Celebrating
350 Years
The 1662 Book of Common Prayer
Celebrating 350 Years: the 1662 Book of Common Prayer

Editorial

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the Prayer Book of a nation

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What would Cranmer ‘tweet’?

youth culture and the *Book of Common Prayer*

Matt Brain

The rise and fall of western civilisation

There are many questions that arise on the 350th anniversary of the *Book of Common Prayer*. Not least among these is that of its enduring relevance. This question, which cuts to the heart of the Prayer Book’s continuing existence, hides a second more subtle subject; the capacity of the *Book of Common Prayer* and young people to engage with each other.

Over the many years of its life, the *Book of Common Prayer* has been at the pinnacle of English-speaking civilisation both aesthetically and spiritually. As other papers in this issue of *St Mark’s Review* demonstrate, it is the words of the *Book of Common Prayer* that have framed some of the key moments in British life: coronations, weddings, baptisms and funerals. Yet like other aspects of life developed in yesteryear the *Book of Common Prayer* faces possible death by neglect, raising the possibility that there may be no future for it outside of the specimen jar.
Youth as ‘digital natives’

Before we attempt to navigate a response to questions surrounding the continued life of the Book of Common Prayer it is worth considering how young people in Australia are shaped. ‘Youth’ in the sense that we now use the word was unheard of as a social phenomenon by Thomas Cranmer, the first Queen Elizabeth or the churches they sought to serve. Youth and adolescence, however, comprise a central part of our society’s culture. As a society we are attuned to the different and developing needs of young people as they grow into adulthood. It is beyond the scope of this presentation to rehearse the many ways that this period of life is manifest. Yet one way in which even this relatively new phenomenon has changed in the last two decades holds the key when considering the possibility of interaction between the Book of Common Prayer and young people.

Most young people in Australia have lived their entire lives in a world dominated by information and communication technologies (ICT). Some dub these people ‘digital natives’ in that they are ‘native’ to the world of digital technologies. While others question the exclusivity of this claim, it seems fairly clear that most young Australians have lived their whole lives immersed in a world shaped by increasingly complex and all pervasive ICT. This has in turn formed the way that young people engage with themselves, each other and the surrounding world. This is true both socially and spiritually as rapid, visual and inter-linked ICT provide an effective tie to the present.

Challenges for ‘digital natives’ in appreciating the Book of Common Prayer

The challenges for young Australians in appreciating the Book of Common Prayer cluster around two distinct but related fields. They (a) exhibit a different literacy and (b) are socially isolated from communities who use the Book of Common Prayer – whether that use is frequent or only on special occasions.

Young Australians have an unrivalled ability to be immersed in a popular culture. They are able to gather, customise and use the artefacts of increasingly-focused sub-groups in a way that cocoons them from other expressions of life or ways of being. When this capacity to immerse one’s self in a particular cultural expression is tied to the increased role that consumerism plays as an ontological force, tradition is disdained and novelty is esteemed. New experiences that sit within and reinforce ways of being and knowing are sought energetically, raising novelty to a position of primacy.
Thus, a sense of boredom is easily elicited if what a young person is being asked to ‘consume’ does not fit within a particular field of interest – at that moment. This is magnified if the form of the experience is perceived to be static.

Comfort in the contemporary technological milieu facilitates young people’s ability to be immersed in popular culture. While familiarity with ICT might not be universal, the overwhelming majority of young people profess to be ‘at home’ with, or would like to be ‘at home’ with ICT. Unlike older generations, these ‘digital natives’ seem to regard ICT as the medium within which they swim rather than tools used to complete a task. This comfort with digital technology promotes a different kind of literacy from that required by reading and writing traditional books and journals. Researchers have pointed out that literacy within one technology (such as print media) does not carry over into other technologies (including ICT) as a matter of course. Such comfort with ICT will often mean dis-comfort with printed books, of which the Book of Common Prayer, with its small print and tight formatting, is exemplary.

While the common literacy of young people is different from that demanded by the Book of Common Prayer, their social distance from those who use it also warrants comment. One of the premises upon which the Book of Common Prayer was developed was that it be for the ‘collected’ worship of the people. While the Prayer Book may be used individually, it continually calls for a corporate response and asserts that it exists to bring peace in ‘Publik worship’. The notion of ‘public worship’ is somewhat foreign to many young Australians. Spirituality is usually relegated to an individual and private sphere. Within this context even those who self-identify as being Christian struggle with what is seen as a prescriptive response to matters of personal faith.

Different literacies and ways of conceiving worship present a challenge to productive engagement between young people and the Book of Common Prayer. This is magnified because young Australians are generally de-socialised from and unfamiliar with the act of public worship. Furthermore, they are unfamiliar with the language associated with this act. This is intensified by the reality that they are unfamiliar with the people who legitimate it as members of a worshipping community. While many young people in Australia will know someone who goes to church and some will even know those who use the Book of Common Prayer, they do not know them as representatives of
the church. Nor is the use of the *Book of Common Prayer* connected with an obviously compelling reason to give up time and the novelty of digital media to explore its richness.

**The enduring value of the *Book of Common Prayer***

Young people and the world within which they move do present significant challenges to a continuing appreciation of the *Book of Common Prayer*. It does however have enduring value within today’s context and may provide a resource to counter some of the disturbing tendencies of contemporary life.

Providing for the ‘collected’ worship of God’s people is of significant value. The *Book of Common Prayer* and its progeny have the capacity to counter the individualising tendencies of the current Australian context. As one of the principal purposes of the *Book of Common Prayer* is to bring people together in common (meaning shared) worship of God, this Prayer Book has the capacity to answer a desire borne by young people for authentic community.

Part of the genius of the *Book of Common Prayer* is that it drew from a deep well of wisdom. Cranmer deliberately used liturgical resources from the past to form the pre-cursors to the *Book of Common Prayer*. The value in this approach lay in appreciating and using the way that God had gifted many people in order that they should serve his people. This may help to counter the a-historical myopia that today prioritises novelty above all else.

The *Book of Common Prayer* was originally written in the vernacular. This was a conscious element in its compilation. Indeed Cranmer’s Prayer Books were not originally received as examples of high literary achievement. There is a participatory imperative in the form and language of the *Book of Common Prayer* that allows people to learn as they are immersed in the activity of worship. In other words, worship is not done *to* or *for* the people, rather the people are invited to be *part of* the worshipful experience. This finds surprising resonance in the desire for authentic experience borne by young people. In some ways Cranmer was the original ‘grunge’ artist, creating a ‘do-it-yourself’ worship experience.

The activity of collected worship established in the *Book of Common Prayer* is grounded firmly in the biblical cycles of remembrance and redemption. The ‘remember – respond’ dialectic of the prophets is rehearsed in the call and response dynamic of the *Book of Common Prayer*. This is particularly so given that much of the shared liturgy is drawn directly (in quotation or
paraphrase) from Scripture. Similarly the biblical cycle of ‘sin – redemption – new life’ is invoked as worshippers are taken through the various services of the Book of Common Prayer. This is given clear focus as Jesus is continually celebrated as the fulfilment of God’s work and the motive force for life in the community.

What would Cranmer ‘tweet’?
Thomas Cranmer and those who formed his work into the Book of Common Prayer would not have been able to envisage the technological revolution that has spawned mobile communication devices, Facebook, and Twitter. Indeed, the vast majority of people living in the first half of the twentieth century would have thought the ‘i-world’ the stuff of science fiction. In spite of this at least two principles applied by Cranmer can help to guide the use of the Book of Common Prayer in today’s context.

First, Cranmer was clear. The innovations that Cranmer made that were later carried over into the Book of Common Prayer were well able to be understood by the congregations he served. Indeed the Prayer Books for which he was responsible were paired with the ‘Homilies’, intended to promote understanding of the Christian faith among the people. The principle of clarity in worship is an enduring legacy of the Book of Common Prayer.

Second, Cranmer sought to re-form the lazy patterns of the church. While not everyone agreed with Cranmer’s approach to reform he worked to improve both the content and the presentation of the resources available for worship. Having provided the Church of England with these resources he employed his position of leadership to see that they were used.

Slow down and assume nothing: using the Book of Common Prayer today
The Book of Common Prayer has inspired people in their worship of God for 350 years. It does face challenges if it is to continue to inspire, however it may live on in the worship of younger generations if we slow down and assume nothing. Three principles may help in this undertaking:

1. Use the Book of Common Prayer for effect. It is said that the German/American Old Testament scholar Willem Van Gemeren would encourage his students to take note of ‘ze bumps in ze text’ as a way of discovering the important parts of the Old Testament narrative. In noticing the parts of the text that are different or ‘should not be there’ one may
gain a new appreciation of the treasure within. The *Book of Common Prayer* can function as a ‘bumpy’ text for young people unfamiliar with both its form and its function. So with young people one must slow down as the *Book of Common Prayer* is used to allow the bumps to be felt. One must also make no assumptions regarding pre-existing interest in or knowledge of the *Book of Common Prayer*. In other words, when using the *Book of Common Prayer* one must determine how to turn the ‘bump’ from being an uncomfortable jolt into being a nudge out of sloth.

2. Let others in on the secret. Because young Australians are distant both literarily and relationally from the world of the *Book of Common Prayer* a process of translation is needed if they are to appreciate it. Again, time is needed for this process to occur, so slow down and expect that it will take years and not hours for young people to develop a robust appreciation for the *Book of Common Prayer*. One must also assume nothing and give the young people with whom the *Book of Common Prayer* is being used time to process each new part. Just as the Apostle Peter needed to translate the experience of Pentecost to the watching crowd, so the experience of worship using the *Book of Common Prayer* must be explained.

3. Because the *Book of Common Prayer* is not written in the modern vernacular, much less in the mode of ICT, it will function for young people best as a treat and not a staple. It will be best remembered if it is used well at key times (such as at a dinner party) rather than if it is pressed into daily service (for instance, the daily meal). So again enthusiasm for what one may see as the great riches contained within the *Book of Common Prayer* must be contained. This means slowing down so that each use of the *Book of Common Prayer* leaves the young people hungry and wanting more. Once more those who are familiar with the *Book of Common Prayer* can assume nothing; a ‘digital native’ will find engaging with it hard work.

‘*It’s life Tom, but not as we know it!*’

It would be a mistake to think that the only home for the *Book of Common Prayer* is the specimen jar. There is life in the *Book of Common Prayer*! However
it would also be a mistake to assert its continued use without recognition of both the context within which it grew and that within which we now live.

We have rehearsed several of the challenges for young Australians if the *Book of Common Prayer* is going to find an enduring role in their lives. Yet, there are good reasons to hope that it may contribute to their worshipful life, particularly if we remember what serves whom!