

Service, schmervice: getting liturgy right

For years traditional liturgy in the Anglican Church has been spurned by many as out of date and unhelpful for newcomers. But now the pendulum is swinging back the other way amid concern we don't throw out the spiritual baby with the liturgical bathwater. ANDREW ROBINSON reports.



LITURGY is back. Sort of. After it was accused of a litany of failings — inauthentic, repetitive and outsider-unfriendly — and was largely abandoned in Sydney and across the evangelical world over the past 30 years, some people are asking if ditching liturgy was such a good idea after all.

The Archbishop of Sydney's Liturgical Panel launched the *bettergatherings.com* website with its online 'service builder' in 2009 and a successor to the 2001 *Sunday Services* 'white book' of liturgical resources is due out later this year. But a rediscovery of formal liturgy is also taking place in other, more unexpected quarters.

Redeemer Presbyterian Church, pastored by Dr Tim Keller, is a wildly successful church plant in Manhattan. But the bulk of the 4400 regular attenders — most of whom are young professionals and creatives — participate in a traditional Presbyterian service.

'It is interesting to note that, at least in Manhattan, our 'contemporary music' service has not been more effective than our classical music service in including non-believers,' Dr Keller wrote in Don Carson's *Worship by the Book*. 'If anything, the reverse has been the case.'

Dan Kimball, who is now pastor at Vintage Faith Church in California, wrote in the *Leadership Journal* that he had found younger people at the contemporary worship megachurch where he served were increasingly disillusioned with 'predetermined transitions, upbeat intro songs, announcements backed with

PowerPoint slides, sermons crafted with felt-need application points and abundant video clips'. Instead, they were asking questions about liturgy and the church calendar.

When his young adults ministry started using hymns, responsive readings and even the *Book of Common Prayer*, he writes, 'the introduction of ancient practices helped them feel grounded and rooted to something bigger than themselves'.

But a move back to formal liturgy is not a universal mood. When Kimball started speaking about this discovery at conferences, he met pastors of liturgical churches who found the opposite: their younger people were desperate to get away from practices they saw as lifeless and routine — and many in Sydney still feel the same way.

Liturgy is a slippery word. Deriving from the Greek *leitourgia*, which meant 'public service' or 'the people's work', it has come to describe formularies of prayers, responses, readings and hymns for shaping Christian gatherings. Many rightly point out that a Christian gathering with no formal prayers or set forms still has a 'liturgy' — the pattern of songs, prayers, announcements and preaching that make up the service. This is a helpful distinction to make but for the purpose of this article 'liturgy' will generally be treated as synonymous with 'formal liturgy'.

So why did churches move away from formal liturgy in the first place? Bishop Robert Forsyth, one of the thinkers behind *bettergatherings.com*, describes the shift in Sydney with three 'Rs': regulation, reaction and responsibility.

Regulation was the time of authorised

services. There were some local variations but fundamentally what happened in church was governed by the use of authorised services: the *Book of Common Prayer* (BCP) and, after 1978, *An Australian Prayer Book* (AAPB). But the introduction of alternative services in AAPB came at the same time as a radical shift in the culture at large.

"As we moved away from the *Book of Common Prayer* to other forms, people kept moving away from liturgy entirely," Bishop Forsyth says. "I think there was a real loss of faith in liturgy and a reaction against what was seen as stultifying and formal."

There were also theological and missional reasons for the change.

David Peterson teaches Anglican worship and liturgy at Moore College. He argues that a move away from describing Sunday Christian gatherings as 'worship' in an effort to emphasise the all-of-life worship of Romans 12 increasingly diminished the 'vertical' (God-focused) dimension of church in favour of the 'horizontal' (focused on encouraging and building one another up in faith).

"It was also about minimising the foreignness of church, changing the music, the way that people sat... to make it more outsider friendly," he says.

This 'seeker-sensitive' approach, exemplified by churches like Willow Creek Community Church in Chicago, attempted to remove as many perceived barriers as possible from church so that people could connect with Christ.

But Bishop Forsyth argues that the time of reaction is coming to an end. Now the

church is entering a period of responsibility. "It's not good enough just to react and not have liturgy," he says. "Now comes a period of... taking responsibility for the form of our meetings, their prayers and what happens there: I think this is where the main work is now to be done."

But taking responsibility looks different in different churches.

A traditional AAPB service runs early on Sunday morning at St Paul's, Castle Hill, while the 10am family service and the evening services are planned by a creative team. They reflect on the week's Bible readings and sermon notes and plan a 'contemporary liturgy' — timed to the minute — that communicates the theme of that week's teaching. It will often include drama, musical items or videos.

The focus for Bren McLean, the Sunday services and music director at St Paul's, is communicating God's word through the entire service.

"The question we ask is this: what sort of music or medium is someone growing up today listening to?" he says. "What's the norm for them? We embrace the creative arts but it is meant to serve God's written word. We're not just being contemporary for the sake of being contemporary."

In Sydney's south-west David O'Mara, senior minister of St Mark's, Sadleir, says he uses liturgy because it models the priesthood of all believers. "I use parts of the Kenyan services," he says. "It's a nice liturgy because it's like some of the psalms — response-oriented. The leader does one thing and the congregation responds."

Against the criticism that formal liturgy is inauthentic and crushes spontaneity, O'Mara finds that liturgy enhances the chances for informal participation as well.

"We actually have an opportunity for [informal] testimonies and thanksgiving during the service," he says. "There are actually lots of opportunities for people to participate and the structure gives them permission. Often the informal liturgy ensures that only the leadership is involved in the service, not the congregation." A printed service outline for the whole congregation

means that people "aren't kept in the dark".

O'Mara also says that formal liturgy helps keep Sunday worship biblical. "It ensures for us that every week we have repentance, which is critical — because we're sinful and need to repent — and it ensures that we have intercession so that prayer is not just me-focused."

A clear, simple, printed liturgy also serves those from non-English-speaking backgrounds at Sadleir's ESL service. "Sometimes repetition in liturgy is undervalued; there's value in repetition to teach deep truths about God."

For Bishop Forsyth, the question is bigger than just liturgy or no liturgy.

"It's much more fundamental than that," he says. "It's whether or not what we do when we meet really is an engaging with God through his word and each other."

Peterson says that according to Ephesians 4, church meetings are primarily about building up the body of Christ. But that edification also has to do with growing toward Christ.

"Church is not just an occasion for meeting other people," he says. "We have to keep on encountering God. I would have no embarrassment in saying that we come to worship God at church. If worship is not something that we do when we gather there's something profoundly missing."

"In 1 Corinthians 14, if you're praying and prophesying in a way that's building up the church, then outsiders will come in, fall down on their knees, say 'Truly God is in your midst!' and be converted."

He says that meaningful structure, good content and smooth flow are essential.

"The whole thing has to make sense, people need to be caught up and carried along with it," he says. "[Otherwise] they'll be sitting there wondering what's going on, or they'll be lost, or angry."

"It needs a logic to it that's pretty clear, a biblically driven logic. So if you call people to repentance, give them an opportunity to confess their sins. Then you assure them of God's forgiveness and then you praise God for the forgiveness that's available at the cross."

Peterson hopes that resources like *bettergatherings.com* and its service

builder will help churches think through their Sunday services more thoroughly. The website offers services from the *Book of Common Prayer*, AAPB and *Sunday Services*. Service builder is a tool that collates readings, creeds and prayers and exports them for churches to use in printed service outlines or digital presentations.

The forthcoming white book — the title is not yet confirmed — is being designed to work alongside the website and will also include updated marriage, funeral and baptism services from AAPB. Peterson hopes that the new service book can also be used to train lay leaders in service leading.

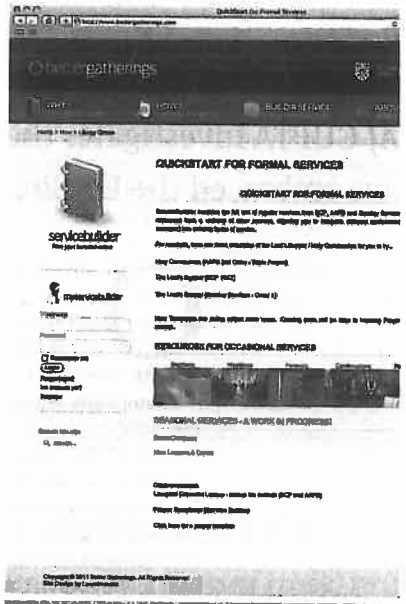
Adds Bishop Forsyth: "Is the service thought out? Is it genuinely God-focused? Is it coherent and truthful? These are the

"If worship is not something we do when we gather [at church] there's something profoundly missing."

David Peterson

Are the style changes in our Sunday services the product of the US Church Growth Movement?

Turn the page to read Raj Gupta's history of CGM in Sydney.



A page from the bettergatherings

questions now. It seems to me that with the loss of authorised forms and liturgy we have entered a very dangerous period, as well as getting the benefits. The dangers are that our meetings will be offhand, unthought-out. But the days of going back to one liturgy are over. The future will be much more flexible and more individual."

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