BRIAN WREN

Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany

LITURGIES *and* PRAYERS *for* PUBLIC WORSHIP

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Contents

Items marked Years A, B, or C are for general use but designed also to go with the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL).

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Introduction

This book is for Christian public worship in any size of group or congregation. It consists of orders of worship (liturgies) and worship elements, including calls to worship, collects, litanies, thanksgivings, confessions of sin, and affirmations of faith for use in worship during the four weeks before Christmas (Advent), Christmas, and after Christmas as far as the first Sunday in the New Year (Epiphany).

The Sundays in Advent together with Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, and New Year's Eve/Day are high points in the Christian calendar, and there is a continuing need for worship resources. This book tries to meet the need with material that is theologically sound, creative, Scripture oriented, and crafted to encourage vigorous and rhythmic public utterance. Each item is original, and almost all are published here for the first time.

Some of the liturgies are for use within a congregation's own order of worship, for example, the Hanging of the Greens and the lighting of Advent candles. At Christmas, three complete Services of Scripture and Song offer fresh alternatives to the King's College Cambridge Service of Lessons and Carols.

The worship elements in this book are suitable for a variety of worship traditions and are intended for use within a congregation's customary order of worship. Some items are best spoken by a worship leader on behalf of the congregation; some can be spoken by a congregation; and others can be spoken responsively by two or more worship leaders or by leader and congregation. Each item is prefaced by a brief explanation of how it can most appropriately be used.

In order to expand the worship repertoire still further, each section of the book includes a selection of my hymn and song lyrics, some of which are not available in hymnals. The music of these hymns can be accessed on the publisher's Web site. To make the material user-friendly, permission is given to reproduce the prayers and liturgies free of charge in noncommercial worship materials, such as printed or projected worship orders. Hymns have different requirements, but permission to reproduce them is inexpensively obtained. (See p. ix.)

Theme Based or Lectionary Based?

Many congregations choose Scripture readings to follow particular Scripture narratives or themes or to hear complete books of the Bible. Many others follow the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL), which provides Scripture readings and a psalm for every Sunday in the Christian Year and covers significant portions of the Bible during its three-year cycle (Years A, B, and C).

Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany is intended for both types of congregation. All the worship materials in this book are compatible with the RCL days and read-

ings listed. RCL users will find prayers and other liturgical elements for every Sunday from Advent to Epiphany in all three lectionary years.

In the Advent to Epiphany season, congregations not committed to the RCL are nonetheless likely to use a number of its Scripture selections, such as the nativity narratives in Matthew and Luke and the "messianic" sections of Isaiah and the Psalms. The Scripture index points the way to materials drawn from such passages, while the topical index lists items usable on other occasions during the year. The book is Scripture based and Scripture oriented: every item is drawn from or prompted by an RCL reading.

Approaching Scripture

Prayers and other worship elements described as from, drawn from, prompted by, echoing, or responding to a Bible passage have varying degrees of relationship to it, including paraphrase, partial quotation, and language intended to honor but not imitate it. I have sometimes given chapter-and-verse, sometimes not.

Readings from the Bible and references to it are mostly from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), an ecumenical translation that has been widely adopted and improves greatly on previous revisions of the historic King James (Authorized) Version.

To take one example, the NRSV recognizes that many occurrences of Hebrew and Greek words literally meaning male human beings or male siblings were not addressed to all-male audiences or communities but to audiences or communities of women and men—and sometimes, also, children. When the apostle Paul calls his recipient congregations literally "brothers," he is merely following linguistic convention and clearly intends to include both genders. Thus, where the original has such words, formerly and elsewhere rendered "men" or "brothers," the NRSV makes a more accurate translation by using terms such as "mortals," "human beings," and "brothers and sisters."

I have sometimes amended the NRSV in the interests of liturgical flow—for example by dropping the occasional "and" to improve speech rhythms—and by shortening or taking extracts from some quotations in the Advent Candles liturgies, where the aim is to mark an essential element in the source, not hear its full exposition. I have also simplified or amended the NRSV on occasion and marked the reference with an asterisk (*) to indicate that I have done so or have included my own translation. I have avoided divine pronouns (God as "he," "him," etc.) out of the conviction that English pronouns are more gender laden than their Hebrew and Greek antecedents and that biblical voices know that the Creator of male and female cannot be either.

More noticeably, perhaps, I have used nonmale alternatives to the word "Lord" throughout this book in quotations from the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament). To put the matter briefly, the word "LORD" or "the LORD" is not a *translation* of the Hebrew Name of God but instead translates a word spoken *in place of that divine Name.* In Hebrew the noun in question has the consonants

"YHWH" (perhaps originally pronounced "Yahweh") and seems to be a proper name as distinct from a title such as Shepherd, Rock—or God. By the time of Jesus, the Name "YHWH" had long been avoided in prayer and in readings from Scripture. Other words were substituted for it, such as "Elohim" (God) or most commonly "Adonai" (chieftain, governor), for which the equivalent in the England of King James was the aristocratic male rank and title "Lord." Though nowadays archaic, "Lord" still carries associations of maleness and male dominance absent from the name "YHWH." Though "Adonai" is a common substitution in Jewish worship, few Christian congregations currently use it. I have, therefore, sought other substitutions, such as "Living God" or Holy One." Sometimes I have used another Jewish substitution, "the Name" (Hebrew *Ha-Shem*).[1]

In some scripture quotations, the source is announced in general terms (e.g., "Listen to these words from the Gospel of John" on p. 4, and the chapter-and-verse reference is printed at the end in italics (*John 1:1–5 and 8–12**). A reference like this is best left unspoken, so as not to impede the flow of worship. In this particular case the asterisk indicates that I have modified the NRSV to express a Greek word that means both "understand" and "overcome." Similarly, when two or more Scriptures sources are quoted without interruption (e.g., Isa. 7:14 and Matt. 28:20 on p. 35), the chapter-and-verse references are printed but unspoken. In readings where chapter-and-verse is printed at the beginning, the speaker announces it.

Praying from This Book

The prayers and worship elements in this book will hopefully come alive by being spoken. Because we live in a visual culture, please look for ways of using video and images to give more depth to the words.

Most types of prayer will be familiar or self-explanatory. *Pastoral prayers* typically incorporate *adoration, praise, thanksgiving, confession of sin, petition* (asking God's help), and *intercession* (praying for others)—categories that also occur separately along with other kinds of utterance (e.g., *affirmation of faith, meditative* (*informal*) *prayer, call to prayer, charge,* and *blessing* (*benediction*). A litany is a series of prayers with the same repeated response (see p. xv below). A collect (pronounced "COLL-ect") aims to collect or sum up a congregation's prayers. Collects have the classic Anglican form, as in the following for Epiphany Sunday (see p. 199):

Toddler Christ,	(*Address—who are we speaking to?*)
whose light shines out,	
not from a palace,	
but from a village woman's lap,	(*Ascription—more about "who"*)
shine on us today	(*Petition—one specific request*)

1. A more complete discussion of "LORD" is in my book *Praying Twice: The Music and Words of Congregational Song* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 243–52.

through the youngest and the least,
that we may open our treasures (*Purpose—The hoped-for result*)
and give them precious gifts (*Close—Ending the prayer*)
in your name. Amen.

Ecstasy and Economy

In many (not all) Pentecostal and Black American traditions, public prayer is ecstatic—an outpouring of praise, petition, lament, and intercession with vocal congregational participation. When congregation and preacher are steeped in the King James (Authorized) Version of the Bible, the preacher can draw on that knowledge so that the prayer becomes an unscripted Scripture-laden utterance.

At the other end of the spectrum, public prayer in Anglican (Episcopal) and Lutheran traditions tends toward economy. It is mostly or often Scripture based; highly scripted; screened prepublication for theology, brevity, clarity, and speech rhythms; and spoken from a printed worship order, prayer book, or other service book. When scripted prayers are internalized, they can sometimes be spoken without thought. Alternatively, their very familiarity can prompt intense awareness.

Scripted, unscripted, economic, ecstatic—the boundaries shift and blur. Psalms 34, 103, and others are scripted but impassioned. Some people steeped in Anglican and Lutheran traditions can utter new unscripted collects, perfectly formed.

Economic and ecstatic prayers have one important thing in common. Like the biblical prayers from which they are ultimately derived, they originate in an intensely oral culture, where prayer was chanted or spoken and in the best sense publicly "performed." Their natural habitat is as speech spoken and heard, not a text read silently on a page or grudgingly grumbled in a classroom.

Obviously, the prayers in this book are scripted. Some tend toward economy. Others, I hope, are touched with the ecstatic. They risk being dead in the water if treated with—dare I say it—Methodist mumble or Presbyterian plod. To bring the prayers to life as committed public speech, try the following teaching moves and action strategies:

1. Periodically remind one another that in our culture, public speaking by a group is an uncommon activity outside church. *To speak together in worship is therefore countercultural.* Not perhaps objectionable, but certainly a little odd. We do it not out of habit but for good reason—because we belong together in Christ and by speaking with conviction together we commit ourselves publicly to Christ and to one another. This being so, it's important to speak out—not to shout, but not to mumble either.
2. When we speak aloud together, we do not speak for ourselves alone. We speak also for those who cannot join in, for whatever reason: literal speechlessness, grief, loss, heartache, disappointment, depression, or hurt. We

voice a faith some long for but do not yet have, a trust that some are as yet unable to share, and a hope that we ourselves perhaps go in and out of, but which belongs to the whole company of Christ's people.

3. Resist market anxiety—the culturally conditioned consumerist impulse to make every prayer, every Sunday, "new" and "different"—even if very rarely "improved!" Worship thrives on familiarity as well as on innovation. So choose a few prayers from this book and repeat them over several weeks until they become familiar. Then, if they can also be used at other times of the year, revisit them periodically.
4. When using a short prayer such as a Collect, sometimes ask the congregation to read it over silently for a few minutes and quietly say it to nonreaders or sight-impaired neighbors—and then to speak it together (not "read it") from the heart.
5. Ask a choir or form a speaking team to lead/perform some of the litanies, such as "By God's Generous Love" (p. 162) or "God Alone, Through Jesus Christ" (p. 171), to demonstrate how they sound as committed public utterance. Optionally have the congregation sing or say the response.

Format and Typeface

The worship elements and liturgies in this book are formatted in short lines rather than spread out in prose paragraphs across the page. This format is intentional and important. Whether spoken by one voice or many, public prayer is closer to poetry than prose and should, therefore, look more like poetry than prose. If it looks like poetry, it will tend to be spoken accordingly.

Thus, the materials in this book are formatted in short "sense lines" (sometimes called "thought lines" or "breath lines") whereby each line contains enough sense to be understood as a unit even when it is grammatically inseparable from the next. When there is no punctuation mark, the end of the line denotes an almost imperceptible pause, as in the previously quoted collect for Epiphany Sunday (see p. xii):

Toddler Christ

(*Spoken by a worship leader or in unison*)

Toddler Christ, whose light shines out,
not from a palace,
but from a village woman's lap,
shine on us today
through the youngest and the least,
that we may open our treasures
and give them precious gifts
in your name.

If this prayer is spoken in unison, some congregations may need a word of explanation to avoid getting out of step at "today," "treasures," and "gifts."

If you copy items from this book, please preserve their format, even if some unwritten law urges you to cram as much text as possible into a horizontal, two-page spread. If you want to save trees, recycle bulletins or print them on recycled paper!

In the liturgies and worship elements, three typestyles are used: plain, bold, and italics. In prayers and liturgies other than litanies, plain type is used for the worship leader or for the leading voice when there is more than one speaker. Line spaces between sections show how different voices can be assigned. Bold type denotes the responding voice(s) or the whole congregation. Copy or project the whole prayer if the congregation is responding.

In most of the litanies, one voice speaks a repeated cue, called a bidding, to which one or more voices or the whole congregation say a response. Some biddings and responses can also be sung. Because bidding and response are easily learned, litanies are friendly to nonreaders (adult or child), prereaders, and sight-impaired worshipers because it is not essential to print them. The bidding (*in italics*) and response (**in bold**) are spoken responsively by a worship leader and congregation or by two worship leaders, or the bidding and response are the same phrase, spoken and then echoed (e.g., "*Thanks be to God*—**Thanks be to God**"). If you project or print a litany, help nonreaders, prereaders, and sight-impaired worshipers by announcing and practicing the bidding and response immediately before the prayer begins. To add musical enrichment, use the sung responses provided or make up your own. Teach the melody by ear, with or without a printed melody line.

Language and Theology

Grounded in Trinitarian theology, this book offers a variety of ways that the divine mystery can be encountered in public prayer. The whole being of God is addressed as Holy Trinity, wrapped in light; mysterious, hidden, and revealed; God of incomparable love; mother of creation; sovereign love; source of all wisdom; compassionate and faithful; owner and Creator; on the move; in our midst; caregiving; exuberant, life-giving; keeper of the secrets of creation; governor of creation; compassionate, mysterious, and faithful; God of promise and hope; source of loving unity; and God of surpassing peace.

The third person of the Trinity is infrequently addressed at this season of the year but is encountered as Spirit of God, Holy Spirit, and life-changing Spirit.

The second person of the Trinity is encountered as living Christ, Jesus of Nazareth; teacher, friend, Savior, and Lord; welcoming Christ; sovereign leader; Mary's child; faithful Jew; star of hope; energetic Word; active expression of Divinity; Wisdom of God, playful and profound; agent of God's perfection; priest and minister of God; risen Christ; toddler Christ; and radiant Christ, light of the world, whose death, life, and birth are illuminated by the glory of the resurrection, as in the following hymn:

Sing my song backwards from end to beginning,
Friday to Monday, from dying to birth.
Nothing is altered, but hope changes everything:
sing "Resurrection!" and "Peace upon Earth!"

Whisper a hope through the fear in Gethsemane,
horror and emptiness darker than night;
visit the wounds, and the failure of Calvary:
sing "Resurrection!" and bathe them in light.

Gather the bones and the sinews of memory—
healings and parables, laughter and strife,
joy with the outcasts and love for the enemy—
breathe "Resurrection!" and dance them to life.

Stretch out a rainbow from cross to nativity.
Deck out the stable with shepherds and kings,
angels and miracles, glory and poetry—
Sing my song backwards, till all the world sings![2]

Brian A. Wren
November 2007

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Hymnal Abbreviations

Hymn suggestions in worship services are from a selection of recent denominational hymnals using the acronyms below. The wording varies from hymnal to hymnal. For hymn numbers, consult the first-line index. Many other hymnals have some or all of the hymns suggested.

AHB	*Together in Song: Australian Hymn Book II* (East Melbourne, Vic.: HarperCollinsReligious, 1999)
AMNS	*Hymns Ancient & Modern: New Standard* (Anglican Church, U.K.; Hymns Ancient & Modern Ltd., 1983)
BP	*The Book of Praise* (Canada, Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1997)
CH	*Chalice Hymnal* (Disciples of Christ, U.S.A.; St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1995)
CH4	*Church Hymnary—Fourth Edition* (Church of Scotland, U.K.; Church Hymnary Trust, Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2005)
ELW	*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America; Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006)
H82	*The Hymnal 1982: According to the Use of the Episcopal Church* (New York: Church Hymnal Corp., 1985)
NCH	*The New Century Hymnal* (United Church of Christ; Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1995)
PH	*The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Presbyterian Church, U.S.A.; Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990)
RJS	*Rejoice and Sing* (United Reformed Church, U.K.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991)
UMH	*The United Methodist Hymnal: Book of United Methodist Worship* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1989)
VU	*Voices United: The Hymn and Worship Book of the United Church of Canada* (Etobicoke, ON: The United Church Publishing House, 1996)