Fragments in the Archaeology of United Church Worship

In contrast to many other churches, liturgical scholarship in The United Church of Canada has remained largely undeveloped. Most mainline denominations, such as those of Methodism, Presbyterianism, Anglicanism, Lutheranism, and especially Roman Catholicism, possess highly developed traditions of scholarly liturgical inquiry and devote significant resources to the study of worship. Each of the founding traditions that entered the United Church union in 1925 brought with them rich histories of theological debate and denominational deliberation regarding worship. Indeed, their liturgical histories address matters that speak to the very core of their respective identities. As a result, one can learn a great deal about the liturgical origins of The United Church of Canada by considering, for example, the liturgical practices of Methodism in relation to the Prayer Book tradition of the Church of England, or the forms and content of prayer created by John Calvin and John Knox and their evolution in Presbyterianism, or the radical simplicity of Separatist and Puritan worship that lies at the heart of Congregationalism. In the United Church context, however, popular consciousness of such liturgical genealogy is relatively rare.

Part of the challenge may have to do with dimensions of personal, collective, and institutional awareness. During his time as Moderator of the United Church, The Very Reverend Peter Short presided over the 80th anniversary of the denomination in 2005. A gifted preacher, he once used the image of an octogenarian to invite the church to reflect on life at 80 years of age. While the metaphor evokes both the value of an elder’s wisdom as well as concern about diminishing energies in the face of rapidly changing times,
sometimes the United Church seems to exhibit behaviour more like that of an adolescent than a senior citizen. When it comes to the subject of liturgical identity and self-awareness, we tend to show very little interest in our own history, little concern about the past, and much attraction to the present and the very near future. In the scheme of liturgical history, the United Church is no more than a teenager, if not still an infant.

In spite of the centrality of worship in the life of its congregations, United Church institutional resources, human and otherwise, dedicated to worship are often *ad hoc*. This makes all the more impressive its record of internationally recognized hymn books, service books, and other resources. While no institution can be expected to do it all, and all its members bear some responsibility for setting its priorities, one might reasonably expect such a denomination to identify and support its core activities more substantially. This tendency may be related to the popular perception of the United Church as a “free church tradition,” an expression frequently invoked throughout its history to argue against the need for denominational liturgical resources. However, the free church tradition was something much more specific in relation to very particular historical circumstances. It was not so much an assertion of the freedom to do whatever one pleases in worship, but rather freedom from state interference (i.e., the separation of church and state), the freedom from the mandatory use of a particular liturgical text (e.g., *The Book of Common Prayer*), or, more rigorously, the freedom to worship according to the Word of God, which is arguably about as far from doing whatever one pleases as one can possibly get. The United Church of Canada is a free church liturgical tradition in each of these senses, but not in the sense that is often popularly understood.

Academically, one practical problem is the availability of sources. Most of the significant primary sources relating to the history of worship in The United Church of Canada are now out of print or dispersed in archival collections. Similarly, a substantial body of relevant, but little-known secondary source material is found in forms that enjoy only limited circulation, such as academic journals, popular periodicals, or scholarly monographs. A handful of more recent works, such as those cited in the Conclusion, warrant more attention for having laid important foundations for this and future work. In
the absence of such attention to sources, a situation is perpetuated in which United Church people, students, clergy, and scholars fail to know and appreciate the substance of their own liturgical history and ethos. In an age where liturgical traditions are under significant pressure to respond to changing contexts, not knowing one’s own tradition can be a serious liability.

This collection is one small step toward addressing that concern. It is intended as a reader or textbook for theological students, clergy, worship leaders, scholars, and interested laypersons. As a gathering of primary and secondary sources drawn from United Church liturgical history, each introduced by a brief editorial commentary, it is an attempt to more publicly begin to excavate some of the fragments in the archaeology of United Church worship, and to invite others to join in the work.

The origins of this collection are two areas of long-standing interest in my own teaching and research. The first is precipitated by the practical demands of teaching United Church students in both masters and doctoral degree programs. In addition, the students are regularly joined by a small, but steady flow of individuals already ordained in other denominations who come seeking admission to the order of ministry in The United Church of Canada and who are required to take a course in United Church worship. This group has been a particularly stimulating catalyst. Coming as they do with a wealth of experience as worship leaders from other denominational and cultural contexts, they have consistently expressed a desire for documents that shed some light on the liturgical history, institutional processes, and theological assumptions that lie behind United Church practices of worship. They are often the ones who have most powerfully pressed such questions as: What is United Church worship? Is there such a thing as a United Church liturgical tradition? If so, how would one define or describe it? What are its characteristic features, theological touchstones, liturgical structures, and pastoral practices? How has it changed over the years, and why? What is its future? I am particularly thankful for them, for the gifts they bring and the questions they raise.

The second related area of interest has to with the identification of methodologies conducive to the study of worship in a liturgical context, such as that
of the United Church. There are, of course, many ways to study Christian worship in general and United Church worship in particular. Historically, the traditional theological disciplines—history, Bible, theology, pastoral—have each made important contributions. Consider, for example, some of the different methodological emphases that have been taken in the study of worship in various traditions. In Anglican and Episcopal contexts the subject often tends to be treated historically, emphasizing the development of the Prayer Book tradition and the enormous influence of *The Book of Common Prayer* in the Anglican liturgical ethos. In Reformed Protestant and evangelical settings, particular care is often taken to explicitly articulate an approach to worship based on biblical principles, appealing to the authority and interpretation of scripture and the Reformation call *sola scriptura* ("by scripture alone"). Roman Catholic and Orthodox approaches have a respected tradition of treating the study of liturgy as a theological discipline, one in which liturgy is viewed as both the primary theological source and an expression of essential doctrine and dogma. All approaches also tend to give close attention to the practical and pastoral dimensions of the concrete practices of worship.

At their most rigorous, all such methodologies eventually come to recognize how each line of inquiry inevitably leads to all the others and beyond. Feminist and liberationist methods have shown us how the praxis of worship is the dynamic integration of theory and practice, each pointing to the other. Such thinking has opened up a new door in the study of worship, a new paradigm in liturgical studies. From one perspective, the result has been to expose the bankruptcy of the traditional theological disciplines whenever they are appropriated as mutually exclusive silos of scholarly propriety. On the other hand, an exciting and complex, sometimes overwhelming, interdisciplinary landscape has emerged, drawing upon the insights of contemporary philosophy and the social sciences, hermeneutics and anthropology. Recent decades have seen a succession of new resources and challenges for the study of worship and liturgy, such as those marked by phenomenological methodologies, ritual studies, cultural criticism, and post-colonial interpretations. Consequently, there are increasingly new and different ways to piece together fragments in the archaeology of Christian worship. But whatever the starting point or hermeneutical perspective may
be, all methodologies stand to benefit from the identification of the very sources that have defined the liturgical traditions in question. The people and issues, contexts and texts that shape the liturgical resources of such traditions (e.g., hymn books, service books, denominational policies and practices) are the stuff of this research and therefore the focus of this particularly United Church collection of artifacts.

The use of the terms “primary” and “secondary” to describe this collection of sources warrants clarification and qualification. Strictly speaking, primary liturgical sources would be the liturgical texts themselves, for example, prayers, liturgies, and hymns. In this collection, the term has been interpreted more broadly. I have chosen not to include lengthy liturgical texts, except for a portion of the 1925 Inaugural Service. Obviously, service books and hymn books are too long to reprint in their entirety, though they are certainly worthy of close study. I also considered including a few significant hymns as illustrative of the United Church liturgical identity, as in the work of such quintessential United Church hymn writers as R. B. Y. Scott, Sylvia Dunstan, Walter Farquharson, and Linnea Good. But it was as hard to know where to begin as it was to know where to stop. Instead, I have chosen to use the limited space to draw the reader’s attention to the relevant prefaces, introductions, and guidelines that accompany the different generations of primary liturgical resources. Some of the material, such as acknowledgements, may seem inconsequential; however part of the point of this exercise is to resist the kind of collective and institutional amnesia that too easily forgets the principles, processes, and people that have shaped our liturgical history. Also included as primary sources are some key doctrinal and denominational statements, chosen for their direct bearing on the polity, policies, and practices of worship in the United Church. Such sources are often overlooked, but reveal many of the theological and liturgical presuppositions on which United Church worship and its resources are based. It is in this sense that they are “primary,” foundational in their relevance to the ethos of worship in the denomination.

The secondary sources represent more obvious examples of historical, theological, and pastoral reflection on United Church worship and its resources. Most of the authors are also key figures in the creation of many of the primary
sources, significant scholars and leaders in the history of United Church worship. As noted earlier, much of this material has been recovered from sources now out of print and has been chosen for its capacity to shed light on the shape and content of United Church worship, past, present, and future. Reading Richard Davidson on the Lord’s Supper, for example, can help one better understand the content of *The Book of Common Order*, in much the same way that reading David Newman can help one better appreciate the intent of *A Sunday Liturgy*. Moreover, it may even be possible to hear the social gospel themes raised by R. B. Y. Scott in the thirties reprised for the new millennium in *A Song of Faith*, or issues raised by Ronald Atkinson over 45 years ago revisited today in a new context by Bonnie Greene. It is precisely the possibility of such connections that this collection aims to foster in United Church liturgical scholarship and worship.

In the introductions, which accompany each of the sources, I comment on the significance of the document, drawing the reader’s attention to some of its salient features and frequently offering a particular interpretation of its role in the evolution of United Church worship and liturgical identity. As the title suggests and the Conclusion argues, the intended effect of the collection as a whole is to construct a cumulative history of worship in The United Church of Canada under the banner of “ordered liberty.”

Therefore, it is to answer the questions raised by my colleagues from other denominations in the affirmative: Yes, there is such a thing as a United Church liturgical tradition. It can be defined as ordered liberty and described in reference to its key primary and secondary sources.

Inevitably, more has been left out than included. For example, in spite of the centrality of preaching in the United Church, its long history of fine preachers, and the international renown of its own scholar of homiletics, Paul Scott Wilson, there are no documents on United Church preaching to parallel those on liturgy, *per se*. As a result, the brief, but cogent section on the sermon from *A Guide to Sunday Worship* (Chapter 31) must bear the full weight of this important subject.

Among primary sources, absent is anything from the controversial New Curriculum of the sixties. Though significant in the theological and pedagogical
life of the United Church, the conspicuous lack of any specific attention to the subject of worship in that material is noteworthy, if not revealing. In addition, space did not permit the inclusion of all the liturgies “for optional use” produced by the Working Unit on Worship and Liturgy during the eighties. While those relating to funerals, weddings, and pastoral liturgies were not as influential as A Sunday Liturgy and Baptism and Renewal of Baptismal Faith, it should nevertheless be noted that they did affect the development of United Church worship, including the content of Celebrate God’s Presence, and are worthy of further study.

As for secondary sources, only one article from The United Church Observer has been included (Chapter 27) and none from its precursor, The New Outlook. As demonstrated in Chapter 22 and noted in the Conclusion, Thomas Harding and Bruce Harding have mined this material to great effect in their research. Indeed, a focused collection of worship-related articles and letters to the editor from these periodicals would make for an entertaining read and provide valuable insight into the popular practices of United Church worshippers. However, I have chosen to limit the scope of the secondary sources to more scholarly commentary on United Church worship—the one exception being the irresistible Observer cover story on Ronald Atkinson (Chapter 27) and his work with experimental and contemporary worship in the sixties and seventies, a period which contains an uncanny resonance with many concerns circulating today.

In addition, gaps of a more chronological nature in this collection suggest interesting features in the history of United Church worship through the relative absence of material. Note, for example, the lack of primary and secondary sources preceding, during, and following the Second World War. With war looming on the horizon, it is not difficult to imagine how an institutional agenda could be affected. The United Church became increasingly immersed in heated debates about pacifism, followed by the anxious and stressful years of the war itself. Not surprisingly, in this context, the production of liturgical resources dropped in priority. Then, in the period of rebuilding that followed, attention focused on social issues, emerging biblical scholarship (e.g., The New Curriculum), and the production of educational resources to support the emerging postwar baby boom. The Hymnary and
The Book of Common Order set the tone and provided the content of worship, and preaching dominated the experience. As more creative breezes started to blow throughout the sixties and the work of revising The Book of Common Order dragged on, experimental and contemporary worship stimulated some colourful discussion and debate, but very little of this liturgical material seems to have been put to paper. More archival excavation is certainly needed. But even the gaps of such a collection as this tell a significant story. The absence of sources can be just as revealing as their presence.

Finally, consideration of the significance of other kinds of gaps or absences is important for the future of liturgical scholarship in the United Church. In a liturgical tradition defined by such metaphors and vocabulary as United Church, Voices United, and More Voices, the story of United Church worship is also a story of voices absent, voices silenced. Only three women appear among authors of the secondary sources. While many women worked on the more recent committees of the church, their names need to be recovered and remembered in order to be appropriately celebrated. Similarly, the voices of persons of diverse sexual orientations or intercultural identities have yet to be fully heard in the history of United Church worship. Aboriginal voices have been offering prayer and praise in worship in this land since long before the formation of the United Church. Much work remains in order to continue to identify sources relevant to the full breadth and depth of United Church liturgical history.

It is my sincere hope and prayer that what is absent in this collection, as well as what is present, will continue to support, encourage, and empower liturgical scholarship in The United Church of Canada.

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