

## Saint Paul's Chapel in New York City: A Case Study

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Commonality is typically defined as a function of habitual contact: family, friends, neighborhood, or denomination. What if there are other possibilities?

Built by Trinity Parish in 1766, Saint Paul's Chapel attracts visitors from around the world, all of them drawn by the chapel's rich history, especially the chapel's unique role after the tragedy of 9/11 when Saint Paul's was transformed into a round-the-clock support center where firefighters and rescue and recovery teams were fed, given counseling, slept, and stored their equipment on the pews. The photographs of the fallen and letters of mourning and support that once covered the iron fence around the building have now been brought inside and are part of a permanent 9/11 exhibit lining the perimeter of the chapel's interior.

The 9/11 exhibit is only the most recent renovation in Saint Paul's history, during which various entrances have been sealed and relocated, altars and sanctuaries added, and pews and other furniture elements installed and removed. The visitors looking at the 9/11 exhibit may not know it, but they are standing inside of New York City's oldest building in continuous use. What they do know is that this chapel,

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Video clips of worship at St. Paul's Chapel are available at [www.trinitywallstreet.org/atr](http://www.trinitywallstreet.org/atr).

which stands directly across the street from the former World Trade Center towers, has an enduring power to hold memories and inspire hope.

The global and religious diversity of these visitors poses unique challenges for those planning the 10 a.m. Sunday liturgy, especially because visitors typically comprise over half of the congregation, and thus, half of those in the seats have never worshipped at Saint Paul's. Many have no experience of Anglican worship. Planning liturgy in this context requires us to abandon assumptions about who belongs. With this ever-changing and diverse congregation of strangers in mind, Saint Paul's worship planning team has developed the following principles:

- Create a liturgy in contemporary, graceful prose that reflects our heritage as Anglicans, but is also sensitive to other traditions.
- Extend hospitality in all aspects of worship: verbal instruction, music, liturgical actions, layout of furniture, bulletin preparation, social interaction, vestments.
- Engage not only the congregation but exhibit visitors in face-to-face interaction and touch throughout the liturgy.
- Allow authority to move among the liturgical leaders (marshal, musician, preacher, presider, reader, intercessor).
- Observe and listen to the experience of worshippers and refine the liturgy accordingly.

What follows is a description of the Sunday morning worship experience which, based as it is on these principles, is an attempt to provide an experience of commonality to the unlikeliest of congregations.

### *A Layout That Creates a Sense of Gathering*

The heavy use Saint Paul's received during its eight months as a rescue and recovery center after 9/11 took a severe toll on the pews, which were subsequently removed. Though the building dates back to 1766, the pews that were removed were installed in the 1960s and thus not of any particular value as architectural artifacts. Having been sanctified by the firefighters, emergency crews, and support teams that used them in the aftermath of 9/11, however, these pews retain great meaning for those workers and the community of volunteers

that supported them and have thus been preserved in an off-site storage facility. Three of the pews were donated to the 9/11 Museum and will be displayed in an exhibit on radical hospitality at Ground Zero. Replacing the pews with chairs opened up the space and allowed multiple seating arrangements to accommodate the variety of events that regularly take place at Saint Paul's—concerts, dance performances, film screenings, readings, and community meetings, as well as the worship of a Jewish congregation in lower Manhattan. Saint Paul's staff and congregation, in consultation with a parishioner/architect, auditioned several configurations of the liturgical space before settling on the current layout.

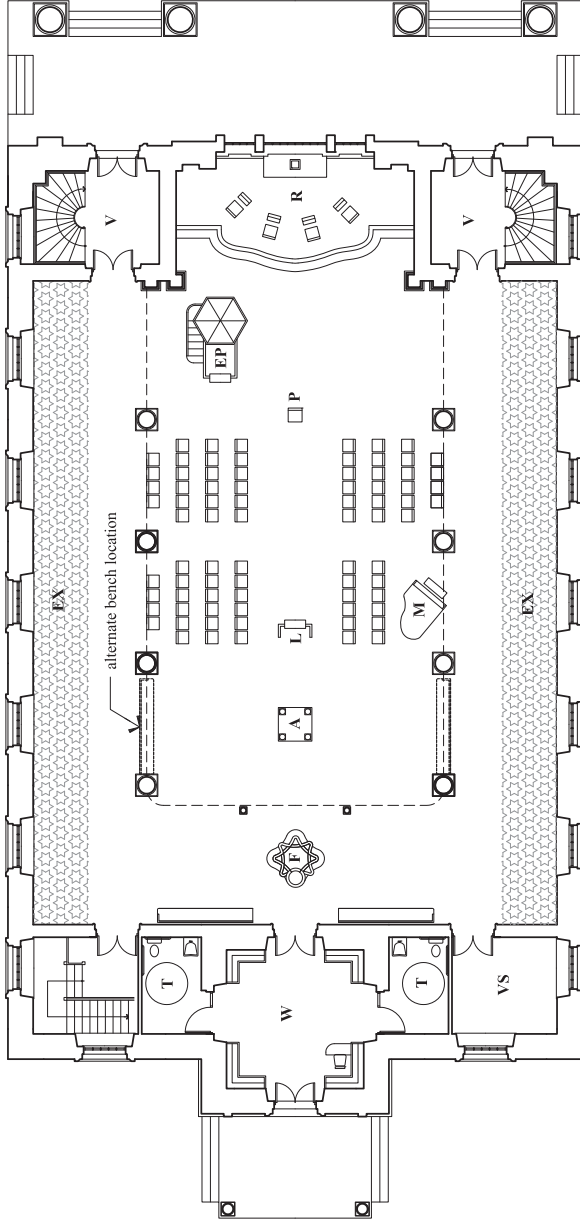
The congregants sit in rows of chairs that face each other north and south across a central axis. The presider and marshal (or deacon) sit at the east end facing the lectern. In contrast to standard pew seating, in which congregants stare at the backs of the heads in front of them, this arrangement creates eye contact and a sense of gathering. (The layout closely resembles that of Saint Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church in San Francisco and reflects one of the many ways in which Saint Paul's modeled itself on Saint Gregory's.) Those in the congregation can see and hear each other as well as anyone speaking to them or leading them in song. The preaching takes place at the lectern, and preachers at Saint Paul's are free to walk up and down the central axis, often involving congregation members as they illustrate some point or bring a reading to life. A table filled with sand holds a bowl for incense and is surrounded by candles, placed into the sand by congregants in the minutes before the service starts.

The square altar stands behind the lectern at the west end of the chapel. During the table portion of the liturgy—the peace, eucharistic prayer, final hymn, offertory, and postcommunion prayer—the congregation stands closely gathered around the altar, again sustaining a palpable sense of community. The coffee hour, which immediately follows the dismissal, takes place at the altar, where a platter of pastries is set out, right next to a coffee cart.

The worship space in the center of the room is surrounded by the 9/11 exhibit that wraps around the perimeter. The pillars that hold up the balconies (used only on occasions requiring extra seating) form a porous boundary between the exhibit and worship areas, one that allows those viewing the exhibit to continue their viewing or to sit in on and even join the worship, as they are invited to do throughout the service.

# PLAN LEGEND

- W WELCOME CENTER (Proposed)
- T HC TOILETS (Proposed)
- VS VESTING SACRISTY
- V VESTIBULES
- R RESERVATION OF THE SACRAMENT & CONTEMPLATIVE CHAPEL
- EX EXHIBIT ZONES
- A ALTAR
- P THE ONE WHO PRESIDES
- F PROPOSED IMMERSION FONT
- L LECTERN
- EP EXISTING PULPIT
- M MUSIC MINISTRY



PROPOSED LITURGICAL PLAN FOR ST. PAUL'S CHAPEL  
 New York, New York  
 Trinity Church/St. Paul's Chapel  
 The Rev'd Dr. James H. Cooper, Rector/The Rev'd Canon Anne Mallonee, Vicar

PLAN - SCHEME-IIIId for 78 seats

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*A Liturgy that Welcomes and Includes*

Saint Paul's 10 a.m. Sunday service uses the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer* eucharistic rite with minor adaptations, but all of the relevant text, along with hymns and service music, is printed in the program, so worshippers are not juggling programs, hymnals, and prayer books.

At the beginning of the service, worshippers are told that they will be guided at all points by spoken instruction. For example, "Please stand and sing 'Listen to the Word of God,' found on page two of your program." Thus, someone new to Anglican worship can participate fully and feel part of a congregation where no one is expected to know what comes next.

The readings and sermon are punctuated by a minute of silence that begins with the striking of a gong and ends with the sound of a small bell. As the gong's vibrations dissolve into silence, the sounds of traffic on Broadway, outside the east doors of the chapel, the subway below, and the footsteps of visitors touring the 9/11 exhibit around the edge of the room connect the worshippers to their surroundings. Far from being noisy and chaotic, the overall effect is one of worship in a lively environment.

During the prayers of the people, all are invited to speak their intercessions aloud, and newcomers regularly chime in with their petitions and thanksgivings. Sometimes those in the exhibit add their prayers to the mix or stop their tour momentarily to participate in silence.

Following the prayers, the marshal makes brief announcements and asks everyone in the room, worshippers and exhibit viewers alike, to call out their home city, state, or country. The flurry of responses—"Belgium . . . Wichita . . . Indonesia . . . Hoboken . . . São Paulo . . . Germany . . . London"—attests to the global diversity of these Sunday gatherings.

Singing, the congregation then moves from the word space to the altar: facing the altar, each member of the congregation places a hand on the shoulder of the person in front of her/him. The cantor teaches the Tripudium dance step—right, left, right and then back on the left foot—which is simple enough that first timers are surprised to find that they are able to sing and dance at the same time. As the congregation circles the altar and the hymn concludes, the presider invites the congregation to exchange the peace, which is easily done now that

the congregation is tightly gathered. By now, the people have seen each others' faces while singing, listened to the readings and sermon, heard each other lift petitions and thanksgivings, and then danced to the altar with hands on each others' shoulders. All of that sets the stage for a warm exchange of the peace.

The congregation remains around the altar during the eucharistic prayer. The presider invites all to receive communion with the words, "Christ is present among us as we share this holy meal. Jesus welcomes everyone to this table." The marshal makes a second announcement inviting those in the exhibit to join the circle and receive as well. The presider and marshal, assisted by additional lay ministers, make their way around the circle to distribute the bread and wine.

After communion, the marshal announces the final hymn and places an offering basket on the altar, saying, "God feeds us and invites us to feed others. While we sing, please place your gifts of money for the church's work in the basket." This inversion of the standard liturgical order, with the offertory following communion,<sup>1</sup> suggests that by placing our gifts in the basket, we are not purchasing communion, but rather responding with thanksgiving for all God has done in our lives.

The altar stands at the west end of the chapel, footsteps from the doorway that looks out on the 9/11 Memorial on the former site of the World Trade Center. As the hymn ends, the marshal removes the offering and replaces it with a cross of nails. The presider explains the origins of this cross and its relevance to Saint Paul's unique role after 9/11: "This cross was made with nails taken from the ruins of Coventry Cathedral in England, which was bombed in World War II. After the war, Coventry partnered with German cities to begin a worldwide movement for peace, of which Saint Paul's Chapel is a part, and for which this cross is a symbol." Congregants are then invited to reach out and touch the cross or the table or the shoulder of someone who can reach as all recite the postcommunion prayer. Once again, the congregation is gathered closely, and as the presider says, "Let us bless the Lord," and the congregation responds, "Thanks be to God," coffee and pastries are brought into the gathering, launching the coffee hour as percussionists strike up a drum postlude (usually a rhythm from West Africa).

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<sup>1</sup> A similar order may be seen in the *First Apology* of Justin Martyr, chapter 67, "Weekly Worship of the Christians."

*Music that Makes Community*

The welcoming heart of Saint Paul's 10 a.m. service is the music, because the congregation sings together, mostly *a cappella*, throughout the service, including the creed, the Lord's Prayer, and through the entire eucharistic prayer. The music is selected or written to be accessible, beautiful, and engaging. Every week, thirty to fifty strangers find themselves singing music they have never encountered before and singing it really well from the very beginning of the service. It requires a warm and encouraging director with an ear for music as simple as it is beautiful, but this is far from the whole story.

The absence of an instrumental prelude, during which people tend to sit in observant silence, allows people to interact as they enter the room. The service begins with a short music rehearsal, where the cantor gives the congregation a taste of the service music, thus signaling to all that we are learning together and that the learning will continue throughout the service. The cantor's goal is to make sure that that congregation is secure. The vocal quartet, which sings a communion anthem later in the service, is salted throughout the seats, where their voices (and those of a handful of regular attendees) serve as vocal guides, providing an extra boost of confidence for newcomers learning the music.

The first song, as well as about half of the pieces in the service, is paperless, that is, sung without printed music. Paperless pieces employ call and echo, call and response, simple rounds, drones, and other methods that bring melodies and harmonies to life easily and intuitively. Singing the first song without printed music lifts all eyes toward the center of the room, where the cantor stands to lead. Thus, the congregation is seeing and hearing itself sing as one from the very start, and those with little or no sight-reading abilities feel emboldened to participate. The repertoire includes newly-composed music, standards from around the world, as well as gems from the hymnal.

Saint Paul's has a good piano and a beautiful organ, but these are used infrequently. Almost all of the sound is generated by the voices of the congregation, sometimes accompanied by djembe (an African hand drum) and hand percussion. Asking the congregation to share the musical authority allows a congregation of strangers to form a bond of ownership and empowerment. By the end of the service, they have sung and danced together, droned during the eucharistic prayer while circled around the altar, and sung a final hymn in unaccompanied

four-part harmony—and done it all very well. Typically, the first words from visitors during coffee hour express how moved they were by the singing. Many want information on how their home churches can do something similar.

### *Intentionality and Sharing the Work*

Twenty minutes before the start of the service, the marshal (a non-ordained diaconal server) convenes a meeting where those in various leadership, liturgical, and musical roles gather around the piano to talk their way through the service. Any early arrivals, regular congregants or visitors, are invited to participate, giving them a chance to become more familiar with the music and the flow of the service. It is a chance, for instance, for a visiting presider to sing through the setting of the eucharistic prayer or for others to iron out any wrinkles from the previous week's service, such as, "Do I start the incense at the very beginning of the prayer or should I wait?"

The discussion is especially helpful because most of the liturgical roles at Saint Paul's are filled by lay members of the congregation. The jobs of marshal, reader, intercessor, chalice bearer, incense and candle attendant, and bell ringer require an hour or less of initial training and a mini-refresher course now and then.

When the opportunity looks ripe, clergy and lay members invite visitors, especially children, into small but meaningful liturgical roles—striking the gongs that begin the silences, spooning incense over the charcoal, bringing the bread and wine to the altar, or joining the percussionists for the drum postlude. We make these invitations immediately after the pre-service gathering. The tasks require only a few minutes of training right before the service, which the invitees appreciate. Additionally, just before the beginning of the service, all members of the congregation are invited to light a candle and place it in the sand around the incense bowl. We have found that inviting the congregation to share in the work of the liturgy creates a powerful sense of belonging for newcomers and regulars alike, especially children.

At the conclusion of the coffee hour, the marshal convenes a second meeting for anyone present to review the service, using the prompt "What did you notice?" The responses inform our sense of what works well and what needs work. (Saint Paul's 10 a.m. service is the product of continuous experimentation.) Almost all the discussion



revolves around our sense of how the visitors responded to the liturgy and music and what they said to us during coffee hour. Their testimony is powerful and vital for a church whose mission is to be a place of reconciliation and renewal for the strangers who find their way to us week after week.

*What Is Common about Common Prayer?*

In the context of the 10 a.m. Holy Eucharist at Saint Paul's, this becomes an interesting question. The description of the weekly rite offered here makes it clear that Saint Paul's is unique in almost every way. At the same time, the liturgy is an experience of community in which prayer is offered in common. While everyone in the room recognizes that they are involved in something they have not experienced before, they find themselves worshipping as members of a temporary community.

In 1995, at a time when the church had seriously engaged the issue of cultural diversity within the Anglican Communion, the International Anglican Liturgical Consultation, a gathering of Anglicans who care deeply and think carefully about the church's common prayer, prepared a statement that included this comment: "In the future, Anglican unity will find its liturgical expression not so much in uniform texts as in a common approach to eucharistic celebration and a structure which will ensure a balance of word, prayer, and sacrament, and which bears witness to the catholic calling of the Anglican communion."<sup>2</sup> This comment offered a helpful way forward. Perhaps the witness of Saint Paul's might push the conversation still further.

For those who worship at Saint Paul's on a weekly basis, it is impossible not to notice that the experience is less about belonging than about being there. For perhaps half of those who worship at Saint Paul's, the visit is a once-in-a-lifetime experience. How does the experience of eucharist affect the life of one who is not a Christian and never will be? What about the person who grew up in the church but has rejected it as an adult? What about the faithful Christians whose experience of Saint Paul's introduces them to a liturgy they had never imagined?

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<sup>2</sup> *Renewing the Anglican Eucharist: Findings of the Fifth International Anglican Liturgical Consultation, Dublin, Eire, 1995*, ed. David R. Holeton (Bramcote, Nottingham: Grove Books, 1996), 7.

The opportunity to engage organized corporate prayer with a group of strangers casts a new light on the question of commonality. Sunday after Sunday we hear from people as they leave who express their eagerness to introduce what they have just experienced to their own church communities. “Can we use this music back home?” “I loved watching my daughter spooning incense on the charcoal.” The experience of worship at Saint Paul’s is an experience of commonality in the moment. Without regard to questions of membership, everyone in the room participates equally. What is common about common prayer? Belonging. Experience. Being there.