

# The Revised Common Lectionary

By Alan Lewis, Ph.D.

*Reprinted from The Journal of the Association of Anglican Musicians (Vol. 15, No. 10, December 2006) with permission.*

The headline events of last summer's General Convention in Columbus, Ohio, were clearly the election of a new Primate and the determination of a response to the Windsor Report. A step of lesser prominence, but with the potential for far deeper ramifications on the weekly experience of those in the Church's pews, was the formal adoption by The Episcopal Church of the Revised Common Lectionary (hereinafter RCL). For those who may have missed this action, and the years of discussion that led to it, I offer this thumbnail introduction, and a brief guide to the challenges and opportunities the RCL presents to musicians and others engaged in the planning of liturgy. My presuppositions are that (a) readers serve in contexts where a lectionary is used, (b) they do not yet use the RCL, but soon will, and (c) they are concerned with choosing music for any given Sunday that connects in some concrete way with the Scriptural lessons assigned for that day.<sup>1</sup>

Like the three-year Lectionary of the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer* (BCP), the RCL owes its existence to the *Ordo lectionum Missae*, the Lectionary of the Roman Catholic Church, promulgated in 1969 as a result of the Second Vatican Council. By its jump to a three-year pattern, this document unshackled liturgists from the limitations inherent in a one-year cycle of readings for public worship, and held out the hope of a truly representative array of Scripture being heard in Sunday services. In the 1970s and early 1980s, while Episcopalians adopted the Roman lectionary more-or-less intact, the North American Consultation on Common Texts (CCT), a committee of Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Protestant liturgists and scholars, sought to improve on the Roman document, particularly its choices of readings from the Hebrew Scriptures. The CCT produced a trial document (the Common Lectionary) in 1983; the Revised Common Lectionary followed in 1992. The RCL is already widely in use in North American Protestant Christendom—at least, in those Protestant churches where a lectionary is used at all—and elsewhere, particularly in the Anglican Communion (though sometimes with significant adaptations, as in the current Lectionary of the Church of England). It may be noted that, despite having essentially started the wave of lectionary revision in motion, and continuing in dialogue with CCT, the Roman Catholic Church does not use the RCL, but sticks with a version of the Lectionary that started it all.<sup>2</sup>

The RCL has been authorized for trial use in certain designated Episcopal congregations since the mid-1980s, and has been available as an experimental option throughout the Church, by diocesan permission, since 1994. The action of the 2006 General Convention makes the RCL the official Sunday Lectionary of The Episcopal Church, superseding that printed at pages 889-921 of *The Book of Common Prayer*

(although the text assignments for certain Holy Days not covered in the RCL remain intact). This change takes effect on the First Sunday of Advent, Year A, in December, 2007, though the resolution establishing this also provides for local delays of one three-year cycle, thereby potentially deferring the change until Advent, 2010.

Like the Roman Catholic Lectionary of 1969, and the closely-related BCP Lectionary, the RCL is a Sunday-by-Sunday schedule of readings for congregational worship. As in those earlier lectionaries, each Proper, or set of lesson assignments, provides four readings, including a selection from the Psalter. The Epistle and Gospel readings assigned in it are broadly identical to those familiar to us from the BCP. The three Synoptic Gospels are the basic source for Gospel readings during most of Year A (Matthew), Year B (Mark) and Year C (Luke). In both lectionaries, the Sunday-by-Sunday readings, especially in the “Ordinary Time” cycle of the Sundays after Epiphany and Pentecost, progress in a generally linear way through the Gospel of the year; during the seasons of Advent, Christmas, Lent, and Easter, the Gospel assignments skip around a good bit, and have frequent recourse to the Fourth Gospel. The Apostolic writings—Acts, the Epistles, and Revelation—which constitute the reading before the Gospel, are also read more or less in course, that is, sequentially across a series of weeks, especially in the “green” seasons, with occasional deviations when a different passage is chosen in order to connect particularly with the Gospel of the day.

The traits distinct to the RCL come in the pericopes chosen from the Hebrew Bible.<sup>3</sup> The 1969 Lectionary marked the first systematic appearance of readings from the Hebrew Scriptures in Roman Catholic Eucharistic worship in more than a thousand years. The proponents of the RCL contended that, in seeking to engage the Hebrew Bible, the Roman Catholic lectionary did not generally do narrative justice to it; the Lectionary assigns privileged parts of these stories for the sake of their thematic connection with episodes in the story of Jesus, a practice that led to some fragmentation and discontinuity in congregations’ experience of those ancient narratives. Inevitably, vast tracts of the Hebrew Bible were neglected in the process. So the RCL was formulated to address this fragmentation and neglect.

Even so, through the first half of the liturgical year, from Advent through Eastertide, the first lesson in each Proper appears largely as in the 1969 Roman Catholic Lectionary. But in the long season after Pentecost, the RCL provides two parallel tracks of readings for each of the three years of the cycle. One track essentially preserves the pattern of 1969: the readings from the Hebrew Scriptures (including the Psalm assignments) connect thematically with the day’s Gospel. But in the other track, the one preferred by the RCL’s framers, the first reading follows a single narrative arc across long periods of weeks and months (though usually not reading exactly in course, as the stories must be drastically abridged to fit into the available number of weeks). This latter track pursues narratives drawn out of Genesis and the story of Moses (Year A), the story of the Davidic kingship (Year B), and the stories of Elijah, Elisha, and the Minor Prophets (Year C). Each Hebrew Bible reading in both tracks also has a Psalm assignment that fits it appropriately.<sup>4</sup>

What results in this “narrative track” may feel familiar to those accustomed to using the BCP’s Daily Office Lectionary. That two-year cycle of readings (which obviously has seven times as many reading slots available in each of its years, and typically employs both lengthier and more continuous passages of scripture for each lesson than is normative even in the RCL) nearly always leaves preachers groping in vain for thematic connections between readings. The point of the Office readings does not lie in such connections, but in the day-to-day continuity of the separate narrative lines. Now a similar week-by-week continuity is available as an option in the Sunday Eucharist, as well—but it comes at the price of the thematic coherence within a given Sunday familiar from the Roman Catholic/BCP lectionary.<sup>5</sup>

Note that the two Ordinary Time tracks of the RCL are not like a weekly menu: one is not meant simply to choose the Hebrew Bible readings from Column A or Column B, at least not on a week-by-week basis. Once a parish starts down a given track in May or June, the intent is that that track will be pursued right through until Advent. I’m sure that intention won’t keep some parishes from using it the other way, but such a choice would run counter to the whole purpose of the “narrative” track of the RCL. Obviously, rectors and vicars, and their lay colleagues and advisors, will need to make the determination of which track to follow. But to do the new lectionary justice, the choice ought to be made, not Sunday-by-Sunday, as with the occasional options already present in the BCP Lectionary, but year by year and with the awareness that that choice, when- and however it is made, will have implications for both preachers and musicians stretching all the way from the Second Sunday after Pentecost to the end of November.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps an illustration is in order. In the First Book of the Kings, Elijah’s encounters with the widow of Zarephath occupies most of Chapter 17 (vv. 8-24). This story falls into two episodes: the woman’s drought-time generosity to Elijah, in vv. 8-16, and the illness, death, and resurrection of her son (vv. 17-24). In the BCP Lectionary, we hear the first part of the story in conjunction with the image of the widow’s mite (Mark 12:38-44), a Gospel assigned to Proper 27B. The second episode is assigned with the story of Jesus raising the son of the widow of Nain (Luke 7:11-17, set for Proper 5C). In the RCL, one track (I’ll call it the “thematic track”) has these same assignments. It is the other, more continuous track where things get interesting. Here, the Hebrew Bible passage assigned with Proper 27B is the second of two installments from Ruth, establishing her ancestry of David (recall that Year B follows the kingship narrative). The passage assigned in this track for Proper 5C (early in the prophet-narrative) is 1 Kings 17:8-16 (17-24). That is, we have a choice where to end the reading, but the required part is the widow’s generosity, not the raising of her son! Given the different emphases of these pericopes, the accompanying Psalm assignments differ, as well.<sup>7</sup>

A common theme in the reactions I have heard from both musical and clerical colleagues who have lived with the RCL for some time already is that the length of the readings is often problematic for Eucharistic use—that is, in a context where the readings form an integral part of an overall liturgical action, rather than its sole focus (as would be the case in many Protestant contexts). Some find this particularly true of the Psalm assignments, others find it to be the case in general. The most reassuring thoughts I have

heard on this subject come from our AAM colleague, the Rev'd Dr. Clayton Morris, at The Episcopal Church's Office of Liturgy and Music. He reminds me that the rubrics concerning the Readings and Psalm are (as so often in the 1979 BCP) permissive rather than prescriptive: one or two Lessons, as appointed, are read and a Psalm, hymn, or anthem may follow each Reading. It may come to pass that, in living into the realities of the RCL, some congregations find themselves reducing the number of lessons before the Gospel to cope with their sometimes expanded length. And even as the Gradual Psalm settings already available from Church Publishing occasionally omit assigned verses to keep the Psalm to a manageable length (even under the BCP Lectionary), the often-longer Psalm assignments of the RCL may be locally abbreviated (or even adjusted more drastically) without breaching either the letter or the apparent intent of this rubric.

So much for the mechanics of the RCL—what it is and how it works. The real question before us is, “How do we, as musicians, best accommodate ourselves to it?” The answer really depends on the choice of “track.” Musicians serving congregations that opt for the thematic track will have very little adjusting to do. On the other hand, the narrative track will really change the feel of services in the months after Pentecost, and will demand some significant accommodation from musicians. My first advice—reactionary though it may sound—would be, for the sake of both preachers and musicians, to live into the RCL gently, employing the thematic track for one three-year cycle, but paying attention to what is going on in the parallel track, perhaps making notes for next time and developing a sense of what to expect. Then, with a little more time to prepare for the shift, and with more resources available by then to help with musical decision-making, try the narrative track for the cycle beginning in 2010.

My next suggestion, whatever your parish's initial choice of track, is to beef up your budget for resource-acquisition across the next few years. For the good news is that publishers—particularly our friends at Church Publishing, Inc.—are busily preparing to meet our needs. The bad news is simply that it won't come cheap.

For hymnody, the *Church Musician's Handbook* (formerly the *Choirmaster's Handbook*, published annually by The Living Church Foundation) has for several years made hymn-suggestions for both the BCP Lectionary and the RCL, with reference to *The Hymnal 1982*, *Wonder, Love, and Praise*, and *Lift Every Voice and Sing II*. This will continue to be a useful resource. (I am sure I am not alone in wishing, for the sake of convenience, that the editors of that handbook would specify the connections between their suggestions and the propers; does a given hymn connect particularly with the Epistle, or the Gospel, or the Psalm? Yes, of course, we can figure that out for ourselves—when a connection actually exists!—but it would be a convenience to us all not to have to.)

What we can look for from Church Publishing across the next few years is a sweeping revision of essentially all their liturgical planning resources to accommodate the RCL. This will include a revision and expansion of the Liturgical Index to *The Hymnal 1982* (*Hymnal Studies 5*), to encompass not only the RCL, but also the several collections published by the Church since the advent of *The Hymnal 1982* (i.e., *Lift Every*

*Voice and Sing II, Wonder, Love, and Praise, Voices Found, and My Heart Sings Out*). In the meantime, the old HS5 will still be usable with the thematic track of readings, and in the narrative track for its hymn suggestions relating to the Epistle and Gospel. (It will also continue to be as indispensable as ever for Lesser Feasts and Fasts, the Daily Office, and other occasions.) Other items slated for eventual revision by Church Publishing include the Scriptural Index to *The Hymnal 1982*, all the various Psalter materials currently in print, the planning indices for each of the hymnals named already, and all the electronic products relating to liturgical planning. While it is not realistic to expect many of these materials to be in our hands soon, I am assured that they will make at least the bare essentials available by next summer, in time to plan for Year A.<sup>8</sup>

More vexing is the question of choral repertory. While this arena nearly always has a greater degree of freedom than hymnody, the volume of material available to choose from is so staggering that keeping track of it is always a challenge, and the familiar tools are not yet available in suitably revised forms. William Wunsch's *Catalogue of Anthems and Motets* is for many of us an indispensable resource. Since the Gospels remain largely unchanged, many of its suggestions remain valid (though, as the catalogue also does not make specific the scriptural or thematic elements that lead to his suggestions, we may have to do a bit of interpreting); Bill hopes to have a revision of Year A, at least, available to us in time for planning Advent 2007. James H. Laster's catalogues of choral and solo literature according to scriptural texts will both help, though I can't be alone in thinking that wading into either one (let alone both) every single week as a primary resource would be a wearisome challenge.<sup>9</sup>

Even leaving aside the length of the verse-selections, singing the Psalter will present other issues, particularly (again) in the "non-thematic track." While the two whole-Psalter volumes from Church Publishing (Alec Wyton's *Anglican Chant Psalter* and James Litton's *Plainsong Psalter*) will both be as useful as ever, and the latter will eventually be revised to contain appropriate antiphons for the RCL, musicians accustomed to the convenience of Richard Crocker's *Gradual Psalms* (also from Church Publishing), Peter Hallock's *Ionian Psalter*, or any other BCP-Psalter resource, will have to wait a while for a viable revision or alternative to emerge. In the meantime, there's always the permissiveness of the rubric!

In summary, the conversion to the RCL may prove to be not a bang, but a whimper. Parishes opting for the thematic track for the weeks after Pentecost will notice relatively few differences from the lectionary they already use. And even those opting for the other track will hear much that is familiar. Still, it is in the details of the season after Pentecost that the challenges and opportunities will come for us, as we seek to make the most musical sense out of the heretofore marginalized texts we and our congregations will now be able to hear from the Hebrew Bible. Along with creating some new challenges—like how to select hymns and other music when there is, by design, no thematic connection between the readings—this will open up some new musical terrain, allowing repertory that previously just didn't fit in connection with the Lectionary to be heard more easily.<sup>10</sup> I suspect—and hope—that the transition will bring out its best results in the ways that it invites (and compels) us all, musicians and clergy alike, to re-engage with

Scripture, to wrestle with new choices and new tools, and to relate different narratives through new musical means. My hope is that it will, in the long run, help us all to transform telling “the old, old story” into singing a new song.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> I should acknowledge at the outset that I am far from an authority on this topic. I have not yet lived with the RCL over real liturgical time; my connection with it has been, as it were, theoretical, trying over the past few months to grapple with its implications for our Eucharistic liturgy, particularly in reference to the use of the Psalter. In my defense, I can only plead that I have tried without success to recruit colleagues with better “RCL credibility” than my own to discourse on this topic; faced with their reluctance, and in the absence of a suitable ship headed for Tarshish, I will simply do the best I can.

<sup>2</sup> American and Canadian Lutherans (ELCA and ELCC), The Presbyterian Church, USA, the United Methodist Church, and the United Church of Canada are among the North American users of the RCL. According to its website, [www.commontexts.org](http://www.commontexts.org), the CCT now includes “representative[s] of more than twenty-five Protestant Churches in North America as well as the Roman Catholic International Commission on English in the Liturgy (ICEL).” For a more detailed history of the Common Lectionary and its revision, see Horace T. Allen, Jr., and Joseph P. Russell, *On Common Ground* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> The Greek word pericope means, literally, a “cutting-out,” a snippet; in liturgical parlance, it refers to a self-sufficient or coherent narrative unit of Scripture—units not necessarily related to the chapters and verses into which the Biblical literature has been edited over the centuries.

<sup>4</sup> One detail to note in passing is that, where assignments from the Psalter in the published RCL contain verse numbers, as opposed to whole Psalms, these are based on the versification of the NRSV Bible, not that embodied in the 1979 BCP Psalter. (Not only does the BCP Psalter differ in translation from any particular version of the Bible, but its verses also frequently have different divisions.) In other words, if one simply goes to the Prayer Book Psalter with a generic listing of the RCL, the Psalm citation may cut off in the middle of a thought, rather than where a division was intended. One such listing of the RCL, which links one easily to the NRSV translations of all the readings for each Sunday, but thus not to the BCP Psalter, is at [www.divinity.library.vanderbilt.edu/lectionary/](http://www.divinity.library.vanderbilt.edu/lectionary/). The RCL listing downloadable from the Liturgical Office of The Episcopal Church ([www.episcopalchurch.org/liturgy\\_music.htm](http://www.episcopalchurch.org/liturgy_music.htm)) has adjusted for these deviations in Psalter versification.

<sup>5</sup> Chapter 2 of *On Common Ground* explores the varied functions of a lectionary, and the implications inherent in them, including what it calls “vertical” and “horizontal” coherence—that is, connections within a day’s lessons, and connections from week to week. The “thematic track” of the RCL in Ordinary Time provides “vertical” coherence, or thematic connection within a Sunday; the “narrative track” yields horizontal coherence across the entire season.

<sup>6</sup> We have, in fact, the potential for what is essentially a six-year, rather than a three-year cycle, with the only difference between one Year A and the next (say) being the selections of readings and graduals from the Hebrew Bible. This sort of cycle-by-cycle alternation of tracks is nowhere mandated or even recommended, but congregations wanting to get maximum exposure to the breadth of the Hebrew Bible might want to consider such an approach.

<sup>7</sup> Psalm 146 is assigned in the thematic track for Proper 27B, while the heritage-minded Psalm 127 is set with the passage from Ruth; in Proper 5C, Psalm 30 goes with the thematic track, which includes Elijah’s

raising of the widow's son, and Psalm 146 is set again for the alternate track in which that part of the story is optional.

<sup>8</sup> One argument in favor of conversion to the RCL was its widespread use, which meant that both sermon-preparation publications and clergy/colleague-based study groups could work better for Episcopal clergy if we made the switch. And some of the same arguments apply in the musical arena. Hymn suggestions, for example, drawn from the *New Century Hymnal*, the *Lutheran Book of Worship*, or Methodist or Presbyterian hymnals can, in many cases, be translated into 1982 terms.

<sup>9</sup> *Catalogue of Choral Music Arranged in Biblical Order*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1996; suppl., 2001) and *Catalogue of Solos and Duets Arranged in Biblical Order*, 2nd ed., compiled with Diana R. Strommen (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2003).

<sup>10</sup> I think first of the wonderful settings of “When David heard that Absalom was slain,” which will now fit right in on Proper 14B—admittedly just when most of our choirs are on summer holiday—but the examples are surely legion.

*Alan Lewis earned a Ph.D. in musicology at the University of California, Berkeley, as a Mellon Fellow in the Humanities. He was a lecturer in sacred music at the Church Divinity School of the Pacific in Berkeley before becoming the Director of Music at Calvary Church, Pittsburgh, in 1997.*

*Sidebar:*

A feature of the Music Ministries Retreat will be a discussion the use of the *Revised Common Lectionary* and how it relates to music ministries.

Sep 21-22

Music Ministries Retreat

Fri 5 p.m.–Sat 3 p.m.

Bishop Claggett Center

3035 Buckeystown Pike, Buckeystown

The Music and Liturgy Committee is sponsoring a retreat for church musicians, music ministers, choir directors and others. Featured presenters include William Bradley Roberts, choirmaster at Saint John's Episcopal Church in Washington, D.C. He will be giving a presentation on choral rehearsal techniques. The Saturday session features a discussion on the *Revised Common Lectionary*, including musical resources for the new readings, and an anthem reading session with a focus on two-, three- and four-part anthems.

Cost \$125 full retreat, \$90 commuter, \$75 Saturday only.

For more information on the retreat contact Ken Brown: [KBrown@dafferorgans.com](mailto:KBrown@dafferorgans.com).

To register call:

301-874-5147

[dkerner@bishopclaggett.org](mailto:dkerner@bishopclaggett.org)

[www.bishopclaggett.org](http://www.bishopclaggett.org)

