional order of the sacraments of initiation when Pius X lowered the age for communion without doing the same for confirmation, with significant variation in practice.21 Appealing to the practices of these churches, then, does not really provide a way forward. Confirmation practices in the Episcopal Church continue to range from the historical connection between confirmation and first reception of communion (still preserved in the Church of England), to adolescent rite of passage, to public commitment of Christian faith for adults; at any deanery or diocesan confirmation, these theologies are often all simultaneously present in a single celebration.

21 See www.papalencyclicals.net/Pius10/p10quam.htm for an English translation of Pius X’s decree Quam singulari, which reduced the age of first communion to the “age of reason.”
Questions regarding the communion of the unbaptized are more fraught, given the continuous discipline maintained by the “churches of the catholic order” of reserving communion to those baptized, notwithstanding current and quite recent variance in practice. Yet the debate around the reception of communion, like that regarding confirmation, hinges on the question of whether the eucharist is something received after initiation or is itself a sacrament of initiation. Current scholarship and the liturgies of the other catholic orders lean in the direction of full initiation as the baptism–chrismation–eucharist progression, with the celebration and reception of the eucharist as the culmination.  

What currently distinguishes the Episcopal liturgy of the BCP from many of the other churches is not so much the restriction of presidency at confirmation to the bishop but the claim that baptism alone constitutes full initiation, a liturgical theology reflected in the fact that the rites related to the catechumenate are consigned to the Book of Occasional Services, while in the Roman Catholic Church, the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, including the catechumenate and culminating in baptism–confirmation–eucharist, is the normative liturgy of initiation. Returning to the question of BCP reform, then, the time seems ripe for a review of the church’s understanding of initiation taking into account not only the recovery of the catechumenate in the intervening period but also the questions posed by advocates of Open Table eucharistic practice, particularly crucial questions as the church proclaims the gospel in an increasingly secular context.

Tackling these most basic questions of initiation, and especially of the communion of those not (yet?) baptized, is perhaps the most fraught component of any renewal of the church’s liturgies related to the catechumenate, baptism, confirmation, and eucharist. There is an obvious disconnect between those on the ground in parish ministry (embodied in the affirmative votes of the House of Deputies to the Open Table resolutions) and those charged by their ordination with safeguarding the liturgical and doctrinal heritage of the church.

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22 See, for example, Nathan Mitchell’s Eucharist as Sacrament of Initiation (Chicago, Ill.: Liturgy Training Publications, 2007) for reflections on this question from a Roman Catholic perspective.


24 A helpful collection of essays on the theology and practice of the Open Table can be found in the Conversations section of the ATR’s website, www.anglicantheological review.org/conversations.
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(embodied in the House of Bishops’ rejection of those resolutions). In addition, there is arguably an ecumenical issue here every bit as potent as those related to naming God, the ordained ministry of women, and the sacramental celebration of a same-gender union. On the one hand is the desire to embody gospel hospitality at the feast Christ prepares; on the other is a legitimate concern about a discipline that has undeniably deep roots in the history of Christianity, perhaps all the way back to its foundation. The two camps seem at an impasse, while conflicting “praying” shapes the “believing” of the church, which is evolving in multiple directions.

One path forward may be returning to the basic insight expressed repeatedly by one of the grandparents of current Episcopal liturgical practice, Louis Weil, who insists that “it is together as an assembly that all those gathered are ‘celebrants’.” In other words, Christian initiation empowers the faithful not just to receive the eucharist, but to exercise the common priesthood by which the church celebrates it—an ancient insight still reflected in the post-Vatican II Roman Catholic practice of dismissing catechumens from the assembly, not before communion, but well before the eucharistic prayer itself. The reception of communion by a baptized person, then, might be characterized as a weekly exercise and consummation of the privilege of that initiation and priesthood, while reception of communion by one who does not yet share the kind of faith in Christ that might lead to baptism is surely a different theological and liturgical reality. The question lying before the church has at least partially to do with whether these differing “communions” and the theologies underlying them might coexist, and if so, how such an approach to the reception of communion might be articulated in new and transformative way.

One Book, One Hymnal?

Reviewing these resolutions related to the liturgy highlights some fundamental questions that are hard to ignore, among them critical ones about how the liturgy represents and values human cultural and linguistic difference, the legacy of racism and colonialism, the recognition of the historic marginalization of women in the liturgy, and the oppression of sexual and gender minorities—all of which have been

inscribed in the official liturgies and musical repertoire of the church. Liturgical theological questions about the relationship between liturgy and music, the embedded theology of initiation, and the tension between the official liturgy as it is proposed and how that liturgy is received in a Sunday assembly add further layers of complication. Along with these are other issues, including the relationship between the church’s liturgy and the church’s place in God’s mission in the world, which these resolutions barely touch.

Adding further food for thought is another resolution regarding liturgy, Resolution D050, which seeks to authorize “An Order for Celebrating the Holy Eucharist” in the BCP (pages 400–405) as a principal Sunday service under certain circumstances, specifically “if the Eucharistic Prayer is written and submitted in advance of its use to the Bishop.” Read broadly to its admittedly absurd conclusion, the effect of this resolution, though certainly not its intention, is to reduce liturgical discipline in the Episcopal Church to a single locally composed prayer approved by the local bishop, a possibility that is, nevertheless, already embedded in the current BCP.

The complexity of the task of liturgical revision, and the legitimate pastoral need for the kind of liturgical flexibility suggested in D050, pose challenges to a church that places so much of its identity in the axiom “praying shapes believing.” Such a church needs a normative body of liturgical materials—a ritual “center of gravity”—to be sure, though one that also contains within it flexibility along with the guidance and expertise to make best use of what is available. The resolutions summarized here all seem to indicate that our current liturgical resources are no longer serving the needs of the contemporary church, yet they also seem content to repeat the remedies of the last few decades and update liturgical forms—the Book of Common Prayer and Book of Occasional Services, a new hymnal (The Hymnal 2025?)—that are arguably old wineskins unable to hold the new wine of a twenty-first-century liturgical reform, much less pastoral need.

The task that lies before the church, to use the language of Ronald Heifetz, founder of the Center for Public Leadership at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government, is more than a mere “technical” challenge, in this case an editorial project of adding new texts and

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26 The work of Heifetz and his colleagues has recently influenced work in congregational development. See, for example, Ronald Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, and Marty Linsky, The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing...
discarding others to produce updated versions of the resources currently available. On the contrary, the broad changes in the life of the church since the completion of the 1979 BCP and *The Hymnal 1982*, such as the integration of women into ordained ministry and of LG-BTQ persons in the life of the church, the recognition of the equal value of the many cultures and languages that were always present in the church, and more comprehensive reflection on the connection between the church’s liturgy and mission, require what Heifetz terms an “adaptive” response, one that asks fundamental questions and leads to transformed practice. The changes in society that have paralleled those in the church, first among them the transformation wrought by the revolution in information technology and social media, along with the seemingly intractable systemic injustices of poverty, violence, and racism, make the need for an adaptive response all the more acute.

Since the completion of the 1979 BCP and *The Hymnal 1982*, the Episcopal Church has approached ongoing liturgical work more or less in a “technical” fashion, employing what Church of England liturgical scholar Mark Earey has characterized in his own context as a continual expansion of boundaries that increases the number of permissible liturgical resources. In the Episcopal Church this expansion has produced helpful supplements in both liturgy and music: the *Book of Occasional Services*, the *Enriching Our Worship* and *Enriching Our Music* series, among others, and supplemental hymnals such as *Wonder, Love, and Praise*; *Lift Every Voice and Sing*; *Voices Found*; and *My Heart Sings Out*. These were arguably appropriate “technical” responses to church’s liturgical needs, given that at the time of their completion, the BCP itself was not yet two decades old in its final form. But because these resources were by definition supplementary, they have never been fully integrated into the primary liturgical resources of the church. As such, they remain marginal in the church’s prayer, as have, arguably, members of groups these resources were meant to address: women, African Americans, U.S. Latino and other language and cultural groups, children.


If the church is to allow the theological voices of communities of color, women, LGBTQ persons, and native speakers of languages other than English to transform our Christian witness and prayer, something more integrated is called for in the matter of liturgical resources. Mark Earey, responding to a felt need for greater local freedom and flexibility in liturgical preparation in the Church of England, suggests a “centered set” approach to official liturgical resources, a collection of texts, music, and liturgical guidance that creates a center of gravity, providing broad norms and from which liturgies might be prepared.28 In our own Episcopal Church context, we might imagine a multilingual and multicultural library of liturgical texts and music, both historic and contemporary, along with what Earey calls the “directory approach”29 to liturgical preparation: both outlines of liturgies to guide preparation as well as authorized models of what it looks like in practice. Such a library might be shaped into a variety of printed and online resources to meet the particular needs of congregations as well as help other churches expand their liturgical repertoire. With less reliance on common texts, however, more focused reflection on the particular qualities of the Episcopal and Anglican liturgical traditions might well be in order, as well as structures for accountability and shared practice.30

Key to the success of Earey’s prescriptions for his own Church of England context, however—and likely to any similar efforts in the Episcopal Church—are structures that meet what Earey describes as a “new urgency for liturgical training for leaders”: “This liturgical training and foundation-building becomes more important, not less, as more and more Church of England churches embrace informal styles of worship, and as fresh expressions of church become more common.”31 Earey goes on to note the importance of diocesan bishops and liturgical commissions and national liturgical offices to create structures for both pastoral flexibility and accountability. On the agenda for such bodies he suggests “production of texts which are deemed to represent ‘good practice’ but which don’t have to be

29 Earey, Beyond Common Worship, 40.
30 For two Episcopal approaches to these liturgical principles, see Oliver, “Just Praise,” in Meyers, A Prayer Book for the 21st Century, 278–79, and Sylvia Sweeney, “Future Directions in Liturgical Development,” Anglican Theological Review 95.3 (Summer 2013): 517–524.
31 Earey, Beyond Common Worship, 121.
considered ‘essential’—effectively ‘commended services’ for everything, but a variety of styles and to suit different contexts [and] the production of guidelines for good practice—for instance over inclusive language and expansive language, and over the use of technology in worship.”

The Episcopal Church clearly has the expertise and structure to take on these tasks if resources from *Enriching Our Worship* to *Holy Women, Holy Men* (now *A Great Cloud of Witnesses*, as directed by Resolution A056), *Daily Prayer for All Seasons*, and the new resources for solemnizing same-gender unions are any indication. What the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music lacks is likely the budget to really promote its work. At the same time, given the continuing shrinking of the residential seminary system and the number of Episcopal clergy being formed in non-Episcopal seminaries, the challenge of forming those who will have the primary task of shaping liturgy in Episcopal churches poses new “adaptive” challenges. New models of liturgical formation for those who prepare liturgy, whether baptized or baptized and ordained, will by necessity be an integral part of further liturgical revision, along with more fulsome guidance in the resources themselves for what makes a good liturgical celebration—the “guidelines for good practice” of which Earey speaks, keeping always in mind his commendation to accommodate the “variety of styles . . . to suit different contexts.”

*Ready for Reform?*

These resolutions pose basic questions to the church, and it would be unfair to the members of the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music to ask them to engage these issues alone. The questions regarding the next steps in liturgical reform are for the church as a whole: Is it time for a truly “comprehensive” reform of the liturgies of the Episcopal Church? And, equally important, do we have the will and stamina to engage the fullness of the “riches” of the church’s

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traditions, both its history and its contemporary reality? If this revision is to be more than a technical editorial updating, what principles will guide the effort? What vision of liturgy, and music within liturgy, will they propose? What forms will new resources take, and how will they ensure that those who have been historically marginalized in the liturgy (women, communities and cultures of color, diverse human languages, LGBTQ persons) will see themselves at the center of the church’s prayer?

This effort will take more than the money that these resolutions have requested of the church; it will take an even greater amount of will and courage—along with an abundance of charity and pastoral concern. And yet, if any General Convention can capture a snapshot of the mind of the church at that moment, there seems to be a true thirst for the new wine that only a comprehensive liturgical renewal can bring. The Episcopal Church has before it a wonderful opportunity to point the way forward with a new liturgical library, just as it did with the 1979 revision, which furthered liturgical reform in other traditions, especially in its Baptismal Covenant.34 If the liturgy is to continue to be the “summit toward which the activity of the church is directed [and] the source from which all its power flows”35 in the Episcopal Church, now seems an acceptable time.

34 For a description of the contribution of the Baptismal Covenant to liturgies both within and outside the Anglican Communion, see Stephen Burns and Bryan Cones, “A Prayer Book for the Twenty-first Century?,” 644–646.