

THE EFFECT OF THE PARISH COMMUNION MOVEMENT

Introduction

In “Rites for a New Age”, Michael Ingham noted that for 400 years Anglicans have been a people of the Prayer Book. It not only defined us as the Latin Mass defined Roman Catholics, it was a badge of our identity, and a symbol of the unity of our world wide communion.¹

In Canada all of that changed in 1980 when General Synod decided that no further revision should be made to the Book of Common Prayer (BCP). Instead, it authorized the compilation and publication of a book of contemporary, alternative rites. This decision was meant to bring some order out of the liturgical confusion that existed throughout the 1970’s when divergent liturgies were being produced and distributed by dioceses and even parishes.² This process resulted in liturgical change every bit as far-reaching and dramatic as that which occurred at the other two watershed moments in church history:

- a. In the 4th century CE, after the conversion of Constantine, when the liturgy grew from a style appropriate for small informal gatherings to that of grand public ceremonial in large and splendid buildings as the official religion of the Roman Empire
- b. In the 16th century when new structures and liturgies along denominational lines emerged from the upheaval of the Reformation.³

What makes this change a “watershed moment”, according to Ingham, is that in the 20th century the secularization of Western culture pushed Christianity aside from the central position it had occupied since Constantine, and created a new situation of marginalism for the church.⁴

In addition to the external pressures of secularization, there was movement for liturgical reform within the church that sought to effect renewal by

¹ Michael Ingham, *Rites for a New Age: Understanding the Book of Alternative Services*, (Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 1986), 13

² *ibid*, 14

³ *ibid*, 27

⁴ *ibid*

restoring something essential that had been lost. In “The Service of the Word”, Alan Hayes notes that from the 1560’s to the mid 20th century the principal service of worship in most Anglican churches was the Prayer Book service of the Word – Morning and Evening Prayer - centred on the reading of scripture. However, by the end of the 1970’s, the “Parish Communion Movement’ had persuaded most Anglican Churches to adopt the Eucharist, with “Communion of the People” as the principal Sunday service.⁵

Rational for Change

The Parish Communion Movement - dating to the 1937 publication of 14 essays titled “The Parish Communion”, edited by Fr. Arthur Gabriel Hebert - reflected a powerful new theological vision of the Liturgical Movement, a Roman Catholic reform movement led by the Benedictines⁶. Essentially, members of the movement believed that the eucharist was central to christian life, and fundamental to the nature of the church. Indeed, weekly parish communion was seen as the key to a healthy parish community.⁷ In their view, the eucharist, unlike Morning Prayer, joins Christians together in an act of corporate offering which makes them the church. Even the Coffee Hour afterwards was considered essential – it made manifest the agape originally joined to the Eucharist.⁸

What made it practically possible to adopt the eucharist as the principal Sunday service was that the Roman Church liberalized the communion discipline in 1953, ’57 and ’64, a lead that Anglo-Catholics followed. Specifically, there was a relaxation of the traditional disciplines requiring sacramental confession in preparation, and abstinence from food, drink and sex before the service. Moreover, there was a growing idea that the eucharist as celebration of a feast should not be surrounded by penitential disciplines.⁹

⁵ Alan L. Hayes, The Service of the Word: Historical Considerations, in Alan L. Hayes and John Webster, What happened to Morning Prayer, (Toronto: Wycliffe College, 1997), 7

⁶ *ibid*, 8

⁷ *ibid*

⁸ *ibid*, 10

⁹ *ibid*

Within the church, the appeal of the Parish Communion Movement was that it promised to heal divisions between evangelicals and Catholics. The evangelical world signaled its acceptance of its objectives in the final statement of the National Evangelical Anglican Congress, at the University of Keele, in 1967 - a sort of Vatican II for English evangelicals – in which was the statement that evangelicals would work toward weekly communion as the central corporate service of the church.¹⁰ In the compromise that resulted, it was determined that evangelicals would keep the priesthood of all believers (the laity were understood to be celebrants at the eucharist, but not presiders), and the Service of the Word. The first part of Parish Communion is the Liturgy of the Word, including Old Testament readings, and an obligatory sermon. They also gave up presiding at the north end of the Lord's Table. Anglo-Catholics kept the three Holy Orders of bishop, priest and deacon essential to their view of the nature of the church and a valid Eucharist; and their sacramental observance. The second part of Parish Communion is the Liturgy of the Table. They also gave up presiding with their backs to the people.¹¹ (With the exception, of course of a few hardcore Anglo-Catholic parishes that cling to the traditional Solemn High Mass).

The Movement naturally attracted the support of clergy because it provided a clear *raison d'être* for their office, and a clear sense of their indispensability in the larger scheme of things. In particular, the liturgical movement reassured them that what mattered most was the church's worship – particularly the kind over which only they could preside.¹²

In addition to internal concerns, there were societal factors motivating significant change. The 1985 ruling by the Supreme Court of Canada striking down the Lord's Day Act indicates the extent of the shift that had occurred in the religious makeup of the country, and the resulting demise of Christian privilege that was the eventual end-product of the new constitutional guarantees of religious freedom to men and women of all faiths.¹³ By the 1980's it was clear

¹⁰ *ibid*, 11

¹¹ *ibid*, 14

¹² *ibid*, 14-15

¹³ Ingham, 35

that the decline of Christendom meant finding a new role for the Church and its leaders. In Ingham's words, "We are called to be a spiritual community in a society which promotes individualism, to affirm the dignity and worth of human beings in an economy which reduces persons to units of production, to develop supportive and nurturing relationships in the midst of competitive and consumer values."¹⁴

Twentieth century Christians were confronted by a situation similar to the pre-Constantinian one of the early Church. Working from a position of comparative weakness, church leaders must approach centers of power from the outside. With increasing secularization, the state has taken over most of social services that constituted the church's domestic mission. Indeed, secularization of the culture and the decline in religious commitment, placed the church in a situation of having to contemplate domestic evangelism on a large scale – from a minority position – for the first time since the pre-Constantinian era.¹⁵ Moreover, the Post-Christendom church has started to view its mission from the perspective of those on the periphery of society. The church has come to understand that servanthood means more than caring for the less fortunate; rather, it's about seeking justice for victims and peace among the powerful. Furthermore, prophesy has come to mean more than denouncing sin in individuals but also exposing corporate, social, and systemic injustice.¹⁶

It was into this world that the Book of Alternative Services (BAS) was "born" - a set of rites for a more fragmented and less homogeneous society, in which Christians are a minority. Its contemporary liturgies were designed to equip a post-Christendom church to strengthen its own sense of being a community, and to help bring new members into the church in ways that help them experience a new identity in Christ.¹⁷

Significant Changes

¹⁴ *ibid*, 76

¹⁵ *ibid*, 165

¹⁶ *ibid*

¹⁷ *ibid*, 57

The new rites feature the theme of “The People of God”; echoing the biblical call of Israel to become a chosen people in a covenant relationship.¹⁸ Although provision has been made for services of Morning and Evening Prayer, there is an emphasis on the eucharist as creating and sustaining the community – indeed an expectation that it will be the principal weekly service.¹⁹

Since the new rites are designed for Christians who find themselves in an indifferent and somewhat hostile environment, by emphasizing the resurrection of Christ and the gifting of the church by the Spirit, the BAS has undertaken a deliberate shift of spiritual emphasis to equip Christians for a time in which they are once again a minority. As Ingham notes, the resurrection, not the crucifixion, must be the central paradigm for a marginalized church in an alienated society.²⁰ Moreover, Holy Week rites in the BAS are theologically grounded in the Gospel of John, rather than the Matthean Passion²¹. Whereas the BCP Lenten services were preparation for the passion of Christ, the BAS rites are preparation for the celebration of Easter.²²

In a significant departure, the season of Trinity has disappeared from the liturgical calendar. Instead, Pentecost now extends until Advent, a sign of the recovery of a focus on the spirit, appropriate for the new apostolic age of a post-Christendom church.²³

In order to strengthen our sense of community, the physical exchange of the peace, by handshake, embrace or kiss, places a new emphasis on relationship with our fellow parishioners. Its purpose is to make reconciliation and forgiveness a concrete reality within the community of faith.²⁴

In the Post-Christendom community, Christians are formed not born. Baptism is considered to be the full incorporation of the individual into Christ and Christian fellowship, whether that be as a child or an adult. Indeed, as Ingham points out, the water bath and the laying on of hands are part of one and the

¹⁸ *ibid*

¹⁹ *ibid*, 58

²⁰ *ibid*, 121

²¹ *ibid*, 123

²² *ibid*, 124

²³ *ibid*, 125

²⁴ *ibid*, 62

same rite, and are not divided in scripture or any practice of the apostolic church. The original initiation sequence was baptism, anointing and admission to the eucharist, all of which occurred together. Participation in the eucharist is the privilege of the baptized.²⁵

The Other Side of the Story

The shift to parish communion was controversial, to say the least. Bishop Michael Marshall, in his book *Renewal in Worship* (page 62) noted that the parish communion movement has “done more than any other single movement to unchurch the people of the United Kingdom. It insisted on one sort of service (exclusively the eucharist) for one sort of people at one sort of time.”²⁶ In Canada there was a gradual introduction of “parish communion’ by the clergy, combined with a not-so-subtle message from the leadership that it was futile to resist inexorable theological progress. The decisive factor was that canonically the clergy themselves had virtually unfettered authority to institute it.”²⁷

There was, indeed, opposition – not only to the institution of a new liturgical style and service book, but also to the almost complete disappearance of Morning and Evening Prayer services. However, as noted above, the clergy had the power to make, and did make, the decision about the choices of liturgy and services that would be offered. The laity could complain, but beyond that, could have little effect.

Since the virtual disappearance of Morning and Evening Prayer, and the coincident introduction of the BAS, church attendance has been in a state of continuing decline. Successive surveys by the sociologist Reginald Bibby, and others, leave one with the nagging suspicion that many voted with their feet, and left. Bibby even raised serious concerns about the medium-to-long term viability of the Church as an organization – a position that, this writer is happy to note, he has reversed in his most recent, post 9/11, survey, reported in his book “Restless

²⁵ Ingham, 63

²⁶ Hayes, 5

²⁷ *ibid*, 14

Gods". Nevertheless, while the decline has been halted, there is not yet any sign of a return to the attendance rates of the pre-BAS church.

In "Rites...", Michael Ingham makes the observation that "...the relative absence in our worship of a tradition of joyful praise and thanksgiving has tended to make our worship appear to outsiders as somewhat somber and gloomy (albeit splendid and dignified gloom)."²⁸ The principal exception to this, he notes, is Morning Prayer; a liturgy of praise and joy which lacks the profoundly penitential character of the Prayer Book eucharist, and expresses the more positive feeling of Christian joy in the house of the Lord.²⁹ He also notes that the BAS, in a profound departure from Prayer Book tradition, does present rites that are more joyful, positive and optimistic than those in the BCP.³⁰ Perhaps this was an attempt to compensate for the effective loss of the service of praise and joy – Morning Prayer – on Sundays. Judging by the attendance figures reflected by Bibby, this attempt was not altogether successful.

Alan Hayes raises an interesting point for investigation when he says, "...in recent years I have found that some of our healthiest and most growing Anglican Churches are ones which provide a service of the word on a regular basis."³¹ Indeed, he cites two interesting examples that have been documented.

The first, St. Michael's Church, in New York City, had very few members in 1976. A new rector instituted services of Morning Prayer on the 2nd, 4th and 5th Sundays of the month. Ten years later they had a full Church on Sundays, and an overflow at principal feasts. Hayes notes that after the change St. Michael's attracted a surprisingly large number of Anglo-Catholics, and some Roman Catholics. The rector's answer, when asked why the strategy had proven to be successful, was that in his opinion 2/3rds of Episcopalians respond enthusiastically to alternating pattern of Eucharist and Morning Prayer.³²

The second, St. Agnes, Long Branch, in Etobicoke had an average Sunday attendance of 18 in 1994. One year later that had been raised to 167.

²⁸ Ingham, 119

²⁹ *ibid*, 119

³⁰ *ibid*, 113

³¹ Hayes, 26

³² *ibid*, 27

The new rector, the Rev. Myles Hunter, eliminated the eucharist from Sunday morning completely and replaced it with Anglican and non-Anglican hymns and chant and “absolute hardcore ritual”³³

Based on these two, limited examples, and the writer’s personal experience, Morning Prayer is a liturgy that speaks to many in a very meaningful way. Such examples lead one to wonder, in fact, whether we threw the proverbial baby out with the bathwater with our almost exclusive focus on the eucharist.

Of further note, John Webster, in “The Service of the Word: Theological Reflections”, questions whether the evangelistic mission of the church is even well served by the eucharist, which by its nature is exclusive. It is limited, except in the very few places where there is an “open table”, to the initiates (the baptized), as opposed to the newcomer or unbeliever.³⁴ He goes on to note that the Service of the Word may be more hospitable to an outsider.³⁵

Conclusions

The Parish Communion Movement, which was intended to effect renewal within the Church, may, in fact, have contributed to its decline by making it less seeker friendly.

In the first instance, the eucharist is, by definition, a celebration in which only the initiates can partake. A newcomer who is not a baptized Christian will be very obvious – and, therefore, potentially uncomfortable at a eucharist service. At a Service of the Word, on the other hand, there would be little to distinguish a “guest”, with the exception of some initial unfamiliarity with the service book. Over a relatively short period that would be overcome, and the seeker could participate fully in the worship of the community. With the Eucharist, he or she would always feel, and be made to feel, an outsider during the second half of the service – the Liturgy of the Table.

³³ *ibid*

³⁴ John Webster, *The Service of the Word: Theological Reflections*, in Alan L. Hayes and John Webster, *What happened to Morning Prayer*, (Toronto: Wycliffe College, 1997), 35

³⁵ *ibid*, 36

Although the opportunity is available for an outsider to seek baptism, and thus become a member of the community, one needs to ask how many depart without taking that step because there is no service alternative available for exploring a closer relationship without significant risk and discomfort.

Moreover, with the closed circle policy that the eucharistic emphasis implies – only the initiates can fully participate – one must question whether we are, in fact, approaching a degree of gnosticism.

To this writer, at least, there would appear to be grounds for considering whether the Parish Communion Movement, as implemented through the vehicle of the BAS, has actually contributed to the marginalized position of the Church for which the BAS was prepared, rather than effecting the renewal it intended.