

COMMON ORDER

[TWO]

**The Revd Peter D Thomson, MA BD
Comrie and Strowan with Dundurn**

Common Order is bound to create Initial, favourable impressions, which are unlikely to be dissipated by any subsequent detailed examination or questioning of its contents. The publishers and printers are to be commended for producing such an attractive book, particularly in terms of the actual layout of the text. To have compressed 700 pages so elegantly and legibly into this one, easily handled volume is an achievement in itself.

But, even more, it is the compilers of *Common Order* who deserve appreciation and thanks. What has been produced may have been a long time in the making, but surely has been worth the wait. The range of services set out, coupled with the range of possibilities within the main different orders, indicates a willingness to work with imagination and insight at the question of what the Church ought to have placed before it at this time.

As well as the provision of orders that one would expect, the varied material now presented includes the following: "Order for the Funeral of a Still-born Child", within the section on Funerals, "Order for a Service of Healing", "An Order for the Blessing of a New Home", "An Order for Daily Devotion" and Benedictions for the Christian Year. In addition, the Lectionary and Scripture Sentences and Collects of the Day have been set out in such a way that it is immediately obvious what should be used on any given date in the foreseeable future. Congregational participation is encouraged. The index is full and helpful.

Common Order is designed deliberately to be a successor to the 1940 *Book of Common Order* rather than to the 1979 edition. As well as aiming to be as comprehensive as possible in its provision of services, ordinances and prayers, it appears to be trying to present material that is homogeneous throughout.

For instance, whereas the 1979 edition made use of at least four different versions of the Bible, *Common Order* uses only the R.E.B. No provision is made for God being addressed as "Thou" as well as "You" - it is always "You". The liturgical texts, from the Creeds to the Lord's Prayer, are now taken

uniformly from "Praying Together", The English Language Liturgical Consultation, 1988, in contrast to the variations presented in 1979. due consideration has been given to the use of inclusive language throughout. At the same time, the attempt has been made to reduce the usage of the traditional, male metaphors for God, though without employing any female ones, so far as I am aware.

The result is that we are presented with a consistent and recognisable pattern of text and language in *Common Order*, which generally reads and sounds well. Given the wide diversity of practice in the forms of worship in the Church these days, it seems sensible to have made no attempt to cater for all tastes, which would have finished up satisfying none. At the same time, all tastes should be able to find here "a wealth of resources which can be mined and re-mined for many years to come", as John Bell suggests in his Preface.

Despite all this, some questions do present themselves..

First, I wonder if I am alone in finding that the passages which reflect the Celtic tradition, even if a relatively small part of the whole, seem to stand out somewhat awkwardly from the rest of the material. For instance, one Benediction, p.597, is worded as follows:

*"May God shield you in the valleys,
may Christ aid you on the mountains,
may the Holy Spirit bathe you on the slopes,
in hollow, on hill, on plain,
mountain, valley and plain."*

If it is hard to see such an item as this coming into general use in the Church, that is not to say that the attempt to develop new forms should not be made. But is *Common Order*, which appears to be trying to cater for the whole Church for a generation or more to come, like the 1940 book, the most suitable place for such an experiment as this? Or is Celtic spirituality now to be seen as part of the mainstream expression of the Christian faith?

Second, it is one thing to seek to follow the pattern of the 1940 edition, but is it really necessary to include "Order for the Dedication of a Church" in *Common Order*? If a new *Ordinal and Service Book* is to be produced, that would seem to be the appropriate place for the service to appear, rather than repeating the publication twice over, as was the case with the 1940 edition and the present *Ordinal*. Also, how often do ministers find themselves invited to dedicate a Churchyard or Burial Ground? Is there really a need for a special order to be provided for this purpose?

Third, why has it been decided to make use only of the R.E.B. to be the most satisfactory of the modern versions of the Bible, both for personal and public use. The Panel on Worship's report to the 1994 General Assembly has a brief discussion on the merits of different versions of the Bible and mentions that the R.E.B. has been chosen for *Common Order*. It would still be good to have the case for its sole use argued, however, rather than presented as something of a *fait accompli*.

Further, whilst it is evident that variety in the forms of the liturgical texts used throughout the Church has been a source of some confusion in worship in recent years, even so, change from the forms found in C.H.3 may well not be accomplished without some additional confusion. This, of course, is not an argument against making the change. But, again, it would be good to be given an explanation for the decision taken by the compilers to use only these forms.

A similar explanation of the choice of Lectionary would be welcome, especially given that "A Four Year Lectionary" (JLG2) was published comparatively recently by the Join Liturgical Group, whose membership is given as including Charles Robertson and Andrew Scobie, both of whom have helped to compile *Common Order*.

Indeed, what would be helpful would be to be given the ideas and intentions which lie behind *Common Order* in the form in which it appears. Perhaps opportunity could be given to the compilers to add to the understanding of those who will find themselves using the material here for years to come. Perhaps, too, the Society itself could encourage such a step to be taken. An increase in awareness of what has been done and why is bound to be of benefit to the Church as a whole in its offering of worship to God.

