

KEVIN J. MORONEY



The
LITURGY
Common
LOOKING
Thread
FORWARD

 CHURCH
PUBLISHING
INCORPORATED

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CHAPTER ONE

Starting the Conversation

WHY DO YOU go to church? Let me guess. You were raised in a denomination of some European background; dropped out immediately after confirmation; had an emotional crisis during your late teens when a friend fell off a cliff and died as part of an overnight drinking party; went to the funeral and sat in the church realizing that an important part of your life was being neglected; then after a year of soul searching, had a “come to Jesus” moment that set the course for your entire adult life.

It’s complicated. First of all, that’s not your story; it’s mine. I believe you have a story that is just as important

to you or why else would you be here? There are as many answers to that opening question as there are stars in the sky; they all get underneath our skin and make us tear up from time to time. I still miss Dave and I still pray for him every time we pray for the deceased because I know I wouldn't be here without him. Yet none of this—the struggles, the stars in the sky—is unique to church people. The same can be said of those who chose not to stay in the Church, as well as for those whose life began or continued with a different narrative. So let's forget the triumphal stuff. It's all complicated and human and meaningful but I can't write for everybody. This book is for those of us who have decided to stick it out in the Church and, to a certain degree, in the Episcopal Church. That, too, is complicated but we have our reasons. For me, one of those reasons is that I love Christian worship; particularly the Roman Catholic, Pentecostal, and Episcopal/Anglican worship that have made me who I am. I love it all so much that I wanted to teach it for a living, and God has mercifully allowed me to do just that. Oh, and I love God and by God I mean the Trinity. I should have said that first because, you know, now that I haven't, the angry God of my childhood might slay me, and rightly so.

Yes, I am an Episcopal priest, but before that, I am a Christian and before that, I am a human. I started as a Bible guy, but went to a seminary where chapel was the center of life and praying with the community every day, twice a day (except when rebelling), paved the way for biblical passion to lead to liturgical passion. I feel like a better version of myself when worshipping. I enjoy

pattern and ritual and well synchronized movements that mean things. I have a funny feeling that you may, as well.

So a Jersey boy who thinks about liturgy and prays about liturgy and teaches liturgy is one of the people optimistic about this new era of liturgical renewal in the Episcopal Church. I not only believe that we can do this, but I believe that the whole Episcopal family can stay together and maybe, maybe, *maybe* even get a little stronger for doing so—and that is why I am writing this book. I didn't say it would help us get bigger. I worry about that, too, but I have no ideas. I do have an idea about how we can shape liturgical renewal but I am going to take a bit of a slow road to get to that idea so I can explain what it is and why it might be a good one. Leave nothing behind. Every crumb is sacred. Then I'm going to retire. I get tired more easily now.

Why do you attend the church you do? It takes a lot of courage to visit a new church, even if you are lucky enough to know someone who already worships there. Or, maybe you are the faithful remnant who still attends the church of your childhood. God knows we could use more of you. I have no idea where all the Episcopalians have gone. It's like they evaporated with the polar ice caps. Most parishes I have known consist of former Roman Catholics or former Evangelicals or former something else, which means that most of us had that experience of timorously entering the previously unknown church building. If you did go through the unique agony of visiting a new church you first had to get there, and if you were driving, you had to find a place to park. Once parked, you had to find the door that everyone *actually* uses; once inside you were

either greeted or not by someone who was either friendly or not (I've been doing this stuff for years; I know). Then your brain went into processing overload. You either did or did not resonate with the space (normal is what we know). You either did or did not receive helpful information on how to follow the service. The worship space was either full, empty, or somewhere in between and you either felt comfortable or uncomfortable with how many people were there. And you got an early impression of whether or not there was anyone else there who was remotely like you. And then, after all that, the service started.

And now here we are. What keeps you there? I have to believe that one thing you and I share in common is a love for the worship of God. I am not saying that worship is the most important thing we do, but I have been a priest long enough to know that any Spirit-driven energy a church has draws from what happens when we're together on Sunday morning, and that is primarily for worship. It's important. It's meaningful. The only problem is that like every other important thing in our life it keeps changing.

For the last decade and a half, I have been a priest of the Episcopal Diocese of Pennsylvania. There's a lot of New Jersey in me but that will come in later. On Saturday, November 7, 2015, the above-mentioned diocese sat patiently through the report of their delegates to the General Convention of the Episcopal Church that had taken place earlier in the year. I confess that, for me, events like diocesan conventions are a kind of church equivalent to medieval dental practices: we just sit still while all

the hope is painfully yanked out of us. I do know many people who work very hard to prove me wrong about that. God bless them—I'm too far gone. The report on the approval of rites for same-sex marriage came and went without noticeable reaction. What's so earth-shattering about that? A description of the proposed restructuring of the national church passed by with a similar non-response from the four hundred or so gathered. Yawn and check the time. However, when the presenter noted that a resolution had passed that could lead to a revision of the Book of Common Prayer, the people who filled that cathedral spontaneously, audibly, and unmistakably *groaned*. I can suggest with reasonable confidence that the involuntary expression of primordial angst was a response to either the memory of the introduction of the 1979 prayer book, a reaction to the sense that the Episcopal Church was just beginning to emerge from what felt like a long period of church-wide conflict and didn't need any more, or both.

The end of the Church's exclusive claim on Sundays. The ordination of women. Prayer book revision. Rising divorce rates. Growing secularism. Changing views on human sexuality. Changing definitions of what constitutes a family. The ordination of those in the LGBTQ community. The slowness of institutional change. The resistance of the institution to actually changing. The passage of progressive sounding resolutions as a substitute for actually changing. The death of the World War II generation. The catastrophic drop in church attendance as a result of the death of the World War II generation. That, coupled with what some see as the decline of Anglo culture. That, coupled with the fact that the Episcopal

Church is still overwhelmingly Anglo and does not seem particularly motivated to become anything else. The fear of our extinction as a church.

It's exhausting; can we just take a break? Do we really need a new prayer book? If we are to revise, who is going to make the decisions about our worship? How do we know that the theology of the Trinity enshrined in the creeds and prayers of the 1979 prayer book will be preserved in a new book? Will tree hugging ceremonies be placed in the same volume as Holy Baptism and Holy Eucharist (yes, I have heard this question more than once)? The issue that hovers over all of these questions, over this book and everything it includes (or not), is the issue of power. God is power, language is power, the General Convention is power, and the power to change our language about God is an alarming level of power. This issue will return frequently, but let's tuck it in for now, take a breath, and keep going.

Technically, what was approved at the 2015 General Convention was a resolution for the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music (SCLM) to "prepare a plan for the comprehensive revision of the current Book of Common Prayer." Our General Convention only meets every three years and a prayer book must be approved by two successive conventions, thus it would take a minimum of three conventions to produce a new prayer book, which would require the miracle of producing all revision work between 2018 and 2021 in order to approve a new prayer book by 2024. Couldn't happen that fast.

Nonetheless, it should come as no surprise that, as delegates to the 79th General Convention of the Episcopal

Church prepared to gather in Austin, Texas, in the summer of 2018, participants packed their bags knowing that one of the big topics coming before the convention was whether or not to revise the 1979 Book of Common Prayer.¹ The SCLM presented two options to the 2018 General Convention:

Option One . . . envisions a decision by the upcoming General Convention to move into the revision process immediately, the first stage being to gather data, resources, and ideas, and then set up the structure to begin drafting immediately after 2021 General Convention. Option Two . . . envisions a slower pace, while remaining open to Prayer Book revision in the future. Option Two invites the whole church to broaden its familiarity with the 1979 Prayer Book and the history that underlies it, and provides for time to reflect as a body on the significance of common prayer in our tradition.²

The House of Deputies passed Option One, but the House of Bishops replaced it with a much longer and more complex resolution that intends to set the direction of liturgical revision in the Episcopal Church for years to

1 The General Convention is made up of the House of Bishops and the House of Deputies, which includes both laity and clergy other than bishops. General Convention meets every three years.

2 2018 Blue Book, 194, <https://extranet.generalconvention.org/staff/files/download/21368>.

come.³ The resolution itself is a study in Anglican theological method: there is a clear attempt to be comprehensive and inclusive of all traditions and perspectives within the Episcopal Church by providing language that speaks to every group, but in doing so it generates a distinctly Anglican kind of ambiguity that requires interpretive negotiation between the words.

Resolution A068 reads as follows:

1. *Resolved*, That the 79th General Convention, pursuant to Article X of the Constitution, authorize the ongoing work of liturgical and Prayer Book revision for the future of God's mission through the Episcopal branch of the Jesus movement. And, that it do so upon the core theological work of loving, liberating, life-giving reconciliation and creation care; and be it further
2. *Resolved*, that our methodology be one of a dynamic process for discerning common worship, engaging all the baptized, while practicing accountability to The Episcopal Church; and be it further
3. *Resolved*, That the 79th General Convention create a Task Force on Liturgical

3 The full resolution can be found online at The Archives of the Episcopal Church, The Acts of Convention, 2018-A068, https://www.episcopalarchives.org/cgi-bin/acts/acts_resolution.pl?resolution=2018-A068.

and Prayer Book Revision (TFLPBR), the membership of which will be jointly appointed by the Presiding Bishop and the President of the House of Deputies, and will report to the appropriate legislative(s) of the 80th General Convention, ensuring that diverse voices of our church are active participants in this liturgical revision by constituting a group with leaders who represent the expertise, gender, age, theology, regional, and ethnic diversity of the church, to include, 10 laity, 10 priests or deacons, and 10 Bishops; and be it further

4. *Resolved*, That this Convention memorialize the 1979 Book of Common Prayer as a Prayer Book of the church preserving the psalter, liturgies, The Lambeth Quadrilateral, Historic Documents, and Trinitarian Formularies ensuring its continued use; and be it further
5. *Resolved*, That this church continue to engage the deep Baptismal and Eucharistic theology and practice of the 1979 Prayer Book; and be it further
6. *Resolved*, That bishops engage worshipping communities in experimentation and the creation of alternative texts to offer to the wider church, and that each

diocese be urged to create a liturgical commission to collect, reflect, teach and share these resources with the TFLPBR; and be it further

7. *Resolved*, That the TFLPBR in consultation with the Standing Commission on Structure, Governance, Constitution and Canons is directed to propose to the 80th General Convention revisions to the Constitution and Canons to enable The Episcopal Church to be adaptive in its engagement of future generations of Episcopalians, multiplying, connecting, and disseminating new liturgies for mission, attending to prayer book revision in other provinces of the Anglican Communion; and be it further
8. *Resolved*, That liturgical and Prayer Book revision will continue in faithful adherence to the historic rites of the Church Universal as they have been received and interpreted within the Anglican tradition of 1979 Book of Common Prayer, mindful of our existing ecumenical commitments, while also providing space for, encouraging the submission of, and facilitating the perfection of rites that will arise from the continual movement of the Holy Spirit among us and growing insights of our Church; and be it further

9. *Resolved*, That such revision utilize the riches of Holy Scripture and our Church's liturgical, cultural, racial, generational, linguistic, gender, physical ability, class and ethnic diversity in order to share common worship; and be it further
10. *Resolved*, That our liturgical revision utilize inclusive and expansive language and imagery for humanity and divinity; and be it further
11. *Resolved*, That our liturgical revision shall incorporate and express understanding, appreciation, and care of God's creation; and be it further
12. *Resolved*, That our liturgical revision take into consideration the use of emerging technologies which provide access to a broad range of liturgical resources; and be it further
13. *Resolved*, That the SCLM create a professional dynamic equivalence translation of The Book of Common Prayer 1979 and the Enriching Our Worship Series in Spanish, French, and Haitian Creole; and that the SCLM diversify the publication formats of new resources, liturgies and rites to include online publishing; and be it further

14. *Resolved*, That this church ensure that, at each step of the revision process, all materials be professionally translated into English, Spanish, French, and Haitian Creole, following the principles of dynamic equivalence and that no new rites or liturgical resources be approved by this church until such translations are secured; and be it further
15. *Resolved*, That the TFLPBR shall report to the 80th General Convention; and be it further
16. *Resolved*, That there being \$201,000 in the proposed budget for the translation of liturgical materials, that the Executive Council be encouraged to identify additional funds in the amount of \$200,000 to begin this liturgical revision.

What on earth does all that mean? It is, err, a bit circular in its progression. At a minimum, it must mean that the 1979 prayer book will continue in some fashion and be the basis for revision work, and that we will address those things which our current prayer book left undone in regards to inclusive and expansive language, creation theology, and drawing on the diverse cultures of the Episcopal Church, with some provision for approving new liturgies more quickly. With that said, there is nothing in the resolution about how long the 1979 Prayer Book will remain in use or what the final result of this

new era of revision is going to look like. The resolution sets the direction without limiting possibilities. That task has been left to the task force to figure out.

Wait, I have an email in my inbox. I have been appointed to serve on this task force. How did that happen? Actually, it's an honor to be asked to help and I am proud to do so. All snarkiness aside, the Episcopal Church has been very good to me for more than thirty years and I wouldn't recognize my life without it. I now have an opportunity to make a contribution to the life of this church that has given me such a good life and I pray to God that I don't blow it.

While the creation of the task force in clause 3 is significant because much of the work related to the resolution will be done by its members, a far more radical statement is made in clause 2 of the resolution, calling this new era "a dynamic process for discerning common worship, engaging all the baptized. . . ." Generally speaking, liturgical revision has always been the work of liturgical specialists and church leaders, who then pass their work through the consideration of the General Convention and on to dioceses and congregations. By calling for the engagement of all the baptized, this resolution clearly envisions the involvement of every order of ministry (lay persons, bishops, priests and deacons, BCP 855) at the level of liturgical creation, and that is new, and that is all of us!

So this book is an attempt to have a conversation about who we are as Christians, why we do what we do in worship (on a good day), what we can do now, and how we can do it, written by someone who has been doing this

work for quite some time and who sees an opportunity to demonstrate to ourselves that we can move forward liturgically without falling into another soul-wrenching conflict that sends more people running for the door. Yes, we can.