

SPECIAL AGENDA IV: Liverpool Diocesan Synod Motion

COMMON WORSHIP BAPTISM PROVISION

That this Synod request the House of Bishops to ask the Liturgical Commission to prepare material to supplement the Common Worship Baptism provision, comprising additional forms of the Decision, the Prayer over the Water and the Commission, expressed in culturally appropriate and accessible language.

A group of clergy from parishes characterized by high multiple deprivation across the Diocese of Liverpool meets regularly to support one another with the maze of funding, management and legal issues that surround the church-based project work they are engaged in. Two sessions in 2008 were given over to consideration of baptismal practice in the particular high IMD (Index of Multiple Deprivation) contexts represented, as a number of the clergy present argued that the Church of England provision and rules were problematic for them.

Our church has grappled before with the old chestnut of a tension between understandability and historic theological reference in our rites. This is as sharp as ever in Initiation rites involving large numbers of people, including key players like parents and godparents, who are unchurched. The pictures and metaphors of the service don't resonate with their knowledge and experience; the metaphors from scripture and history are unfamiliar to most (e.g. "slavery in Egypt" or "brought to birth by water and the Spirit"). It was a common experience of clergy to feel they were losing touch with congregations at important moments in the service unnecessarily. The unease expressed is not about the number of words in the service, but that those words do not connect with too many people.

The group considered a variety of practices for handling baptism requests, baptism preparation, and follow-up, but the nature and conduct of the baptism service was the subject of the majority of contributions. There were a large number of complaints about the *Common Worship* baptismal provision raised in discussion. These fell into four broad categories:

1. general concern that a universal liturgical provision may not be most appropriate for every particular context;
2. misunderstandings about those parts of the baptism provision that are mandatory, those that are normative and those that are completely dependent on the local context;
3. aspects of the service where imagination and shared creativity beyond the adherence to the bare rubrics is necessary;
4. parts of the provision that are too limited for many IMD contexts across our own diocese and where some additional provision is required.

It was partly the case that the freedoms within and permissive nature of much of the *CW* Baptismal provision was opaque to some of the Liverpool clergy group. This may be a clergy training issue or a drafting issue of text and notes. There was not a unanimous agreement about whether every complaint raised was as a result of misunderstanding the *Common Worship* liturgical provision, or whether it was a problem with the provision itself, but some consensus was reached. Consensus on each of the category areas outlined above might be summarized as follows. It is the fourth of these that gives rise directly to the motion.

1. The Church of England is a church whose doctrine and patterns of worship are intimately linked. The authorized liturgical texts of the church represent the mind of the broader church and offer good practice for worship and the formation of the people of God. These texts are embodied in law and ministers who choose to disregard them are on uncertain territory. Whilst some may break new ground for the wider church to follow, others will find themselves in cul-de-sacs. There was a general spirit among the high IMD clergy that they wanted to stay within the provision of the church as far as possible but that some of it was simply too inaccessible for the communities they served. As many who attend baptism services are not used to the language and practice of the church, the issue of accessibility was a particularly strong one in this case.
2. Not every part of the Baptism Service is mandatory and even where words are printed for priest and people to say and where no alternative is given careful attention to the rubrics can reveal where the legal flexibilities are. Examples include:

... these or other suitable words.

This means that ministers are free to write their own texts or even use unprepared texts if they want.

Use of the word 'may' means that the section may be omitted and it is generally an indication that a section is not prescriptive.

There were some complaints that the service was too long and wordy but no members of the group had worked through all the options for cutting down the word count. Some clergy were still using the 1998 paperback version of the Baptism Service although General Synod has agreed a number of subsequent changes that can affect the word count considerably and that are to be found in the 2000 *CW Main Volume* and the 2006 hardback *Common Worship: Christian Initiation*. This includes permission to use the 'ASB Decision' which is half the length and considerably shorter than the original Common Worship Decision.

3. The Baptism Service does benefit from some imaginative and creative preparation. For instance, there was very little experience in the group of encouraging a 'Testimony'. This can be a means of bringing local experience by way of a story in a local voice into the service. The service also benefits from careful thought about movement, action and use of symbols. There are ways in which members of the congregation can make contributions focused around a range of symbols. Churches in cultures where the word count matters might find the ways that people can respond to such symbols a helpful counterbalance.
4. A great deal of thought was given by the group to consider those parts of the service for which there seemed to be no other satisfactory solution than the

redrafting of the service or the drafting of additional material. When all of the flexibilities and possibilities of the existing provision were explored, three awkward paragraphs remained:

- i. *The Decision* - although the General Synod has inserted the ASB form of The Decision:

Do you turn to Christ...
Do you repent of your sins...
Do you renounce evil...

there remains some unhappiness about the language not being earthed enough. The concern is not that of 'word count' (addressed by General Synod permitting this short form), but is one of the language not making strong enough connections to life choices in such a way that it can be heard, even after preparation (note: Godparents rarely join in baptismal preparation).

- ii. *The Prayer over the Water - Common Worship* provides a normative Prayer over the Water and three seasonal ones (Epiphany/Trinity, Christmas, All Saints to Advent) but all four were felt to depend heavily on an understanding of salvation history that is not possessed by most baptism congregations in high IMD parishes. Examples of problematic sentences in the normative prayer for such congregations include:

Through water you led the children of Israel
from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land.

.....

In it we are buried with Christ in his death.

By it we share in his resurrection.

Through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit.

There was a strong plea from among the high IMD clergy for a shorter prayer in direct but poetic language that allows the gospel to resonate better with people's experience of life. This was not a plea for a prayer in *Scouse*, but for a prayer that the majority of non-theologically-versed Britons would understand. We already have such a prayer authorized for use in an emergency baptism but not for use in church:

Heavenly Father, bless this water,
that whoever is washed in it
may be made one with Christ
in the fellowship of your Church,
and be brought through every tribulation
to share the risen life that is ours in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

- iii. *The Commission - Common Worship* provides three forms of Commission:

- For parents and godparents of children too young to speak for themselves,
- For children old enough to understand but not speak for themselves,
- For those able to answer for themselves.

The second form will only ever be used to supplement the first. In some services all three forms will be used. Although the rubric says, *..using these or similar words*, it was felt that a shorter and more direct form of Commission should be drafted as an optional replacement for this whole section.

The suggestions outlined above are very modest in their scope. The current provision allows no way around i and ii. Whilst there is some flexibility over the words used for iii, it was argued by the Liverpool clergy that some supplementary material could be drafted alongside i and ii that would considerably improve what we have. The Liverpool Diocesan Synod invites the national church to respond to these observations learnt on missionary frontiers.

Tim Stratford
on behalf of Liverpool Diocesan Synod
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