

# Newsletter

Lent 2013

## Trusting God’s Providence: The Importance of the Collects in the Book of Common Prayer

*The results of the essay competition sponsored by the PBSC Ottawa Branch last year have been announced. This is the first prize winner, written by Elliot Rossiter.*

### Introduction

Vision 2019, the Anglican Church of Canada’s Strategic Plan, began a few years ago with a two-part questionnaire. Canadian Anglicans were asked two simple questions: where is your church now, and where do you want the Anglican Church of Canada to be in 2019? One does not have to read through very many of the published responses to discover a strong sense of anxiety about the state of the church and its decline in numbers over the past years.<sup>1</sup> Attendance in the Anglican Church of Canada peaked in the 1960s – 1,358,000 members in 1961 – and has since been in steadily accelerating decline – there were 532,000 members in 2008. And with a decline in membership comes a decline in revenue. Indeed, many dioceses are now at risk of becoming insolvent and plans are being

<sup>1</sup>See Appendix D of the Vision 2019 Final Report.

proposed to merge dioceses in an effort to reduce overhead expenses.

Vision 2019 represents the church asking itself existential questions in the



*Elliot Rossiter*

midst of decreasing membership and revenue. In addition to a sense of anxiety, the responses published in the Vision 2019 documents also convey feelings of frustration and fatigue. Many respondents, lamenting the absence of younger people in the pews, believe that the

church is simply irrelevant to today’s culture. Some cite liturgical practices as the reason why this is the case, while for others it is divisive issues like same-sex blessings which are causing growth problems. But a common theme is that churchgoers need to get out of their buildings and reach out to members in the community. And so, it is unsurprising that the central thesis of the Vision 2019 Strategic Plan is that renewed growth in the Church will come from increased missional activity.<sup>2</sup> The report highlights the importance of focusing on the Five Marks of Mission: (1) to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom; (2) to teach, baptize, and nurture new believers; (3) to respond to human need by loving service; (4) to seek to transform unjust structures of society; and (5) to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth.

<sup>2</sup>Appendix C, Ibid.

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These mission priorities, used widely in the Anglican Communion, are commendable. But we must remember that this mission is not primarily our own: it belongs, first and foremost, to God. In this paper, I argue that it is very important for the Church to recover and maintain this sense of divine providence as it focuses on mission and strategic planning in the midst of its current decline. For if the Church loses this sense, then it risks losing its identity as the people of God. It will become an institution, just like any other, striving to preserve itself. The Church must not give in to 'practical atheism' – that is, acting apart from a sense of divine providence and thinking that growth in the Church comes from our own ability to make ourselves relevant to the broader culture. I further argue that this sense of providence is very well maintained in the tradition of Anglican common prayer, especially in the collects of Thomas Cranmer. The central thrust of my argument, then, is that we in the Anglican Church of Canada would do well to reincorporate the collects of the Book of Common Prayer, with all the wonderful ways they remind us of God's providence, into our liturgical practice. While I think that the Prayer Book as a whole should be our liturgical standard, I principally focus on the value of the collects in relation to recovering an appreciation of the doctrine of divine providence.

### **I: The Doctrine of Providence**

A Christian doctrine of providence is ... a representation of how the Father's plan for the fullness of time is set forth in Christ and made actual by the Holy Spirit

among the children of Adam.<sup>3</sup>

According to John Webster, the doctrine of providence is primarily about God's purposes in the world and our response, as Christians, to the vocation God has given us. And this is evident in the writings of St Thomas Aquinas, that great mediaeval theologian. While the doctrine of providence involves the goodness of created being in its very substance, St Thomas thinks that it is especially concerned with God's ordering of creation towards its end, this end being the divine goodness.<sup>4</sup> Simply put, God governs the world according to his plan, which is the communication of his goodness to the created order. Our great purpose, then, is to participate in God's goodness – and this we discover in the Bible. Indeed, Webster holds that the doctrine of providence is primarily an exercise in biblical reasoning.<sup>5</sup> This means that the doctrine of providence is not primarily a philosophical account of divine action in the world, but rather a theological exploration of God's covenant love for us, which we discover in the words of scripture.

Now, it is important to see that God's purposes pre-exist us. Appreciating the doctrine of providence, then, means realizing that it is not up to us create our own purposes, nor to govern our own affairs. Both the modern and post-modern intellectual traditions celebrate autonomy: liberalism enshrines individual political and economic liberties; and post-structuralism denies that there is

any discoverable purpose beyond ourselves which could constrain the radical freedom we have to make and re-make ourselves as we see fit. But the Christian's engagement with these traditions, and their attendant cultural realizations, must be moderated by a commitment to the doctrine of divine providence.<sup>6</sup> If the Church loses this commitment, it will inevitably be subsumed into some amalgam of these cultural movements. What makes the Church distinct from other social organizations is its trust in divine providence. Indeed, we seek the Father's purposes for the world, which are set forth in Christ, and realized by the Holy Spirit's work among us. Accordingly, we do not embrace autonomy in the same way that the secular world does. But this does not mean that we forfeit our dignity. In fact, the situation is quite the contrary.

God loves the creature in his work of governance. Creaturely self-government is destructive and enslaving, because it exchanges the divine necessity for some other self-imposed necessity, less wise and loving than that appointed by God, and leading not to our happiness but to decay. In his providence, God overrules this; he so orders creaturely history that – without our knowledge or consent – we are set free for our inheritance. This inheritance is not received

<sup>3</sup>"On the Theology of Providence", p.162.

<sup>4</sup>Summa theologiae, Prima Pars, q.22, a.1.

<sup>5</sup>"On the Theology of Providence", p.161.

<sup>6</sup>I think that it is possible to take a redemptive view of these movements. See, for example, the work of James K.A. Smith, especially his book *Who's Afraid of Post-Modernism? Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church*, Baker Academic, 2006.

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apart from the saving missions of the Son and the Spirit. But these works, by which God's kingdom is established, are anticipated by his providential government, which also accompanies and furthers the benefits which flow from them until in the fullness of time all things are united in God.<sup>7</sup>

The point here, which Webster is right to stress, is that we are bad at governing ourselves. While the Age of the Enlightenment has brought with it progress in areas like suffrage and modern medical care, it would be unwise to put our faith in some humanistic vision of overall progress. Indeed, the Age of the Enlightenment has also brought with it Hiroshima and the Holocaust. Winston Churchill famously called the twentieth-century 'the century of the common man' because in it the common man has suffered most. Self-governance does not ultimately lead to progress but rather to decay. But by God's grace, in the saving mission of the Son and Spirit, we are set free to receive the inheritance that God the Father has providentially prepared in his plan for creation. The doctrine of providence disabuses us of the notion that we can bring about our own good; but it also wonderfully shows us that there exists a God who loves us, cares for us, and who will bring about his good purposes in the world. Recovering a robust sense of God's provision, in our common life as God's people, involves being both taught about divine providence, and living in a way that reflects trust in that providence. And this is excellently

<sup>7</sup>Webster, "On the Theology of Providence", p.172.

facilitated in the Anglican tradition of common prayer.

## II: The Prayer Book and Providence

O God, whose never-failing providence ordereth all things both in heaven and earth; We humbly beseech thee to put away from us all hurtful things, and to give us those things which be profitable for us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

- *The Collect for the Eighth Sunday after Trinity*

Lord God, which seest that we put not our trust in any thing that we do; Mercifully grant that by thy power we may be defended against all adversity; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

- *The Collect for the Sunday called Sexagesima*

If there were a prayer for those engaged in strategic planning in the section of the BCP entitled 'Prayers and Thanksgivings Upon Several Occasions', it seems likely that these collects would make up part of it. For they remind us that we ought not to put our trust in our own abilities, and that it is God's power which defends us against adversity. And the Anglican Church of Canada is certainly facing adversity: this is evident in the sense of despair and frustration found in many of the responses in the Vision 2019 report. But the doctrine of providence reminds us that our circumstances are ultimately in God's control. When we engage in strategic planning, focused on the renewal of a Church in decline, we must remember that God the Father's 'strategic plan' for the redemption of the world has already been carried out in Christ, and is being effected by the work

of the Spirit. This 'plan' is not something that we determine, according to our best lights, but rather is a vocation into which we enter as God's people, a people called to follow him and participate in bringing about his kingdom here on Earth. Our vocation is to be like Christ and to follow God with humility and trust. And this is something we are regularly reminded of in the collects of the Book of Common Prayer:

Almighty God, who hast given thine only Son to be unto us both a sacrifice for sin, and also an example of godly life: Give us grace that we may always most thankfully receive that his inestimable benefit, and also daily endeavour ourselves to follow the blessed steps of his most holy life; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

- *The Collect for the Second Sunday after Easter*

In their reflections on this collect, C. Frederick Barbee and Paul F.M. Zahl understand this prayer as a deterrent to the vice of 'practical Pelagianism'.<sup>8</sup> According to them, this vice involves 'any way of living by which responsibility for the willing and doing of the right things is yours'.<sup>9</sup> Of course, Pelagianism, the heresy named after the fifth-century British monk Pelagius, is the idea that human beings have it in them to earn their own salvation according to their works. Practical Pelagianism, on the other hand, involves some kind of perfunctory assent to the necessity of God's grace but emphasizes that the real business of decision making and planning in

<sup>8</sup>The Collects of Thomas Cranmer, p.55.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

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the Church, and in our lives as Christians, belongs to us and is ultimately dependent on our best wisdom. The problem with practical Pelagianism is that it really just amounts to practical atheism – living in a way that does not acknowledge the reality and necessity of divine providence in our lives as God’s people. And to live this way is to reject our call to imitate Christ in following God with humility and trust in his providence. Our primary call, as Christians, is not to be relevant to the culture surrounding us, by following its trends and seeking to imitate it, but rather to follow Christ in the midst of that culture, and surrender ourselves entirely to God’s providential plan for the world. The work of the Church is not primarily the savvy use of social media or the perpetual production of fresh expressions, but rather the enduring work of the Holy Spirit, who builds the kingdom of God and brings it to its completion.

This fact is both humbling and liberating. It is humbling because it is neither our power nor our wisdom which is valuable in God’s sight, but rather our trust in his wisdom and power. Yet it is also liberating, because it is God’s wisdom and power which give us life and sustain us as his people. The beauty of the collects in the BCP is not primarily their poetic expression, but rather their constant reminder of God’s providence. It is a reminder that both constrains us and enlivens us. We are apt to trust in our own providence, and so we need to be regularly reminded in our liturgical life that the doing and willing of the right thing is not ultimately up to us. But free from an undue sense of our own importance, we can begin to appreciate the life-giving and nourishing work of God’s Spirit in our midst. And our choice

of liturgy is very important in keeping a sense of God’s providence.

The Book of Common Prayer is not conceived (as are its current alternatives) as a kind of resource-book for worship, from which one may choose elements according to one’s tastes or inclinations, or have them chosen for one by the clergy or by some “worship and spirituality” committee, more or less *ad hoc*. The Prayer Book is, rather, a spiritual system, biblical, traditional, and logical, which includes, but at the same time transcends and corrects, the subjective inclinations of the worshipper or the spirituality committee.<sup>10</sup>

The problem with some contemporary forms of liturgy, according to the late Rev’d Dr Robert Crouse, is that they are based on the subjective preferences of the worshipping community. And these ‘pick-and-choose’ liturgies fail to transcend and correct our subjective inclinations. But why should this be a bad thing? Indeed, it makes good business sense to craft a product that will be appealing to the preferences of consumers. To do otherwise is to risk going out of business. Shouldn’t the same logic apply to the Church? The Church is in decline and so we must repackage and rebrand our liturgy in order to meet the needs of the culture around us. And this is what Bishop Michael Ingham suggests:

Against the background of growing secularism and changing cosmology, those at the leading edge of liturgical design (i.e. our parish clergy and local worship committees) have

felt a powerful pressure to develop radically new rites and liturgies to address the spiritual needs of today’s generations. The BAS, in other words, has become to this era what the BCP had been to the one before: a standard and norm from which to move on.<sup>11</sup>

The BAS, argues Ingham, like the BCP, had both its time and place, but now the spiritual needs of contemporary society have rendered the BAS irrelevant: indeed, those on the ‘leading edge’ have moved beyond it. The problem, as Ingham sees it, is that people today want spirituality, but they don’t want religion (i.e. the institutional Church). And so, the Church must make itself less religious and more spiritual. This involves the development of radically new liturgies, customized to suit the needs of today’s generations. But our preferences are often in need of correction, for it is a perennial temptation to put our faith in our own abilities and not in God’s provision for us as his people. And so our liturgy cannot simply reflect our preferences. Rather, it must transcend and transform those preferences into a trust and longing for God’s providence.

The Church is not in the business of selling itself to the broader culture. Its calling is much greater. The mission of the Church is to transform the world, in line with the coming reign of the kingdom of God – a victory won in Christ’s redemption, in the providence of

<sup>10</sup> Crouse, “Anglican Spirituality and the Book of Common Prayer”.

<sup>11</sup> Ingham, “An Imperative for Change Once More”. This essay was composed in 2010 for the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the BAS.

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the Father, effected by the Spirit. The liturgy of the Church must transcend the culture in which we live. The collects of the Prayer Book continually remind us that we are not our own. We belong to God, and he will achieve his good purposes in the world. And a liturgy like this is not irrelevant. It is decidedly fresh. But what is fresh about it is not its association with the leading trends in our society, but its focus on drawing us as God's people into a deep trust in his providence, mindful of his ever-present love for us. That is the refreshment we need in the midst of our current adversity and anxieties. That is the refreshment we have always needed and will continue to need. May we in the Anglican Church pray the wonderful collects of our tradition, and be ever reminded of God's providential care for us.

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**About the author:** *Born and raised in Toronto, Elliot Rossiter completed a one-year diploma at Augustine College, Ottawa, and a B.A. in Philosophy at the University of Ottawa. Elliot moved to London, Ontario, in 2009 to*

*pursue graduate studies in Philosophy at the University of Western Ontario. It was there that he met his wife, Sarah; they were married according to the rite of the Book of Common Prayer in their home parish of St. George's Anglican Church, London, in 2011. Now in his 3<sup>rd</sup> year of doctoral studies, Elliot is completing a dissertation, entitled "Covenant and Natural Law: John Locke on God's Legislative Power". He is currently spending a semester abroad in England as a visiting student in the Department of Philosophy at King's College, London.*

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## "Confessions of a Prayer Book Junkie"

*By the Rt. Revd. Dr. Stephen Andrews, Bishop of the Diocese of Algoma. This was the bishop's Advent letter to the diocese, printed in the November issue of the diocesan newspaper.*

Dear Friends,

It should not come as a surprise to most readers that the Bishop of Algoma is a hopeless admirer of the Book of Common Prayer. Archbishop Caleb kindly agreed to

use the BCP service in my consecration, remarking that the last time this service for making bishops was used was his own consecration, some thirty years earlier. (Mine is not the most recent, however – Bishop Adam Halkett, bishop to the Cree in northern Saskatchewan, was consecrated according to this rite in October.) My request was greeted with puzzlement and suspicion in some quarters. A wary bishop called me up in the weeks before the service and asked if I was about to launch a new offensive in the liturgy wars. I

explained, among other things, that the BCP service lays a strong emphasis on the teaching role of the bishop, and that this suited a college professor like myself.

There are, of course, a number of other features of the BCP services that distinguish it from more contemporary worship books. The roots of these differences are described on page nine of the Book of Alternative Services, and are chiefly related to the matters of polity and piety. The Church of the

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sixteenth century played a central role in the life of nation and village and the liturgy assumed a patriarchal class structure that is foreign to us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. What is more, the ethos of the BCP seems not entirely to have left the Dark Ages behind, with the vestiges of what appears to be superstition and an obsessiveness with sin and death clinging like cobwebs. This is why some find the BCP to be strange and alienating. “How can it be anything more than a museum piece in our post-Christendom and scientifically humanist world?” it is sometimes asked.

Well, the answer, for many at least, is that it is appealing because it is *not* a product of the modern world. This is a major reason why the Prayer Book is enjoying something of a small resurgence among young people. These antique words, set out in Cranmer’s matchlessly mellifluous cadences, have the capacity to raise the worshipper from the mundane and pedestrian to the sublime. In them we inhabit the prayers of faithful believers from the earliest period of the Church’s existence, prayers embodying a primary humility that recognises our limitations and failures as God’s creatures, and expresses a deep aspiration that the God of all creation will bring healing to his world. Such words are a luminous relief to a culture accustomed to expressing itself in tweets and Facebook comments.

This, in fact, is what drew me to Anglicanism some thirty-three years ago. I was a young theological student wrestling with my own sense of Christian identity and vocation in the context of a foreign culture where my core convictions were being tried daily in the classroom. One Sunday I wandered into a local Anglican Church. The building was not especially attractive, and the greeters were not especially friendly. Unobtrusively, I slipped into an empty pew. When everybody fell to

their knees I rather self-consciously did the same and fumbled to locate the words in the worn red service book sitting in the pew rack. I found my place just in time to repeat the words, “Almighty God, unto whom all hearts be open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love thee, and worthily magnify thy holy Name.” In that moment I knew that I would never approach worship in the same way.

What changed for me? To begin with, my perspective on worship was fundamentally altered. I was accustomed to denominational traditions where worshippers could fairly be called “the audience”. My home church featured comfy raked seating set out in gently curving rows, all designed to help the congregation focus on the action being played out on the stage before them. But in the Collect for Purity I was dumbfounded to realize that the true stage was my own heart. I had come to church expecting to be entertained by God; I was suddenly aware that God had also come to church, but he was not there to entertain. He was there to be worshipped – by me.

The second discovery was that the work of the liturgy was to assist me in my own pilgrimage to wholeness in Christ by drawing me into the movement of God’s sanctifying grace. There is a logic in the way that the Prayer Book liturgies are structured. In a recent *New Yorker* article on the Book of Common Prayer, entitled “God Talk: The Book of Common Prayer at three hundred and fifty”, James Wood picks up on this:

There is a Protestant severity to the avowal that “there is no health in us”. But penitence can be reached only by walking down a familiar path, lined with straightforward

words: we are “lost sheep” because we have “left undone those things which we ought to have done, And we have done those things which we ought not to have done”.

What Mr Wood observes here is that there is a cycle of devotion in the Prayer Book that begins with the frank acknowledgement of our bankruptcy before God. But, as the liturgy continues, this issues into an offer of God’s grace (conveyed in the assurance of our forgiveness) that is then received by faith (expressed in the reception of the sacrament and the offering of ourselves to God). This sequence of sin-grace-faith (it is, in fact, repeated three times over in the Holy Communion) constitutes the gospel genome, and those who pray the liturgy will undergo a kind of gene therapy where they will find themselves transformed into vectors of the gospel’s life-changing work.

Part of what prompts me to write on this matter is that 2012 is the 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1662 Book of Common Prayer. I hope you will join me in giving thanks for this extraordinary book and will consider joining with Anglicans across Canada in celebrating the BCP this upcoming Advent Sunday. December 2 is the date fifty years ago when the new Canadian Prayer Book was officially adopted for use.

To the honour, praise and glory of God’s name,




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***The Annual General Meeting of the PBSC will be held on May 4, at the Church of St. John the Divine in North Bay, ON. Nominations for officers and councillors of the Society are invited. Please see the notice on our website for details.***



*The letter below was sent to Dr. Diana Versegby, a member of the editorial board of this newsletter, late last year in response to a message that she sent to all diocesan bishops inquiring about anniversary year activities in their dioceses. It is reprinted here with the permission of Bishop Alexander.*



November 20, 2012

Ms. Diana Versegby  
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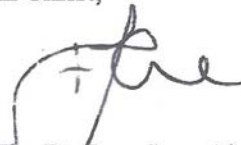
Dear Diana,

Thank you very much for your e-mail. The Prayer Book Society in Edmonton is active in raising awareness of the Book of Common Prayer throughout our Diocese. For the past year they have been graciously providing copies of the BCP to be distributed to every person confirmed in the Diocese. This has been an incredible blessing, and has introduced a new generation to the Book of Common Prayer, and most particularly, the Rule of Life.

For many years All Saints' Cathedral has been a part of the great tradition of Choral Evensong. Recently we have been incorporating special Diocesan celebrations into Choral Evensong, including the licensing of Lay Readers and Lay Hospital Visitors, and the Installation of a Canon of the Diocese. The inclusion of these special Diocesan-wide events introduces or reacquaints a variety of people with the rich heritage of the Book of Common Prayer Evensong.

We give thanks for the Book of Common Prayer, and join with people around the country and the world in celebrating this anniversary.

In Christ,



The Rt. Rev. Jane Alexander  
Bishop of Edmonton

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