Some Thoughts on Liturgy

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Liturgy is like a language in our relationship with God.

And we can learn a lot from thinking of liturgy as being like a language. I think it's a very useful model. But right at the start I need to be clear that there is a danger with my model of liturgy as language.

It's a trap that is very, very pernicious, and incredibly prevalent. And that trap is the misunderstanding that liturgy is primarily about words. There's a mistaken idea that liturgy is mostly about words. It isn't.

So let's be clear: The basic building blocks of liturgy are actions and gestures and people and space and symbols and signs and vesture and music and silence and movement and – yes – and words. Jesus said do this to remember me. Do this. And we turn his command into "read pages 404 to 429 out loud to remember me". In lots of places, we come together for an hour or so on Sundays and read lots of lovely poetic stuff to each other, and sing four bits of poetry – and many of us give the impression that that's liturgy.

So – when I talk about liturgy as language, I want you to think of the building blocks of that language (the nouns, the verbs, the adjectives, the adverbs of the language of liturgy) I want you to think of those building blocks of liturgy as the processions, the robes, the bread and wine and water and oil, the gestures, the actions – the taking, the breaking, the sharing, the embracing, the going out.

Yes words in liturgy are important. Like the actions and so on, the words link us back through the centuries, in union with Christians throughout the ages, back to Jesus, and through Jesus back into our Jewish roots.

But at the outset I want to make crystal clear that when I'm using language as a model for liturgy I don't want to give the impression that I'm talking principally about our prayers and responses and readings. When I'm talking about language as a model for liturgy, and when I'm talking about liturgy generally, I'm talking about the whole package: environment, people, actions, words, music, lighting, symbols, and so on.

We've put huge energy, huge energy into getting the words right. Into making sure that they are acceptable to evangelical, and catholic, and liberal, and so on; into making sure they are inclusive; into making sure that there's te Reo Maori and so on. All that is important.

But changing the environment, or changing our actions, I think often can have even more impact than changing the words.

Think of how differently the same words of a confession can be experienced in two different services. You can imagine one service with just a few people and they are kneeling spread around a large building. Now imagine another community where the people are all standing close together, and they are using the same words, and they are singing them. One is about being conscious of personal sinfulness – the other, with exactly the same words, is about a sense of community and maybe is experienced more as an acknowledgement of the communal responsibility we all share for evil in the world.

Many of us get so caught up in thinking that changing the words is what will change the liturgy. But I'm emphasising that most of liturgy isn't the words at all.

The words we use in liturgy are more like the punctuation in our language of liturgy. We can have discussions about whether we should have this prayer or that prayer or no prayer, just silence at a certain point. Just like we debate about a semi-colon or a comma or having nothing at all at a particular point in a sentence.

In language it is seldom the case that there is only one right way to get our idea across. Some people put a comma where others put nothing. Some put a semi colon where others put a comma. Some use capitals where others use lower case. Some start a sentence with a conjunction, others see that as forbidden. And so on and so on.

Here's already one lesson we learn from language. To get a particular idea across - there may be good ways to do that; there may be not so good ways; and there will be ways that won't work. But in any language there is generally more than one way to get the idea across.

There is not just one cookie-cutter way to do liturgy that we replicate in every situation.

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A new rabbi comes to a well-established congregation. Every week on the Sabbath, a fight erupts during the service. When it comes time to recite the Shema prayer, half of the congregation stands and the other half sits. The half who stand say, "Of course we stand for the Shema. It's the credo of Judaism. Throughout history, thousands of Jews have died with the words of the Shema on their lips." The half who remain seated say, "No. According to the Shulchan Aruch (the code of Jewish law), if you are seated when you get to the Shema you remain seated."

The people who are standing yell at the people who are sitting, "Stand up!" while the people who are sitting yell at the people who are standing, "Sit down!" It's destroying the whole decorum of the service, and driving the new rabbi crazy. Finally, it's brought to the rabbi's attention that at a nearby rest home is a 98-year-old man who was a founding member of the congregation.

So, in accordance with Talmudic tradition, the rabbi appoints a delegation of three: one who stands for the Shema, one who sits, and the rabbi himself, to go interview the man. They enter his room, and the man who stands for the Shema rushes over to the old man and says, "Wasn't it the tradition in our synagogue to stand for the Shema?"

"No," the old man answers in a weak voice. "That wasn't the tradition." The other man jumps in excitedly. "Wasn't it the tradition in our synagogue to sit for the Shema?"

"No," the old man says. "That wasn't the tradition."

At this point, the rabbi cannot control himself. He cuts in angrily. "I don't care what the tradition was! Just tell them one or the other. Do you know what goes on in services every week — the people who are standing yell at the people who are sitting, the people who are sitting yell at the people who are standing—"

"That was the tradition," the old man says.

That's what it can be like isn't it? Where there's 2 Anglicans there can be 3 opinions. We are not all going to agree with each other about everything. Agreeing to disagree is part of our Anglican tradition.

Even though we may not all agree on particular details, that's not to say there are no general principles that make things better.

Let's think about how we use the English language in our ordinary everyday life. I think there are things we can learn from that.

We take for granted the way we greet people early in the day. There might be a few options, but we tend to do it quite similarly. There are also a few options in the way we say goodbeye. And so on.

Now if you were teaching someone, say they came from China, how to greet someone in English, and how to start a conversation, all the way through to how to say farewell – you probably would have a book with instructions. You would rehearse it with them – over and over. For you, as the English speaker, the book is just describing what you do. For the Chinese-speaker, learning English, it doesn't appear descriptive – the book appears prescriptive. This is what you have to do in order to communicate in English.

And the same is true for liturgy. For thousands of years, the people of God have been greeting each other something like this: The Lord be with you. We see it in the book of Ruth, 3000 years ago – The Lord be with you. The Lord bless you. During the 50 days of the Easter Season we greet each other: Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. If you've been to Greece in the Easter Season – you'll know that's how people greet each other – and not just in church: Christos anesti – Christ is risen. Alithos anesti.

We use lots and lots of Alleluias in the Easter Season – soak in them; we use a medium amount of Alleluias a lot of the year; and we totally abstain from Alleluias during Lent.

We don't do liturgical things because they are in some book that this is what we have to do. They are in some book because this is what we do. This describes what we do as Christians, and what Christians have been doing for centuries back to Jesus and through Jesus back for centuries into our Jewish roots.

Just as in daily life we don't say, Good morning; how are you; nice to see you; have a good day; see you later – we don't do these things because they are in some book that this is what we have to do. They are in some

book, that people who are learning English use, because this is what we English-speaking people do.

When we get to work in the morning we don't say to people, I greet you in the words of the Teach Yourself English Book page 247 "good morning, how are you". So what are we doing when the first thing we say to people in a service is to turn to page 404? What are we doing when we use three different greetings? Do we trust that "The Lord be with you" is a real greeting or isn't it?! Are people really saying it to each other or are they saying it to a book, or a pew sheet, or a projector screen?!

Obviously it is good and appropriate if after the response to the greeting you add some words that locate the celebration in our particular context and situation. But I'm sure we've all been in situations where the impression is given that we only use what's in the Prayer Book – because we have to. This isolates the Prayer Book material. The priest, as it were, peeks out from behind the Prayer Book material in order to do what is clearly the real stuff. If this is happening then right from the start the message is: our prayer book is not the real stuff; our prayer book is just formalistic, ritualistic stuff that we have to do but I don't really believe in it. I don't really believe it works.

Why do we have this bizarre attitude to liturgy? How did we get to this bizarre disconnect between what we agree to do together and reality? When we say "I love you" to someone – we are saying what millions say daily, and what people have said to each other for centuries. Sure, it can become a mindless routine without content: "I love you. (3x)" But mostly it is not. Mostly it is a real message with real content and real communication. Why do we treat our liturgical words any differently. "The Lord be with you – the Lord bless you" is a real dialogue that is part of gathering as a community.

OK. If we follow this approach, of beginning to treat liturgy seriously, yes – some visitors are not going to be able to be totally involved all the time. Because some of this stuff we will be expecting the community to know and use by heart. It's a good phrase isn't it: by heart. Yes, of course we are going to continue to use books or screens or whatever at some points in a service – for a long prayer we say together (but when you do, think about why you are saying this long unknown prayer together), obviously we are going to provide words for hymns.

But readings and prayers proclaimed by one person, let's expect that they are proclaimed well, in a way that doesn't require the text in front of the community. You don't take the script to a play, you don't read along the screenplay at the movies, you don't follow the text of a politician's speech.

It is good and important to be welcoming to visitors. But in most places we have arrived at the bizarre situation of treating all of the people in our regular community as if everyone is a visitor, as if everyone is new. That's not very encouraging to a new person, getting the impression that no one has worshipped here before, being given the impression that no one worships here regularly.

What we need to do is provide a welcome for visitors where they don't feel too awkward – but nonetheless they go: wow – what a cool community – I want to be part of this. I want what they've got. I want to come again and grow into this.

I don't know if you've ever tried it: you and your partner, or a couple of your friends – English is your first language, your main language, but you've learnt some French or Japanese or something at High School and you are able to say some basic stuff – you don't really understand the tenses but you can get by a bit. And for fun you and your spouse talk to each other in French. For a bit. Or you talk in Japanese to your mates. And it feels really artificial; and a bit quaint; and not really very useful; and not very real when you want to have some serious communication.

And for some of us that's what liturgy feels like – for those who aren't fluent at liturgy. It feels artificial, a bit fake even; certainly not what we think really communicates – so we keep adding to it, padding it out, leaving bits out, peeking out from round behind it; and being a bit embarrassed and apologetic about it. Not wearing the robes with dignity – crossing our legs in the sanctuary so that it's clear I'm really a real kiwi guy and I only do this cross dressing because it's in the rules.

And when we're not fluent at it, liturgy is frustrating and irritating. So there's all this debate – let's not speak French to my spouse – it's too hard, it feels silly. Let's not speak Japanese to my friends – it's just quaint. Let's go back to the language we all know well.

Let's not do liturgy in church anymore – no one gets it. Let's, in church, follow the culture and language from the world; let's in church do things the way people are used to at work or in a pub or in a shop or in a café.

How did we get to this point? We got to this point, this disconnect, because over the last century there has been a massive revolution in liturgy. A reform and renewal. And a lot of people got left behind. Communities got left behind. It's like the language has changed so drastically – that many people can't speak it anymore. And so in churches when they try doing liturgy they use old concepts, old ways of doing things – with this new stuff. And it doesn't work. It just doesn't work. It's like putting old wine into new wineskins.

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Three o'clock every afternoon the abbot would address the community and retreatants and any other visitors to the monastery. He would give deep, wise teaching and people would come from far away to hear him. But the abbot had a cat, and it would go around everyone and leap onto the abbot's lap and generally distract people.

So they decided that every day three o'clock they would take the community cat, the abbot's cat, and tie it to a tree, just before the abbot spoke. Every day, 3 o'clock the cat would be tied to a tree - the abbot spoke. 3 o'clock cat tied – abbot speaks. That abbot died – the tradition continued with the new abbot. 3 o'clock cat tied – the abbot speaks. That abbot died. New abbot. 3 o'clock cat tied – abbot speaks. Finally the cat died.

Well the tradition of the community is that prior to the abbot speaking there is the ceremony of the cat tying. The abbot cannot speak until the cat is tied. So if there's no cat – then the abbot cannot speak. They had to get a new cat in order for the abbot to be able to speak to the community. Because that's the tradition of the community.

There's a lot of abbot's cats in the liturgical life of communities. In fact in the Anglican Church people write theological treatises about the allegorical meaning of tying up the cat. Things that made sense when the priest had his back to the congregation are continued without even a moment of reflection facing in the opposite direction. Things that made perfect sense and were practical responses to particular concrete situations, hundreds of years ago maybe, have been passed on from

training vicar to curate, from parish priest to community, from person to person.

Which order to light and put out candles; using a burse and veil; having a book stand on the altar and using it as if you are working off a recipe on a kitchen bench; having a collection of chalices and patens on an altar as if it's the end of year prizegiving; or possibly an auction of silverware; using an altar that's shaped like a sideboard and standing behind it as if you are a bartender; or sitting behind it as if you are a judge; or kneeling behind it to give the impression of John the Baptist's head on a platter; or holding your hands like this to show how big the fish was that got away; or making the sign of the cross so often it looks like you are swatting away flies; or when distributing communion it look like you are shaking off crumbs…

We continue to run our New Zealand Prayer Book services in a Book of Common Prayer style. Services in The Book of Common Prayer were "meals on wheels." They were centrally prepared, and then warmed and dished up locally. You began at the beginning of the service, and read most of it until you reached the end of it.

Services in A New Zealand Prayer Book are more like a basket of groceries and a recipe book. There's a core of essential material, with some further resources. And other content is added locally. The obligatory material from any of the eucharistic liturgies takes only about six minutes to recite. Six minutes. Most of the rest of the service is locally chosen. The quality of the meal is now much more dependent on the local "cook"!

The cook, the presider needs to understand the structure of the service. Needs to understand the grammar of liturgy. The parts of the liturgy are all interconnected and the presider needs to convey this flow to the assembly. Familiarity with the liturgical structure helps prevent the presider from creating dams which stop the flow of the service.

When a community is comfortable with the structure, and sees the "slots" into which an assortment of elements can be inserted, they will worship with confidence even when the elements are varied.

So keep it simple. In language it is much more effective to have simple short sentences where the words we choose are one or two syllable words.

A carefully chosen adjective or a wisely selected adverb can enhance a sentence.

But keep it simple. When you are preparing a service look at what is required, and then you might add a carefully chosen optional piece - if you have a particular reason to do so. Less is more. Where the Prayer Book says “may” it does not mean “must”. As a rule of thumb, if it says “may” be used – leave it out. It is much better to err on a liturgy with clean lines than to have a cluttery liturgy with no breathing space and no sense of direction.

Here’s an example of not keeping it simple:
The liturgy starts with an informal greeting, announcement of a theme, three written greetings, and opening hymn, the collect for purity, the Gloria, the summary of the law, kyries, sentences before confession, invitation to confession, confession and absolution, a response, the sentence of the day again and several collects with their page numbers or read together.

All perfectly “legal” but after this people haven’t been prepared to hear the readings together – we’ve all just ended up being spiritually bloated. Inevitably what happens in a community that does stuff like this is that they start to cut back on the readings. They start cutting back on having three readings and a psalm. That’s what we’ve been preparing for – we were supposed to be preparing for hearing what the Spirit is saying to us through these scriptures that we all share around the world and across denominations.

When you are learning English you learn that the underlying grammar of a simple sentence in English is subject-verb-object. In liturgy there is also an underlying grammar. I would suggest it is gather-listen-respond.

And by respond I mean with prayer, with the actions of communion, with the action of getting married – and so on. We gather to form a community, hearing together of the God who acts, and then we respond and cooperate with this God who acts – including and especially in our actions beyond the service; the service beyond the service.

When we get this pattern, gather – listen – respond, suddenly services begin to flow – we are leading services (a wedding, a funeral, the Eucharist) without it feeling like we are graunching through the gears.

Liturgy is not a collection of unrelated verbal components.

Gathering also has its own dynamic, its own grammar. It really helps the service when we recognize and apply the grammar of gathering.

The process of gathering starts with a greeting. We greet - and then we sing. There can hardly be anything more unifying for gathering individuals together and binding them into a community than singing. After this the presider calls us to prayer and we all enter into deep, communal silence. Deep silent prayer. And then the presider collects our deep, silent, individual prayer and prays aloud a general prayer, called, obviously a collect, because it collects our prayers and collects us together. The presider prays this aloud on behalf of the community, in the name of the community – just as the presider will later do the same with the other great prayer of the service, the Eucharistic Prayer – and we all make this prayer our own by saying with vigour: Amen.

There's the basic framework for gathering: greeting; singing; deep silent prayer – verbalised in our name and we all make it our own: Amen. Now we have been gathered as separate individuals into a community, ready now to hear God's word to us individually and as a community.

Keep it simple. Cranmer in the front of the Book of Common Prayer wrote that things had become too complicated. He said it took longer to find what had to be read than to read it once you'd found it. And we seem to have arrived at this place again – there are now so many resources and options and alternatives that it takes much longer to decide what to use than to use it once you've decided. Trust the simple.

We can add to the simple, taking great care not to swamp the celebration. We can add to give a specific flavour for maybe a feast day or a season.

But don't strangle the celebration with too tight a theme.

The Eucharist is a thanksgiving for creation and redemption. That is the primary theme and anything "more" is icing on the cake. Human celebrations are normally of events rather than abstract concepts, the themes that so often people make up for liturgy. The scriptures tell the story of a God who acts and through our remembering and thanksgiving we are renewed to act in response.

Our worship is like a lake upon which liturgy can cast a number of stones, each sending out its pattern of ripples. One person (a new Christian) may connect with the opening hymn, another (a person who has worshipped since her youth) with the Collect, another (just unemployed) with the first reading, another (coming to church for the first time since her husband died) with the Psalm, and so on. And so on.

Read my lips: most of the year the Revised Common Lectionary – the agreed set of readings for our church, do not have a theme. For most of the year we read several readings that have no connection to each other except the unity within the scripture themselves.

Often the feast, or liturgical season, provides "theme" enough. Advent prepares for Christ's coming. Christmas celebrates Christ's incarnation and birth. Don't make a theme into a straightjacket for the service. Advent is theme enough; Christmas is theme enough. Advent or Christmas or a feast day is like a particular type of restaurant (a Mexican one, or a Chinese or Indian one, for example). Such a "theme" provides the mood in which the meal is enjoyed.

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Now, I have been presenting a lot of liturgical ideals. It is good to have all these ideas I've been sharing – these liturgical ideals. And then there is the concrete local situation where Mrs Jones has always put a beautiful flower arrangement in the font on AAW Sunday, and Mr Smith likes to play the hymns slowly, and the embroidery was a gift from the Adams family – we can't just put that in a cupboard, and we have never done this, and we have always done that… We all know how many Anglicans it takes to change a lightbulb: change! change! my great grandmother gave that lightbulb!

Christianity, Anglicanism in particular, has tended for the middle way – now that's not half way between points, but (rather than the extremes of either–or) it's both and. The ideal and the real; the tradition and the present context; informal combined with the words and actions of our deep tradition.

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There are different ways to learn language. You can grow up in a community that is fluent – and you just absorb the language naturally. It is your mother tongue. But, if that is the case, you still, at some stage, learn structure and expand your vocabulary.

Some people grow up with a language, and yet they use it badly, they mispronounce words; put words in the wrong order; put the emphASis on the wrong syllABle.

You know the sort of person who is starting out writing and they have far too many florid adjectives – whole lists of them. And there are certain words that they keep on using, words like "plethora" – they just use it because they've recently discovered it – or they just like the sound of it.

Sometimes you can't even follow what a person is trying to get at.

And then there are other people who are trying to learn a language.

All these are paralleled in liturgy: people who have grown up in a healthy, fluent liturgical Christian community. They can come to understand the structure, the grammar, they can improve things, they can expand their liturgical vocabulary as it were. And there are those who clutter the liturgy with too many actions, far too many words, the service is confused and confusing – it just doesn't work. Some stress the unimportant and we lose sight of the essential. And then we have to help those who have no real familiarity with liturgy and there needs to be a way to inculcate them into what for them is like a foreign language.

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And so we need to look at being the leader of the liturgy. Presiding.

Christchurch has a wonderful buskers festival in the summer. I have learnt so much about liturgy and about presiding from these buskers. And, to re-emphasise an important point of mine: so much of busking is action. First they have a way of gathering a crowd. And once a crowd begins to form – it gets its own momentum. A crowd gathers a crowd – now there's a good liturgical principle. There's a critical mass isn't there. Especially if you hope for young people – but any group really. The busker creates an environment of anticipation – through music, props, clothes. And the busker gathers the crowd so that all participate – mostly a busker will gather people in a circle. But it can vary.

Buskers are very skilled at teaching people responses and at giving directions that encourage crowd participation. They have set pieces that they perform – but they adapt these set pieces to the local context and to what is happening with the crowd that has gathered. A busker gathers a group of individuals, turns them into a participating crowd, and sends them off as changed individuals.

I remember well presiding at a highly elaborate wedding ceremony. It had flower girls, pageboys, choir, soloist, music group, horse and cart – you name it, they had it. At the end someone came up to me and said: wow that was awesome. I replied: thanks – I'm really tired now. The person looked at me quizzically and said: why – what did you do?

That was possibly one of the best compliments I've ever received about my presiding. Because I had been invisible. The focus had not been on me – quite the opposite. The focus had been on the celebration, the couple, the actions, and the community. And hopefully on God.

The conductor at an orchestra chooses the material, organises it, makes sure all know their parts, and then in the actual concert makes sure that all flows. It's not about the conductor. It's about the music. It's about making the music live in this particular moment. That's the role of the priest. The presider is the conductor – selecting, organising, coordinating, and making sure that all flows.

But, the congregation is not the audience. The congregation, the gathered community, is the orchestra. And each and every one of us in the congregation has a part to play. The renewal we are working for is so that there is full, conscious, and active participation by all – by all – in the liturgy.

We have to be really careful because that goal can so easily be undermined – even by actions that we intend to have increasing participation. Sometimes especially by such actions.

Some places have a lay person assist the priest in leading worship. This has to be very, very carefully thought through. It can make the priest appear a bit like a magician who just comes out for the absolution and to consecrate – and maybe to give the sermon. The real leader of such a service is not the priest who is called and ordained to leadership – but the lay person.

Within the community it can create a clique – the in-crowd of those laypeople who lead worship. How do people get into that task? How do people get moved on from that group? I've been suggesting unfussy, uncluttered liturgy with clean lines. There's actually not much for the presider to do. If you have an extra leader there's a danger of cluttering the liturgy again – because this person needs something to do.

The impression can also be given that real lay ministry is standing up the front and being like a priest.

But authentic lay ministry is primarily what happens outside the church building: in everything from the boardroom to the bedroom. In the way one is a good parent, a good partner, a good employer, a good student. We embody the gospel, we proclaim the gospel – with our life. Jesus says that people will see the good that we do and it will move them to worship. This is what attracts people to church. They want what we've got. And we can also invite them along.

As well as the paramount lay ministry outside the church building's walls, there is also a lot of lay ministry within our services. There's those who welcome at the door. That's a real skill. That's a real ministry – with gifts, and possibly training. Lay ministry. Sitting beside those who are new, or visitors – to help them in the service. To sense how much or how little of that they want. Again a very important ministry. Lay ministry requiring real sensitivity. Being there for young children; young families; older people. Then there's proclaiming the readings. You are proclaiming the inspired Word of God. Hard to get a more sacred ministry than that. Leading the prayers – that's not a second sermon, it's not a gossip session, it's not the announcements. If we believe in the power of prayer shared by two, or three or more – leading the prayers is significant lay ministry. And we need to spread that around. Young people, for example, need to be seen to be reading and leading the prayers. Leading music, preparing the worship environment, arranging the flowers, speaking to people after the worship… The list of lay ministry goes on and on. And they all need training and encouragement and the realisation how important the role is.

And again and again we need to reinforce that all of us are involved in liturgy: our responding, our singing, where we sit, how we relate together – all this sets the tone – is the tone – of the worship.

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We who worship start like those who love music, or art, or the cinema. There is a wonderful naivety. And then we study the grammar of liturgy,

its history and so on. After this study and analysis of liturgy, when we return to worship – like the music scholar at a concert – we must put that study to one side, valuable as it is, and re-enter worship with a second naivety.

Sunday by Sunday we gather around the word and the table. We in New Zealand launch the world's celebration Sunday by Sunday. And then the worship rolls on around the world: Australia, Asia, Africa, Europe, North and South America. We not only gather around the same readings; in essence we are all standing around one table. God's people is gathered around God's table. And in our churches we regularly image in stained glass windows or icons around us, that we are at this table with Mary, and John, and James, and Martha, and Augustine, Julian, and Bede and on and on goes the list.

We on earth gather
with the faithful who rest in Christ
with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven
we proclaim God's great and glorious name.

And there united in Christ with all who stand before you in earth and heaven
we worship you, O God,
in songs of everlasting praise.
Blessing, honour and glory be yours,
here and everywhere,
now and for ever. Amen.