THE CHURCH SERVICE SOCIETY – A BRIEF RETROSPECT

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The Revd. Dr. Conor Fegan has sourced this article from the archive of material on the website of the Church Service Society https://churchservicesociety.org. *In the abstract, it says, 'This article outlines the situation prior to the founding of the Society on 31st January, 1865, and the publications provided since. Even though the General Assembly established a Committee on Public Worship and Aids to Devotion and it was proposed that the Society be wound up, it was felt that a role continued.' At a time when the Society is reviewing its past and future direction, it is a timely opportunity to pause for thought and remember our forebears' hopeful and what turned out to be fruitful vision. (ed.)*

Those of our readers who know the 'Scotch Minister's Assistant' in either of the editions in which it was published, 1802 or 1822, or the Rev. William Liston of Redgorton's 'Service of the House of God, according to the practice of the Church of Scotland', published in 1843, will turn to their 'Prayers for Divine Service', the book authorised by the General Assembly of 1923, with feelings of the profoundest gratitude. And yet, in their day, these old manuals for the guidance of young ministers in the conduct of worship, while completely ignoring liturgical principles and materials, were indications that men realised all was not well with the worship of the Church of Scotland. The services of the Church at that time have been described by Principal Story as 'a caricature of the Church as it was designed and ordered by the first Reformers'; but by the early 'sixties interest in the reform of worship had given place to controversy and even persecution of the reformers—the necessary prelude, it would seem, to improvement.

During the period of controversy, when the Assembly had appointed a Committee to inquire into 'Innovations in Public Worship' (1863), and when Dr Robert Lee had published his 'Reform of the Church of Scotland', the idea of a society for the study of matters liturgical was forming in the minds of certain ministers; and on 31st January 1865 the Church Service Society was born, under the Presidency of Principal Barclay of Glasgow, with the Rev. James Cameron Lees as Convener of Committee, and the Rev. George Campbell of Eastwood as Secretary and Treasurer. It has been largely the work of this Society for the last sixty years that has accomplished the transformation in the conduct of worship in the Church of Scotland illustrated by the volumes above mentioned.

It is not possible in the space here available to go into any detailed survey of the stages of the Society's progress; but one or two events and points of interest may be mentioned. The first publication of the Society, when the membership numbered some forty ministers, was a tract on Public Prayer, written, curiously enough, by a Rev. C. J. Brown, a minister of the Free Church in Edinburgh. Being, as the Committee thought, 'a sensible and pious composition', it was sent, along with a statement of the aims and views of the Society, to 'every minister of the Church, every Theological Professor, and every Student of Divinity'.

In the first days, all members of the Society were working members, taking an active part in the work of the Society. That work was two-fold—constructive and eclectic; (a) the study of liturgies ancient and modern and the collection, from all sources, of liturgical material, and (b) the compilation of suitable forms of Service for the use of ministers in their conduct of worship. The early work of the members issued in the publication of 'Euchologion : or Book of Prayers ; being Forms of Worship issued by the Church Service Society' in 1867. The sequence of the parts of worship had not yet been considered, and this book was merely the provision of materials of prayers. But it was so well received that a second and extended edition was resolved upon, to include not merely materials of prayers, but Forms of Service for Morning and Evening Worship, and also Forms of Occasional Services. 'The Book of Common Order' was the title chosen for subsequent editions, and known as such the nine editions that have been published are familiar in the manses of Scotland. The valuable eighth edition, which contains notes as to the sources of the materials used, is a notable contribution to liturgical literature, and was the work of the late Dr George Sprott. Besides the 'Book of Common Order', a volume of Daily Services, now out of print, was issued in 1893, called 'Daily Offices for Morning and Evening Prayer throughout the

Week'. In the same year, at the Annual Meeting of the Society, Dr Sprott moved 'that authority be given to the Editorial Committee to edit a cheap reprint of all the liturgical books used or proposed to be used in the Church of Scotland since the Reformation, in such a series, annual or otherwise, as their funds permit.' This led to the issue of the valuable series of books—the 'Scottish Liturgies of the Reign of James VI.' (a reprint of a volume already published, in 1871, by Dr Sprott) ; the 'Book of Common Order, commonly called Knox's Liturgy', the 'Liturgy of 1637, commonly called Laud's Liturgy', the 'Westminster Directory', and the 'Second Prayer Book of King Edward the Sixth (1552)', along with, in the same volume, 'The Liturgy of Compromise, used in the English Congregation at Frankfort'. The editors of these valuable volumes include Dr Sprott, Dr Leishman of Linton, Professor Cooper, and Dr H. J. Wotherspoon. The publication of these volumes not only gave a new impetus to the study of Scottish liturgical history, but helped to call the Church back to the wholesome principles and practice of our early reformers. In all this work Dr Sprott was a moving personality; and his death in 1909 meant, and has proved, a serious loss to the Society.

The Society has published several occasional papers and Orders of Service. During the time of war it issued valuable Services for different occasions, such as the unveiling of a War Memorial and the Commemoration of those who had fallen. These were largely used by the Ministers of the Church. Among the earlier occasional papers of the Society are two of special interest, one on the Admission of Young Persons to the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, the other on the Ordination of Ministers. These papers, which are now out of print, contain a short statement of the doctrine of the Church of Scotland and comparisons with the customs of other Communions, followed by Orders of Service, the material for which was taken mainly from Reformed Liturgies. These have now been superseded by the Orders of Service published in the 'Book of Common Order'; but they exemplify the pioneer work which the Society has done throughout its history.

A sentence from an early paper on Public Prayer may well be quoted here as giving the rationale of the Society's existence, and the principle of its work for the Church: 'It is, we believe, no restless feeling of dissatisfaction with the traditionary usages, doctrines, and rites of the Church which has directed general attention to the question of worship; it is rather an earnest desire that the Church's worship should become a more and more comely and perfect vehicle of her devotion, that has led men to inquire wherein it is capable of improvement.'

The work of the Society was seriously interfered with by the years of war, 1914-1918, and during the subsequent years, when the cost of publication on anything like the Church Service Society Annual old scale was prohibitive, the Society entered upon troubled days. The Minute Book of the Council wound up, as its usefulness was finished. It was thought that the beneficent activities of the General Assembly's Committee on Aids to Devotion were superseding the activities of the Society. Certainly the Church Service Society must hail with joy these activities of the Assembly's Committee, and the publication of 'Prayers for Divine Service', issued under the Assembly's authority, was proof that the Society had not been working in vain.

But the usefulness of the Society abides. There is much still to be done which cannot yet be done by an Assembly Committee. Many new sources of liturgical history and principle and information are available. Professor Doumergue's colossal life of John Calvin, published some twenty years ago, suggests new fields of research for the liturgical student, with special reference to Reformation sources. Also, it is possible for a private Society to be progressive in a way that an Assembly Committee could never be. Both in the eclectic and in the constructive branches of the Society's work much remains to be done, and recent years are showing a new revival of interest in liturgical matters.

The Society has in hand some interesting work—the preparation of a volume of Holy Week Services, and of a Handbook on the Principles of Church Worship,—and looks forward to the preparation of a volume of Occasional Services, which should be of value to ministers of the Church. We look back with gratitude to the work done in the past by members of the Society—work which has borne such fine fruit in the Church of Scotland; and we call upon all ministers

and others who are working, perhaps independently, on matters in which the Society is interested to ‘get together’ in the Society, and help one another by means of the Society for the further and greater good of our Church.