

Praying in Common

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INTRODUCTION

The 1993 publication of the *Book of Common Worship* marked the culmination of a ten year effort to provide Presbyterian congregations with a full range of liturgical resources. The Directory for Worship (1989), *The Presbyterian Hymnal* (1990), *The Psalter* (1993), and the *Book of Common Worship* grew out of the faithful thought and prayer of individuals and congregations throughout the church. Together, these resources assist sessions, pastors, musicians, and other worship leaders to shape worship that is biblically, historically, and theologically faithful.

Worship is not liturgical texts, however, no matter how good they may be. Worship is the action of congregations, and of groups and persons within congregations. Just as any printed Sunday bulletin is lifeless without the action of the gathered community, Presbyterian liturgical resources remain inert until they are vitalized by the community of faith's regular praise of the living God.

As one means of helping Presbyterians transform the *Book of Common Worship* from pages of words into faithful worship of God, the Theology and Worship Ministry Unit held a series of "Festivals of Worship" throughout the country in 1993 and 1994. The Festivals introduced the *Book of Common Worship* to the church, familiarizing thousands of persons with a rich array of liturgical possibilities and providing pastoral guidance for congregational use.

The Festivals of Worship cannot be duplicated, but one feature of the Festivals can be shared with a wider audience. Theology and Worship Occasional Paper No. 6, *Praying in Common*, contains two of the Festival keynote addresses. Dr. Cynthia M. Campbell, Pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Salina, Kansas, and Dr. J. Frederick Holper, Associate Professor of Worship and Preaching at Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, explore the promise of Presbyterian worship in a time of renewed liturgical resources. The two addresses are complimentary, providing different angles of approach to the *Book of Common Worship* and its possibilities. Each address explores the *Book of Common Worship* within its ecclesial and cultural context, encouraging thoughtful shaping of congregational doxology.

Theology and Worship is grateful to Drs. Campbell and Holper for allowing us to share their addresses as part of our Occasional Paper series. We encourage responses to *Praying in Common*, as well as suggestions for our ongoing efforts to enrich congregational worship.

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THE PROMISE OF COMMON PRAYER

Cynthia M. Campbell

Some years ago, talk show host Joan Rivers popularized the phrase, "Can we talk?" The phrase caught on because that question is the issue of our age: can we communicate? can we understand and be understood? I will now attempt to communicate about a means of communication: about a book — the *Book of Common Worship* (1993) —and about worship which itself is a medium of communication and communion.

One of my favorite television programs is "Star Trek" in all its various manifestations. From its beginning in the 1960's, a frequent theme has been communication and the struggle to understand across seemingly alien cultures. Recently, "Star Trek: The Next Generation" presented a compelling variation on this theme. Captain Picard and the crew of the Enterprise encounter a group of alien humanoids whose speech consists only of set phrases. In place of dialogue, they speak in a collection of stock responses which seem to make no sense (something like "Molok and Pindar at Tagore" repeated over and over). Picard and the captain of the alien vessel find themselves stranded on a planet where they must cooperate in fighting a monster. As they attempt to battle the monster together, Picard discerns that the set phrases of the alien's speech are lines from the ancient stories of his people. Rather than saying, "we are here to do battle," they would name two ancient warriors locked in mortal combat (thus, "Molok and Pindar at Tagore"). Picard manages to figure out how enough of these phrases function in order to communicate in a rudimentary fashion. After the battle with the monster, Picard tells his crew, "We must learn their stories so that we can learn to speak." In the final scene, as Picard is reading Homer, he remarks, "Perhaps we should re-learn some of our own stories and find out if we have any in common."

THE CHURCH'S STORY

There are few tasks more critical for the church today than to re-learn our own story. We know the statistics about so-called "biblical illiteracy." Even some seminary students read the Bible all the way through for the first time in their introductory classes. Curiously, however, we live in a culture that is fascinated with story. In a society

which might be called the most secular ever developed, people are spending time and money to read about the myths of ancient cultures. We know how Thomas Moore's *Care of the Soul* and Clarissa Pinkola Estes' *Women Who Run With the Wolves* have captured the imagination of the American public.

Yet the church has forgotten its own story, or forgotten how to tell it in a way that is compelling to the human spirit. We need to recover our biblical heritage in such a way that it shapes the way we think and feel, the way we choose and decide, the way we live and the way we die. This recovery need not be done (in fact, I think it cannot be done) as a new triumphalism, as though the Christian story is the only right story. But it must be done with the full conviction that this story is the voice of God speaking to the human soul. A central purpose of the *Book of Common Worship* is to serve as a means of recovering the biblical story and making it again common language—the language held in common by the people of God.

Some years ago at Austin Seminary, the worship committee planned an Easter Vigil service. Over seventy people participated in the planning, execution and leadership of what seemed to many of us a marathon worship experience. The Liturgy of the Word consisted of nine lessons from the Old Testament, an epistle and a Gospel reading (each followed by a musical response). The first year we observed the Easter Vigil, I was the preacher. Over an hour after the service had begun, the opening words of my sermon were, "It's a long story, isn't it?"

It is a long story, and we do not often hear it from beginning to end. We need to hear the whole story, however, because to be a Christian is to give oneself over to being shaped by that story until we become remade after the image of Christ so that he lives in us. Worship is a place where we hear and learn and internalize the story. There are many other ways in which this story becomes part of our lives, of course: church school, service projects, mission work, witnessing to our faith in both deed and word. But worship is the primary place where we should be reconnected with the story that shapes and supports the ministry we do.

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of the *Book of Common Worship* is its use of the language of the Bible. For the past twenty years, it has been customary among those interested in worship to write everything in "contemporary language," the words of everyday life. While the goal has been to bring worship out of King James English and into

contemporary vernacular, the result has often been worship that is cut off from the language that gives Christian faith its substance, namely, biblical language.

Even a cursory look at the *Book of Common Worship* suggests its rich dependence on the Bible. The Opening Sentences are not "Hi, how are you?" or "Good morning," but verses from the psalms: "This is the day which the Lord has made...; Our help is in the name of the Lord ...; The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it." These phrases, repeated frequently enough that they are memorized, become part of each worshiper and the whole worshiping community. They tell us who we are, to whom we belong and where everything belongs in the broader scheme of God's creation.

Scriptural allusions and the use of biblical symbols and metaphors are also widespread. This is most evident in the Great Prayers of Thanksgiving. The Great Prayer for Lent, for example, rehearses the mighty acts of God which will be heard again in the lectionary:

When we were slaves in Egypt you freed us and led us through the waters of the sea. You fed us with heavenly food in the wilderness, and satisfied our thirst from desert springs. On the holy mountain you gave us your law to guide us in your way. Through the waters of Jordan you led us into the land of your promise, and you sustained us in times of trial.

It is ironic that, as heirs of the Reformation tradition whose goal was to put the Bible back in the hands of the people, we have let the Bible become a remote and sometimes lifeless text. It is even more ironic that two centuries of biblical scholarship (which has brought so many important insights into the language and culture of the ancient world and the early church) has had the unintended effect of making those who are not biblical scholars afraid to speak with confidence about what the Bible says and means. While much needs to be done in the arena of Christian education, worship is the most effective means of reconnecting believers with the Bible's story and with biblical language, metaphor and symbol — if only because that is what most people participate in most often.

While the Bible contains many stories, the central or controlling story for Christians is the story of Jesus. His life, death, and resurrection form the base upon which the faith of believers is built. It is with

reference to the Jesus-story that all the other stories are read and told. Imprinting that story on the lives of believers is the purpose of Christian formation.

SACRAMENTS

Those who are familiar with the pattern of the Service for the Lord's Day in use for the past twenty-five years realize that the attempt to give a christological shape to worship has been with us for some time. The Lord's Day services in the *Book of Common Worship* are all written presuming that the Lord's Supper will always be celebrated. More than two dozen Great Prayers of Thanksgiving are contained in the *Book of Common Worship* (including seasonal celebrations and those designed for other pastoral rites). The purpose is not to turn Presbyterians into Catholics, but to center each service in the recital of the mighty acts of God in Jesus Christ and to rehearse Christ's self-giving in action as well as in words.

In the liturgy of Baptism and in liturgies for Reaffirmation of the Baptismal Covenant, the christological focus is quite clear. Through scripture and the prayers, Baptism is affirmed as our dying and rising with Christ, as the grafting of believers into Christ's body, as the act through which we become one with Christ so that Christ begins to live in and through us. Much of our ordinary baptismal practice places emphasis on the infant, and perhaps on the theme of becoming part of the family of faith or the household of God. While these familial metaphors are important, they may overshadow the christological center of Baptism and thus the importance of Baptism throughout the life of the believer.

First of all, then, the *Book of Common Worship* invites us to a recovery of the biblical story and especially to a recognition of the centrality of the story of Jesus. But surely, some will respond, this is the goal of good preaching and especially of evangelical preaching: to hold forth the good news of Christ and to call people to commitment based on the promises of the gospel. What is the need for liturgy? Does it not, in fact, get in the way of presenting the unvarnished "truth" or "message" or "content" of the gospel?

Many people continue to feel that liturgical worship means "empty ritual." Presbyterians who attend funeral services in the Episcopal Church are sometimes put off by the use of the *Book of Common Prayer*:

"It is so hard to follow, and why are we reading along if the leaders are merely reading out of the book, and doesn't anyone ever do anything spontaneous?" Many who have been raised as Presbyterians or who come out of various free church traditions think liturgy means rote recitation, speaking words with neither conviction nor meaning.

In response to these concerns, it should be recognized that the *Book of Common Worship* is not a "prayer book" in the sense of a text which is required for use in all worshiping communities. The text has not been legislated; it is an offering to the church from the life, study, and worship of many people over a number of years. It is designed to save worship planners and leaders from wandering with no direction except their own instincts and the needs of the moment. The *Book of Common Worship* is a resource that puts Presbyterians in touch with our own heritage and with the practice and wisdom of ancient communities of Christians.

Furthermore, the complaint that liturgy equals rote recitation equals meaningless verbiage, stems from the mistaken notion that a liturgical act has only one meaning. Consider the question of the frequency of celebrating the Lord's Supper. Many of us were raised with quarterly communion: at the first of the year, Maundy Thursday, sometime in the summer, and on World Communion Sunday. The theory was that if one has communion too often it "loses its meaning." Even as a child, I could never grasp this logic. As a rebellious teenager I argued that this was analogous to saying that two people in love shouldn't make love very often because, if they do, it might lose its meaning.

Those who think that frequent communion "loses its meaning" fail to recognize the power of a symbol to carry many meanings at one time. In fact, what makes a true symbol is the presence of so many levels of meaning that it can function across a wide variety of moods, settings, and levels of apprehension. The American flag is such a symbol. The feelings it taps differ from person to person and from time to time. Think of what the flag means to you in these settings: carried by the Olympic athletes in procession with hundreds of other flags; lining the entrance to a cemetery on Memorial Day; at the head of a marching band; on the bumper of a pick-up truck; draping a coffin. The flag doesn't mean just one thing. It means many things and its precise meaning is shaped by the setting in which we find it.

The central visual symbol of Christian faith is the cross, and the central active symbol is the breaking of bread. From the beginning, disciples recognized the risen Christ in the breaking of bread. For the first disciples, this act of worship was a way to stay connected to their experience of Jesus. They remembered their last meal, the Passover they shared before the tragedy of Jesus' death. That Passover reminded them of other Passovers as well as the many ordinary days when they broke bread together as a group of friends. It reminded them of the feeding of a multitude, and of the times of table fellowship shared with shady characters such as Zacchaeus the tax collector or enemies such as Simon the Pharisee. As time went on, the act of breaking bread not only looked back, but forward to the Messianic banquet, the feast in eternity with God, the Marriage Supper of the Lamb. Eventually, this symbol from the life of Jesus became connected with the ancient story of God's people: with the Passover and the feast of liberation, and with the bread given in the wilderness, the manna from heaven.

The simple act of breaking bread and sharing a cup does more than connect believers to multiple stories within the Bible. Because the act is simple and direct, its meaning is also shaped by the context in which the church performs it. The Lord's Supper should take on a different tone in the season of Advent than it does in the season of Easter: Advent eucharist sounds the note of anticipation, while Easter eucharist sings of accomplishment and realization. The Lord's Supper, like our faith itself, is both "not yet" and "already."

The significance of the Supper also changes depending on what worshipers and leaders bring to it. On any given Sunday, we may come troubled or anxious and be invited to know Christ as the one with whom all burdens are shared. We may come grieving the loss of a dear friend or family member and be invited into a true communion with all the saints. We may come in grateful praise for health, family, love, or work, and be reminded that we stand at the "joyful feast of the people of God." The technical way to describe the phenomenon is to say that a true symbol is "multi-valent." That is, it contains such a wealth of meaning that it can "mean" many different things simultaneously. Thus, we can come to the Lord's Table and be met by words that touch a wide variety of needs and feelings.

Sermons (no matter how good they are) cannot do this much at one time. A ritual act, a sacrament, may have many levels of meaning

proceeding simultaneously, like a symphony orchestra with a wide variety of instruments playing at the same time. A sermon must concentrate on one or perhaps two levels. To continue the musical analogy, preaching is more like a solo voice, or at most a voice with simple accompaniment. Sermons may, of course, trigger thoughts, responses, and feelings not intended by the preacher. But a preacher must focus the message in order to communicate clearly and effectively.

Thus, the Reformed tradition has always insisted that Word and Sacrament belong together. We have been very scrupulous about one half of what this means. We are careful that no celebration of the sacrament (and no other pastoral rites such as weddings and funerals) proceed without the reading and proclamation of God's Word. However, we have rejected, to our considerable loss, the notion that the Word should always be proclaimed in the context of the Sacrament. The leaders of the Reformation, Luther and Calvin in particular, never intended the two to be separated.

The *Book of Common Worship* offers the Presbyterian Church an opportunity to become reconnected to the most ancient worship traditions of the church as well as to the original intentions of our Reformed heritage. Our tradition has held onto the importance of preaching and the significance of careful preparation for both reading the Word and hearing it proclaimed. The recovery of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper as central to worship need not replace that tradition. What it can do is enrich both preaching and prayer by expanding the levels of meaning which can be shared in any service of worship.

Just as a lifetime of faithful reading cannot exhaust the meaning of the scriptures, so a lifetime of gathering at the Lord's Table cannot exhaust the number of ways in which the symbol of breaking bread and sharing the cup can touch the lives of individuals and of communities. The meaning of a symbol cannot be precisely nailed down or contained. Leaders and participants alike must be open to the meaning that emerges in any given celebration.

Syndicated columnist Ellen Goodman offers an intriguing analogy which makes the point that a basic ritual, by remaining somewhat the same, offers the opportunity for varied experience and multiple meanings. She tells about preparing her extended family's Thanksgiving dinners. Certain foods were basic: the turkey, a certain

type of dressing, one or two side dishes. But other foods varied depending on who was participating. Over the years, she writes, people would come and go. The shape of the table changed by death or divorce, by moves across country or ill-health, by new faces arriving through marriage or birth or special friendship. The content of the table conversations varied, but the context, by remaining the same, meant that this meal was always one in which extended family came together, renewing the ties that bound them together and gaining strength for the journey ahead.

COMMON WORSHIP?

Approached from a variety of angles, my first concern has been with the *Book of Common Worship* as an aid to the shaping of common life around the biblical story we hold in common. For all of the importance of that theme, some will rightly say that the Reformed tradition has never required uniformity, either in worship or in polity. Presbyterians today come from a wide variety of ways of being Reformed: we have Huguenot roots as well as Korean, we come from Scots Covenantors and from African-American traditions, we are Hispanic and Native American, descendants of Puritan New England, and of frontier revivalism. Our diversity is not simply "racial ethnic," for it is also regional, historical, cultural and generational. Some might argue that this is precisely the wrong time to move towards a *common* form of worship.

This critique allows us to consider a fascinating aspect of the *Book of Common Worship*. What we have is 1100 pages of printed words which have yet to be spoken or sung. The book is silent; leaders and communities will make it speak and sing. The text may be "common," but its interpretation is adaptable to a wide variety of situations.

For several years I have served on the play-reading committee for the community theater in Salina. This has been a difficult task for me. I read the words of the plays, but I find it hard to see and hear them. I am amazed by what a play becomes once a director, actors, and tech crew make it come alive. The same is true of music. Music is not the notes on the page. Music is what a singer, or pianist, or sax player brings to life, giving to the musical notations their own distinctive sense of what is beautiful and how it should sound.

Perhaps some of you have seen the PBS video "Amazing Grace with Bill Moyers." Moyers relates the history of this popular hymn and features a wide variety of performances. From a country church singing in the shape-note tradition to Jessye Norman, through a large church choir, to a young girl gifted in the improvisational style of the African-American church, the hymn is the same and yet it isn't. Just so with liturgical text and the instructions called "rubrics." They await the accents and tempos, the diverse musical traditions and pacing that come out of the diversity of faith communities today.

The *Book of Common Worship's* services of Daily Prayer are a good example of liturgy waiting for interpretation. These services can be used in small groups, spoken rather than sung, with a heavy emphasis on silence and meditation. Here, the effect is to let the Word be heard and echo in the silent meditations of the heart. Or these services can be used in larger settings with virtually every part sung. The words then resonate in a different way because the musical settings carry their own emotional tone. Services of Daily Prayer are one thing if the emphasis is on psalms and canticles sung either in metrical or responsorial versions; they are another if traditional hymns are used and psalms and readings spoken. Again, the ways in which the prayers of thanksgiving and intercession are conducted can both reflect and create the culture of a community.

Text and rubric, psalm and scripture readings, cycles of thanksgiving and intercessory prayer are places to begin, not places to end. The notes are here: they await the creativity of leaders and communities to make them come alive in accent and sound.

Again, the use of common biblical language does not limit options for how we speak to and about God. In fact, it opens up a wider range of possibilities than most people have ever used. Many people, when praying aloud extemporaneously, use one or two comfortable means of addressing God: O God, Dear Lord, Heavenly Father. A brief examination of the Daily Prayer liturgies shows expanded possibilities including: Mighty God of mercy and merciful God of might; God our creator and God our savior; loving God and merciful God; God of all who fear you; God our shepherd; Eternal Light; Lord Jesus, unconquered light; God of our joy; Blessed Savior. Each of these, with roots in biblical imagery, opens our prayer to various facets of God's being for us. By these words we come to recognize that even our own diversity is overshadowed by the great variety of divine life which is

held together in the holy unity.

What happens when worship begins to shape our lives as individuals and our life as communities of faith? The words and sounds and actions of worship create an "alternate universe." As we participate in the rituals of eucharist and baptism, share in worship at marriage and funeral, and join together in prayer, we are provided with a story within which to interpret our lives and shape our everyday living. To say it another way: praying regularly for the reign of God to come into our lives can shape us into people who live according to that reign here and now.

As we gather at the Table we hear the invitation proclaiming that people will come from north and south, from east and west, to sit at Table in the kingdom of God. These words invite us to envision a world without artificial boundaries, a world where diverse humans can see in one another the common bond of humanity as the family of God. I have heard and said these words all my life. I believe them and have attempted to live in accordance with them. But I never really experienced the fullness of the image until I attended the Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Canberra in 1991. Here there really were people from east and west, north and south, sharing wonderful and joyful worship even as we argued deeply about the war that was raging in the Persian Gulf.

One day, in Canberra, we all experienced a dramatic instance of people coming from different places to sit together at Table in the kingdom of God. After many years of negotiation, the Protestant church of mainland China and the churches of Taiwan came together to join officially the World Council of Churches. Representatives of Chinese and Taiwanese churches participated in a simple ceremony of affirming the principles and mission statement of the Council. Current members affirmed their readiness to welcome these new members. Then two old enemies turned to one another, bowed, shook hands and embraced. Meanwhile, an Orthodox priest led all of us in singing one of the Taizé refrains: *Laudate omnes gentes, laudate Dominum* (Praise the Lord, all you people; Praise the Lord). In the midst of a world of death, these ancient words called us to celebrate a sign of life; the words of worship reminded us of how we all can live.

This relationship between the words of worship and our life in the world is nowhere clearer than in the liturgy of Baptism. The service

begins with scriptural reminders of who we, the baptized, are and are to become: clothed with Christ and no longer divided by race, status or gender; people chosen to proclaim the mighty acts of God; those who have died with Christ so that we may be raised with him and thus walk in newness of life. Baptism is about how we promise to live: turning away from sin and evil; accepting Christ as the one who rules and redeems our lives; living so as to show forth the love of Christ to the end of life.

Baptism is the sign that we have been claimed by God. It is also our commitment to live each and every day — in family, workplace and leisure — according to the example of Jesus. Reaffirming the baptismal covenant allows each of us to reflect on the quality of our living, on the values our lives reflect, and on the call to do justice, to make peace, to serve the least and the last and the lost. Baptism is (or can be) the place where we reflect on who God calls each one of us to be in the community in which we live because baptism is an expression of our calling and our living.

Sitting at Table together reminds us of our constant need for nourishment and that God's creatures need food for the body as well as manna for the soul. In the words of songwriter John McCutcheon, the Lord's Table is the place where "everybody's got enough, tho' we ain't got alot." And *everybody's* got a place at the Table. Lives shaped by this vision cannot help but be moved toward strategies for eliminating hunger and poverty, asking questions about food production and distribution. The Table asks us about justice as well as compassion. Listen to the theme of living God's vision as it is voiced in one of the Great Prayers of Thanksgiving from the *Book of Common Worship*:

Gracious God, by your Spirit, unite us with the living Christ and with all who are baptized in his name, that we may be one in ministry in every place. As this bread is Christ's body for us, send us out to be the body of Christ in the world. Help us to love as Christ loved. Knowing our own weakness, may we stand with all who stumble. Sharing in his suffering, may we remember all who suffer. Held in his love, may we embrace all whom the world decries. Rejoicing in his forgiveness, may we forgive all who sin against us. Give us strength to serve you faithful until the promised day of resurrection, when with the redeemed of all ages we will feast with you at your table in glory.

One September morning in 1993, something happened that many thought might take several more generations: the government of Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization signed peace accords beginning the process of Palestinian self-government in territory held by Israel. I heard most of the ceremony on the radio, and I was struck not only by the solemnity and the emotion of the event, but by the religious content of the remarks. President Clinton spoke about the longing for that holy land to be a land of shalom, salam, peace. He reminded us that Christian, Muslim and Jew share common heritage as the Children of Abraham. Both the Prime Minister and the President of Israel prayed and invited the assembled group to say, "Amen". Chairman Arafat began his remarks, not with formal greetings, but with the words "In the name of God the all-merciful and all-compassionate." If you were not familiar with the biblical story, some of the speeches must have been a little difficult to follow.

What struck me, however, was that this momentous event, this baby-step towards peace, drove political leaders to their roots in their worship-life which is (both for good and for ill) deeply involved in the controversy itself. The peace accords were an answer to prayer, and all of the speakers knew it. Their traditions as people who worship gave them words when everyday words would not do. By using the language of worship, these leaders signaled that what they did ranged far beyond their own skill and ingenuity and even courage. What they did came from the heart of God.

The *Book of Common Worship* is a gift. It is offered to us, that through its use, our lives may be both nourished and challenged. I add my prayer as well, that faithful use and adaptation of this resource may draw us closer one to another as we are drawn deeper into the mystery of God.

THE PROMISE OF PRESBYTERIAN LITURGICAL RENEWAL

J. Frederick Holper

INTRODUCTION

The publication of the *Book of Common Worship*¹ (1993) invites Presbyterians to think seriously about the central, formative role worship plays in our common life. Having been privileged to do some work on this project and having watched its progress through my years as a young pastor, then as a doctoral student in liturgical studies, and now as a professor of liturgy, I am genuinely excited about the publication of this ground-breaking servicebook. But I am also extremely anxious and cautious about what may result from it.

The true value of any denominational service book does not derive from what is printed between its covers, but from what is used and internalized in the common prayer of the church and expressed in its service of God's reign in the world week after week after week. We should take pride in what the *Book of Common Worship* represents, and we should look forward with genuine hope for what it can mean for our life together. But we must also be brutally frank. For the reality is that only a part of liturgical renewal is now done (and the easiest part at that). The really hard work has just begun. Every one of us must now be willing to serve as mid-wives in the birthing of a church renewed through its liturgy.

To paraphrase Winston Churchill, the publication of the *Book of Common Worship* is not the end of the struggle nor even the beginning of the end of it, but it is at least the end of the beginning. Because this book is now 'in play,' those who care deeply about the church and its worship can begin to redeem its promise. To that end, I will explore with you five crucial dimensions of the *Book of Common Worship's* vision of liturgical renewal, a vision that embodies its promise.

I. A CHURCH SHAPED BY THE LITURGY: WHY "COMMON" WORSHIP IS IMPORTANT

By its very title, the *Book of Common Worship* makes an implicit claim that what the church is and what it is called to do flows from and results in "common worship." In authorizing the development of a new service book, the General Assembly called for "an instrument for the

renewal of the church at its life-giving center."² That is the promise, but it is also the challenge. At least initially, I expect that some people will resist both the implicit vision of the church which has shaped the *Book of Common Worship* and the explicit terminology used to talk about that vision. Nowhere is that more likely to surface than in the notion of "common worship." The reasons for this resistance are numerous, but I will discuss two of them.

Our nation's social patterns have been shaped in large measure by two cultural default-drives: first, a tendency to see the individual rather than the community as the starting point for reflection on how the world works; and second, a tendency to be suspicious of the claims of both history and tradition. These two cultural default-drives have helped to shape the patterns of our social organizations at every point, from our national political system and our particular denominational polities to the economic system by which we produce and market goods and services. (Only in the United States is it possible to imagine someone devising a multi-level marketing system like Amway or Mary Kay.)

When we in our culture hear the term "common worship" we tend to make two connections, neither of them positive. Some of us see common worship as nothing more than a stifling prison of uniformity, one that rubs the fur of our individualism the wrong way. Others of us see common worship as "common," that is, the kind we reject year after year in favor of the "new and improved" kind.

Thus, we need to be clear at the outset that a recovery of common worship must not involve either uniformity or dullness. Rather, common worship must be precisely the sort of worship that shapes and expresses the distinctive identity and lifestyle of a common people, a community. To understand how "common worship" works, we must consider contexts in our society in which persons' identity and worth depend upon the character and patterns of relationship within communities which claim and nurture them rather than upon persons' ability to differentiate from and dominate others. The most obvious of these communities is the family.

Several years ago, *Boston Globe* columnist Ellen Goodman related a telephone conversation with the matriarch of her extended family about the family's Thanksgiving Dinner.³ It was a lengthy call because the matriarch's purpose was not only to clarify what Ms. Goodman would be bringing to the feast, but to make certain that Ms. Goodman

understood that the feast they were to share was no ordinary meal, not even an ordinary Thanksgiving meal, but rather *their family's* Thanksgiving meal. Thus the feast had to be celebrated according to the common, yet distinctive traditions of their family. As I recall, this family never served pumpkin pie, only lemon meringue. Cornbread stuffing would have been unthinkable, because stuffing was always made with oysters. Broccoli was never, ever to be served. Lest we get the idea that the entire family was just a hair off plumb, Ms. Goodman assured us that the meal did include turkey and cranberry sauce and many other traditional Thanksgiving treats. But these were served for the same reason the other things were served — because that was what it meant for *their* family to “do” Thanksgiving.

Ms. Goodman used that telephone conversation as a jumping off place for thinking about the way Thanksgiving functions ritually, the way it forms and maintains a distinctive community. Over the years, children grow up and strike out on their own, while parents and grandparents age and die. Nieces and nephews marry spouses for whom the family's distinctive, strong traditions always seem, at first, a bit overwhelming. Occasionally someone has been divorced, and the hole in the family fabric is knit back together only around the Thanksgiving table.

Ms. Goodman concluded that Thanksgiving was the highest of holy days for Americans because of its ritual and symbolic density. The meal never changes but the table-talk always does. The meal — not the menu *per se* but the ritual event of eating and drinking together — keeps families rooted in their distinctive communal identities, while the ever-changing table-talk helps families to bear communal identities in a fast-paced, constantly-changing world.

Something like that vision of both community and corporate worship lies behind the texts and orders and rubrics for worship in the *Book of Common Worship*. Common worship needs a common people, a community sharing a common identity and bearing that identity in an ever-changing world. Without common worship, sustaining a community of shared identity and commitment becomes difficult, if not impossible. Common worship is able to renew the church at its life-giving center by gathering a people to do the same things week after week: to remember who they are, to share a meal rooted in their communal identity as the body of Christ, and to engage in table-talk about the possibilities for their service of God's reign in the world.

Common worship does not require uniformity any more than the ritual success of Thanksgiving depends upon every family eating exactly the same foods cooked in precisely the same way. Indeed, any tradition of common worship worthy of the name must encourage and embrace precisely the kind of variety to which Ms. Goodman bears witness in recounting her family's thanksgiving celebration. But for variety to strengthen rather than diminish the church's communal identity each Lord's Day, common worship needs a menu of shared reflective practice, a menu in which scripture, sermon and sacrament function interactively as the critical core.

II. RECLAIMING OUR LITURGICAL HERITAGE: SCRIPTURE AS TABLE TALK

Embracing our Reformed heritage means honoring the norms of the Protestant Reformation: grace alone, faith alone, scripture alone⁴. For us, the Bible can never be a mere sourcebook for readings and preaching. Rather, scripture must be the generative norm for our common life, including what we do in worship. For the pioneers of our tradition, scripture was not only a sword with which to purge the church's worship of corruption and superstition, it was the taproot of the church's piety and the only fitting source for its sung praise of God in worship. No worship service in Geneva or Edinburgh ever began or ended without acknowledging God's grace and power in the words of scripture.

Unfortunately, scripture's generative role in our tradition of worship has diminished. Prayers too often become arguments for the correctness of a particular position couched in the abstract language of theology or morality, instead of a recital of God's mighty acts in history drawn from the concrete images of scripture. The discipline of reading and preaching through entire books of both Testaments Sunday after Sunday too often has given way to topical preaching, sometimes with only a verse or two of scripture being read. In this century, congregations stopped singing the psalms in worship, and started reading them; by the 1970's, psalms had all but disappeared from our servicebook and hymnal.

The critical core — of scripture, sermon and sacrament — remained formally in place, but the integral relationship between them was absent or underdeveloped. Infants were baptized early in the service and then removed to a nursery, thus depriving the congregation of a visible reminder of God's covenant promise as they listened

reading and interpretation of scripture. The continuing significance of baptism for a community gathered around the Word was inadequately developed in our rites for baptism. Preachers tended to make few allusions to the baptismal and eucharistic identity of the community, because the Lord's Supper was celebrated infrequently.

The *Book of Common Worship* powerfully reclaims the *sola scriptura* mantle of our forebears, insisting that any renewal of the church at its lifegiving center must be rooted in scripture's witness to God's covenant relationship with Israel and the church sealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Scripture must never again be reduced to the formal norm for the church's worship. It must also and always be the material norm as well: the source for its readings, the image grid from which the symbolic language of its prayer is to be drawn, the lens through which the rich, multiple meanings of the sacraments are brought into clearer focus.

The Book of Common Worship restores scripture to its place at the center of our reflective practice. It does so in many different ways: through the provision of lectionaries for both the Lord's Day service and daily prayer, through its use of scriptural metaphor as the key source of language in its prayers, and through restoring the fullness of scripture's witness to the meaning of the sacraments.

The divided churches of Christendom have been fighting over the meaning and purpose of baptism for centuries, but this fight has been waged mostly around a fairly narrow range of issues. Some say baptism is for all, including infants, and can be administered by pouring or sprinkling alone. Others insist baptism is only for mature believers, and must be done by immersion. Scholars disagree about the evidence regarding these questions, but the important point is that scripture itself never raises or answers either question directly. The New Testament church was less concerned with when and how baptism was administered than with what being baptized meant in shaping the identity and ministry of the church as the body of Christ in the world.

Because of these historic divisions, Presbyterian baptismal rites traditionally have focused on texts and theological positions which support infant baptism. While not unimportant, these texts do fall short of witnessing to the depth of scripture's understanding of baptism: as dying and rising with Christ, as incorporation into a priestly people, as entrance into a new community in which hierarchies based on culture, economic status and gender are prohibited, etc.

The early church reflected on baptism's meaning in the light of all the wondrous events in salvation history in which God redeemed a people in the midst of waters. Every time someone was baptized, the church told its saving story so that the identity of both the candidates and the community could be reinforced and celebrated. This, the new baptismal rites suggest, is what it means to worship *sola scriptura*. Consider carefully the differences in imagery and cadence between the baptismal prayer from *The Worshipbook* and the prayer over the water from the *Book of Common Worship*.

The Worshipbook (1970)

God our Father: we thank you for your faithfulness, promised in this sacrament, and for the hope we have in your Son, Jesus. As we baptize with water, baptize us with Holy Spirit, so that what we say may be your word and what we do may be your work. By your power, may we be made one with Christ our Lord in common faith and purpose. O God, who called us from death to life: we give ourselves to you, and with the church through all ages, we thank you for your saving love in Jesus Christ our Lord.⁵

Book of Common Worship (1993)

We give you thanks, Eternal God, for you nourish and sustain all living things by the gift of water. In the beginning of time, your Spirit moved over the watery chaos, calling forth order and life. In the time of Noah, you destroyed evil by the waters of the flood, giving righteousness a new beginning. You led Israel out of slavery, through the waters of the sea, into the freedom of the promised land. In the waters of the Jordan, Jesus was baptized by John and anointed with your spirit. By the baptism of his own death and resurrection, Christ set us free from sin and death, and opened the way to eternal life. We thank you, O God, for the water of baptism. In it we are buried with Christ in his death. From it we are raised to share in his resurrection. Through it we are reborn by the power of the Holy Spirit. Send your Spirit to move over this water that it may be a fountain of deliverance and rebirth. Wash away the sin of all who are cleansed by it. Raise them to new life, and graft them to the body of Christ. Pour out your Holy Spirit upon them, that they may have power to do your will, and continue forever in the risen life of Christ. To you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one God, be all praise, honor, and glory, now and forever. Amen.⁶

One way to think about the use of scripture in all of the rites in the *Book of Common Worship* is by analogy to the Passover Seder. In the

course of the Seder, the youngest child in the family asks the question, "Why is this night different from all other nights?" In baptism, we implicitly ask: "Why is this bath different from all other baths?" At the Lord's Supper, we ask: "Why is this meal different from all other meals?" The answer to these questions, like the answer to the child's question at Passover, can only be answered by telling the biblical story of how God creates, redeems and sustains us as God's people over time.

III. THE WAY THINGS MEAN: WHY SYMBOLIC WORDS AND GESTURES ARE IMPORTANT

The third key to understanding the significance of the *Book of Common Worship* is the way in which it pays attention, not just to what things mean, but how they mean. Presbyterians are most comfortable when we can analyze and explain everything. That is why we insist on professionally-trained ministers, and why we have a constitution that spells out in sometimes mind-numbing detail what we believe, how we will live together, what is appropriate for worship, and when somebody has stepped over the line. Using words with precision and clarity is something we value, and so we should.

The down side is that Presbyterians are often exceedingly uncomfortable with what we cannot analyze or describe precisely. All things being equal, we want words to have "this" meaning and not "that" one; we want a particular rite to accomplish one thing and not some other thing every time we celebrate it. The problem is that human life is rarely neat and precise; it is more often unbelievably messy and complicated. Even the most mundane events bear a surplus of meaning that we can spend a lifetime discovering and still not exhaust.

Nowhere is our tradition's historical preference for clarity over mystery more obvious than in our hesitancy about embracing non-verbal symbolism in worship. Theologically, our hesitancy is rooted in our tradition's concern about idolatry. We rightly resist any attempt to confuse the creator with the creation. But we are also inconsistent. The words we feel so comfortable using are no less symbols — and no less open to idolatrous uses — than things that makes us feel uncomfortable: gestures like blessing and anointing, or movements like dancing and processions, or elements like bread and wine and oil. The problem does not lie with the words or the

movements or the elements *per se*, but with their misuse. When they call attention to themselves, they obscure our personal encounter with God, and so become idolatrous. But they can also function as means by which God invites us to explore the mystery of God's redemptive presence and purpose in the world.

The *Book of Common Worship* encourages rather than discourages the symbolic dimension of worship. Where earlier servicebooks downplayed or discouraged ritual gestures, and made the language of prayer serve the goal of understanding a theological claim, the *Book of Common Worship* encourages ritual gesture and movement, choosing to focus the language of prayer so it engages all the senses, and thus invites people to participate in the mystery of God's redemptive purposes. Mysteries are like symbols. They remain resistant to any final comprehension, because each time we enter into them we discover a surplus of meaning we had not seen before.

The rites in the *Book of Common Worship* invite the whole person and the whole community to participate in a symbolic journey of discovery. Thus, the rites for Baptism and Renewal of the Baptismal Covenant bid us to "grow into our baptism," to explore how baptism means to a child, how baptism means to a couple who will follow Christ in the particular relationship of marriage, how baptism means to those whose life has been changed by disease, divorce or disability, how baptism means for those facing death.

This does not mean that worship — particularly the sacraments — has no objective dimension. Rather, the objective meaning is discovered again and again in new depth and breadth as sacramental celebration draws us into the mystery of God's covenant relationship with us in Jesus Christ, a relationship whose depth and breadth is never fully exhausted or comprehended. God presents Godself to us in new ways each time we encounter God in the sacraments no matter how often we celebrate them.

Perhaps an analogy can be drawn between our encounter with God in ritual events and the encounter between lovers in a marriage. In both cases, people use repeated symbolic words and gestures to explore, celebrate, and understand what it means to be one with and for each other within the context of a larger network of relationships. But in neither case is the meaning of marriage ever exhausted by any single encounter. Rather, as husbands and wives communicate with one another through a variety of symbolic words and gestures, they find

themselves drawn into discovering and exploring the breadth and depth of their relationship to one another and to those around them. In like manner, each time we encounter God in Word and Sacrament we use ritually thick symbolic words and gestures to discover and explore the breadth and depth of our covenant relationship with God. As we participate in those symbols again and again in the changing circumstances of life, our understanding of the meaning of that relationship deepens and broadens but is never exhausted.

This point is critically important because it offers a foundation for realizing why very young children should be actively involved in the worship life of the church, including participating in the eucharist. Some, perhaps most, believe that children should not take communion until they "understand what it means." But such a viewpoint equates understanding the sacrament's meaning with comprehending the church's teaching on the sacrament, which is not the same thing. If the sacrament is not primarily about comprehending a doctrine, but about participating at ever deeper levels in the mystery of God's covenant relationship to us in Jesus Christ, then two things seem obvious. First, those whom God has claimed as "children of the covenant" have a right and obligation to participate in that covenant meal. Second, developing a child's openness to, comfort with, and capacity to participate in, symbolic language and gesture should be a major concern for church educators.

IV. BECOMING ONE IN CHRIST: WHY ENCOURAGING DIVERSITY WITHIN COMMON WORSHIP IS IMPORTANT FOR EXPERIENCING THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH

The fourth perspective which finds clear expression in the *Book of Common Worship* is a genuine commitment to diversity within the church's common worship, not for its own sake but as a way of experiencing and making visible the unity of Christ's church. Given the dizzying diversity of worship now evident from one congregation to another within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the notion of encouraging diversity in worship may strike some as having the same potential for good as pumping gasoline on a forest fire. To be sure, when there is no commitment to common worship as I have described it, diversity can as easily baptize division as manifest unity. But the opposite is also true. Any view of common worship which fails to encourage and honor diversity — not as exceptions to the church's

common worship but as evidence of it — simply baptizes the preferences of one part of the body of Christ over another.

Too often, denominational service-books, as well as the day-to-day experience of many congregations, have either claimed the norm of diversity and rejected the importance of common worship, or have claimed the norm of common worship and rejected the importance of diversity. What must be understood is that spontaneity and diversity, and the structure of common worship, are complementary. Like art and play, worship functions best when familiarity with the “way things are done” frees people to be imaginative. The *Book of Common Worship* tries to hold these two dimensions of worship together, in at least the following ways:

First, improving upon a strategy first introduced in *The Worshipbook*, the *Book of Common Worship* begins its presentation of the Service for the Lord’s Day by describing the basic theological movement at the heart of the church’s central liturgical gathering — from Gathering, to Word, to Eucharist, to Sending. Phenomenologically, this movement invites the church to move from hearing to doing, from proclamation to thanksgiving, from Word to Table. The *Book of Common Worship* offers a theological rationale for how the individual elements of Sunday worship serve this underlying movement, proposing a specific outline for ways these elements might be ordered to embody this movement most effectively. Only then does the *Book of Common Worship* provide texts for possible use in the liturgy. Here we find a major improvement over *The Worshipbook*.

Whereas the 1970 book provided only a handful of alternative texts for use in the Lord’s Day Service, the 1993 book includes hundreds of alternatives, a collection made even more diverse by the inclusion of specific texts for all the feasts and Sundays of the liturgical year. Finally, the *Book of Common Worship* gives explicit warrant for alternative placement of particular elements within the service, as well as for enriching and refining the order.

Second, the *Book of Common Worship* honors and encourages the importance of free prayer as a manifestation of the church’s common worship. It is difficult to produce a book of common prayer which adequately represents the tradition of free prayer because, by definition, free prayer is offered on behalf of a particular community of faith gathered for a specific liturgical event at a specific time and place. As a result, it usually doesn’t “travel” well from one event to another.

Thus, the *Book of Common Worship* includes free prayer as a numbered option at every significant part of the liturgy. Rubrics are provided to help leaders understand the various prayers' theological and liturgical functions, and to suggest a basic movement or outline. This encourages pastors and congregations to voice the church's faith in the distinctive rhythms and metaphors of their particular cultures.

At Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, students who already are ordained in their own traditions may be invited to preside at the Lord's Supper during our Friday chapel service. On one occasion, an African-American Baptist student, who shares with me a vision about the nature of common worship, offered an *ex tempore* Great Prayer of Thanksgiving. Using cadences, rhythms and imagery drawn from his culture and religious heritage, he offered a prayer that I could never duplicate but which surely sounded the thanksgiving that I would have wanted to offer had I presided that day.

Third, and perhaps most significant, the rubrics of the *Book of Common Worship* are intentionally inviting and inclusive rather than demanding and exclusive. In evaluating a servicebook it is tempting to pay attention only to the prayer texts and service outlines. But the ethos of a book's vision of common worship is most often found in its rubrics, what might be called its "rules for playing the game." The rubrics of the *Book of Common Worship* avoid wherever possible the words "shall" and "must" in favor of words like "may" and "is encouraged to."

Any book of common worship can only provide a framework and a vision for encouraging and celebrating the diversity which is essential if we are to experience our unity as one body in Jesus Christ. The only authentic limits to diversity are those which are necessary because of who we are and what we are called by God to do in the world. Michael Jordan is the most talented and versatile basketball player ever to play the game, in part because of his unique ability to use his manifold gifts in different ways depending on what others — his own teammates as well as his opponents — are doing. The only limit imposed on him is that he play by the rules of basketball and not some other sport. If he were to tackle his opponent whenever he made a rebound, or land an upper-cut to the chin of the person guarding him, his "diversity" would be out of bounds. So it is in worship. Each congregation has distinctive gifts, and each of them experiences and responds to God's presence and call in the distinctive accents, music,

colors, and voices of particular subcultures. Diversity and indigenization of the church's common worship within these particular subcultures is not only desirable, it is absolutely necessary. The only limit is that we play by the norms of the church's common worship and not merely the norms which support a particular lifestyle enclave.

V. LEARNING TO HUNGER AND THIRST FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS: WORSHIP AND THE CHURCH'S VOCATION OF SERVING GOD'S REIGN IN THE WORLD

The final normative principle is that the church's common worship is the fundamental matrix within which the community of Christ's disciples is formed and empowered for its service of God's Reign in the world. The church's faithfulness and obedience in its ministry to, for, with, and against the world for the sake of the gospel is the ultimate test of the authenticity of its common worship.

Every way of worshiping forms people in some way and equips them to do some thing. But not every way of worshiping adequately forms people to become the community the *Book of Order* talks about when it calls the church "the provisional demonstration of what God intends for all humanity," even at the cost of its own life.⁷ That kind of community does not come into being easily or naturally. It comes only when people learn how to long for the coming of God's Kingdom, when they learn to experience hunger and thirst for righteousness. Authentic common worship enables us to claim that longing, and experience that hunger and thirst, by bringing into focus a different vision of the "way things are" in the world, by rehearsing alternative patterns of relationship and commitment to one another and the world, and by training us in what to care about and how to do it.

We have long acknowledged the importance of preaching in these tasks, but we have not been as attentive to the formative power of worship. With the *Book of Common Worship*, however, we begin to see how the liturgy as a whole shapes a people for their vocation in the world. There is no time to note all the major ways in which this can happen, but we can examine one instance.

The single most important way the church can learn to see the world with new eyes is to celebrate the Lord's Supper on every

Lord's Day. The Service for the Lord's Day includes a variety of elements that invite us to explore the meaning and purpose of discipleship without celebrating the sacrament, but the eucharist brings all of those elements to focus within the context of an event rooted in the most basic of human needs — the need to eat and drink together in the company of those with whom we share a common identity and a common purpose.

The Great Prayer of Thanksgiving begins with a dialogue that seems somewhat curious: "Lift up your hearts", says the presider. "We lift them to the Lord," the community answers. "Let us give thanks to the Lord our God," she says. "It is right to give our thanks," the community answers. The ancient text of which this is a translation actually says a good deal more: "It is truly right and just" to give God thanks and praise.⁸ And so we do, rehearsing the essential contours of the whole story of what God has done, is doing, and promises to do for us and for the world in Jesus Christ. Having looked up to see how things "really are," and having acknowledged God's purpose for the world as the only "truly right and just" way of living, we promise to offer our lives in God's service, literally betting our future on the future God has promised to the world in Christ Jesus. The heart of what it means to serve God's reign in the world is captured well in the concluding lines of eucharistic prayer B in the *Book of Common Worship*:

Gracious God, by your Spirit unite us with the living Christ and with all who are baptized in his name, that we may be one in ministry in every place. As this bread is Christ's body for us, send us out to be the body of Christ in the world. Help us to love as Christ loved. Knowing our own weakness, may we stand with all who stumble. Sharing in his suffering, may we remember all who suffer. Held in his love, may we embrace all whom the world decries. Rejoicing in his forgiveness, may we forgive all who sin against us. Give us strength to serve you faithfully until the promised day of resurrection, when with the redeemed of all ages we will feast with you at your table in glory.⁹

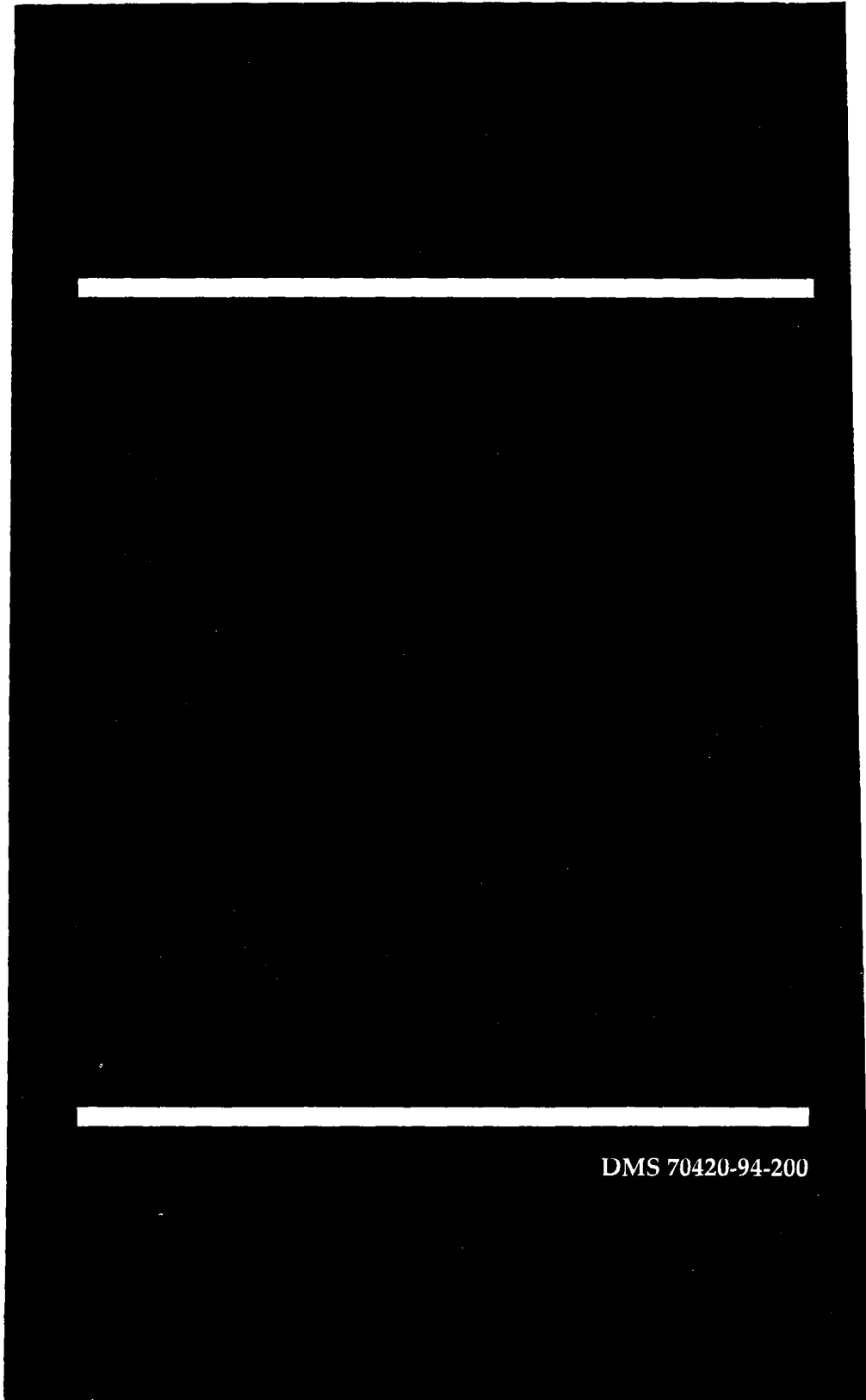
How shall we pull all of these dimensions of common worship together? Mark Searle's essay "Serving the Lord with Justice,"¹⁰ captures quite well, I believe, both the challenge and the promise of

the *Book of Common Worship*. And so I will end with a quotation:

The eucharistic assembly is the place where justice is proclaimed, but [the assembly] is neither a classroom nor a political rally nor a hearing. It is more like a rehearsal room where actions must be repeated over and over until they are thoroughly assimilated and perfect — until, that is, the actors have totally identified with the part assigned to them. The liturgical action is a rehearsal of the Kingdom first enacted upon the human stage in the meals that Jesus shared with outcasts and sinners. In it we learn to understand the drama of God's justice as it unfolds in our world and to identify with the role assigned to us so that we may play it effectively in our lives and eventually before the throne of God for all eternity, when his justice will be established beyond all compromise.¹¹

ENDNOTES

- ¹ The Theology and Worship Ministry Unit, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *Book of Common Worship*. Louisville, Ky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993.
- ² The language of the overture is quoted here from the "Preface" of the *Book of Common Worship*, p.5.
- ³ This account is based upon the author's recollection of the column, since my copy of the text of the original column has been misplaced.
- ⁴ *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.): Part II: The Book of Order*, Louisville, Ky.: Office of the General Assembly, 1994. Cf. G-2.0400.
- ⁵ Joint Office of Worship, *The Worshipbook: Services and Hymns*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972, p. 45.
- ⁶ *Book of Common Worship* (1993), p. 410-411.
- ⁷ Cf. *The Book of Order*, G-3.0200, 3.0400.
- ⁸ The Latin version from which the contemporary translation has been made is "*Vere dignum et justum est*" (ET: It is truly right and just).
- ⁹ *Book of Common Worship* (1993), p. 129.
- ¹⁰ Mark Searle, "Serving the Lord with Justice," in Mark Searle, ed., *Liturgy and Social Justice*, Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1980, pp. 13-35.
- ¹¹ Mark Seale, "Serving the Lord with Justice," p.32



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