PRAYER BOOK STUDIES

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THE PROBLEM AND METHOD OF PRAYER BOOK REVISION

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THE STANDING LITURGICAL COMMISSION
OF THE PROTESTANT EPISCOPAL CHURCH
IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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Foreword

This brief paper is an effort to explain with greater fullness the thinking of the Standing Liturgical Commission with respect to certain recommendations it plans to make to the General Convention of 1961. In this way we hope to reach many more readers than those who may obtain our more formal canonical report to the Convention. We ask only that those who read this Study will lend to it the constructive help of a fair and unprejudiced consideration, whether or not they agree with its argument.

Since this Study was completed the Commission has received with great regret the resignation of its esteemed secretary, Mr. Spencer Ervin. His name, however, is signed to this Study as one who made very substantial contributions to the formulation of its several topics of discussion. The Commission can never express adequately its profound gratitude to Mr. Ervin for the many hours of faithful and painstaking service he has rendered to the work of the Commission, and its indebtedness to his ever fair, generous, and disciplined contribution.

THE STANDING LITURGICAL COMMISSION

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THE PROBLEM AND METHOD OF PRAYER BOOK REVISION

The Problem and Method of Prayer Book Revision

I. *The Problem of Procedures*

Prayer Book revision is a lively subject of interest throughout the Anglican Communion these days. It is stimulated by a variety of factors:

1) The revolutionary changes in our world in the generation since the revision movement of the 1920's;
2) The impact on an ecumenical scale of the contemporary Liturgical Movement;
3) The significant advances in liturgical knowledge, especially of the New Testament and Patristic periods;
4) The emphasis of the new Biblical theology, which has altered our perspectives upon the doctrinal issues of both the medieval and Reformation eras;
5) The needs of younger Churches of Asia and Africa, now largely self-governing, to adapt liturgical usages to their own cultures;
6) The cross currents of influence from one Christian tradition to another, which stem from the encounters and discussions of the Ecumenical Movement.

At the Lambeth Conference of 1958, the Bishops devoted a major portion of their Report to the problems and principles which these new factors create for the task of Prayer Book revision in the immediate years ahead. They recognized that the coming generation will be one of notable liturgical changes, that new liturgical knowledge makes it impossible to accept tacitly the English Prayer Book of 1662 as a definitive norm of liturgical unity in our Communion, and that several provinces of Anglicanism must be allowed freedom to adapt our common inheritance to local needs and circumstances.

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Within the past decade, several Anglican provinces have completed major revisions of the Prayer Book; namely, South Africa, India, Japan, and Canada. The process is still at work in the West Indies and (so far as we know) in China, and it is being inaugurated in Wales and England. Doubtless some of the newer as well as older provinces of Africa and Asia will soon be launched on the same venture. In our American Church, there has been much informal talk of a new review of the 1928 Prayer Book, stimulated in part by the Studies of the Standing Liturgical Commission. At the General Convention of 1958, a resolution designed to initiate a formal revision of the Prayer Book was introduced and passed the House of Deputies, though it failed to receive a concurrent vote in the House of Bishops. (See *Journal of the General Convention*, 1958, pp. 292–94.)

It is not the purpose of this paper to argue the pros and cons of whether the American Church should at this time engage in a formal revision. We shall assume only that a large proportion of our clergy and laity, if not a majority of them, desire such a move in the near future. If we dare to assume such a sentiment on a widespread scale, a more immediate problem presents itself for consideration: namely, what is the best way to proceed in Prayer Book revision? How can the Church not only profit by the best liturgical scholarship, but also be satisfied that the results of such a large undertaking will be as beneficial as possible for us, under God and the guidance of His Holy Spirit?

Until recent years, the pattern of procedure for revision of the liturgy has been basically similar in all our Anglican provinces. A commission has been appointed, representative of varying points of view, to prepare concrete proposals of change. These proposals have then been published for study and debate, and finally, according to the constitutional processes of the several provinces, they have been voted upon *seriatim* by the supreme legislative bodies of the Church. Thus the decisions made, pro and con, respecting each proposal of change, have

been definitive and irrevocable, and a "new" Prayer Book issued on a determined date has taken its place as the one and only liturgy authorized for use in public worship. Specifically in our American Church, this procedure, as is well known, requires that every single proposal to change the Prayer Book (including commas, semicolons, periods, italics, no less than words and order of parts) be approved by concurrent majorities in both Houses of the General Convention for two successive conventions. Should any mistake have been made, whether of a major or a minor nature, as a result of this procedure, the only legal way of correcting it would be by concurrent majority vote of the two Houses in two more successive conventions. The only exception is the provision for change of the lectionary of the Daily Offices by vote of one rather than of two conventions.

The advantages of this procedure, which we inherit from the Constitution established by the first General Convention of 1789, are obvious. It assures the Church that the liturgy cannot be recklessly altered by a passing whim and without due consideration over a period extending for at least three years, though usually for six years or more. It provides sufficient opportunity for any member of the Church to air his views and to seek support for his opinions. Thus the Church is insured against arbitrary and autocratic action. The procedure gives ample time for the ripening of judgment upon any proposal, and, as past experience has shown, it almost inevitably leads to preponderant majorities for or against specific proposals when the time of final voting arrives. Certainly the record of voting in the General Convention during the revisions of 1880–1892 and 1913–1928 reveals that no sizable minority could claim that any changes of major import were passed by narrow margins, or that its conscientious acceptance of what was finally adopted was threatened.

The disadvantages of such a procedure are equally obvious, however, especially if one considers the present size and program of the General Convention. Our constitutional provisions

for Prayer Book revision were drawn up when the House of Bishops consisted of three members, and the House of Deputies could be comfortably accommodated in a relatively small room. By comparison with present day Conventions, those of our early years seem like two committees, where every member of Convention had ample opportunity to speak, discuss, argue, and treat one with another in intimate personal exchange. Now, however, the House of Deputies numbers over 650 members, and the House of Bishops over 150 members. The amount of overall business with which the Convention is concerned is so greatly increased that it is difficult to comprehend within the allotted time of meeting all the pressing issues that await attention. Moreover, the large increase in "extra-curricular" activities that take place concurrently alongside the formal sessions of the General Convention is very time- and energy-consuming, however worthwhile they may be in purpose.

The result is that much of the business of Convention has to be directed to smaller committees of each House. These committees work with the best of will, but always under pressure, and frequently they have but a few months at most, or a few days at least, to give consideration to reports that may have taken years to formulate. It is no exaggeration to say that many deputies, for reasons both excusable and not excusable, give little study to the reports circulated among them, but depend – as in all large assemblies of this kind – upon the opinions of leaders or the recommendation of committees. In recent years also, there has been a notable problem connected with the procedures for intercommunication between the two Houses of Convention. It often happens – as it did frequently in the last revision of the Prayer Book – that matters which are considered and voted upon in one House never reach the floor of the other. Thus the business in hand is delayed for another three years. As the Church grows in membership, and new dioceses are formed, the difficulties of the General Convention as at present constituted are likely to increase.

The situation just described obtained in large degree a gen-

eration ago during the last revision of the Prayer Book. Instead of taking from three to six years' time, the work of two General Conventions, it spread out over fifteen years and five successive conventions. The Deputies, for example, had passed through two successive conventions a sizable portion of the Joint Commission's proposals, in 1916 and in 1919, but much of it the Bishops did not even begin to consider until 1922. Hence much of the work had to be started all over again. The work of revision would have lasted longer had not the General Convention of 1925 decided to cut off all further consideration of "new" business connected with revision, in order to complete the required constitutional procedure in 1928. Nor should it be overlooked that most of what was finally passed in 1928 added up to what has been called "the unfinished business" of the 1892 revision.

This long delay in completing what had been begun with enthusiastic purpose was certainly not due to lack of extraordinarily able leadership in the conventions. It was due precisely to the fact that the General Conventions from 1913 to 1928 were engaged in many other projects of tremendous and time-consuming import, among other things the whole reorganization of the national structure of the Church and its missionary enterprise. It is difficult to believe that in the foreseeable future the General Convention will have any more leisure, from lack of other pressing business, so that it may devote its attention with sufficient time and concentration to the revision of the liturgy.

Another disadvantage of our procedures revealed by the last revision was the piece-meal way in which it of necessity was conducted. There was never an opportunity to consider what the final results of a revised Prayer Book would be like as a whole. It is the more remarkable that the Book of 1928 came forth with the consistency of rubric and formulary such as it has, especially when one considers that most of the bishops and deputies who participated in the final voting in 1928 were not the same as those who voted upon the earlier stages of revi-

sion in 1916 and 1919. Fortunately, the leadership of the revision during the five conventions maintained a sufficient continuity. Even so, the two primary leaders in the Deputies in 1916 and 1919, Dr. Parsons and Dr. Slattery, were elevated to the episcopate by 1922; though happily in their case, the House of Bishops waived its traditional custom that "baby bishops" should be seen but not heard!

II. *A New Method*

A new method of approach to Prayer Book revision, called "trial use," has come to the fore in recent years and has been followed with considerable success by many of the Anglican provinces that have recently completed, or are now at work on revision. It has been used in South Africa, India and Ceylon, Japan, and Canada, and it is being pursued in Wales and the West Indies. The Church of England's Liturgical Commission is also seeking enabling legislation from Parliament to allow the same method.

It should also be noted that the same method has been followed in the past decade in the liturgical reforms initiated in the Roman Catholic Church, in the development of the liturgical rites of the Church of South India, and in the promulgation of a new liturgy by eight Lutheran Churches in America. The Methodist Church in the United States, at its 1960 General Conference, adopted the same procedure for the proposed revisions of *The Book of Worship for Church and Home.*

This new method of "trial use" involves the following procedure: A duly appointed commission is engaged to prepare proposals for liturgical revision. As always, such proposals when drawn up and published are circulated throughout the Church for constructive criticism by letter and in the church press. The proposals are then considered by the supreme governing body of the Church as a whole, with opportunity to make changes if need be or if desired. The proposals are then

authorized for trial use for such a time and under such conditions as the governing body deems appropriate. That is to say, the proposed changes, under the conditions laid down, may be used experimentally for a period of time as an optional alternative to the established and authorized liturgy. At the conclusion of the appointed time, with the experience gained not only from discussion but also from actual use, the supreme governing body then proceeds to formal voting of whatever changes it considers to be feasible and fitting. Only after this experiment has been made and the testing ratified or annulled by such a vote is the authorized liturgy or service book revised and published in its new version, and the period of trial use brought to an end.

Two objections to this procedure will at once come to mind. The one, which is more serious, is that less care may be taken in authorizing experimental forms than is taken in final voting, so that formularies or practices that are theologically unsound may intrude their way into the worship of many congregations. This is a risk, certainly, but only a risk. It assumes a priori that any commission appointed to prepare formularies for trial use will be less conscientious and responsible about the integrity of the faith than is a commission appointed to prepare final revisions. This is to prejudge the question. Similarly, it ignores the fact that the General Convention, in the case of our own Church particularly, would still have control over whatever proposals were authorized for trial use. Trial use does *not* mean that any and every proposal of the revising commission should or would be acceptable for experimental use. The General Convention would not give up its constitutional right to a veto. Moreover, if the Convention had any fear that promiscuous use of the trial proposals would do damage, it could lay down the conditions of time and place when and where such experiments might be made.

But this objection still does not meet a more formidable circumstance: namely, there is no assurance that revision under our present procedures would necessarily preserve the Church

from doctrinal error. We have as a Church never claimed infallibility for the doctrine of the Prayer Book. It is perfectly clear that many clergy and laity at the present time do not believe that every doctrinal expression or nuance in our Prayer Book is incapable of improvement. The range of doctrinal interpretation allowed by our present formularies is considerable, yet this does not necessarily weaken the unity which we now have in the faith. In fact, our Communion has by and large boasted of its comprehension within the same fold of doctrinal expressions and emphases that are maintained in a certain degree of tension.

Should inept or inexact phrases of doctrinal import occur in formularies issued for trial use, remedy of them could be made in a single session of Convention. Under our present constitutional procedures, should such a misfortune happen to a formulary that succeeded in passing two successive conventions, it would take two more conventions to correct it. And we all are aware that General Convention has always been very loath, and rightly so, to make changes in the Prayer Book by bits and pieces. For this would require a whole new printing of the Prayer Book and the difficult task of replacing the slightly altered Book in all parishes, missions, and chapels. The practical problems are almost insuperable. But changes in experimental forms, since they have nothing final about them, can be made much more readily and easily.

A second objection to trial use has to do with the practical problem of having varying liturgies in use simultaneously in the Church, to the confusion of the laity, who move about quite a bit, if not of the clergy. This objection would be the more solid were it not for two circumstances that obtain at present. One is that we are already accustomed in the Episcopal Church to considerable variety in liturgical usage – and that, too, legally – because of the flexibility of rubrics in some of our services, and also because of the great variations in ceremonial from parish to parish. It is arguable that variation in ceremonial

causes more consternation and confusion to many laity than does variation in text. Whether this is desirable is not a matter for discussion in this connection. But it is reasonable to suppose that the Church allows such variation to continue, with all the risks involved, because it considers this to be fitting in a Church that claims to be comprehensive.

Another circumstance that should be borne in mind is due to the recent growth of the Church itself, with the increase and mobility of our American population. More and more parishes and missions now find themselves ministering to people who have no background either in the Episcopal Church or in any other Church with a fixed liturgical tradition. One of our greatest problems today is to mold these new people in the spirit of liturgical worship itself. They have no presuppositions about it and very few prejudices. It is very doubtful if they would be put off by liturgical variables. This is the more true if one considers the fact that any commission appointed to provide forms for experimental use is not likely to be so radical – and least of all is General Convention likely to be so – as to produce forms of unrecognizable relationship to the familiar patterns. An American churchman travelling abroad – and there are more and more of them – who attends the Daily Offices or the Holy Communion in churches of other provinces of Anglicanism is seldom disturbed by the variations from his familiar American Prayer Book which he encounters. And the amount of variation, as between the English and the American Prayer Books respectively in their orders of Holy Communion, is not inconsiderable.

There is one advantage to trial use that possibly outweighs all objections. It removes the task of liturgical revision from the realm of purely theoretical discussion and provides a basis of judgment on proposed forms from concrete experience. It has been aptly said that when the disciples asked the Lord to teach them to pray, He did not give them a lecture or a pamphlet to study, but He gave them a prayer to be said. One learns to

worship and pray by doing it far more than by considering and discussing it. For the Spirit helps our infirmities in and through the act of worship itself. The whole purpose of trial use is summed up in the consideration that we cannot really tell what we ought to say and to do until we try it out under the provident assistance of the Spirit of God working in us.

Under our present arrangements for Prayer Book revision, we cannot know until it is too late whether what we think is good and proper is actually as effective and helpful as we suppose. Often this involves seemingly minor matters – directions of posture, syntax and punctuation, the difference of "may" and "shall" rubrics, the rhythm of Collects, the sequential arrangement of forms and ceremonies, the beginning and ending of lections. But it may also affect matters of major importance – the length of intercessions and consecratory prayers, the dramatic build-up of a rite, and the more subtle nuances of meaning that accrue from the order of words. The shift of position of a whole section of the Communion rite, for example – such as the intercession or the penitential devotions – might affect the whole movement and action of the service. Similarly, a Prayer of Consecration quite as long as our present one might be devised, but at the same time be made to seem less long and tedious because of a differing order of contents or of rhythmic relation of phrases.

It is possible, of course, that the principle of trial use might lend itself to a piece-meal revision. But if so, this would not have the disadvantage of such a method of revision as we have under our present procedures. We have noted that at present the slow and piece-meal process of revision makes it almost impossible to make an overall review of the Prayer Book as a whole. Under trial use, however, no final decisions would be made until the entire liturgy proposed had been subjected to experiment. Hence loose ends and awkward or obscure phrasing can be caught and corrected at the end of the process of revision before it is too late to deal with them. Such a procedure

would also greatly enhance the likelihood of consistency of reference and coordination of rubrics in the final stages of revision.

Trial use has one inestimable advantage in the Church today, considering its present size and complexity and diversity of membership. It allows every member an opportunity to voice his or her reaction to proposed changes in the liturgy on the basis of actual experience. It would thus make the decisions of the General Convention more truly representative and responsive to broad sentiment within the Church. There would be less likelihood that a relatively small number of revising "experts" on the one hand or of powerful committee leaders on the other would dominate the course and results of revision. Of course, there would not be unanimity on every point and issue. Nor is there any way of predicting whether the opportunity afforded for a wider participation by the rank and file of church membership in the task of revision would lead to conservative, moderate, or radical changes. But this is not of great moment, compared to the prospect of creating a liturgical reformation that could witness to an informed and responsible public opinion throughout the Church based upon the broadest possible experience of actual participation in the task.

We must bear ever in mind today, in any process of liturgical revision, certain insights provided by the modern science of liturgical research and study with regard to the way in which the great rites of the historic Church have come into existence and exercise a living and creative influence upon the spiritual growth of the Church. As the late Dom Gregory Dix said so pointedly, "The good liturgies were not written; they grew." That is to say, a great liturgy is not merely an external, imposed law. It is a process welling up in continually fresh streams of devotion from the inner life of believing, practicing Christians. Law plays a very necessary part in liturgical revision, in that it preserves standards recognized and approved by the whole Church. But liturgies also develop through the emergence of

unwritten customs responsive to needs of actual worshipping congregations. The recognition of this fact was a significant factor in the modern revisions of our Prayer Book in their ideals of "enrichment and flexibility" that modify in some degree the principle of a rigid uniformity.

III. *A Specific Proposal*

For the past three General Conventions (1952, 1955, and 1958) the Standing Liturgical Commission has offered with its report to the Convention a resolution seeking an amendment to Article X of the Constitution that would set up the possibility of trial use in any forthcoming revision of the Prayer Book. This resolution has been defeated in all three Conventions. The Commission is disturbed, not so much by its defeat, as by the fact that the proposal has not as yet been properly interpreted to the Convention. This circumstance has arisen in part from the peculiarity that the Commission has not been able to explain the proposal to the Convention except through mediate persons and groups. Though the Liturgical Commission is set up by Canon Law, it has no right to present its report and recommendations directly to the Houses of Convention, but its proposals are referred to committees which make such disposition of them as they please. In the House of Bishops, of course, an episcopal member of the Commission has the right of the floor to support, oppose, or elucidate the actions recommended by the committee of the House. In the House of Deputies, an amendment to the rules of procedure might well allow the Commission – and any other Joint Commission for that matter – to have the privilege of the floor of the Deputies to present and explain its report, especially in circumstances when no clerical or lay member of the Commission has been elected as a deputy.

The resolution offered in the 1958 Convention – one that will be offered again in the 1961 Convention – reads as follows:

Resolved, The House of . . . concurring, that the first proviso of Article X of the Constitution, be and it is hereby amended to read as follows:

But notwithstanding anything hereinabove contained, the General Convention may at any one meeting, by a majority of the whole number of Bishops entitled to vote in the House of Bishops and a majority of each order in the House of Deputies,

a. Amend the Table of Lessons and all Tables and Rubrics relating to the Psalms;

b. Authorize for trial use throughout the Church, as an alternative at any time or times to the established Book of Common Prayer or to any section or Office thereof, a proposed revision of the whole Book or of any portion thereof, duly undertaken by the General Convention.

It is section b) that primarily concerns us here. Contrary to opinions widely disseminated in the Church, this resolution is *not* intended to cover any and every proposal made by the Standing Liturgical Commission or by any other responsible group in the Church. It refers only to a proposed revision of the Prayer Book in whole or in part that has been *duly undertaken by the General Convention.* The prerogative of the General Convention is in no way altered by this resolution, since the Convention would still be the arbiter with respect to the when, the what, and the how of Prayer Book revision.

1) As to the *when:* The General Convention alone can decide at what time or times any revision may be undertaken and trial use permitted, and the length of time such trial use may be allowed. It does not give this authority to the Bishops alone, or to the Standing Liturgical Commission, or to any other body.

2) As to the *what:* The General Convention alone can decide whether the whole Prayer Book or any part of it may be brought under consideration for revision. It may, for example, decide to revise only one portion of the Prayer Book and

determine, by the method of trial use, whether or not it wishes to proceed further along this line. But in no way does the amendment bind the General Convention to adopt the method of trial use for any and every proposed revision.

3) As to the *how:* The General Convention alone can decide what group or groups may be authorized to present proposed revisions. It is not bound to use the services of the Standing Liturgical Commission in this way. It is the more likely that it will follow precedent and call for the appointment of a Joint Commission on Revision, with such and so many representatives of clergy and laity as it sees fit.

It is therefore important to bear in mind that the proposed amendment to the Constitution is designed solely to provide the Church with the flexible resource of trial use for such time and under such circumstances only as the General Convention sees fit to employ it in the course of Prayer Book revision.

It is inevitable that this proposed amendment offered by the Standing Liturgical Commission will be linked to another proposal made by the Commission at the General Convention of 1958: namely, the resolution asking the General Convention to authorize for optional use a number of additional propers of the Holy Communion on the Lesser Feasts and Fasts. But the two resolutions are not necessarily linked together. But this second proposal may well be used to illustrate the first.

Under the present constitutional directives, the Convention in 1958 decided that it could only authorize the propers of the lesser holy days as a formal revision of the Prayer Book: Hence, if the Convention of 1961 ratifies the action taken in 1958, these propers will have exactly the same authority as the material of the Prayer Book itself – even though they are for optional use only and will not be printed within the Prayer Book itself. Futhermore, under the same canonical regulations, these propers of the lesser holy days cannot be changed without the vote of two successive conventions.

If, however, the Convention of 1958 had been able to operate under a constitutional provision allowing trial use, the propers

of the lesser holy days could have been authorized by the vote of a single convention – and changed by the vote of a single convention – and a period for their experimental use could have been determined if so desired. Since these propers are certainly in the nature of an experiment – and no one can know at the present time how many of them will prove to be acceptable and regularly used – it would seem that trial use would have been a much better way of dealing with them. After a period of availability and use in the Church, it would be possible to determine how much of this material should ultimately be incorporated in a formal revision of the Prayer Book.

Furthermore, if these propers should prove to be inadequate to the need which they are designed to supply, trial use would make it easy for the Church to make such supplements to them as might from time to time appear desirable, and these supplements would in turn undergo a testing from trial use. Through this whole process of sifting a fairly sizable body of new material, the Prayer Book would remain unaltered and free from constant encumbrance with what might turn out to be of ephemeral interest.

Nor would the problem of doctrinal orthodoxy be so serious under a trial use as some suppose. Priests who found any of the material theologically defective or offensive would not be under any obligation to use them. If there should be widespread dissatisfaction on these or other grounds (such as literary style) with the material in use, the matter could be readily remedied by vote of General Convention. The offending material would be withdrawn, without jeopardizing the rest of the material. The Prayer Book would still remain unaffected, as our primary standard of doctrine, and nothing would be ultimately admitted within its covers except what the Church over a period of use and familiarity had come to believe was appropriate to its contents.

The Standing Liturgical Commission believes that the Church acting through the General Convention should have an honest confrontation with this proposal of constitutional amendment

to permit trial use as a revision method. It believes that this method offers the best means whereby a future revision of the Prayer Book can be made to the satisfaction of the vast majority of the Church, and with the least burden of partisan tension. It believes also that it is only fair to offer to the Church a method of procedure that many other provinces in the Anglican Communion, as well as other distinguished bodies of Christian people, have found and are continuing to find effective. We believe that the present size of our Church and of its supreme legislative organ suggests that the method of trial use is the best we can devise to ensure that the whole Church – that is to say, all its members – may have an opportunity to participate and express themselves in the development of our common liturgical life.

worship and pray by doing it far more than by considering and discussing it. For the Spirit helps our infirmities in and through the act of worship itself. The whole purpose of trial use is summed up in the consideration that we cannot really tell what we ought to say and to do until we try it out under the provident assistance of the Spirit of God working in us.

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