

WORSHIP IN THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN IRELAND

A REPORT ON RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

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When I was a youthful minister some thirty years ago the impending publication of the new *Book of Public Worship* of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland was announced at our Presbytery, I recall raising a few smiles by innocently asking why we did need such a book when we were already well served by "our own" Scottish *Book of Common Order*.

The *Book of Public Worship*, first published in 1923 and again in 1931, and with further revisions in 1942 had been out of print since the early fifties. The publication of the promised book in 1965 owed a great deal to the immense liturgical scholarship of The Revd Professor John M Barkley who incidently introduced the present writer to the Church Service Society. It drew upon the 1940 *Book of Common Order*, while at the same time making use of a wide range of liturgical material, ancient and modern, together with new material from within the Irish Presbyterian tradition, not a little of it provided by Barkley himself. What Barkley did however was no mere revision of the earlier material. It was a major new work with a wealth of fresh material and a number of significant changes.

The Order of Service was now based firmly on the pattern of Preparation - Proclamation - Response, rooted in the great traditions of Christian worship. The lectionary was based on the Christian Year, and in particular on the lectionary of the Church of South India. The Communion order contained some important new developments, while the general structure was similar to that contained in the 1940 *Book of Common Order*. The Baptismal Service required a Trinitarian profession of faith, and also addressed a question to the congregation, reminding them of their obligations, and emphasising the place of the child within the visible church. The Confirmation Service moved from the prevailing idea of confirming baptismal vows to the concept of the "*Confirmation of Baptised Persons and their Admission to the Lord's Table*". It thus expressed the importance both of personal commitment to Christ, and of prayer for the strengthening of God through the Holy

Spirit to equip the believer for Christian living. The rubrics suggest that the Minister may raise his hand in blessing over the candidates, or that he may lay hands on them, and that the candidates may kneel.



We are fortunate to have a detailed commentary on the book in JM Barklay's own book *"The Worship of the Reformed Church"* published in 1966. In this important work he examines the main areas of reformed liturgy and gives a detailed comparative study of the Scottish, English and Irish rites. A modern assessment of the value of the 1965 *Book of Public Worship* has been made by RS Tosh in an important essay entitled *"One Hundred and Fifty Years of Worship - A Survey"* contained in RFG Holmes and RB Knox (Ed): *"The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland 1840 - 1990."* (Belfast 1990) pp 140 - 166.

The significance of the revised *Book of Public Worship* was enhanced by the fact that it was published by authority of the General Assembly, and also because many of the younger ministers of the church had the privilege of having been taught liturgy by John Barkley, and were well schooled in the principles that undergirded the book.

In one way however the book suffered a serious limitation. Within a few years of the publication the language of public worship underwent a radical transformation. The *Thou* form of address to God gave way to the more contemporary *You* form, and if this was to be carried through satisfactorily, it meant the complete recasting of sentences. Thus, while the *Book of Public Worship* remained a valuable norm, it became increasingly less useful as a source-book of public prayer.

It was this that led the Public Worship Committee to commence a process of revision. The decision to do so was reported to the General Assembly in 1980 and approval in principle obtained. From the outset however it was made clear that the intention was not to produce a new *Book of Public Worship* carrying with it the authority of the General Assembly, and involving the Presbyteries in a detailed study and revision of the text prior to its publication. The procedure adopted was for the Committee itself to publish the work in its own name as *"An Experimental Revision"* and to invite members of the church to write in to the Convener with comments and criticisms. The material was printed on A5 paper punched for use in a ring binder on which was embossed a Celtic Cross. The various sections came out as they were ready. These included

I The Presbytery Services, and orders for the Dedication of Churches, Church Halls and Furnishings (1982);

- II The Celebration of Marriage, the Blessing of a Civil Marriage, Order for a Service of Healing and Funeral Services (1985);
- III Family Services, Outlines for Prayers of Intercession, and Lectionary for the Christian Year (1987); and
- IV Baptism, Confirmation and the Lord's Supper (1989).

The resulting revision has been widely used throughout the church, especially the Presbytery services and the section on the Sacraments, while the funeral services have been conveniently reproduced in a pocket size book suitable for use in the home and at the graveside. *An Experimental Revision* did not however generate the expected debate, and few people responded to the invitation to engage in a process of on-going discussion. Nor did the book become widely-known beyond the immediate family of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. I suspect few, if any members of the Society are aware of its existence, still less have examined any of its material. This, I believe, is a pity, as I feel sure there are good things to share, as well as the opportunity for us in Ireland to be sharpened by constructive criticism.

The time for that perhaps has passed so far as *An Experimental Revision* is concerned. Here the matter rests for the present, and I doubt if any more substantial revision is contemplated in the immediate future. For those who are interested in reformed liturgies the focus of attention at least for the present must be the forthcoming and long-awaited publication of the revised *Common Order* of the Church of Scotland.

1. Few elements in public worship are of greater importance to the ordinary churchgoer than praise. The Presbyterian Church in Ireland has had its own revised edition of the Psalter since 1880. From the advent of the use of hymns in our services, we have worked alongside the Church of Scotland in its several editions of the *Church Hymnary*. Sadly CH3 has not been able to command the almost universal acceptance accorded to the old *Revised Church Hymnary*. In spite of a vigorous campaign to promote the book by the Public worship Committee, including praise rallies in several presbyteries, our church has become a two-hymnbook church. There are still many congregations that steadfastly hold to the *RCH*. Some members of Assembly took exception to the theology of the *Introduction* to CH3, while others simply featured the loss of dearly-loved material. The omission of "*What a friend we have in Jesus*" was a major diplomatic blunder so far as the Irish Church was concerned, and did more perhaps than any single factor to undermine the new book. Nevertheless the strengths of CH3 are considerable, and many congregations have appreciated its worth.

In addition to praise rallies, the committee for a number of years organised organists' conferences until this work was taken over by our new Director of Christian Training at Magee House. It also encouraged participation in events organised at the Royal School of Church Music, and a number of our choirs have affiliated over the years. One useful, if lesser known, contribution to public worship was the publication of a little leaflet designed for sticking inside the cover of a standard "Words Edition" of either *RCH* or *CH3* with some explanation of the order of service, and the framework of our prayers, together with devotional material for use prior to the beginning of a service.

Like the major transition in the language of worship, so the idiom of Christian praise has been undergoing enormous change in recent decades. Like all periods of creativity, this has produced a plethora of material of variable quality. *CH3* appeared just too soon to take account of the excellent work of writers like Graham Kendrick and Timothy Dudley Smith. So many church members, old and young, have become familiar with modern hymns and choruses that the pressure to incorporate such material into church services has been great. Many churches have responded by using publications like *Mission Praise*, or by creating a collection of locally chosen material. This has raised problems of copyright, and the Public Worship Committee has endeavoured to guide congregations about this important matter.

The publication *Songs of God's People* is known and used in the Irish Church, but not widely. The Church of Ireland produced a fine modern supplement entitled *Irish Church Praise*. This is an excellent production, and has been a source of inspiration to their Presbyterian neighbours. One of the most influential events in our recent history was our first-ever residential General Assembly held in Coleraine in 1990 to commemorate the 150th year of the Union of Synods that brought the Presbyterian Church in Ireland into being. The Assembly worship was a highlight for many members and included the introduction of a number of modern hymns under the direction of Noel Tredinnick and members of the orchestra of All Souls', Langham Place, London.

In the 'Coleraine Declaration' the following paragraphs addressed the subject of Public Worship.

The renewal of the Church, for which we long, depends in the ultimate sense not upon human organisation, but upon the grace of God, bestowed in Christ, and sealed to us by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. We humbly acknowledge our deep sense of failure and need, as we call upon God

to cleanse and forgive us, and to renew us by His word and Spirit, so that we may serve Him as we ought, and carry out the work of mission faithfully, as He has entrusted it to us.

In such renewal, worship is central. We rejoice in the gifts of God for the people of God. Biblical preaching must be at the very heart of true worship. It must, of course, be presented attractively, and applied sharply to the actual situations and needs of our time. Yet the nourishment of mind and heart cannot adequately be accomplished by Sunday worship alone. We urge Kirk Sessions to be creative in providing additional opportunities to study the Bible, and we urge our people to take these seriously.

The sacraments are also gifts of God, and should be celebrated with joy. Careful ordering of the services can go hand in hand with the use of modern worship resources. The biblical practice of frequent communion is worthy of serious consideration by ministers and Kirk Sessions.

A rediscovery of prayer is also of vital importance to public worship, as well as to personal discipleship and congregational life. It is the clue to the Church's renewal, and to the effective carrying out of her mission. Many of our people miss out on the discipline and joy of personal prayer, and are fearful and ill-at-ease at the prospect of praying with others. These barriers must be overcome if we are to have the joy of seeing prayer answered in the renewal of the Church and the healing of our land. We need to help our people to more disciplined prayer in personal and family contexts, to more meaningful participation in the public prayer of the Church, and to a new commitment to group prayer.

The singing of praise is another important part of Christian worship. Recognising that music should help to renew the mind rather than the emotions it is believed that music and songs must be related to the worship and the Word. The time has now come for a new supplemental hymnary incorporating some of the best of recent material. The revision of the Psalter ought also to be contemplated, since the Psalms must always have a normative place in Christian worship. We call upon our congregations to give a high priority to improving the standard of Church music, offering possibilities for wider training and experience to organists, choirs and others involved in congregational music. We call on all our people to put new heart into their singing and to let the inspiration and joy of Christian praise be heard in all our Churches.

As a direct consequence of the Coleraine Declaration a committee was set up charged with the task of producing a new hymn book supplement. We are planning to have this book available soon. It will be entitled *Glory to God* and will be launched with a number of national and local events. Hopefully it will meet a real need for good quality contemporary material for congregational praise. Meantime we are aware that the process has begun to produce a fourth edition of Church Hymnary and our church will be asked to decide shortly if it wishes to remain a partner in that venture. I very much hope that the answer will be positive.

One matter not fully addressed by the production of *Glory to God* is the need for a collection of contemporary children's praise. This, too, is a matter of considerable urgency, as is evidenced by the measures attempted by many congregations, not always satisfactorily to meet this need. The new book will, however, contain a limited number of children's items.

Another venture that may claim affinity with the spirit of the Coleraine Declaration was the publication in 1992 of a book of prayers entitled *Teach us to Pray*, intended for the use of elders and lay people who are called upon to share in the leadership of worship.

A feature of Public Worship in Irish Presbyterianism that we have inherited from our Scottish forebears is the widespread tradition of infrequent communion. The General Assembly in 1978 resolved "that the Public Worship Committee be requested to examine the present practice of infrequent communion in the light of Scripture, the Subordinate Standards, and the traditions of the Church, and report to the next Assembly".

Accordingly the Public Worship Committee undertook a major study of the subject, including a survey of the practice of congregations within the church. This proved to be an interesting exercise. The report to the 1979 Assembly gave a brief summary of Irish practice thus:

Irish Presbyterianism owes something to both English and Scottish traditions. In the south of Ireland, the English tradition was strong, and communion was celebrated in some places monthly, and in others every six weeks or two months. In the north of Ireland at the Antrim Meeting in the mid-seventeenth century communion was celebrated monthly, but when the Scottish tradition became normative, it was usually celebrated once a year, and twice in the larger towns. The apparent infrequency must be understood against the background of participation by members of neighbouring congregations in one another's communions. The result was that in the 18th century most communicants in the north participated four or five times a year, and some even more frequently.

As in Scotland, the nineteenth century saw the gradual loss of this custom, without any substantial increase in the number of communions in each separate parish. Thus the way was prepared for our present practice by which most country congregations celebrate twice a year, while in the towns there are three or four communions annually. Nevertheless, a growing number of congregations are increasing their number of communions. In one Church there is now a weekly communion, a few have communion more or less monthly, while others have six or more communions in the year. As in Scotland such changes take place slowly. It is nevertheless good that we should re-examine and if necessary reform our practice in this matter in the light of Scripture, and of the teaching of the reformers.

The report included detailed Biblical and historical material, together with reasons for and against the practice of infrequent communion. It concluded thus:

The Public Worship Committee is grateful to the General Assembly for setting it the task of examining our present practice regarding the Lord's Supper. We heartily acknowledge the merits of the tradition that has come down to us, and that has conserved so much of spiritual value. Nevertheless it does seem to us that the weight of the evidence certainly lies towards the reformation of our long-established practice. Few congregations relish the idea of change, especially about matters so sacred as the communion service. We believe that Kirk Sessions, as the body charged with responsibility in this matter, should undertake a reconsideration of the

evidence set out in this report, and so we recommend to the General Assembly that the report should be printed, and sent down to the Kirk Sessions with the request that they study it and discuss it together, and send their comments to the Clerk of the Presbytery, and to the Convener of this committee by 31st December, 1979.

The process of consultation by Kirk Sessions and report back was taken with considerable seriousness in many places. Predictably some simply thanked the committee for the report, but indicated that they were satisfied with present practice, while some decided to make a conservative increase in the number of celebrations. It is doubtful if the matter has been reconsidered in many parishes since, in spite of the exhortation given in the Coleraine Declaration. The process of study and self-examination was a valuable exercise, and one which, I believe, ought to be carried out again at some point in the future.

Two important changes have taken place in the context of Irish Presbyterian public worship in the period reviewed in this article. First is the obvious challenge of leading worship in the quarter-century marked by what we call 'the Troubles'. This has caused many of us to re-examine how we preach, and how we may best lead our people in public prayer not least at moments of crisis, and of deep anger and emotion. In the nature of things little of this has been written up, because most of it has been immediate and local in its design. Just as far-reaching has been the growing secularisation of society in Ireland, both North and South, so that a generation later than our Scottish cousins, many of us are having to face up to the problems of decline. Church attendance on the whole is well maintained in rural areas, but urban congregations, and increasingly those in country towns are facing the problems of dwindling and ageing congregations. This is exacerbated by the brain-drain of many of our ablest young people to English and especially Scottish universities. Many of them are unlikely ever to return.

All this poses for us the problem of how best to express our worship and communicate our message so that outsiders may be drawn into an encounter with the Living God, and new believers may be nurtured towards Christian maturity. We have much to learn from the experiences of other churches, and not least the Church of Scotland, as together we wrestle with the task of evangelising a generation that has lost its way. In all of this, public worship, rightly ordered and sensitively expressed, must still play a pivotal role, as it has done from the first beginnings of the church. We look forward to the publication of your new *Book of Common Order*, and to continued co-operation and mutual encouragement in the provision and sharing of resources that will enrich our offering of worship to the glory of Almighty God.