

THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN CANADA: THE CURRENT LITURGICAL SCENE

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The Presbyterian Church in Canada (the PCC) now numbers about 145,000 members gathered in 968 congregations. One of the few statements that one could safely make about the liturgical practices of the PCC is that (probably like the C of S) there is great variety within it.

However, change there has been and it has been very great in the years of my ministry. Consider the following:

--the official position of the Church is to encourage ministers to wear vestments other than black in colour; many have discontinued the use of black vestments;

--while crosses and candles on the communion table were a rarity 30 years ago, they are now commonplace;

--the lectionary is in wide use;

--most churches now follow the church year. In practice this will often mean extra services in Advent and Lent. Advent wreaths, unheard of 30 years ago, are now common sights in churches. The Good Friday services of our youth have now seen Maundy Thursday services with Communion added to many Lenten observances;

--with coloured vestments have come the colours of the church year observed in many churches.

Most churches now use a version of the Bible other than the KJV (the new RSV being an especially popular choice). The hymn book of 1972 now has a successor issued just last year. In 1996 a psalter was also issued. Of special importance to this article is to note that our latest *Book of Common Worship* was issued in 1991, replacing the previous one published in 1964 (then called *The Book of Common Order*).

Most congregations still basically celebrate Holy Communion about four times a year at the morning service. But a number of other services are also being established. At Knox Church, Ottawa, we celebrate the Sacrament at an after-service on the week following each of our regular Communion services and also have a mid-week service.

Some churches experiment with a time of silence in the prayer of intercession. While mainly used for private prayer for people in need, it is also an opportunity for the congregation individually to give thanks to God. The silence, too, has the merit of sharply reminding people that they have a job to do at worship: the work of worship, the offering of themselves in praise.

The central element in the worship of the PCC, however, continues to be the word: the reading of the Bible, and the preaching of the message. Indeed many services are constructed along the lines of preparation, approach, word and response to the word, with offering after the sermon. Most of our services will include a Responsive Psalm from the back of the 1972 hymn book or from the new Psalter and in some congregations the psalm will be followed by the *Gloria Patri*. The Lord's Prayer is said in most churches, usually using the older versions.

There is also musical variety in our churches. Most congregations use the hymn book of our Church, but some have added other types of music. I asked a friend the other day how many churches in our denomination used guitars and was astounded at the answer: about 30%, he thought. The figure seems very high to me. But there you have it: more variety, even in – some might add, especially in – music.

As a denomination we are going through an odd time. Numerically it has been a time of decline. Yet strangely there is so much good news out there. So many congregations are doing well. They are happy and united. They are led in fine worship week by week and, in many cases, hear an excellent sermon.

One last point, though not directly on liturgy. In 1984 the PCC accepted a new statement of faith, entitled *Living Faith*. In 1997 the General Assembly voted to send it to the presbyteries under the Barrier Act. The majority of Presbyteries supported its acceptance and in June 1998 it was adopted as a subordinate standard of the Church. What was astonishing was that in the Assemblies of both 1984 and 1997 the level of support was so high and the level of opposition so low to *Living Faith*. Much of the document, some 24 pages in length, was written to be used in worship. A few congregations actually use it weekly, others intermittently or not at all. But a common sight in the congregations of the PCC is to see sticking out of many pew

racks, along with a Bible, hymn book, and in some cases new psalter as well, copies of *Living Faith*.

Of course, that is the point of any liturgy: to have a living faith that glorifies God.

Those who want a little more detail may wish to read the three notes I have added on the new Book of Common Worship, the new hymn book and on the new (as of 1984) statement of faith.

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NOTES.

(1) The Book of Common Order

As mentioned above the latest edition was printed in 1991. It seems to have met with wide acceptance in our church. Happily, after a lot of behind-the-scenes controversy, the double epiclerosis was included in most of the sacramental services. It is sad to observe that it was ever in question. Of interest is the fact that the word 'Confirmation' has been replaced by the phrase 'Affirmation of Baptism' – a mistake in my view. Many simply continue to use the word 'Confirmation' despite the admitted ambiguity present in the word. Also, in my opinion, the book borrows too heavily from other sources (though what is borrowed is fine and intelligent) and also the book is far too large physically. How convenient were the old books that fitted in an overcoat pocket on the way to a funeral. The present book is loose-leaf (a good idea) but its bulk means that many ministers tend to use other books. On the other hand the latest Scottish book is also much larger than its 1979 predecessor. When all is said the book seems of considerable merit.

(2) The Book of Praise

The new *Book of Praise* was issued in September, 1997, and many congregations have already purchased it and are using it. The editors were exceedingly wise in surveying the congregations to discover what hymns were actually in wide use. Then they made sure that these were included in the new book. Thus we still have (and enjoy!) 'Onward! Christian Soldiers', 'Amazing Grace' (to its familiar tune – the 1972 hymn book astonishingly had changed the tune) and many other favourites. The book is large – over 800 hymns – and unlike the book it replaces does not include a section at the back for said

responsive psalms.

Some of the new inclusions seem more suited to campfire settings than for church services and also seem trendy. How quickly will congregations tire of them (or not use them at all)? The book contains nine hymns by John Bell and a number of other contemporary compositions.

To me the main question centres on the number of new hymns that are here that have an enduring quality. The answer to that question will only arise from the life of the church and time will tell. But my impression is that such hymns are insufficient to have warranted the writing of a new book. The book also contains odd inconsistencies, sometimes retaining, sometimes not, such words as 'King'. 'Of the Father's love begotten' is now changed to 'Of Eternal Love begotten' even though our Lord clearly taught us to address God as 'Father'.

However, with 800 hymns to choose from, people can use the book as a resource and different churches will use it in different ways.

(3) Living Faith

Frankly, most people in our church never thought we could do it: achieve a modern statement of faith that the General Assembly would find acceptable. But that actually occurred in 1984 and now the document has passed the majority of our Presbyteries under the Barrier Act and has been adopted by the General Assembly (June 1998) as an addition to our subordinate standards. Our chief subordinate standard is the Westminster Confession of Faith. There was added to it a statement on church and nation in the post second World War period. I have always thought of the latter as a Canadian Barmen Declaration. Certainly, it was not an endeavour to take another look at our basic theology, except on the one issue of church and state.

Most of us in the PCC feel fortunate. If we are asked: "What does your church teach and believe right now?" we can pass on to the inquirer a copy of *Living Faith*. At 24 pages, written as a prose poem in many parts (one thought per line) it comes across as readable, modern, and yet rooted in the ancient faith of the Church. I recently passed on a copy to a young woman who has since joined my congregation. Later, I asked her what she thought of it, and she told me that she sat in her apartment

in downtown Ottawa, reading it, and found herself saying, "Yes, yes". Theology, rooted in the past and yet written into the ethos of the present has power to excite.

AN ABERDEEN RESPONSE TO PROFESSOR REYMOND'S LECTURE

HENRY R. SEFTON

The Aberdeen audience obviously enjoyed Professor Reymond's stimulating lecture.

I found his emphasis on continuity and discontinuity convincing. The gathering of the congregation around the pulpit has pre-Reformation origins. His suggestion that they are not gathered round the Word so much as a "choral square" is intriguing, but not entirely convincing. Zwingli had no place for music or singing in worship. His suggestion that the focal point in a Reformed church is not the pulpit but the Communion table does not apply to many Scottish examples where the Communion table was not a permanent piece of furniture. While it is true that Reformed worship is essentially corporate and has no need of side chapels, it could be argued that some Reformed churches are bi-cameral rather than uni-cameral with a preaching room and a sacrament room.

The illustrations and diagrams about sight-lines were very telling. The weakness of a special religious style of architecture, such as Gothic, was well highlighted. The strength of using contemporary building materials, methods and styles was equally effectively commended.

I was surprised that Professor Reymond did not consider the possibility of a single focal point at which the Word is preached and the Sacraments celebrated such as is suggested by Karl Barth and André Biéler.

The Reverend Dr Henry Sefton, an Honorary President of the Society, was formerly Master of Christ's College, Aberdeen.