

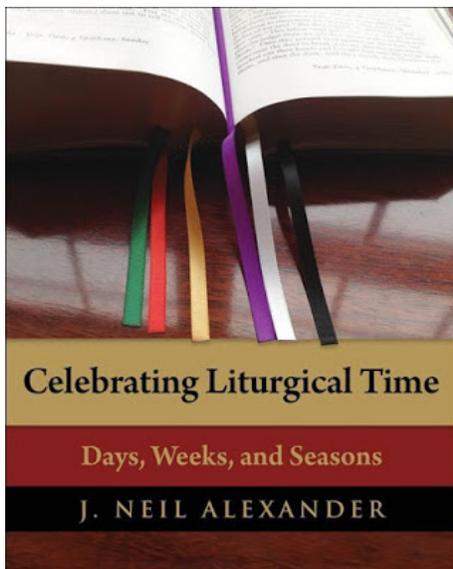


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Friday, April 28, 2017

## Book Review: Celebrating Liturgical Time by J. Neil Alexander



Book Review by [David Deutsch](#), Verger at [St. Mark's Episcopal Church](#), Washington, DC

### [Celebrating Liturgical Time: Days, Weeks, and Seasons](#)

by J. Neil Alexander  
New York: Church Publishing, 2014

*It is right, and a good and joyful thing, always and everywhere to give thanks to you, Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth.* —Book of Common Prayer, page 36

The Rt. Rev. J. Neil Alexander, dean of the [School of Theology at the University of the South](#), writes clearly and concisely about the spiritual foundation that upholds our worship throughout the church year. Alexander further gives the reader both practical and religious information about celebrating major feasts days of the Episcopal Church and the Daily Office. As a verger in the Episcopal Church since 1999 and a seminary graduate (MTS degree), I totally appreciate Alexander's book which reminded me that one should never miss the opportunity to keep learning especially when a know-it-all complacency settles over the brain like a fog.

*The liturgy of the church is a living tradition and is constantly evolving. Ritual life, no matter how well informed or deeply entrenched, never fully 'settles,'*<sup>1</sup>

writes Alexander in his introduction. This is good practical advice to vergers and all planners of liturgy and reminds us to continue to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest the ways and the whys in which we celebrate God's word.

I appreciated being reminded—no, taught—right at the beginning of the book that the spiritual foundation that upholds our worship is prayer. Prayer acknowledges God's work in time. Alexander reminds us that

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  - ▶ [May 2017](#) (4)
  - ▼ [April 2017](#) (4)
    - [Book Review: Celebrating Liturgical Time by J. Nei...](#)
    - [Saturday Events at the 2017 VGEC Annual Conference...](#)
    - [A Time "Meet and Right" for Prayer and a Vergers P...](#)
    - [2017 VGEC Annual Conference Profile: The Most Rev...](#)
  - ▶ [February 2017](#) (1)
  - ▶ [January 2017](#) (1)
- ▶ [2016](#) (17)
- ▶ [2015](#) (46)
- ▶ [2014](#) (50)
- ▶ [2013](#) (17)
- ▶ [2012](#) (12)
- ▶ [2011](#) (10)
- ▶ [2010](#) (15)
- ▶ [2009](#) (2)

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- [2010 VGEC Archives](#)

*It is by prayer, both public and personal, that time is made holy, set apart for divine purposes. The effect of such prayer is not to change time, but to more clearly recognize God at work within it... Time and prayer go together. All prayer is in time.*<sup>2</sup>

In the yearly liturgical cycle of the church season, we give thanksgiving and praise to God for our blessings of our life. He says that all forms of prayer—lamentation, intercession, confession, offering, pleading—spring from "the rich matrix of thanksgiving."

The principal day that shapes liturgical time is Sunday. Alexander says, "All other patterns of liturgical time are overlays of this primal shape."<sup>3</sup> So, the importance of prayer which marks God's work in time coupled with the significance of Sunday which is the feast day that shapes the way we participate in sacred time is the major theme of the book.

In the above I have given a large amount of space to the spiritual underpinnings of our liturgical calendar. But Alexander takes us through each principal feast day giving us both its history and liturgical importance. I'll use Epiphany as an example. He reminds us that the Feast of the Epiphany is a much older feast than Christmas. Epiphany dates from around the third century while Christmas seems to emerge at the beginning of the sixth century. Epiphany weaves together the baptism of Jesus, the miracle at the wedding in Cana, and the star that guided the Magi. Alexander reminds us that Epiphany is not to be thought of as the end of Christmas; Epiphany looks forward toward the beginnings of things to come.

Finally, Alexander devotes much thought to the Daily Offices. While the Sunday celebration is fundamental to Christian life, daily corporate prayer is deeply rooted in both the Jewish and Christian tradition. While praying privately is certainly permissible and upheld, it is common prayer with other believers that is the source of all other prayer. I love what Alexander writes about common prayer:

We learn to pray with the well-worn words of the church's prayer, over and over, at times almost rote. We fear the inoculation of repetition until **we discover the grace of holy words being so deeply implanted in us that they cannot be taken away... We search for our own personal ways to say things better, but eventually acknowledge that the church's prayer has become our own.**<sup>4</sup> [my emphasis]

That the church's prayer has become our own is, perhaps a good way to end this review. I found *Celebrating Liturgical Time* informative and compelling. It is a book that should be in the church library as well as on the verger's bookshelf. It will help us avoid answering "because that's the way we've always done it" when asked why we do such and such a certain way. It will also guide us when we think about perhaps changing the way we worship on a particular church feast day by giving us a framework on which to build. *Celebrating Liturgical Time* manages to be both scholarly as well as accessible — a rare feat for theological writing.

I am personally excited that Bp. Alexander will be presenting a lecture on his book at the [2017 Annual Conference of the Vergers Guild of the Episcopal Church](#) in Atlanta on Saturday, October 14, 2017 at both 1pm and 2:45pm.

<sup>1</sup> p-vii

<sup>2</sup> p-4

<sup>3</sup> p-10

<sup>4</sup> p-55



The 2017 VGEC Annual Conference will take place in Atlanta, Georgia from October 12th through October 15th. We hope you can join us! Click the big red button to register today. You can also [read more about the conference](#) and [book your hotel](#).

*Abstract: David Deutsch, Verger at St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Washington, DC presents a book review of "Celebrating Liturgical Time: Days, Weeks, and Seasons" by J. Neil Alexander, Dean Sewanee School of Theology, and the retired Ninth Bishop of the Diocese of*

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Atlanta. Deutsch states that Bp. Alexander "...writes clearly and concisely about the spiritual foundation that upholds our worship throughout the church year. He further gives the reader both practical and religious information about celebrating major feasts days of the Episcopal Church and the Daily Office." Deutsch concludes that, "Celebrating Liturgical Time manages to be both scholarly as well as accessible — a rare feat for theological writing."

Posted by [Scott Smith](#) at [9:06 AM](#)



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