

A Reflection on the Anglican Church of Canada's trial liturgy,  
"Pastoral Liturgies for Journeys of Gender Transition and Affirmation"

A friend asked me to look at a new cluster of trial pastoral liturgies being offered from the National Church: "Pastoral Liturgies of Gender Transition and Affirmation." I hope these notes can be constructive feedback and criticism, from my perspective.

In all the Canadian Church's reflections about human sexuality in the past 45 years or so, I have never questioned liturgists' sincere pastoral concern in these matters. For the most part, I have found our theological reflection to be inadequate. So, I approached this liturgy with a degree of skepticism, but also from the perspective of a parish priest with a moderate interest in liturgy, who wants to honour Christ, and who has a young parishioner who is presently undergoing a gender transition.

I believe that I am open to my perspective on a wide number of issues to be changed, if the theological presentation is adequately robust. However, I acknowledge that the proponents of these liturgies have an uphill battle to persuade me that these liturgies serve individuals and the Church well – and of course, that we honour Jesus Christ, who is the end purpose of all our worship.

I have several serious concerns about the trial liturgy, and one even more substantial concern, as they are now composed. Our prayers and liturgies emerge from our theological presuppositions, and so I am even more troubled by what I read – and what I do not read – in the Introduction to these trial liturgies. I will outline these points below.

Beginning positively, everyone is agreed that every human being is welcome in the Body of Christ, and is deserving of love and excellent pastoral care. We would further heartily agree that prejudice and cruelty against TransGender Diverse populations is evil and faithless to the Gospel. For example, the trial liturgies quote from a General Synod (2010) motion:

In 2010, Act #75 of the General Synod of 2010 committed our church, nationally, to "1. Deplore any legislation calling for punishments for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons and their supporters and encourage our partners in jurisdictions with such legislation to do the same; and 2. Request the Anglican Church of Canada at all levels to embrace the outcast and stand against the abuse and torment of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons."

Here we surely all agree.

*Purpose of Liturgies*

It is worthwhile to consider what we want to achieve in a liturgy to begin with. In my experience, there are a few parishes that as part of their D.N.A., lay people have strong convictions and interest in liturgical development. For the most part, though, liturgies are of greater interest – not surprisingly – among the clergy, and I suspect we are mostly tolerated or indulged. Excellent liturgies are appreciated; we will receive feedback from terrible liturgies, but most lay people do not have the same interest in liturgies as those who customarily preside.

Liturgy is one way – an important way, but certainly not the only way – to help shape us as disciples to worship and to be equipped to build the kingdom of Jesus Christ. Because liturgies are within the parish communities – among groups of people gathered together -- they are conservative (in the best sense of the word) by nature. People who are content with the current liturgies aren't putting new proposals forward, and perhaps aren't saying enough about the benefits of what we already have. So, trial liturgies are invariably skewed toward innovation and, often, edgy theology.

Our liturgies are not trivial. They are core to our Anglican identity, and our doctrine emerges from how we pray together. This principle is set out in the “Principles for Liturgical Revision” from the Faith, Worship and Ministry Committee following General Synod (2007), the *Book of Common Prayer*, and the *Book of Alternative Services*. This makes it all the more critical that our liturgies – even trial liturgies – are excellent.

In the Introduction, there is already awareness that these liturgies are not suitable for some parish communities: “The use of these rites requires wisdom and discernment on the part of community leadership, guided by pastoral wisdom... and from knowledge of the nature of the worshipping community.”

I believe it is better to work in a private pastoral setting with people who are working through their gender identity, rather than a liturgical setting – unless perhaps the presider has strong ideological convictions, so that the presider wants to make a statement to the parish community.

### *Specific Concerns*

I have several concerns about the liturgy itself. First, there is provision for “God” as a substitute for “Lord,” as has been the norm for Christian liturgies, in such places as the opening mutual salutation. Thus:

*Presider:* May God be with you

[or The Lord be with you]

*All:* **And also with you**

Why is the use of “Lord” being purposefully diminished? Disquietingly, it appears that the author(s) want to avoid the principle of our being under God’s authority as stewards and servants. The fact that this is within this cluster of liturgies is noteworthy – and to my mind, deeply troubling.

The traditional catholic Creeds are not offered. Instead, the credal hymn from Philippians 2 is offered. Certainly, this passage of scripture is thought to have informed the Jerusalem Creed, which in turn informed the Apostles Creed. But why avoid the traditional Creeds of the worldwide apostolic Church? There is nothing in Philippians 2 which is of course objectionable. Presumably, then, there are points in the traditional Creeds which are thought to be objectionable or troublesome for the compilers. We conjecture that this could be discomfort with traditional language for the Godhead (“Father... Son”) or the fact of our common sinfulness (“From there he shall come to judge the living and the dead”). What appears to my mind to be the casual substitution to a more comfortable confession of faith is breath-taking to me.

Language of Jesus Christ being our Saviour, Lord, and Way are diminished. Some Bible verses are present, carefully chosen, predominantly from the pre-Christian Testament. There is lots of affirmation (understandably!), and God is identified, rightly, as the God of love. But there is not nearly enough language to communicate that we are to be shaped and conformed to the Gospel. Here is one teaching section in the liturgy:

What we do here has echoes in the Bible. God called elderly Abram and Sari, struggling Jacob and the murderous Saul and transformed them into Abraham and Sarah whose descendants are more numerous than the stars, the patriarch Israel whose name became a nation and the Apostle Paul missionary of the Early Church. God looked on them with love and saw them in their truth, calling them both to their own true natures and to a renewed vocation symbolised by new names. In the book of Revelation, God comforts the besieged church with the promise of a new name: those who persevere in faith will be given a white stone on which is written their new name, and that new name is a sacred mystery known only to them.

Today *N* joins this honoured and holy tradition.

Surely names are indeed powerful. We often have insights into scripture which the original authors did not have, but this reads as *eisegesis* – reading into the Bible what we want it to say – rather than faithfully responding to God’s self-revelation in the text. Where is the language of Covenant, Law, Conversion, Repentance, Obedience or Gospel? “God looked on them with love and saw them in their truth.” “Saw them in their truth??” I am flabbergasted.

### *The Most Significant Omission?*

The most significant omission from these liturgies, in my assessment, is the deliberate and substantial downplaying of human sinfulness – that we universally get things wrong and are in profound need for God’s healing touch. In these liturgies, during the Re-affirmation of Baptismal Vows, renouncing the world, the flesh and the devil are omitted. They are replaced with a reaffirmation -- a “renunciation of evil” (as in the B.A.S. Confirmation rite). It is easy for us all to agree that evil exists; it’s much harder for us to admit that we contribute to the problem in various ways. Sin is not just in bigots. Sin is everywhere – in every one of us -- and the purpose of liturgy is to lead us to personal and corporate transformation.

I suspect that avoiding language of sin is to avoid any sense that people are broken or against God’s purposes when they are struggling with profound issues about their self-identity. I firmly believe that genuine pastoral care is not affirming people as we all are, nor condemning people, but inviting how we are in need of God through Jesus Christ, and how we are drawn into him. This does not indicate the end of the process. (Whether Church leaders agree with this or not, people might decide that they are to proceed with gender surgery.) But this does identify where the conversation needs sensitively to *begin*.

Liturgy is not simply humanitarian impulses or therapeutic gestures. I have the disquieting sense that these liturgies do not adequately facilitate people to encounter the Living God. Instead of God being addressed in prayer, *people* are being addressed in prayer, and the Gospel is being captured in order to advance our particular interests.

### *The Introduction*

These are all substantial and unfortunate concerns. My chief interest, though, is not in the liturgy itself. The liturgy emerges from our theological presuppositions. I am really most interested in the Introduction.

As I have already outlined, I believe the theological rationale of these liturgies to be seriously inadequate. Positively, the Introduction does address the subject of baptism, and why the authors feel that the approach of the Church of England is mistaken:

The Church of England recently published guidelines for pastoral prayer, framing them in terms of the “welcoming” of transgender people into the church. However, as evidenced by gender-sensitive historical uncovering and by the present witness of the church, we know that gender non-binary and transgender people have been within the church, are baptised full members of the church and have always been present in the church. The use of these [Canadian] rites here presumes, rather, the active presence of a baptised Christian person within the congregation who is in some place on a journey of gender consciousness that comes with or without an external change.

I believe it is unfortunate that the author(s) of the Introduction take the position *a priori* that the *only* appropriate response of the parish community is to be “supportive” – apparently, to support individuals in their quest to change their genders surgically or not (“with or without an external change”):

That [gender] change is what is to be welcomed and celebrated, and we presume a supportive community, one whose witness in these ways can become attractive to those who feel marginalized elsewhere in church and society.

Before sending this reflection to you, I asked a couple of people to review what I wrote. Besides a few minor stylistic changes, one response – from an Anglican who tends to push against conventional views about human sexuality -- made two additional substantial points:

The emphasis of the liturgy actually moves away from gender and toward a somewhat bizarre (to me) emphasis on *(re-)naming*. This has never been the main emphasis of Christian liturgy, and I really doubt whether Scripture is being faithfully applied here.

[...] the liturgy both reifies gender and makes it disappear. It takes for granted gender, indeed sort of recreates it liturgically by “affirmation,” but the liturgy does not explore what gender means, what it is that is changing. Instead, gender increasingly seems to stand for something else, and we see this in the choices of scripture and the vague language.

Lastly, and perhaps most surprisingly, is a remarkably un-critical view of the evolution and capacity of “science” to address what is to the Church a theological and pastoral issue:

Our society’s consciousness of the full science behind gender identity is something that is still growing; our Christian appropriation of new learnings from science is slower, but the witness of transgender and gender non-binary persons to the Gospel compels us to learn.

Undoubtedly, science helps inform us and reveals God’s creation to us. But Christians have never looked to science alone to discern innovations in our care for one another in the Church. We need science, yes, *and* faith, and both complement one another. Science rightfully can test our engagement with the world, but science is never value-free. It’s appropriate for faith discernment to challenge a natural, materialistic worldview.

This confidence in “science” – and for Christians to follow where science leads -- to address this complex issue seems at least naïve. There also seems to be a disturbing lack of awareness about how new, tentative, and incomplete is the current understanding of the nature of gender, within the scientific research community.<sup>1</sup>

#### *Missing Hyperlink?*

As indicated in the footnote, the companion resource which is commended to readers, “Transgender Pastoral Reflections,” seems to be unavailable.

#### *Conclusion*

There are other points to be addressed within the trial liturgies, or the Introduction, which have not been addressed in this reflection. The Church needs to do much more work in grappling with what it means to be human, made in the image of God. For Christians who choose to undergo surgery to change their biological gender, consciously or not, this seems to be deciding that God has made a mistake in creating us. With humility, respect and concern, this needs to be re-considered.

I have made a list of other resources which I read to get an overview of the subject, in a separate document.

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<sup>1</sup> The Introduction to these rites asked that readers read a companion resource, “Transgender Pastoral Reflections,” but I was unable to find this resource which is commended by the author(s), and no hyperlink was provided. So, I proceeded to google “Transgender Pastoral Reflections,” and read the first six articles. Obviously, that leads one to read the most popular resources, not necessarily the best ones.

Nonetheless, it is a British article, “Transformed,” which includes a section which reviews the current scientific research in an accessible way. Evidently, understanding *within the scientific community* is far less clear than the author(s) of the Introduction presuppose. See:

<https://www.eauk.org/assets/files/downloads/Transformed.pdf>

As has been observed, the TransGender Diverse population appears to be exploding today. This provides an opportunity for the Church to help bring God's grace and love further into human lives. Addressing the issue is absolutely the right thing to do. I regret that what is currently being offered seems to be seriously inadequate.

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