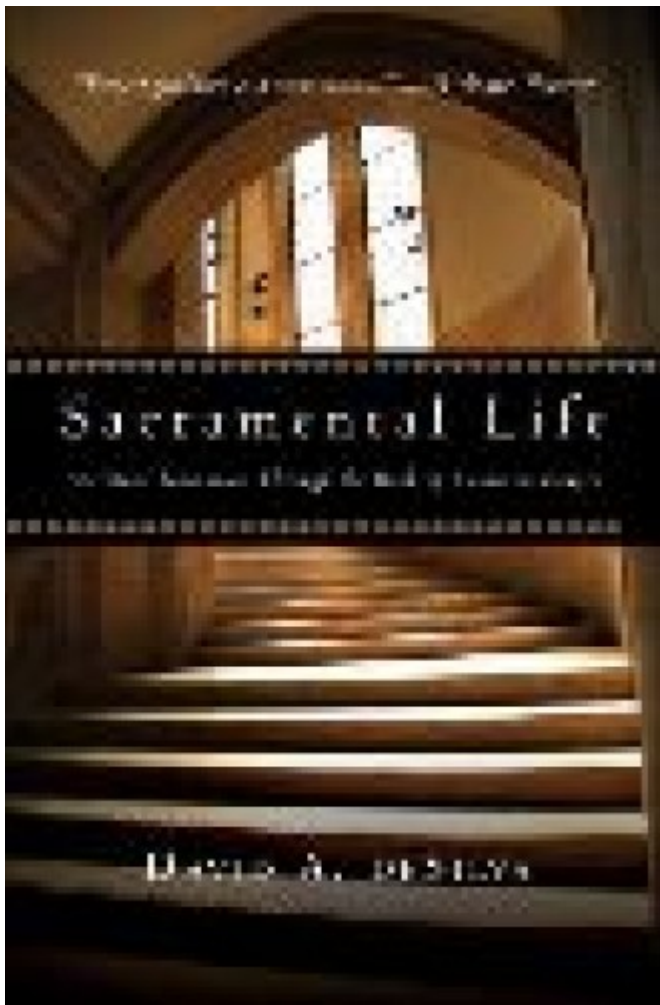


Sacramental Life: Spiritual Formation Through the Book of Common Prayer

reviewed by [Julie Lane-Gay](#) in the [March 24, 2009](#) issue

In Review



Sacramental Life: Spiritual Formation Through the Book of Common Prayer

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I marvel sometimes as newcomers continue to arrive Sunday after Sunday at my Anglican church. Clueless about the messes in Canterbury and beyond, these visitors are drawn to our liturgy and our Book of Common Prayer.

They ask questions. What are these prayers and collects? What makes them stand the test of time? Newcomers want good guides just as all of us do. Of the numerous books addressing their questions, David deSilva's *Sacramental Life: Spiritual Formation Through the Book of Common Prayer* is one of the better. DeSilva, a professor of New Testament and Greek at Ashland Theological Seminary, combines his Episcopal upbringing, his experience as a pastor in the United Methodist Church and his eminent scholarly work to give his readers a thoughtful introduction to the four major rituals of the Book of Common Prayer. He aims to "focus on the spiritual direction these liturgies provide and spiritual direction they seek to form" and "to bring the spiritual formation fostered by the Book of Common Prayer more fully into your daily life."

Spotlighting baptism, the Eucharist, marriage and death, deSilva delves into not only what the Prayer Book teaches but where in scripture these liturgies originate and how they have been shaped over the history of the church. Each of the 45 short chapters is theologically intelligent and easy to understand, and concludes with several practical suggestions. DeSilva's passion is for readers to absorb these liturgies deep into their daily lives and be blessed by them.

One of the book's great strengths is its emphasis on the communal aspect of each of these rituals. DeSilva grounds his readers in the importance of performing these acts together and shows how our lives, both individually and corporately, can be changed when we do.

Ensnared in *Sacramental Life* are some gems of thoughtfulness and pastoral care that are worth the price of the book. My favorite is the chapter on the Nicene Creed, a thoughtful walk through the personal intention of the creed that calls for the fruit of self-giving in each of us and provides insights that will stay with me for a long time. If I were providing premarital counseling, I would use the chapters on marriage for their wise guidance not only for thinking through the vows but also for inviting the church community to actively support unions from the beginning. Finally, though most of us prefer to address our theology of death only at funerals, deSilva's chapters on death and burial are perhaps the most helpful of all.

Sacramental Life has some weaknesses. DeSilva's tone is overly didactic in places, and he conveys sympathy more than empathy over struggles with obstacles to faith and obedience. Some of the examples are stereotypical and outdated—women struggle with marriage and children while men struggle with stress and career. DeSilva is unusual among Protestants in his use of the Apocrypha; though the texts are well chosen, their inclusion will be a deterrent for some.

Still, *Sacramental Life* bridges the gap between the Book of Common Prayer and daily life, making a helpful and substantial contribution to the ever-increasing number of pilgrims who desire a meaningful life with the prayer book.