

Observations after a survey of parish bulletins

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A Danny Shanahan cartoon, published in the June 27, 1994, issue of the *New Yorker*, depicts a disheveled figure walking down a busy, urban street. Instead of holding a protest sign, the man carries a computer monitor on his shoulder. The screen displays the message, "The end of printed media is near!" What prophetic warning could be more wrong?

One unintended consequence of computer technology is the vast explosion of printed paper. Any Candidate for Ordination, coordinator of Diocesan Convention, or organizer of retreats faces this issue most directly. Every week clergy and parish administrators spend hours poring over bulletin options, font size, hymn numbers and music copyright inclusions (or they should). Vast reams of paper are used to construct and control our weekly liturgies. What are we doing? What do our Sunday bulletins mean (the term bulletin being inclusive of the many variations used, such as order of worship, service bulletin, worship booklet, song sheets, inserts)? What do they tell us about ourselves? How do they form, shape and/or warp our Sunday worship? These questions ask us to reflect upon another paper document, *The Book of Common Prayer*. Additionally, a consideration of the means to cue a worshiping community must go beyond paper and include other techniques such as verbal and nonverbal cues. The paper discussion also draws us to consider the inherent tension between stewardship and hospitality. The origin of this essay comes from a small but telling survey of different bulletins from parishes in vicinity of New York City and Philadelphia.

Paper has been a constitutive medium of Anglicanism since Cranmer. Our worship has depended upon a codified paper medium. The apology for such a style of worship is well known: a canonical, printed worship book has fostered consistency, transparency, democracy, to some extent, and, presumably, quality control. The confines of the page liberate the worshiping community from the tyranny of individual and small group ego. Common texts also temper transitory populism and discipline the local community to the larger whole. Yet the limitations of printed and, therefore, dated material are equally obvious: an inability to adjust and include profound and meaningful changes in culture, fostering an idolatrous relationship with a medium and a mono-cultural perspective uninformed by the proliferation of communication exposing us to a broader expanse of worshiping experience. A reactive rigidity emerges at the mention of change (the continual usage of the phrase "the new Prayer Book" some thirty years after its introduction is footnote enough).

John Bell of the Iona Community has observed the irony of old-line denomination and culture, where we are at once obsessed with sellby dates and novel medicines yet complain violently if something other than Victoriana is offered at worship. The hard bottom line in the organized-religion marketplace tells the score between All-Victorian-All-the-Time and those offering different idioms. The ascendancy of variety and option as a prime value in our lives is indubitable. Additionally, the decentralization of liturgical authority and the multiplication of musical/textual norms make common books less and less a reality. Or perhaps we need to acknowledge that we can learn or accommodate far more material than previous thought. Taken with the rapid revolution of language, the challenge to the normative power of one book is profound. Even the anecdotal reports (and perhaps largely wishful thinking) that there is a collegiateled return to classic forms such as Evensong does not provide substantial corrective nor undercut the critique of one-book, one-hymnal liturgiology. Local variations on even the classic forms detailed in any one book tell the truth about our less than common life and practice. There is an inexorable drive toward variety, and it has had an enormous impact on paper usage by the church.

The simple issue of what makes for a proper bulletin touches on more foundational issues. What medium of any kind is appropriate for Christian worship? What physical guide is necessary? What stimulus and prompts do we need to organize and/or order our liturgy? The issue is no longer about hymnboards but

about micro-technology; it is not simply an argument about avoiding redundancy but about a challenge on an ontological and epistemological level. Very soon, we will ask the question, “What is real?” and “How do we know what real is?” as we come to church and have clipboard-sized screens or programmable pages roughly the same size and thickness as a piece of copy paper. Is a worship experience guided by the BCP encountered as highly processed wood bound by glue between cloth and leather more real than a worship experience guided by a BCP on a PDA (Personal Digital Assistant, e.g., Palm Pilot)? Far from contending with the era of the BCS (Book of Common Sheets), we will be faced with ether and vapor. Digital links directly to the brain now provide reproduced sound to the formerly deaf. Perhaps in the near future, a digital link directly to the visual nerve will provide our brains with data. In practice, this would mean that an organist would touch a newly installed toe pedal to initiate the broadcast of a digital signal to the nave on a pre-arranged frequency, and the image of the hymn would be before our eyes, but actually behind our eyes in the sight of our mind. While few would find this scenario anything but a nightmare, we are foolish if we think such developments will not intimately and powerfully affect us, and affect us right in the pew.

On such unsteady ground, Anglicans reach quickly for the incarnation. The incarnation has been a neat defense and justification for all sorts of material props, from steeple to organ pipe to prayer book. R. K. Rowling, author of the wildly popular Harry Potter series, includes this page at the end of all her books: “This book was art directed by David Saylor... The text was set in 12-point Adobe Garamond, redrawn by Robert Slimbach in 1989...” One could reasonably say the same thing about our books of worship, that they are art. But we have come to experience art, from Dadaism to Christo to Blue Man Group as that which is no longer defined by how it is hung or held. A theology of incarnation might well be employed to demand a minimum physicality to our worship and to those things that prompt, cue or direct such activity. We are neither Buddhist nor Quaker, after all. (The quintessential Quaker Meeting is not as one popularly supposed, where people freely speak their minds. The archetypal gathering is a community without the interruption of words. Attenders will have communally experienced the wonder of the divine presence with nary a spoken or sung syllable).

To maintain perspective about the things of worship, we say that some are helpful but not essential (e.g., statuary and bishops). The ethos of helpful-but-not-essential determines the weight we place upon all that prompts and cues us during worship. The “tut-tutting” condescension about PowerPoint sermons hints at an imbalance. Somehow, the screen is not real enough. Compared to what? The pages of the sermon yellow and curl and turn to dust in the end, or are erased from memory with a single click. Perhaps books are more “real” than a screen image, but real in terms of decades and not from the eyes of our faith. Jesus compared our works to fruit, not marble stones. Fruits rot and decay, returning to the elements. So too will our cathedrals and our books. A more detached approach to the things of worship can protect us from the idolatrous need and want for physical structure while protecting us from the arrogance and egoism of supposedly disembodied worship. The church will use incarnation and add tradition as a means of promoting a place to retreat from the onslaught of a world byten (sic) and now rabid with voluminous, technologically-enhanced choice. Perhaps this explains why the church is the last to use new technology. An unattributable quote from a Wall Street Journal editorial suggests, “When the church is using it, you know it is an old technology.” Equal to the expense of it, we are deeply suspicious.

The conflicted church is nothing new, but in the context of technology and its use, we are confused as well. The reasoned call for the church to move more coherently and expeditiously toward alternative and reformation is met with deep pause and hesitation. In the meantime, Sunday bulletins are outward expressions of this inward angst.

These worship-support documents are only as recent as the availability of mass-market duplication machinery. Private printing services creating worship leaflets came into vogue for wealthy metropolitan churches and larger diocesan events a century and a half after the

American Revolution. A survey of the colonial church in the mid-Atlantic region suggests their primary printing concern was rather basic. In 1705, John Talbot, ship's chaplain and pastor in New Jersey, rallied with other New York and New Jersey clergy to print the prayer book and the Psalms so "that the Church might be served and ye Printer employ'd without setting forth those that are erroneous." The neglect of Holy Communion and the difficult struggle of clergy to introduce it has been blamed on anti-ritual prejudice, ignorance, illiteracy, the influence of the enthusiasts and fear-filled scrupulosity. However, the situation could not have been helped by the want of worship texts.

That there are few remnants of anything resembling our present-day bulletins until the 1900s is not hard to fathom. Historically, bulletins were auxiliary at best. We can assume that cuing the congregation was strictly verbal, the only nonverbal cue being the introduction of the hymnboard, the use of which became pandemic with the development of hymnbooks in the eighteenth century. The triumph of hymnboard erection is attested by every Victorian church interior photograph. Given the lack of options for worship using the 1892 and 1928 Book of Common Prayer, there was little need for printed cues, and the only changes took place at the hymnboard. The need for a paper cuing product might therefore reasonably be supposed to arise from a community's need to communicate non-liturgical information. While bulletins are rare, parish newsletters exist from as early as the colonial period. Less an extension of the prayer book, Sunday bulletins might reasonably be considered the historical bastard of a newsletter.

The present-day concerns of bulletins still include the need to impart non-liturgical information (e.g., Golf Outing, June 3rd, 1: 30 p.m., Hawk Pointe). If anything, the announcement portions of bulletins have never been larger than today. The bulletin archives of the small number of parishes included in the survey used for this article shows an explosion of bulletin heft occurring precipitously after the 1979 BCP. But although an increase in the non-liturgical communication of parish programming contributes to the growing volume of paper used, the dominant factor for change (increase) is attributable to worship text.

The inclusion of the majority of the worship texts comes only in the past ten years, in direct correlation with the development of desktop printing. The composition of bulletins in our era has come down to managing choice and variety. As variation increases, so does the quantity of weekly printed material. One wonders, however, how much variation in worship is determined by the development of technology. Have we swung over to variation because we could? For example, one parish's liturgist edited Enriching Our Worship Eucharistic Prayer 1, having found the word "violated" to be overtly "politically correct"; their edition reads "we disgraced your creation, afflicted one another." Without digital technology, many flowers would not be blooming. However, the feminist influence which is reforming and expanding our language, among other factors, predates the personal computer. And this chronology undercuts the proposition that the Rite® Stuff CD-ROMs of the Church Hymnal Corporation create, not just feed a possibility.

If we accept the premises that bulletins are born from non-liturgical purposes and that recent editions are at least in part derived from the capability of producing them, we might do well to develop a healthy skepticism of them. However, there is another cultural shift, if not theological, in the identity of the Episcopal Church that provides another explanation for this papered development. The last thirty years have seen wave after wave of General Convention resolutions on evangelism, including one Decade of It and now two more. Concurrent with the opportunities of desktop printing are hospitality concerns which challenged the dominant Episcopal privileged culture: learn us or leave us. Now having to compete for the unchurched, parishes have taken the initiative to reproduce weekly missalettes of texts and music under the software rubric of user-friendly. This last trend is likely to grow in an era of shrinking attendance and outright competition for population.

The proponents of hospitality are not without challenge in communities where unofficial and official controllers, often long-time members, question the time/money expenditure necessary to produce

dozen-paged booklets. The task itself ineluctably reshapes the ministry of a congregation. It takes time. Time is not elastic. Time not spent elsewhere is time spent on font selection and drag-and-drop. Even if volunteer missal squads are recruited, they are folding and stapling, not feeding and visiting. The prophetic voice of stewardship must be allowed to speak in judgment, if only to correct and balance the fear-driven behavior of a graying, un-Gen-XYZ denomination. That corrective may not stand up well against the manifold agenda for an enlarging Sunday document. An environment turning us toward expansive language, awareness of and access to multicultural worship, a high valuation of variety, and visceral drive toward hospitality, all this coupled with a growing list of community communication needs spells reams for our future. Reams. We print promiscuously without much reflection. Is this situation merely a present-day reality not worth even the fuss of this essay? Are all parts of this enterprise equally worthy? All have their costs, and at the least, we can become more deliberate. But as is shown from a survey of just several parish documents, deliberateness is not a real concern.

Talbot's mission has remained the same in this new century, though with some neglect to his last concern, "that the Church might be served and ye Printer employ'd without seting forth those that are erroneous." Errors in bulletins, especially those inclusive of all text and music, have a tendency to be overlooked. Typesetters are not normally found among the ranks of clergy and parish administrators. The care and poetic arrangement of text is frequently abandoned to fit within unforgiving margins. The options in use in just a dozen parishes revealed some of the following variations: Professional, full-color bulletin covers; locally printed outline of worship; four additional half-page inserts, multi-colored: white for the readings, pink for a stewardship event, yellow for a couple of non-Hymnal 1982 hymns (no copyright information provided) and blue for other announcements and information. Two sheets, letter-sized white, folded to make eight pages; picture of host church on cover; inside basic order of worship, with scripture texts inserted in the order of worship; backpage announcements.

Legal sized, tri-fold, heavy card stock; full text of Easter-season liturgy (used throughout the season) and sporadically noted, "See Insert," related to readings and music selections; additional inserts for announcements. Professionally printed, legal-sized, three sheets forming twelve pages; two-color (rubrics in red) service with partial text; announcements on separate half sheet.

Legal sized, z-fold; order of worship with a pre-printed readings insert and an announcements insert.

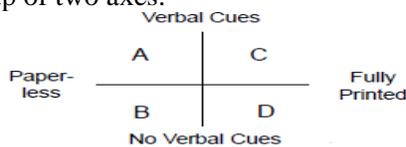
11x17 half-fold, providing four full letter-sized pages; partial text and Mass setting. Seven-sheet, twenty-eight-page integrated booklet; full text, readings, all music, announcements.

Four-sheet, sixteen-page seasonal booklet; full text with four half-sheet inserts, one each for music, parish announcements, schedule of liturgical ministers, and a pre-printed National Day of Prayer advertisement.

In no case were any two orders of service the same, even though the dozen were using Rite II Holy Eucharist from the 1979 BCP. For example, the first hymn sung by the congregation was named either Gathering, Processional or Opening. Some headings followed the outline in the BCP, some did not. Most include body position cues; some did so by asterisk, others more bluntly, "SIT, STAND, KNEEL." Most had "pastoral" inclusions such as a Rite Thirteen liturgy, Laying on of Hands, commissioning, dedications. All had some or all of the following: typographical errors, mixed fonts, clouded or marred copying, random margins, blurred hymns, wavy cut-and-paste, improper copyright data, wrong identifiers (e.g., "The Word of God"/ "The Holy Eucharist"), and embellished identifiers (e.g., "The Proclamation of the Word of God"). All contained adapted, enlarged or pastoral rubrics, e.g., "The children process to the Parish Hall for Children's Chapel." Though knowledge of these parishes is limited, there was some correlation between the size of congregation and staffing, and the nature of the document produced, but this was by no means direct. The largest parish did not use professional printing services, for instance. Two of the mission parishes produced smaller documents but they were more accurate and cleaner.

Conclusions drawn from one weekly bulletin from a sample of only twelve communities and even less carefully made visitations are notably conditioned. And none of this invalidates the Sacrament, of course, though we might wish to amend the Article XXVI of the Thirty-nine Articles. Yet the situation should give us pause. Do these things, however trivial, diminish the celebration? Do they distract or misinform? Since this group was using the same thirty year- old book as source, should we wonder more about those parishes employing other resources? If we look at the most recent attempt of central liturgical authority to inform this situation, the answer has been to assist the technology by adding to it. The powerful and valuable tools of the Rite series CD-ROMs (published by Church Publishing Inc.) have the ability to bring coherence and commonality across our church, if used. However, the availability of quality templates have been plentiful and around a long time. One need only to look in Marion J. Hatchett's *A Manual for Clergy and Church Musicians*, published in 1980. With older templates going unused, it suggests, local option prevailing, a lasting environment where anything that can be printed will be.

Printed material is only one dimension of the issue of cues. Whether the outcome is attendance on the golf course or standing for the eucharistic prayer, the purpose is the same: change. Cues for change can be given in many forms: orally, in print, general postings (e.g., hymnboards and technically advanced hymnboards such as data projection). More simply, worship may be accomplished by repetition and familiarity, by catechesis and preparation. A dizzying combination of all the above is the reality in many or most parishes. The various options for worship cues can be organized and summarized by a grid made up of two axes:



In the church, the conversation about cuing has largely centered on the issue of redundancy between verbal, printed and hymnboard cues. Another conversation has been focused on being hearers or readers of the Word: does the inclusion of the written texts inhibit proper engagement with the Word of God? The issues are larger. The grid displays more complex issues facing worshipping communities: do we go paperless, relying upon the memories or teachability of the congregation, or perhaps use projection media? At the other extreme, do we print out the complete service in order to be user/seeker friendly? Do we expand the book racks under the seats for three hymnals, a prayer book, a supplement and maybe a Bible? Or do we invest in three-ring binders and do the legwork of acquiring copyrights for our own community's service/hymnbook? Will developing technology render these questions moot?

The effect of this light research and observation is cautionary. We can do much better, if we had the time, skill and inclination. As it is, we might be better to simplify. I will not try to save my soul by defacing an original painting, which has its own merits, in order to become an unsuccessful copy of someone else whose character is entirely different than mine. It is commonly believed that the pope's language, even in ordinary conversations, ought to savor of the mysterious and the circumspect. But it is more in keeping with the example of Jesus to maintain attractive simplicity. Simplicity often generates, if not contempt, at least lack of respect in the pompous. But they do not matter very much, even if they are able to inflict some humiliation by their opinions or attitudes. It is they who will be confounded in the end.