

1. Introduction

Parish communion inhibits growing the church. This statement sounds very much like a non sequitur; indeed, one is tempted to say, an oxymoron, although it doesn't quite meet the overt definition. The sense, however, is there. How can the central act of our faith – the celebration of the Eucharist – be detrimental to growing our church? Yet, that is what I am contending in this paper. When the Eucharist became the principal Sunday service, we in effect chose to shift the focus of our worship to the maintenance and sustenance of our parish family. In the process, we quite unintentionally became less than welcoming to newcomers. An observation from an Episcopalian parishioner at Grace Church in Manhattan speaks poignantly to this issue, and could just as easily have been penned by a Canadian:

To abandon our traditional form of worship would be ill-advised ...it would almost certainly hamper, or even cripple, our outreach efforts. The Communion Service explicitly involves exclusion; the heart of the service is open only to 'baptized Christians' There was a time when we were encouraged to 'bring a friend' to services, and many of us did. In my experience, many who are not baptized Christians find our Morning Prayer Service unthreatening and congenial. I have not hesitated to introduce such people to Grace at such services. I would be very reluctant, however, to subject an unbaptized friend to a Communion Service, for no one likes to be treated as an outsider. It is surely no coincidence that, even in the midst of our current liturgical experiment, we reverted to the familiar Morning Prayer Service on Grace Church School Sunday (January 25), when parents, teachers and other members of the School community were our honoured guests.¹

The introduction of the Book of Alternative Services, in 1985, occasioned a seismic shift in the nature of our worship; virtually eliminating the use of Morning Prayer except as personal devotion for clergy and members of the Prayer Book Society of Canada. The fate of

¹ Edward W. Keane, Regarding the Trial Liturgy: A Parishioner's View, ('self-published' letter, February 1998)

Evening Prayer was not much better; although in certain parishes with a high music tradition it has survived primarily as a choir performance piece. Compline is said infrequently, at best. For all intents and purposes, we have become a Eucharist-only worshipping community.

All of that may be alright if everything else was going well with the Church. The plain fact of the matter, however, is that it is not; as the following remarks will illustrate.

Anglican ranks on road to extinction?

In October of 2005, the Anglican Church of Canada's House of Bishops was told that church membership had fallen 53 percent between 1961 and 2001; and that the decline was accelerating. During the period from 1991 to 2001, the decline was 20 percent. It continues at the rate of 12,386 Anglicans per year.² This is shocking news; particularly in light of Reginald Bibby's most recent book, *Restless Churches*, which indicates that 80 percent of adults and teens believe in God; and for 75% of adults and 70% of teens, that God is one who cares about them personally.³ In fact, a survey that Bibby did for the Vanier Institute of the Family, in August 2003, found that 26 percent of Canadians attended church services once a week. That is 1 in 4 adults (plus children), or over 5,000,000 people. Typical church attendance on an average weekend surpasses the Grey Cup or Super Bowl television audiences in Canada.⁴ As he pointed out, "There is no other group activity in Canada that begins to compare with such a level of involvement."⁵

Given the disparity between Bibby's findings and the report that was made to the Bishops, it is evident that some clarification is needed.

² Richard Foot, [Anglican ranks on road to extinction, grim report finds](http://www.canada.com/VancouverSun/story.html?id=56ed5dae-a830-4c5b-9cac-34be8b082cef&k=77563), (CanWest News Service: Thursday, December 01, 2005); found at Anglicans Online <http://www.canada.com/VancouverSun/story.html?id=56ed5dae-a830-4c5b-9cac-34be8b082cef&k=77563>

³ Reginald W. Bibby, *Restless Churches: How Canada's Churches Can Contribute to the Emerging Religious Renaissance*, (Toronto: Novalis/Saint Paul University, 2004), 14.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid, 22.

Canadians believe in God; and a significant number of them attend church every week – not just at Christmas and Easter, or once a month, but every week. However, many do not support our particular brand of Christianity – Anglicanism – and are demonstrating that fact by their departure and continued absence. The appalling news is not that Christianity is dying in Canada – according to Bibby it is not - but that the Anglican Church may be headed to extinction, unless something changes. I suggest that such speculation is not new. The church has heard it before. Indeed, the Oxford Movement is credited with rescuing it from irrelevance in a previous century. However, it is a wake-up call that we should listen to with a good deal of concern. It is an opportunity to reflect on where we are, and how we got here; and on what may need to change.

Looking around my own parish church, there are several groups particularly noticeable by their absence: the so-called Generation X; their younger siblings, the Millennials; and their children. For the most part, the “kids” in the congregation are Baby Boomers; and the youngest in that group are comfortably ensconced in middle age. The eldest (my own group) are at or approaching early retirement. Like many young people, my own children do not regularly attend church, although they did when they were young. Church is now, at best, a peripheral part of their lives. Many of their friends never attended church at all. Church may be in family memory, but not their own.

For many young people, although they may believe in God, church rites and rituals are strange, and may seem alien. Indeed, in *A Celtic Model of Ministry*, Jerry Doherty said, “We are excluding people ... because more and more people in our society have never been to church, let alone understand Latin or Church tradition from the Middle Ages.”⁶ He went on to say we use words and music people do not understand or

⁶ Jerry C. Doherty, *A Celtic Model of Ministry: The Reawakening of Community Spirituality*, (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2003), 11.

enjoy. We think everyone understands when we use terms like *Sursum Corda*, *Gloria in Excelsis*, or *doxology* without telling people where they are in the liturgy, or what they mean. We just think people should know. We use the same bulletin with abbreviations that are meaningful to us; but do not help the unfamiliar find their way in the service. We even use music that is meaningful to us but excluding for those who have no experience of it.⁷ While some new people very much like what we do, they are generally inculturated in a similar way to ourselves, not people with no experience of Church. As Doherty says, “By assuming people know about our faith and who we are, we immediately exclude them.”⁸

The case of Dave and Jennifer, a hypothetical example from George Hunter’s *Church for the Unchurched*, illustrates the disconnect that unchurched people can feel when encountering organized religion. Dave has little Church experience, Jennifer was confirmed a United Methodist but had lapsed. Experiencing disconnectedness and ennui, Dave decided to try God to make sense of his life. Jennifer agreed to accompany him on this journey. They first tried a United Methodist service, which to them seemed bizarre. The music, liturgy, language, and ethos reeked of the 1950’s. Most of the people were older, and upper middle class. There were lengthy organ interludes, and a 30 minute sermon on justice issues. They found the experience to be boring. Next, they tried an independent Baptist church. It was a blue collar congregation. The hymns contained allusions to bible characters and themes not within their experience. The sermon – against homosexuality, pornography, high taxes and the United Methodist Church – did not engage them or meet their needs. It also violated the Code of tolerance important to their generation. Next they tried the Church of the Nazarene. Neither could fathom why such a big deal was made about women’s makeup. They tried the Episcopal Church; but could not relate to the Elizabethan language, organ music, and Latin

⁷ Doherty, 11.

⁸ Ibid, 12.

anthem. They tried the Evangelical Covenant Church, but the members were too overtly Scandinavian for them to feel comfortable.⁹ Finally, they tried the Lutheran Church, whose members were too overtly German.¹⁰

Jennifer and Dave did not experience any of the congregations they visited as people they could identify with. The messages they received were not relevant to their needs and questions; and, in fact, were culturally alien to them. As a result, they concluded God was not for people like them. As George Hunter remarked, “Jennifer and Dave have experienced the most widespread, entrenched, and formidable barrier that prevents most people from considering the Christian faith today: “the culture barrier.” Traditional evangelical churches and traditional liberal churches both erect and maintain their own versions of this barrier, however unwittingly, and they thereby block people, including many serious seekers, from faith.”¹¹

I maintain that what happened to Jennifer and Dave in this illustration can potentially happen to any unchurched persons who come through the doors of an Anglican Church. They encounter something that is totally outside of their experience; and receive little in the way of help from the faithful, who are somewhat apprehensive about these strangers in their midst. They not only experience culture shock; but also discover that they are not welcome to participate in the heart of the service, unless they are baptized of water. The question is how many of them ‘hang-in’ long enough to make it to the coffee hour, where they can be appropriately welcomed as guests in the community? Furthermore, do we ever see them again? Sometimes we do, it is true; however, I suspect that in all too many instances we do not. The combination of an alien culture and an exclusionary service may be just too daunting to overcome; particularly when the Pentacostal service a few streets over, or down the

⁹ George G. Hunter III, Church for the Unchurched, (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1996), 57.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 58.

¹¹ *Ibid*.

block, or even in a different part of the community is so much more accommodating.

Is reinstating Morning Prayer the answer to the problems that currently plague the Church? The answer is clearly no. However, reinstating it, or some other form of seeker friendly service, IN ADDITION TO the celebration of the Eucharist, as a principal service may help to break down barriers to the entry of newcomers. The purpose of this paper is to investigate that possibility.

I will begin with a discussion of how we got to where we find ourselves now; followed by a consideration of what others have had to say about the issue, and about issues tangential to it, such as appropriate worship for a post-modern, post-Christian age; and then to an examination of actual parish situations to test the conclusions reached through the readings, and to determine what new insights may be realized to inform the path forward.