

GENERAL SYNOD

LITURGICAL COMMISSION

THE USE OF THE NICENE CREED IN THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND

1. The Nicene Creed is one of the most significant, universally recognized and definitively authoritative statements of Christian faith, originating from the First Council of Nicaea in 325 AD and later expanded at the First Council of Constantinople in 381 AD. It encapsulates the trinitarian shape of Christian believing, provides a comprehensive summary of the faith of the Church, and has been a central part of Christian worship for centuries. In this paper, when we say 'Nicene Creed', we mean the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed as the Church of England's liturgies use it.
2. As the Declaration of Assent reminds us, the Church of England is part of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, and professes the faith uniquely revealed in the Holy Scriptures and set forth in the catholic creeds, which faith it is called upon to proclaim afresh in each generation.¹ In this 1700th anniversary year of the Council of Nicaea, this paper offers a reminder of the customary place of the Nicene Creed in the liturgy of the Church of England. It also argues for the normative retention of the Nicene Creed in worship, even where it is occasionally appropriate for specific pastoral reasons to use an alternative.

The normative place of the Nicene Creed in the liturgy of the Church of England

3. In the order for the Holy Communion in the *Book of Common Prayer*, the Nicene Creed is always said or sung after the reading of the Gospel.
4. Similarly, the rubrics governing Holy Communion in *Common Worship* indicate a clear expectation that the Nicene Creed 'is used on every Sunday and Holy Day and may be used on other days also' (Order Two), or (in Order One) on 'Sundays and Principal Holy Days'², though 'on occasion the Apostles' Creed or an authorized Affirmation of Faith may be used'. In other words, on Sundays and Principal Holy Days there must always be a Creed or Affirmation of Faith, which is the Nicene Creed by default, in all services of Holy Communion, though the Apostles' Creed or the Athanasian Creed or one of the Authorized Affirmations of Faith may 'on occasion' be used.
5. The introduction of A Service of the Word as a form of service in the Church of England underlines the continued importance of the catholic creeds in worship, by indicating that 'an authorized Creed' should be included in the Liturgy of the Word, unless 'occasion demands' the use of an authorized Affirmation of Faith. However, it is clear that any alternative to one of the Creeds must be one that is authorized. The adoption of a new credal text (or 'affirmation of faith') does not fall under the liturgical discretion of the minister under Canon B 5. As *New Patterns for Worship* observes, 'It is important for our unity in the catholic faith

¹ Preface to *The Declaration of Assent* (<https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/worship-texts-and-resources/common-worship/ministry/declaration-assent>).

² The Principal Feasts and Holy Days are Christmas Day, The Epiphany, The Presentation of Christ in the Temple, Ash Wednesday, The Annunciation of Our Lord to the Blessed Virgin Mary, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter Day, Ascension Day, Pentecost, Trinity Sunday, All Saints' Day.

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that any creeds used are not private or local compositions, but ones that are recognised by the wider Church.’ There is no provision for credal paraphrases sung to music, except in the metrical hymn paraphrase ‘We believe in God the Father’ by Timothy Dudley-Smith, which, notwithstanding its merits, does elide some key elements in the third paragraph of the Creed.³

6. Evidently the Apostles’ Creed and the Athanasian Creed also possess huge merits, and there is much in what follows that might apply to them. However, the Church of England’s authorized Affirmations of Faith, which may be used occasionally for pastoral reasons and which have many scriptural resonances, do not possess such theological richness and are recognised by fewer churches. Churches should carefully identify the pastoral reasons that might necessitate the occasional use of such Affirmations of Faith in Sunday worship.

Handing down the faith to subsequent generations

7. The excellence of the Nicene Creed as a liturgical expression of the faith of the Church has been recognised not only through the centuries, but also in our own part of the universal Church and in our own generation. It serves as a clear and authoritative summary of core Christian doctrines, particularly regarding the nature of God as Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It provides a definitive statement of the divinity of Christ, the personhood of the Holy Spirit, and the reality of the Church as one, holy⁴, catholic, and apostolic. These are not merely theological abstractions, but vital lenses through which we can see the world as God’s world and then come to act accordingly.
8. Frequent use of the Creed in worship reinforces these fundamental beliefs within the life of the congregation and helps to maintain this continuity with the historic Church. The profession of the Creed, especially in the form of the Apostles’ Creed, is intimately linked to baptism, and its regular repetition therefore serves to remind Christians of their abiding baptismal identity. Through the Creed, worshippers are regularly reminded of the essential truths that define and shape their faith. By embedding it into the rhythm of worship, the Church continually reaffirms its commitment to the true and historic faith handed down through the centuries. It reflects the Church’s effort to transmit faithfully the apostolic faith from one generation to the next, ensuring continuity with the teachings of Jesus Christ and his apostles, reminding today’s Christians that their beliefs are not newly invented but have been faithfully handed down through the centuries.

Encouraging theological exploration

9. The Nicene Creed was originally formulated to address the Arian controversy, which questioned the uncreated status of Jesus Christ. By asserting that Christ is ‘begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father,’ the Creed decisively rejects any theology that diminishes Christ’s divine nature, and guards against

³ *Common Worship* main volume, p.146.

⁴ The version of the Nicene Creed in *Common Worship* restores the original reference to the Church as being ‘holy, which was omitted in the *Book of Common Prayer*. It should be noted that the same four ‘notes’ of the Church (One, Holy, Catholic, Apostolic) are mentioned in the *Preface* to the *Declaration of Assent*.

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the resurgence of similar heresies, whether ancient or modern⁵. As the Roman Catholic Church together with the major Lutheran Churches declared in July 1965, the Nicene Faith possesses a unique status in the hierarchy of dogmas by reason of its testimony to and celebration of the mystery of the Trinity as revealed in Christ our Saviour, and by reason of its definitive reply to an ever-recurring question.⁶

10. The Nicene Creed can play a crucial role in catechesis, the formation of Christian faith, providing a concise and comprehensive summary of Christian doctrine. It continues to be a vital resource for enquirers, and for all who seek to grow and deepen their discipleship. It is an invaluable tool for teaching the faith, whether to new converts, children, or lifelong believers seeking to deepen their understanding. By reciting the Creed regularly, the Church provides ongoing catechetical formation, ensuring that all its members are familiar with the essential tenets of the faith. This catechetical function is particularly important in a time when many Christians may lack a deep understanding of their beliefs.
11. Repetition in worship is a powerful means of Christian formation. Regular recitation of the Nicene Creed helps to offer something to the shared theological understanding of the worshipper, embedding the core doctrines of the faith in the hearts and minds of believers. It enables believers to articulate their faith clearly, to engage in meaningful dialogue with others, and to live out their Christian convictions in the world. Many churches sing the words of the Creed to a familiar melody that helps people to join in and to learn the words by heart. The Nicene Creed plays a crucial role in the process of theological education, providing a solid foundation upon which further learning and spiritual growth can be built.

Unity with one another and with the global Church

12. The Nicene Creed is more than just a statement of beliefs; it is a comprehensive definition of what it means to be a Christian. By declaring the Creed, believers affirm their faith in a way that is both personal and communal, aligning themselves with the historic and universal Church. This act of affirmation is particularly important in a world where the term 'Christian' can be used in vague or widely varying ways. This corporate declaration of faith is a powerful expression of the unity of the Church. In saying the Creed together, the congregation affirms that they hold the same beliefs and share the same faith, despite any individual differences in background, culture, or personal

⁵ The version of the Nicene Creed in Common Worship, in common with other modern translations, notes that Jesus 'suffered death and was buried', helpfully adding a not insignificant word undoubtedly implied in the text found in the Book of Common Prayer. In a Christian context, παθόντα signified both suffering and death. As Christine Mohrmann put it, '[passio and πάθος] developed, in Christian circles, a very rich technical meaning: they stood for both passion and death, passion including death, of Christ and of the martyrs.' See *Études sur le latin des chrétiens*, 2nd ed., (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1961), i, 210.

⁶ *The Status of the Nicene Creed as Dogma of the Church* (7 July 1965), printed at: <https://www.usccb.org/committees/ecumenical-interreligious-affairs/status-nicene-creeddogma-church>

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experience.⁷ The Creed reinforces the bonds between members of the faithful, reminding them that they are part of a larger body—the Body of Christ. This sense of unity and the corporate nature of Christian faith is particularly important in a fragmented world, where divisions often threaten to undermine the Church’s witness.

13. Colin Podmore points out that the Declaration of Assent reveals the Church of England ‘first and foremost as a national part of the one holy catholic and apostolic Church’.⁸ The Nicene Creed is the nearest thing we have to a statement of fundamental Christian belief which is not owned by one tradition alone; it is used by Christians around the world, including Eastern and Oriental Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Anglican, and many Protestant churches.⁹ This universality makes the Nicene Creed a powerful symbol of the unity of the global Church. When Christians recite it, they are joining their voices with believers across time and space, participating in worship that transcends cultural and geographical boundaries. Frequent use of the Nicene Creed in worship helps to maintain this connection with the global Church. It reminds congregations that their faith is part of something much larger than themselves, linking them with Christians throughout history and across the world. This connection is particularly meaningful in a time when the Church often feels fragmented by denominational and cultural differences. The Creed serves as a common ground, affirming the shared beliefs that unite all Christians. It is hoped that the anniversary of the Council in 2025 will be an opportunity for the Church to rediscover the Creed as an ecumenical gift.

Witness and teaching authority

14. The corporate recitation of the Nicene Creed also serves as a public witness to the world. It is a declaration of the Church’s faith, often made in the presence of both believers and non-believers. This act of witness is particularly important in a secular context, where the public expression of Christian beliefs is often marginalized or misunderstood. The Nicene Creed represents the Church’s teaching authority, established through the ecumenical councils of Nicaea and Constantinople. These councils were convened to address theological controversies and to articulate the true Christian faith. The decisions made at these councils, and the Creed that emerged from them, carry the weight of the undivided Church’s collective discernment and authority.

The value of the Nicene Creed in ‘informal’ worship

15. The Nicene Creed is the Church’s boldest expression of Trinitarian doctrine, affirming the unity and co-equality of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Incorporating the Nicene Creed into worship, even in settings where flexibility is valued, helps to root the congregation in these essential truths. It ensures that the language we use to describe God is consistent with the historic Christian faith. The congregation is constantly reminded of the true nature of Christ—fully

⁷ This corporate affirmation of faith is emphasised in the *Common Worship* version’s restoration of the plural, ‘We believe’, in comparison to the *Book of Common Prayer* use of the singular ‘I believe’.

⁸ Colin Podmore, ‘The Church of England’s Declaration of Assent’, *Ecclesiastical Law Journal* 5 (1999), 241-251 (p.250).

⁹ The Church of England offers an ‘Alternative Text’ of the Nicene Creed that omits the ‘Filioque’ clause, which may be used ‘on suitable ecumenical occasions’.

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God and fully human—whose incarnation, death, and resurrection are the foundation of our salvation. For worship communities that value spontaneity and creativity or a more ‘free-form’ approach to worship, the Creed can serve as a doctrinal touchstone, ensuring that the worship of Christ is rooted in an accurate understanding of his identity. The Creed is not an obstacle to creativity or spontaneity; rather, it can be seen more positively as a foundation upon which vibrant and varied worship can be built and churches are encouraged to find creative ways to embrace the Nicene Creed in their worship. We are planning soon to publish some resources to enable churches and individuals to reflect on the different sections of the Creed.

16. For all congregations, the use of the Nicene Creed offers a way to maintain a connection with the broader Christian tradition. It reminds us that our faith is not something we invent anew each week but is something we have received from those who have gone before us. By incorporating the Nicene Creed into our services, we participate in a shared heritage that spans denominations and generations.

Conclusion

17. We warmly encourage all congregations within the Church of England to embrace the Nicene Creed as a central element of their worship, recognizing its enduring value for the life, mission, and unity of the Church. Whether a community’s worship is traditional or contemporary, structured or free-form, the Nicene Creed offers a way to put down an anchor in the unchanging truths of the Christian faith, enriching worship and deepening the connection to the wider Church. In an age where faith is often privatized, it serves as a bold declaration of what we believe as a Church.