

2. 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

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

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 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 worship service 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 agapé originally joined to the Eucharist.⁸

⁴ Ingham, 27.

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.

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, 1957 and 1964, 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

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 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 - which contained 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 retain 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).

⁹ Hayes, 10.

¹⁰ Ibid, 11.

¹¹ Ibid, 14.

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 indicated 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 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

¹² Hayes, 14-15.

¹³ Ingham, 35.

¹⁴ *ibid*, 76.

¹⁵ *ibid*, 165.

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 is about seeking justice for victims, and peace among the powerful. Furthermore, prophesy has come to mean more than denouncing sin in individuals. It is 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

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

¹⁶ Ingham, 165.

¹⁷ *ibid*, 57.

¹⁸ *Ibid*.

¹⁹ *ibid*, 58.

²⁰ *ibid*, 121.

than the Mathean 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 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

Concerns

The combination of the new rite, and the change of worship focus to predominantly or exclusively Eucharist, occasioned much debate. Not everyone was in favour. The following are representative of concerns that have been expressed.

²¹ Ingham, 123.

²² Ibid, 124.

²³ Ibid, 125.

²⁴ Ibid, 62.

²⁵ Ibid, 63.

Kenneth Leech, the British theologian, remarked that one of the commonest criticisms of the new rites is their sectarian thrust and closed character; evidenced by the fact that many occasional churchgoers feel lost, and disconnected. Thereby, for them, the feeling being “at home”, which he regards as necessary in worship, has been lost.²⁶ He added that a related problem is that in many places all worship is now Eucharistic; and we are told the Church is in danger of becoming a Eucharistic sect. While acknowledging that the Eucharist is at the very heart of Christian worship, he makes the point that it is not all there is; and that we need to develop or recover ways of worship which allow other sources of life to surface.²⁷

Kenneth Leech’s views are reflected in those of Edouard Fontenot, a parishioner at John's Episcopal Church, Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts, who said:

Frankly, I'm bored with Holy Eucharist, Rite II, not because there's anything wrong with it but because we never dine on anything else. I'm tired of "authentic" chili and I want to taste other recipes-not every day, but I wouldn't object to a new flavor once or twice a year on Sunday mornings and I would leap for joy if we could discover some more of the fullness of the other liturgies of the church at other times as well. Compline on Fridays. Morning Prayer on Mondays. Vespers on Wednesdays. Or whatever. The fact that we are, as our mission statement tells us, a eucharistically centered parish, does not mean that Eucharist is the only kind of worship, or that we are forbidden to worship otherwise.

The Very Reverend Paul Burbridge, a former Dean of Norwich, commented, “I am particularly unhappy about the widespread practice of tagging the Eucharist on to other rites that have an intrinsic importance of their own: baptism, confirmation, ordination, institution and induction. It seems to me that this placing of everything within a eucharistic context might be likened to a ‘chips with everything’ mentality.” He went on to

²⁶ Kenneth Leech, *The Sky is Red: Discerning the signs of the Times*, (London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd., 1997), 180.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 181.

say "By our rather exclusive eucharistic worship, we may not only be excluding many, but at the same time allowing ourselves to become increasingly sect-like, with a cosy warmth for the committed, who are `in', and much less provision for those who are not sure whether they are `in' or `out'."²⁸

That comfortable place for the committed may be part of the problem of declining numbers that the Church is currently facing. As Reginald Bibby said:

A disturbing number of congregations constitute religious clubs and family shrines ... In the pointed words of theologian Letty Russell, "Christian communities fear difference sufficiently that they usually spend a considerable amount of time tending the margins or boundaries of their communities, not in order to connect with those outside but rather to protect themselves from strangers."²⁹

²⁸ Paul Burbridge, Too-Common Worship?, in *Church Times*, No. 7116, 2 Jul 99, 14.

²⁹ Reginald W. Bibby, There's Got to be More!: Connecting Churches & Canadians, (Winfield: Wood Lake Books Inc., 1995), 34.