Abstract:
For four centuries from 1549 the ‘Anglican’ form of the Christian tradition centred on ‘prayer books’. Socially, it reflected the political situation of the British Isles. Technologically, it was made possible by the coming of printing. Theologically, it arose from the impact of Reformation ideals on England. The greatness of the ‘prayer book’ tradition is its sustaining of the heritage of Christian ‘common prayer’ in English cultures. Its weakness was the accompanying ‘principle of uniformity’, which brought oppression, rigidity and internal doctrinal conflict. This paper explores the interaction of this contrast in looking towards the ‘future of the Prayer Book tradition’.

In the midst of a near bewildering variety in ‘Anglican’ liturgical life today, it is argued that we do well by going ‘back to the future’, continuing three distinctive aspects of ‘the Prayer Book tradition’:

- the lectionary and scriptures as the liturgical foundation of each Book of Common Prayer;
- rites being publically accessible, expressing an implicit covenant between clergy and people;
- a commitment to graced, reverent truth in public prayer, sensitive to spiritual well-being, both communal and personal.

This paper argues that these features, set in a common structure that reflects the mission of God (gather / listen / pray / do / go), filled out with classical shapes for intercession and Lord’s Supper, is the ecumenical ‘future of the prayer book tradition’, replacing ‘uniformity’ with disciplined flexibility.

Perspective:
I am a cradle Australian Anglican of evangelical and ecumenical conviction. Growing up with and steeped in BCP, I was also closely involved in the liturgical revisions of recent decades, especially A Prayer Book for Australia. A Cranmerian enthusiast, I have long been engaged in ecumenical dialogue, most notably as a member of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC II & III) from 1991. My life settings have been in inner suburbs and small towns, where ‘odd’ folk abound and socialist agendas and ecumenical friendships make sense.

My vocation has been to be a teaching and writing theologian. Engagement with co-theologian Peta has shaped my outlook on many things, as has exposure to things Chinese and gay. I have a soft spot for the songs of Slim Dusty, play 5-string banjo usefully, and enjoy Meccano, gardens, woodwork, cruises and conversation.
The ‘Prayer Book tradition’: back to the liturgical future

Charles Sherlock

Without liturgy the Christian gospel is not sustained – the health of both are inseparable. What does the ‘future of the Prayer Book tradition’ look against this claim, a presupposition of this paper?

1 The ‘Prayer Book tradition’: its English origins

A distinctively ‘Anglican’ feature of the Christian tradition is that for four centuries from 1549 it took the form of successive ‘prayer books’. Until the 1970s, Australian Anglican ordinands prepared liturgically by taking the subject ‘Prayer Book’ and experiencing BCP daily, with its ‘thees’ and ‘doths’, royal imagery and minimal variation.¹ This was my own experience as a theological student, and in my initial years teaching theology and liturgy. It is hard for Anglicans under 45 to realise how different is the ‘worship world’ of today.

Reflecting on the predominance of BCP is a foundational task in considering the future of this tradition. At least three interweaving factors were involved:

a) England is the major part of an island nation, distinct from the Continent: that its language would spread over the globe was completely unforeseen in the sixteenth century. French might then have been the language of the court, and Latin of scholarship and church life, but English was coming to the fore. With the Wars of the Roses past, the Tudors had a major stake in seeing the nation consolidated: England was becoming a more homogenous society. Pressures toward reform gave opportunity for Henry VIII, fixated about the royal succession, to claim independence from Rome. When occasion arose under Edward VI for a transition to English in church, it made social, cultural and political sense to do so in a Book of Common Prayer, a development which Elizabeth used to advantage.² It is not always realised that the book was produced for a particular, small and isolated national church – not for a global communion.

b) But such a prayer book could not have been made without technological developments, notably (increasingly cheap) printing, along with better ink and paper. Only a generation or so before 1549, all texts were written by hand. It is often said that the spread of Reformation ideas was enabled by printing: so also was the making of an English Prayer Book. Placing a Bible and BCP in every parish church would have been impracticable in 1509 when Henry VIII took the throne.

c) Yet without the impact of Reformation ideas initially, and ongoing doctrinal concerns reflected in the successive editions of BCP, there would not have been the energy to undertake the mammoth task of gathering the wealth of existing rites and ceremonies into a single book. It was Cranmer’s

¹ ‘Prayer Book’ covered the origins, history and detailed commentary on BCP, with a brief section on 1927-28 and the Liturgical Movement. A year-long subject, it was examined by one three-hour unseen examination.

genius to bring contemporary theological scholarship to bear on rendering age-old forms of prayer into English, and in ways that were memorable for a minimally literate population.3

By the end of the sixteenth century, the Book of Common Prayer, with the Geneva Bible and Shakespeare’s plays, epitomised ‘Englishness’. The established nature of the Church of England meant that, most Roman Catholics excepted, at least under Elizabeth and James all citizens were included in the national church. Despite the hiatus of the Commonwealth period, for centuries following, the ‘prayer book’ tradition sustained the heritage of ‘common prayer’ in England, and later its colonies, Empire and Commonwealth. This is its greatness. Its weakness, however, was the accompanying ‘principle of uniformity’ – of which more later.

2 The ‘Prayer Book tradition’: enduring foundations

The enduring worth of the ‘Prayer Book tradition’ can be crystallised in three key features. The contention of this paper is that they continue to serve the mission of God. They represent much more than a narrowly ‘Anglican’ perspective: the demise of ‘uniformity’ means that a good claim can be made for their ecumenical significance. I believe that we neglect them to our spiritual peril.

a) Grounded in the scriptures: lectionary and more

Modern Anglican prayer books typically begin with service texts, e.g. Morning and Evening Prayer in AAPB and APBA. But BCP begins with “Lessons Proper for Sundays and Holy Days”, followed by ‘The Calendar, with the Table of Lessons’ for every day of the year. The First Testament (less some genealogies and cultic regulations) is read once, the New Testament (except Revelation 9, 13 and 17) twice, and the Psalms recited a dozen times! All the Reformers thought of the scriptures as having formal authority (rather than Church Councils or the Pope). In the ‘prayer book tradition’, however, it is the pastoral use of the scriptures, their material authority, which matters. That their public reading forms the substance of ‘common prayer’ can readily be seen by using BCP Morning or Evening Prayer for a few days. Some 50% of the time involves hearing the scriptures; 15% reciting psalms, 15% scriptural songs. A mere 20% is left for liturgical texts, themselves woven from a tissue of scriptural allusions.

This practical centrality of the scriptures, and the transition to English, is the focus of ‘Concerning the Service of the Church’, the introduction to the first BCP (1549), included in successive editions. Its main section concludes by claiming that in the new book

nothing is ordained to be read, but the very pure Word of God, the holy Scriptures, or that which is agreeable to the same; and that in such a language and order as is most easy and plain for the understanding both of the readers and hearers.

The Homilies likewise begin,

Unto a Christian man, there can be nothing either more necessary or profitable, than the knowledge of Holy Scripture; forasmuch as in it is contained God’s true word, setting forth his glory, and also man’s duty ... And as drink is pleasant to them that be dry, and meat to them that be hungry; so is the reading, hearing, searching, and studying of Holy Scripture, to them that be

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desirous to know God, or themselves, and to do his will.4

Both texts, drafted by Archbishop Cranmer, reflect an ethos of being immersed in the scriptures, so as to engage God’s people with the whole drama of God’s dealings and so Christian worship in liturgy and life. Further, this sense of ‘immersion’ extended beyond the lectionary to the liturgical text of BCP, notably the Exhortations, short litanies (largely drawn from the Psalter) and collects.

A first thesis of this paper is thus this: we are called to go ‘back to the future’ by engaging with the whole range of the scriptures, following Cranmer’s lead in employing the tools of contemporary theological scholarship to see them permeate worship, not only in lectionaries but the in texts of written prayer.

I believe the Three-Year Lectionary (derived from the Roman Catholic Ordo, and used in AAPB), and even more, the Revised Common Lectionary (derived from ecumenical reflection on the Ordo, and used in APBA) go a fair way to meeting this call - but it is not always observed in congregational life, not least in those whose clergy and leaders identify as ‘Bible-based’. Further, the modern tendency is to shape written prayers around themes or metaphors, or employ ex tempore prayer whose nature is experiential or conversational: in either case, biblical imagery, citations or allusions are much less frequent than BCP.

b) Liturgy made public, accessible and life-related

Gathering all that is needed for public worship into one volume arose in a particular political context. Though it would lead to an oppressive ‘uniformity’, it expressed a further foundational principle of the ‘prayer book tradition’: making the key resources of the Christian tradition accessible to all. Placing a copy of the Bible and BCP in each church building, and using them daily, encouraged a climate of openness among all the baptised, and excluded spiritual secrecy. This was cognate with the abolition of compulsory auricular confession, while the transition to English saw the end of the priest’s ‘silent’ prayers in the eucharistic canon.

A further consequence of having everything in one public book was that it constituted an implicit ‘covenant’ between clergy and people, which set ‘boundaries’ to both clerical power and local idiosyncrasies. This continues today, as the declaration Australian Anglican clergy make on being licensed indicates:

I, NN, in public prayer and administration of the sacraments I will use the form prescribed in the Book of Common Prayer or a form authorised by lawful authority and none other.5

I am well aware that some clergy take this lightly, but it liberates more than restricts: alongside BCP, which retains its standing as a doctrine norm, AAPB and/or APBA are ‘a form authorised’. This declaration

4 Homily I, Exhortation to the Reading and Knowledge of Holy Scripture Available at http://churchsociety.org/issues_new/ doctrine/homilies/iss_doctrine_homilies_01.asp.


6 As the Constitution Section 4, part of the ‘permanent’ provisions, states, Provided, and it is hereby further declared, that the above-named Book of Common Prayer, together with the Thirty-nine Articles, be regarded as the authorised standard of worship and doctrine in this Church, and no alteration in or permitted variations from the services or Articles therein contained shall contravene any principle of doctrine or worship laid down in such standard.
relieves the pressures of ‘making it up’ each Sunday, and offers the heritage of a scripturally-grounded, doctrinally secure and pastorally sensitive resource for ‘common prayer’. The point is to foster trust among all the faithful that what is experienced in church is spiritually sound and ‘safe’ (in compliance terms). When an incumbency is vacant, not a few parishioners will pray hard that the new rector will listen rather than inflict on them his/her liturgical fads! They rightly expect clergy to honour the ‘prayer book tradition’ in its local form (a principle protected under the Constitution of the Anglican Church of Australia).\(^7\)

Also, the lectionary in *BCP* is all of a piece with the Calendar, which mixes Christian feasts with (northern hemisphere) seasonal days, and the sovereign’s accession: a similar blend of Christian and civil commemorations continues in *AAPB*, and more richly in *APBA*.\(^8\) This interweaving of eternal matters within the context of a particular age expresses a catholic outlook on the wide range of creaturely existence. As in Israel of old, the ‘prayer book tradition’ holds together the drama of salvation with the realities of human life and the cycles of nature.

**A second thesis** of this paper is thus: we are called to go ‘back to the future’ by keeping what matters accessible to all and sustaining a covenant relationship between clergy and people, so fostering a context-sensitive approach which weaves together matters temporal and eternal.

c) **Sustaining graced truth**

The men who drew up *BCP* refused to start from scratch, as other Reformers wanted. They were shaped by Reformation ideals and Renaissance scholarship, but respected the heritage of the past. Sarum was both received and reformed – rubrics and Collects at the level of detail, the ‘hours’ services re-gathered into Morning and Evening Prayer etc. The change to English may have been dramatic, but (with a few exceptions of doctrinal sensitivity) the new rites sought to retain the ‘feel’ of the past familiar to ordinary folk. The Calendar was purged of excesses, but continued to hold the rhythms of Christian memory and time. It is noteworthy that five feasts associated with the Blessed Virgin Mary continue: not only those with scriptural grounding (Presentation, Annunciation, Visitation), but also her conception and birth (but not August 15).

The wealth of the patristic and medieval heritage (East and West) was thus both taken up and sifted: the number of new compositions in *BCP* is minimal – the ‘prayer of humble access’ and exhortations in holy communion (1549); the exhortation in Morning & Evening Prayer (1552); and the General Thanksgiving (1662) are examples. The aim was to foster spiritual health, both personal and communal, not doctrine alone: the scholastic separation of theology and spirituality was redeemed so that divine truth might grace heart and mind alike. The language of *BCP* ‘rang bells’ in English hearts, shaping public spiritual life well into the twentieth century: consider the work of Sayers, Chesterton, Tolkien, Christie and the like. Even

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\(^7\) Section 4 continues by requiring a parish meeting before changes are made to the regular liturgy. This was widely observed in the ‘trial use’ rites period leading up to *AAPB* and *APBA*, but in the time since would not seem to be as well known or applied. Yet appealing to the ‘rules’ is rarely the best way of change!

\(^8\) Charles Sherlock, *Australian Anglicans Remember* (Mulgrave: Broughton, 2015) provides information, readings, sentences and prayers for each Australasian event or person in the *APBA* Calendar.
so, the shift in our day away from ‘thee’, ‘hath’ and frequent royal imagery was unavoidable, especially after television began to change people’s awareness of relevant public communication. Within the churches, the proliferation of English translations of the Bible and increasing diversity in liturgical life has seen a loss of ‘heart familiarity’ with the text. When words are varied and new, few ‘stick’.

It is essential at this point to note that while ‘language’ is a crucial factor in liturgy, it cannot be isolated from ‘trans-textual’ aspects: what is seen, how furniture is placed, body-language, dress, music and the like all affect what is communicated about divine truth. *BCP* addresses some of these matters in rubrics, but minimally, a factor that lead to sharp debates in earlier times. It should also be noted that, beyond the Psalter (sung by chants or metrically) and Gloria, *BCP* makes little provision for singing. The inclusion of hymns as we know them only came about generally in the nineteenth century. The assessment of the suitability of their lyrics and melodies is a matter for local clergy and congregations rather than ecclesial authorities, especially since electronic communication has spread: the ‘worship wars’ of recent decades have revolved around music rather than liturgical text.

But debate about liturgical text dominated intra-Anglican debate for the century before modern prayer book revision, especially around the relation of doctrine and text in eucharistic theology. The Liturgical Commissions appointed to prepare *AAPB* and *APBA* both proceeded under the principle that, if full agreement on a text could not be found, then the wording of *BCP* was to be used. The intention was not to diminish poetic or contemporary ways of expressing Christian theology, but to ensure that all Australian Anglicans could use the book in good conscience. In *AAPB*, *BCP* was reverted to only once, in the prayer over the water in Holy Baptism. The draft of *APBA* presented to General Synod was fully agreed by the Commission, but the Third Thanksgiving Prayer in Holy Communion (Second Order) was replaced on the floor of Synod. The change led to the Synod of the Diocese of Sydney refuse to pass a Canon to authorise *APBA*, though it moved a resolution to allow parishes to apply to the Archbishop for permission to use it.

This unhappy development came about at the behest of the Bishop of Ballarat, David Silk, newly arrived from the Church of England, where he was known as a liturgist in the ‘Anglo-Catholic’ tradition. The resulting shift in policy around liturgical authorisation also led to some loss of trust between dioceses, and loss of interest in the work of the Liturgical Commission. Bishop Silk had approached the General Synod discussion of *APBA* assuming that it worked along the lines of the Church of England. That Church, in its process of liturgical revision, chose not to follow the Australian principle, but to permit the use of wording that is doctrinally ambiguous – a step backward. The reality of living together ‘in communion’ is not sustained by ‘rules’ of themselves, however. The trust between clergy and people expressed in the implicit ‘covenant’ behind *BCP* deepens only as differences in doctrine are faced openly – and new ones keep emerging as contexts change, a notable example being issues around gendered imagery.

A third thesis of this paper is thus: we are called to go ‘back to the future’ by attending to how graced truth – in its doctrinal, affective and aesthetic dimensions – sustains reverent reality in public prayer.

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10 See *Performing the Gospel*, Chapter Six.
NB: It is often said that Anglican theological reflection revolves around scripture, tradition and reason. The difficulty with this (nineteenth century innovation) is that it is like comparing a recipe, cooking and eating: the scriptures are a thing, tradition is a process, and reason is an instrument of logic. A better approach is found in ARCIC II, *The Gift of Authority*, #14-23.

3 Beyond the ‘principle of uniformity’

a) An unhappy inheritance

‘Concerning the Service of the Church’ (*BCP* 1549) concludes (with hope) that “now from henceforth all the whole Realm shall have but one Use”. Elizabeth came to the throne in a fraught situation, with the imminent danger of civil unrest. In her first year, the ‘Act for the Uniformity of Common Prayer’ was issued, imposing imprisonment for deliberate flouting of its provisions – and it remains printed at the front of *BCP*.\(^{11}\) While understandable in the context of 1559, it brought about the persecution of faithful English Christians, not least by my royal namesakes.

The ‘principle of uniformity’ is all of a piece with the nature of the Church of England as the established church of that nation. As noted earlier, under Elizabeth and James, it could be interpreted as encouraging an ‘inclusive’ ethos: a national church cannot not avoid the particularities of diverse places, and must put up with citizen’s foibles (especially those squires, colleges and associations who hold the ‘living’ of each parish). Suspicion of ‘conventicles’ began under Elizabeth, but did not lead to suppression, provided the Act was not overtly challenged. The main group affected was Roman Catholics, for whom strict obedience to papal directives meant treason: the Gunpowder Plot at the beginning of James’ reign would see popular revulsion arise at anything ‘Roman’.

Under Charles I and Archbishop of Canterbury William Laud, however, the ‘Star Chamber’ became the means by which the Church of England persecuted other Christians – now labelled ‘dissenters’ or ‘non-conformists’. If under the Westminster Commonwealth the boot was on the other foot for ‘Anglicans’, Cromwell at least did not press the law and allowed some toleration. Charles II promised religious liberty before the Restoration in 1661, but hundreds of ministers ended up being ejected, and others imprisoned (notably John Bunyan).\(^{12}\) The Preface of *BCP* (1662) – a most unfortunate addition – reads as if its author is looking down the nose at anyone who dares to question it in any way, and could well be described as ‘snobbish’.

England, as part of the British Isles, was necessarily a sea-faring nation. The seventeenth century saw colonies emerge overseas, some arising from desire for liberty from the established church (notably in what is now the USA), others taking opportunities for trade (notably slaves, especially in the West Indies). In England, it would not be until 1831 that Christians who did not belong to established Church could live without the burdens imposed by ‘uniformity’. As the British Empire spread, the

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11 The ‘Reformation Settlement’ of Elizabeth has personal relevance, since Ridley faculty are required by the College’s Articles of Association to affirm its ‘constructive and evangelical principles’.

12 Geoffrey Robertson, *The Tyrannicide Brief* (London: Vintage, 2006) and Charles Spencer, *Killers of the King* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014). These two books, by lawyers rather than church historians, trace the careers of the legal figures (themselves practicing Christians) who took part in drawing up the Bill for the execution of Charles I. Contrary to Charles II’s promise, after the Restoration they were hunted down; several were hung, drawn and quartered.
churches which followed may not have been ‘established’ officially, but this ethos came with them, including to the Australian colonies. Many Anglicans continued to look down on other Christians, and restrict their practice, not only in England but across the developing Empire. The first Bishop of Australia, William Broughton, for example, used his influence to limit the ministry of Roman Catholics and Protestants, and later bishops would follow his example.

b) ‘Inclusiveness’: a new Anglican marker?

As the Anglican Communion of Provinces emerged, ‘the prayer book tradition’ had become a ‘prayer books’ one by the 1960s. The divisive debates over ‘churchmanship’ in the preceding century arose in large part due to the ‘uniformity’ assumption that exactly the same rites must be used by everyone. Thus responses to the Royal Commission of 1906-20 saw a variety of whole prayer books proposed – grey, orange, black etc. The 1927-28 ‘crisis’ in large part issued from the inability of any party to think beyond ‘uniformity’.13 It led, however, to an increasing acceptance of a diversity of rites: the English bishops agreed not to prosecute clergy who varied from BCP within the constraints of the 1928 ‘Deposited Book’, but these limits were widely ignored.

Intra-Anglican divisions began to ease as modern English was introduced in the 1970s, but new forms of difference emerged from increased attention to inculturation in the Provinces of the Anglican Communion.14 The welcome flexibility of the new services and books saw diversity at the level of local congregations increase, furthered since 2000 by data projection. But these are all matters of internal church life. Of greater concern has been the reality that in the West, churches and society have steadily pulled apart, especially since the 1960s. As a consequence, rural settings aside, many congregations – whether parishioners are locals or from afar – are ‘gathered’: they naturally want to have liturgy reflect their preferences, whether doctrinal, aesthetic or in lifestyle.

The ‘principle of uniformity’, whose ethos was still largely in place in the sixties, has been overturned. Many Anglicans now view their part of the Christian tradition as ‘inclusive’ at heart – a sharp reversal of the historic position! An ethos of ‘inclusiveness’ applies not only around diverse approaches to gender (notably over the ordination of women) and sexuality (notably around attitudes to divorce and same-sex relations), but also to contested governance, and diversity in liturgical practice. Positively, this shift has been furthered by less exclusive ecumenical relationships,15 growing awareness of the universal scope of God’s grace, and an ethos of hospitality gradually displacing one of superiority. Yet it has also tended towards extremes of practice. In congregations self-identified as ‘catholic’, services are conducted in an esoteric style, tending towards the congregational being an audience to clerical gymnastics. In stark contrast, ‘lowest common

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15 An important example was the adoption in 1973 by General Synod of the ‘Admission to Communion Canon’, which allowed ‘communicant members of a Christian tradition that holds the apostolic faith’ to receive holy communion in Australian Anglican churches. Prior to this, only Anglicans were admitted. As a young adult, I vividly remember kneeling at the communion rail next to my devout Presbyterian, and so ‘unconfirmed’, uncle. The priest administered holy communion to me, but passed my uncle by, shocking me into wanting this to change. We had both been present at my grandfather’s funeral a day or two earlier, in the same Anglican church with the same priest.
denominator’ approaches to liturgy are taken elsewhere, ironically, in some places self-identified as ‘evangelical’ or ‘Bible-based’, little public reading of the scriptures takes place, and few if any intercessions for the wider world are offered. Singing and (long) sermons predominate, even over Bible reading – and both are clergy-controlled as much as among ‘catholic’ liturgical fundamentalists. With all this goes a lack of knowledge, critical awareness and even interest in pre-AAPB Anglican history and liturgy.

The ‘principle of uniformity’ may have died among Anglicans, though in different guise there are pressures to extend it in the Roman Catholic Church.16 But what is to take its place?

c) Common prayer shaped by the mission of God

Sustaining ‘common prayer’ remains crucial. Without this, congregations grow apart unwittingly, and the door is open for consumerist ideology to dominate church life (‘church shopping’ is no laughing matter). Anglicans tend to think of ‘common prayer’ as the contents of BCP, but the concept is wider. It is an ethos, a sense of corporate prayer that crosses boundaries of place, culture and language. More than an Anglican phenomenon, ‘common prayer’ ideally embraces the spiritual life of all who own the name of Christ. But how is this sustained in the post-modern air we breathe today?

Having the words of a service the same across congregations made sense in ages past: until the 1960s, Anglicans (and other Protestant Christians) had a shared vocabulary and experience of worship, heightened by the King James Bible being the only English version in use, and a ‘canon’ of well-known hymns. Today such an idea belongs to history. But sharing key words matters: someone who participates regularly in church should after a few months be able to join along with others in saying the Lord’s Prayer, confessing sin and faith, sing some songs with familiarity, and make congregational responses. Beyond this minimal level, creative work has seen widespread ecumenical agreement on common structure as sustaining common prayer.

Classically, two shapes for Christian liturgy emerged: the ‘office’ shape, consisting of psalms and songs framing readings from scripture, together with intercessions; and the ‘eucharistic’ shape of two ‘tables’ of the Word proclaimed (synaxis) and enacted (the Lord’s Supper) – verbum audibile et visibile.17 The rubrics of BCP saw both parts brought together in the standard Sunday service, as Morning Prayer, Litany and Holy Communion, though these became separated in the nineteenth century. Liturgical revision in the Anglican world has seen them brought back together,18 restructured into an overall five-fold shape derived from ecumenical scholarship: gather, listen, pray, do, go. Alongside this, the continued use of classical ‘shapes’ for particular elements (intercessions and the Lord’s Supper) assists common prayer at a more detailed level.

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16 See for example Gerald O’Collins sj and John Wilkins, Last in Translation. The English Language and the Catholic Mass (Collegville MA: Liturgical Press, 2017).

17 ‘Lord’s Supper’ is used here to refer to the second part of the full service that BCP describes as ‘Holy Communion’. Roman Catholics helpfully employ such usage to distinguish this from the full service, which they describe as the ‘Mass’ or ‘Eucharist’.

18 Prayer Book Revision in Australia (Sydney: General Synod Standing Committee, 1969) was the turning-point for Australian Anglicans. If you see a copy of this book (it has a distinctive purple / blue cover), take and read it!
The shape of God’s mission

Significantly, this overall structure corresponds to the ‘shape’ of the mission of God. Israel of old was gathered by God at Sinai to listen to the covenant, to offer the three-dimensional prayer sacrifices of dedication, thanksgiving, well-being and humility,19 to celebrate the covenant and live it out in justice and peace. A similar ‘shape’ undergirds the New Covenant/Testament. Jesus Christ called people to gather around him as disciples, to listen to his teaching, and to follow his example of sacrificial prayer and holy living. He assured them of his living presence as they obeyed his command to “do this for my remembrance”, and commissioned them to go out into all the world. This shape – gather, listen, pray, do, go – thus begins with God’s call, attends to God’s word, responds in prayer and action and issues in being sent out to perform the gospel. It is the shape of God’s mission, epitomised in the following graphic.20

This represents a major part of the ‘theory’ behind APBA: its main Sunday services each follow this shape.21 It is not the only structure possible for Christian use: a ‘pilgrimage’ shape is more appropriate for ‘rites of passage’ such as funerals (as in APBA). But a Sunday service lacking rites of gathering, listening, praying, doing and being sent out is significantly impoverished. Each occasion calls for varying emphases in the parts of the common structure. At a baptism, for example, the gathering can include the introduction of the candidate; the prayers may be minimal, and the sermon crafted with visitors in mind, but the ‘doing’ (baptising) will form a natural focus and climax. An image that captures this flexibility is playing an accordion: the breath which makes it work comes from it being expanded and contracted. And so it is in Christian life: the ever-blowing Spirit breathes the mission of God.

Classical shapes

This structure by itself looks rather thin. It is assisted by strong lectionary provision, good preaching,

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19 This description seeks to convey the meaning of the various sacrifices, none of which dealt with intentional sin (that was the distinctive function of yom kippur, the Day of Atonement. See Charles Sherlock, Words and the Word. Case Studies in Scripture (Melbourne: Mosaic / Morningstar, 2013) chapter 7.

20 My thanks to Sarah Crutch, Editor, The Spirit (Anglican Diocese of Bendigo) for this graphic.

21 Holy Communion Outline Order (APBA page 813) shows this structure on a single page. First Order Morning & Evening Prayer (APBA pages 3ff) are modern translations of the respective Book of Common Prayer services, in ‘office’ shape. The only heading is ‘Introduction’, to clarify what is to be used on Sundays.
and employing classical ‘shapes’ for intercessions and celebrating the Lord’s Supper. As regards intercessions, a responsive Litany form, using topics from BCP’s ‘Prayer for the Church Militant’ (said by the priest alone) – world, church, community, those in need, the communion of saints – was taken up in AAPB as a flexible way of enabling a congregation to pray beyond its immediate interests. It allows for a variety of voices, congregational participation through responses, and so enables ‘common prayers’. The ‘collect’ form is a classical shape for a particular prayer. In full, it has five parts, each closely related to scriptural teaching: divine address, divine attribute or action, petition arising from this, outcome of the petition, and its grounding in Christ. This sets ‘common prayer’ in the context of God’s being and act, and looks to where our prayer will lead, thus avoiding starting with just our situation, or praying without reflecting on what will happen when God responds! Not every part has to be used – this shape is an aid, not a regulation. But once internalised, it is a significant help in shaping our ex tempore praying.

A significant classical ‘shape’ is that for the Lord’s Supper. At the Last Supper, Jesus did seven actions: took bread, gave thanks, broke and shared it, then after the meal took wine, gave thanks and shared it. All early accounts of the Lord’s Supper, however, omit the meal and consolidate the actions into four: taking bread and wine, offering thanks, breaking the bread, and sharing the bread and wine. The meal formed the context of the Last Supper, but is not essential for the Lord’s Supper, whose meaning is expressed in these four actions. This ‘four-fold’ shape become confused over the centuries, especially around debates over the meaning of Christ’s presence and action in the eucharist. One of the gains of the Liturgical Movement has been to remove this resulting ‘clutter’ and get us back to the core. Where there is a deliberate ‘taking’ (table-setting), offering of thanksgiving focussed around ‘proclaiming the Lord’s death until he come’, breaking of the bread and sharing it and the wine, authentic eucharistic common prayer is offered.

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22 This list is itself drawn from scriptural directions for intercessions, for example 1 Timothy 2.1-5. It has been well said that when the BCP Litany has been offered, prayer has been made on the basis of, and with supplication for, every ground and topic mentioned in the Bible.


24 Examples include the Collect for Purity which opens Holy Communion (#4 on pages 101, 119, #2 on 168), the Prayer of St John Chrysostom (in two forms at #23 on page 27) as well as the Prayers for the Week and Day. The evening collect ‘Lighten our darkness ... ’ (APBA page 14 #19) is an example of the form being reshaped.

25 This analysis arose from the painstaking research of Dom Gregory Dix, whose The Shape of the Liturgy (London: Dacre Press, Adam and Charles Black, 2nd Edition, 1945) remains a classic. He argues that this ‘shape’ is what is in common across the earliest Christian churches, rather than common words or doctrine. His thesis has been qualified, but remains a basic strategy of modern liturgical revision.

26 As regards the ‘action’ of the eucharistic, the Protestant Reformers, reacting against views of the Mass as ‘repeating’ Christ’s sacrifice, tended to see the Holy Communion as ‘repeating’ the Last Supper (thus primarily looking back – mimesis), rather than as celebrating the Lord’s Supper (which looks forward and upward as well as ‘back’ – anamnesis). This further confused what it means to obey Christ’s command to ‘do this.’

27 Much more could be said: the work of ARCIC is to my mind helpful in sorting out what matters about eucharistic doctrine and practice – The Final Report (1981) as well as the awkward but necessary Clarifications (1994), of which I was a signatory. For documents, see https://iarccum.org/org/?o=6
Conclusion

To foster ‘common prayer’ for the future, the rigidity of the ‘principle of uniformity’ will not do – but neither will ‘anything goes’. Adopting a ‘common structure’ and ‘classical shapes’ approach carries forward the intention behind uniformity, replacing it with the harmony of a heritage-consistent, mission-shaped flexibility.

This paper has argued that three features of the ‘prayer book tradition’ remain vital for participating in the mission of God: the scriptures permeating liturgy; keeping what matters accessible to all, so people and clergy worship as covenant partners; and having liturgy support graced, reverent truth. Going ‘back to the future’ for these aspects of the ‘prayer book tradition’ is an enduring and ecumenical calling.

On the other hand, common prayer is hindered by the ‘principle of uniformity’ – a former cornerstone of the ‘prayer book tradition’ now thankfully abandoned. A better way for the future of this, and every Christian tradition facing post-modernity, is to approach Christian liturgy through a common structure that reflects the shape of the mission of God, employing classical shapes and is sensitive to shifts in culture and context.