

# THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER

new German Protestant liturgies. However the heart of it was the Sarum Rite, England's primary late medieval liturgy. And its form of English, even for the time, was solemn and elevated, preserving some of the precision of Latin services. It was intended as a book for the ages, filled with elegant and pithy phrases, with a careful ear for the spoken word. Its influence on subsequent English literature is incalculable, and its language has influenced everyday speech.

The Book of Common Prayer is probably the most cherished liturgical book in Christian history, partly on its merits and partly for its role as key source of unity for Anglican Christians around the world. Across theological and cultural differences, most Anglican Christians begin common worship with an appeal to "Almighty God, unto whom all hearts be open." On the First Sunday of Advent they ask for grace "to cast away the works of darkness and put upon us the armor of light." They vow to love one another "for better, for worse; for richer, for poorer; in sickness and in health." And they are committed back to God, "earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust."

The primary liturgical resource for nearly every church of the Anglican Communion is called the Book of Common Prayer. Generally speaking, Anglicans have been more cautious than other kinds of Christians about changing their liturgies. But the Book of Common Prayer remains a dynamic text as its compilers intended, continually being translated into more than 200 languages and revised across the world according to what the original preface called "the various exigency of times and occasions."

The versions of the Book of Common Prayer in use in most parts of the Anglican world, for example, use eucharistic rites and forms for private confession that were shaped by the 19th-century renewal of sacramental theology and practice called the Oxford Movement. Many have special services for Holy Week based on early Christian models that were developed in the middle 20th-century Liturgical Movement. These followed in the first prayer book's path of inspiring current dynamism by recovering what had been lost. Analogously, some prayer books propose inclusive language to speak about humanity or have special prayers for ecological justice and world peace that respond to the needs of the world we are called to serve.

We trust that the Holy Spirit, who came down at Pentecost to instruct, guide, and renew God's people, continues to work through this treasure of Anglican Christianity. Timeless and contemporary, beautiful and accessible, when used faithfully the Book of Common Prayer calls people into common life with Christ: to love and serve him with joy.



We are a Christian ministry based primarily in the Episcopal Church, a member of the Anglican Communion. Since 1878 we have published educational resources of various kinds and *The Living Church* magazine.

**The Anglican Inheritance**

## In the midst of St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, he says this of Christian worship and public prayer: "All things should be done decently and in order" (1 Cor. 14:40).

Common prayer has been at the heart of Christian discipleship from the beginning. Jesus taught his disciples to pray, and the early Church was marked by regular and intense times of shared prayer (Acts 2:42). *Ekklesia*, the Greek word we translate as Church, originally referred to any assembly, a gathering of those called out from the world for a common task or purpose. In common prayer, Christians grow in and deepen their communion with God and one another. Faith is strengthened, and mutual love kindled, as we become "one heart and mind" (Acts 4:32).

Most Christian common prayer has used set forms and ceremonies, texts heavy with symbolic meaning, derived mostly from the Scriptures. There is some evidence that the earliest Christians composed their prayers freely, but from the second century manuals were being prepared for common worship. The end of persecution in the fourth century brought a flourishing of Christian liturgy, shaping the development of the rich and vibrant traditions that endure, in modified and adapted forms, across the Church today.

From the fifth century to the 15th, many kinds of service books were composed to aid common prayer, including missals, antiphoners, benedictionals, lectionaries, and homiliaries. But there was no Book of Common Prayer until Pentecost 1549, when a new volume in the English language became the liturgy of the Church of England.

The timing of the first book's release was no mistake. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer, and others who helped him prepare the first Book of Common

Prayer intended it as a tool for the renewal of the Church of England. The Holy Spirit's descent at Pentecost had converted thousands through the apostles' preaching and given rise to a profoundly fruitful common life. The first prayer book's preface described the project as an "order for prayer ... much agreeable to the mind and purpose of the old fathers, and a great deal more profitable and commodious than that which of late was used." This was renewal by return to ancient roots.

The most important of these recovered practices was praying together "in such a language and order, as is most easy and plain for the understanding, both of the readers and hearers." The resulting texts were deeply shaped by the Western Church's tradition of Latin prayer that dated back more than a millennium. But like the apostles' words at Pentecost, for the first time in centuries all those assembled for worship in English churches "heard them speaking in our own languages the mighty acts of God" (Acts 2:11).

The Book of Common Prayer was one among many new patterns for Christian worship developing across Europe as churches were being influenced by the Protestant Reformation. The Reformers believed that worship in their time had become too complex and fussy, and that its inadequacies had led to widespread superstition and an ignorance of the Christian gospel. They criticized the content of some liturgical language and practices, especially for the Eucharist and the burial of the dead, because they

believed these obscured the central truth that we are saved by God's free grace, not by our efforts.

For the Reformers, public prayer was a valuable tool for teaching essential truths. It should be in the commonly spoken language, and should include instructions and exhortations, to guide the understanding and stir the emotions so people could respond to God with worship "in spirit and in truth" (John 4:23). They believed that expanding Bible reading in worship could help in this, along with including more responsive prayer, which would promote active engagement and deepen common commitment.

Unlike earlier books of its kind, the Book of Common Prayer was meant to be taken home, to be used by laypeople to learn and grow in the faith, a development made easier by revolutions in printing technology. It condensed material that had previously been spread across many books into one volume. It simplified daily prayer services for lay use and included a catechism. Married people could use its texts to reflect on their vows, sick persons could find comfort in its prayers about illness, and the mourning recall the Christian hope set forth in the burial service.

Publishing the first Book of Common Prayer helped align the English church more directly with the reform movements emerging from Europe in this time. But for an early Protestant text, it was conservative. It drew from many sources, including some

