

INWARDLY DIGEST
THE PRAYER BOOK AS GUIDE TO A SPIRITUAL LIFE

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Praise for *Inwardly Digest*:

The Prayer Book as Guide to a Spiritual Life

Too often, *The Book of Common Prayer* is open to a few familiar pages on Sunday and closed the rest of the days, with little regard to the deep, transformative spirituality inside. With humor, deep reverence, and academic insight that is anything but dry and boring, Derek Olsen reminds us of the breath of the Spirit, the lives of the saints, the love of Jesus, and the magnificence of God held in the words, silence, and worship of our *Book of Common Prayer*. Clergy and laity should read this to discover and re-discover the daring words and liturgies of our faith spanning eons and to engage the prayers and worship of our faith.

—LAURIE BROCK

Episcopal priest and author of *Horses Speak of God: How Horses Can Teach Us to Listen and be Transformed*

Derek Olsen is the patron saint of the overlooked; campaign manager of the undervalued; tour guide to the taken for granted. His patient, scholarly watchfulness and his gift for rendering complex ideas in clear, concise prose make *Inwardly Digest* an insightful guide to *The Book of Common Prayer* and a sure and steady introduction to Anglican spiritual practice.

—JIM NAUGHTON

Founder of Episcopal Café and partner of Canticle Communications

Written in an engaging style that is both conversational and informative, *Inwardly Digest* is a timely invitation to life in the Spirit sustained by the patterns and rhythms of the Prayer Book.



—FRANK GRISWOLD
25th Presiding Bishop of The Episcopal Church



With the spiritual foundation in *The Book of Common Prayer*, Derek Olsen shows how everyday Christians can grow closer to God through a “training regimen” that incorporates the spirituality of Anglican liturgy as a daily practice. In straightforward and accessible writing, Olsen provides a guide to Prayer Book spirituality for everyone.

—THE REV. SUSAN BROWN SNOOK
Episcopal priest and editor of *Acts to Action: The New Testament's Guide to Evangelism and Mission*




INWARDLY DIGEST
THE PRAYER BOOK AS GUIDE TO A SPIRITUAL LIFE


DEREK OLSEN

FORWARD MOVEMENT
CINCINNATI, OHIO

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FOREWORD



FOREWORD

There are all sorts of different ways of being Christian

I grew up Lutheran and had been working toward ordination in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America when I felt a subtle tugging at my soul. As I explored this further, I found myself being pulled toward a different way of being spiritual than I had known in the Lutheran church. It was an older path, one that gave more credence to mystery and sacrament than I saw in my Lutheran environment, one more heavily populated by the psalms. I began praying with *The Book of Common Prayer* and found a liturgical and sacramental depth that answered the call that I felt in my heart. For me, this spiritual path was more authentic to who I had been created to be. After much agonizing and long conversations with my wife, I left the Lutheran church and the ordination process and found a home in The Episcopal Church.

Don't get me wrong—I have nothing against Lutherans, and I treasure the many things I learned and the many friendships I maintain with my Lutheran colleagues. It simply wasn't the path for me.

I had always intended to pursue a doctorate after seminary. Following my move to The Episcopal Church, I earned a PhD in New Testament for which I focused specifically on the connection between scripture and liturgy—how liturgies use scripture and are, in turn, informed by it. I never entered a discernment process for ordination in The Episcopal Church, nor did I take an academic job after graduation. In the final years of my academic studies, I found a good job doing computer work for a major corporation, and I remain there today.

These biographical facts make me a weird author for this kind of book. Most writers on spirituality tend to be priests or professors or both. I'm neither. I have the same training as a parish priest (including a full year serving a Lutheran parish complete with preaching, teaching, and counseling), and I have a doctorate in a spirituality-ish field. But nobody pays me to study; nobody pays me to pray. My days aren't spent in scholarship and pastoral work with dedicated time for prayer, but in working the day job, cooking dinners, and shuttling my daughters to and from their activities. The only ivory towers in my life are the ones I pass on my way to my older daughter's ballet studio!

As a lay theologian living an ordinary life, I am not under any illusions about the difficulties of balancing a spiritual life in addition to and in relation to all of the other demands in my life and on my time. Figuring out that balance is an important piece of the puzzle for me.

Yet I have found an answer. The spirituality informed by and grounded in *The Book of Common Prayer* leads me most directly into the depths of God. Out of the many possible ways that there are to be Christian, my focus in this book is Anglican liturgical spirituality. Those last three words are terms that we ought to get clear upfront.

Anglican comes from the name *Angles*. It pertains to one of the many Germanic tribal groups that invaded Britain during the Migration Era of the fourth through seventh centuries. These tribal groups took over the place and renamed it Angle-land, which eventually became England. Through a series of events, the Church of England developed and was characterized by a certain perspective on the faith—a way of being Christian—embodied within *The Book of Common Prayer*. As English-speaking people spread across the world, they brought Anglicanism with them. The Episcopal Church is the heir of the English state-supported church in the America colonies. Other groups with Anglican lineages have appeared in America since then, most having split off from The Episcopal Church at some time or another.

Liturgical refers to a set of spiritual practices that use established formulas to structure regularly occurring worship services. Or, as some of my Methodist friends like to kid me, it means that we use “wrote-down” prayers. It's more than that, though. The term liturgical brings with it a sense of patterns that we as individuals and as a church value. These patterns include the seasons of the church year and the rhythm of daily prayer as well as how services on Sundays are ordered. I'll let you in on a little secret: Most Christian churches are liturgical, even those that would be horrified at being called such. If a church uses some sort of regular pattern when the congregation gathers for worship, then they are using a liturgy. Of course, in the Anglican tradition, we have moved quite a bit up the liturgical scale. Not only do we have liturgies and patterns, but we also embrace them as a basic principle of our spiritual practice. And that is where we are going to start. The first section of this book wrestles with the whys, hows, and wherefores of being liturgical, investigating the principles and logic of such a decision.

The word spirituality gets thrown around a lot these days, particularly in church circles, but often the word is dropped without any sort of explanation. What is spirituality? How does it relate to being spiritual? In one way, the answer is simple: Spirituality refers to a set of thoughts, ideas, feelings, habits, and practices that lead us deeper into the reality of God. Spirituality is an intersection of these things in a more or less systematic way that helps us live our faith, get more out of it, and share it with the people around us, aiding us—with God's help—to open and align our lives alongside God's own hopes for this world.

At the heart of Anglican liturgical spirituality is *The Book of Common Prayer*. Some of what I say here can and should apply to any book of common prayer. However, since I am an Episcopalian living in the United States, I will focus specifically on the prayer book authorized in my particular part of the Anglican Communion, the *Episcopal Book of Common Prayer* officially adopted by the Church in 1979. My contention is that the prayer book has at its heart a pattern for Christian living, a rule of life that represents a deeply authentic and well-trodden path toward Christian maturity. Now—does this mean that this book is only for Episcopalians? Actually, no. My belief is that the Anglican tradition and The Episcopal Church hold a treasure in trust for the larger Church, for that great mystical body of believers that transcends organizational structures and denominational lines. That treasure-in-trust is the liturgical life that flows from the prayer book with its balance of classic Christian elements: the Calendar, the Eucharist, and the Daily Office (Morning & Evening Prayer). I hope that any liturgical Christian will find this book to be a resource for their spiritual journey whether they use *The Book of Common Prayer* or not.

The title for this work comes from a prayer that is as old as the prayer book tradition itself. Near the beginning of the

English Reformation, an assembly of bishops created a new prayer book to be used by the whole country, replacing the Latin masses of the Roman Catholic Church and the many Reformation-inspired forms that were springing up. The leader of these bishops was the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer. He had been experimenting with and composing English-language liturgies for many years, but King Henry VIII steadfastly refused to allow public services in any language other than Latin. Once Henry died and his young son, Edward VI, took the throne, Cranmer and his colleagues had the opportunity they had been hoping for: to present the English people with liturgies in their own language, liturgies in continuity with the services they had heard all of their lives (whether they had understood them or not), infused with a renewed focus on scripture.

While many of the prayers had been translated from the Latin sources, many others were newly composed and underscored the theological principles of the reformers. The brief prayer (or collect) for the Second Sunday of Advent was one of Cranmer's new compositions:

BLESSED Lord, which hast caused all holy scriptures to be written for our learning: grant us that we may in such wise bear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of thy holy word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ.¹

At the heart of these words is a desire for the scriptures to take root in human lives. This encapsulated the reformers' hope: to instigate a renewal of Christian life in England,

¹ Joseph Ketchley, ed., *The Two Liturgies, AD 1549, and AD 1552: With Other Documents Set Forth by Authority in the Reign of King Edward VI* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1844), p. 42.

grounded in the scriptures and mediated by the liturgies of the Church. This hope remains with us today. While the language has changed a bit, this prayer is still with us. Its position has shifted around a bit—it's appointed for a Sunday just before Thanksgiving now—but the longing embodied within it remains just as keenly felt now as centuries ago when it was first written.

It is still my hope, an Anglican hope, that the authorized liturgies of the Church serve as a vehicle to connect us to the deep wisdom of the Christian tradition, to its scriptures and teachings. By living the liturgies week by week, day by day, we do—literally—hear and read the Word of God. Eventually, with practice, we come to mark and learn the scripture. But it's that next step of the prayer that is critical: It's not enough to just learn holy scripture. We need to make it a part of ourselves, part of our being.

We have to inwardly digest it.

And that's my hope here. I'm trying to give you a pathway to the riches of our prayer book so that you can understand them more deeply. I am trying to infect you with some of my love for these texts—and not just the words on the page but the energies that can spring from acting them out in your life.

One last note—this book contains a lot of “we” and “us” language; hopefully not much “I” and “you.” That's not just a stylistic convention. Rather, it is born out of the conviction that this whole spiritual business that we're engaged in is a group activity. We don't—we can't—do it by ourselves and, indeed, trying to do it solo is frequently one of the warning signs that we're going off track. Instead, we practice our spirituality within a community of other people who are alternately supporting us, challenging us, frustrating us, and reminding us what authentic love looks like. This book took shape within the context of several such overlapping communities without which it could not have happened and

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without which it would have been a much shorter and poorer work.

The most basic community that enabled it to happen is, of course, my family. My wife, Meredith, is an Episcopal priest as well as being a wonderful mother, a wise friend, and a faster runner than I'll ever be. She has put up with and pushed back on most of the thoughts in this book in one way or another, and they are stronger and richer for it. Our two delightful daughters, Greta and Hannah, relentlessly remind me to “keep it real” verbally and otherwise. Without the support of my family, none of this would have been possible.

The team at Forward Movement has been tremendous. Executive Director and Pamphlet Baron extraordinaire Scott Gunn helped me hash out the shape and direction of this work. Richelle Thompson, Melody Wilson Shobe, and Nancy Hopkins-Greene were steadfast editors who helped improve the structure and content of the work in spite of my resistance. Michael Phillips has an incredible process for coming up with compelling and fitting cover art, and Carole Miller has a keen eye for detail and consistency in layout. And, of course, Jane Paraskovopoulos and the rest of the staff that authors rarely interact with keep the ship righted and moving forward.

Lastly, this book has already been profoundly shaped by its readers. Over a decade ago, I started a semi-anonymous blog and gave ~~it~~ the obscure, unpronounceable, and unspellable name of *haligweorð*. Hey, it made sense at the time. The blog was a creative outlet for me to write and think about things that had absolutely nothing to do with my doctoral dissertation. Over the years, the blog became a community of readers, writers, and responders who have helped me grow in my writing and my thinking. While many of the ideas in this book were informally worked out first on the blog, some of them achieved a more concrete form because of relationships created through it. Part of the first chapter grows out of a post

spurred by Jim Naughton when he was still running the online *Episcopal Café*. Parts of the seventh chapter started life as an address to the Society of Catholic Priests at the instigation of David Cobb and Robert Hendrickson.

Once the book concept became more clear, I blogged much of it as I went, and I owe a debt of gratitude to all of the readers who commented and improved what I wrote. In particular, Barbara Snyder, Christopher Evans, and Nicholas Heavens have been there from the start. Susan Loomis, too, continually pushed me to write more clearly and to remember for whom I was writing. Brendan O'Sullivan-Hale and Hollis Powell, hosts of *The Collect Call* podcast, read and improved the chapter on collects. In addition to my Internet comrades, Brooke Watson and Steven Dalle Mura (my uncle-in-law) commented on every page in order to make this a better and more accessible work.

And finally, dear readers, I invite you to continue the conversations—in your homes, your parishes, and your Internet communities. I've renamed my blog to the more user-friendly *St Bede Productions* (www.stbedeproductions.com), and you're always welcome to join us there.

Derek Olsen, PhD
Feast of Saint Bede

CHAPTER 1

FUNDAMENTALS

Keeping the Main Thing the Main Thing

My wife is, among other things, a coach with our local running club. Runners come to her and complain that they don't feel like they are making progress. Her first question is, "What's your goal?" Whether it's maintaining a certain pace for a number of miles, setting a new personal record for a given race, or losing a few pounds, there has to be a goal. Otherwise the idea of progress is a futile one! Whether they have a goal or not, she then asks to see their running log. Well—they haven't filled it out. Or they have, and it shows sporadic workouts scattered across a couple of weeks. Or the log shows consistency but no differentiation between types of workouts. With the log in hand, she can coach the runners to develop training plans that will help them get to their goal. She helps the runners establish a connection between their daily and weekly training and the accomplishment of their