

B O O K R E V I E W

"P R A Y E R S I N C H U R C H"

Editor: John Conacher

Oxford University Press. £19.95

This collection of 514 prayers is designed to supplement the "Alternative Prayer Book (1984)" of the Church of Ireland. The editor, a bookseller by profession, is a former missionary and a Lay Reader of the Church of Ireland.

The book itself is a fine volume which comes boxed, having stout boards in dark blue gold embossed, its pages gilt edged, and with three ribbon markers. It is, in this sense, worthy of the prayer desk where it would presumably accompany the APB. The setting is clear and uncrowded. It is not always obvious, however, what the identifying rationale is, and at times prayers would have to be read very carefully to catch their flow for speaking. There are ample indices, topics, scripture allusions, lectionary readings and calendar.

Prominent attention is given to scripture throughout the book. Even where a prayer is not lifted from scripture or based upon a passage, Bible references are given beneath the majority of prayers. In line with the APB, the New International Version is the one used.

Prayers are grouped under seven main headings:

1. The Church's Year. (2 - 4 prayers for each Sunday)
2. Other Occasions. (Baptism, Remembrance etc.)
3. The Church at Worship. (Confession, intercession etc. 20 scripture passages are given as "valedictions" for Readers to use in place of blessing.)
4. The Church at Work. (Vacancy, ordination, synod etc.)
5. Pastoral and Devotional. (Bereavement, home life etc.)
6. Society and State. (Education, unemployment etc. Includes prayers for reconciliation in Northern Ireland.)
7. World Needs. (Overseas mission, racial harmony etc.)

70 sources are acknowledged for prayers. That Frank Colquhoun, Dick Williams and Christopher Idle feature largely will give an idea of the general style. The editor admits in his preface his surprise at the difficulties encountered in seeking to use copyright material. 158 of the 514 prayers are his own, a proportion he did not initially intend.

The reviewer naturally read all the prayers in this book but, perhaps also naturally, paid particular attention to Mr Conacher's own contribution as the original material. Some minor criticisms can be disposed

of briefly.

"You who" is not a prevailing fault in the book but it unfortunately appears in prayer number 2.

The reviewer has a personal dislike of "may" in prayers. The word is well used in this collection. "May we..." "That we may...". Hard to avoid but worth trying.

At a time when there is a reasonable sensitivity to inclusive language even in these islands, the unquestioned use of "men" throughout is thoughtless. The reviewer does not have a copy of the APB and must wonder why "Discipleship" appears on Monday, "Temptation" on Tuesday and "The High Priest" and "Pilate" on Wednesday of Holy Week. The reference to the "truly broken" body of Christ in a prayer for Maundy Thursday is scripturally and theologically suspect.

The principal criticism of Mr Conacher's prayers is that he often tries to put too much into them. This, together with his desire to be seen to follow scripture passages, makes for awkward changes in direction. The prayers need concentration and many do not read easily. Most prayers are addressed to Jesus but at times it is not always clear who is being addressed and pronouns become remote from their subjects. The style is rather heavy in an old-fashioned evangelical way and we are reminded that the Church of Ireland is the Anglican Church unaffected by tractarianism. It has been said that a committee cannot write good prayers. Be that as it may, a committee can improve the style and reading quality of an individual's submission.

Here are two examples of Mr Conacher's prayers. The reviewer would find the second helpful, the first unusable in its present form. (Indenting is not reproduced.)

Almighty and loving God, we confess that it is all too true that we, like sheep, have gone astray and that each of us has turned to his own way. We abhor ourselves when we are reminded that our lord was despised and rejected by the men for whose transgressions he was pierced. It is with all humility that we take for ourselves the healing we have by his wounds and the peace that has been brought us by the punishment which was upon him. We offer ourselves now to him so that the will of the Lord may be prospered, and after the suffering of his soul he may see the light of life and be satisfied as he hears the resolve of those he has justified to live the new life to the glory of his name.

Holy Spirit, be present, we pray, in homes where there is tension or anger, where partners find the other to have faults they had not expected, or habits they find it hard to tolerate. Help.....

Help each to look upwards at Jesus, to see him in the perfection that is his alone, to see his suffering for others' sins, to see his forgiveness for the repentant, to see all the possibility of new life in him. Help each to look at the other partner in fresh humility and in renewed love, and to be restored in harmony and unity as heirs together of the gift of life, in Christ the Lord.

The reviewer wishes this book well as a work of love by an obviously dedicated Lay Reader but wonders what place it may claim on the shelves of the Church of Scotland study since it does not provide consistent material for a specific part of the liturgy. As such, it is another quarry among quarries.

Colin R. Williamson