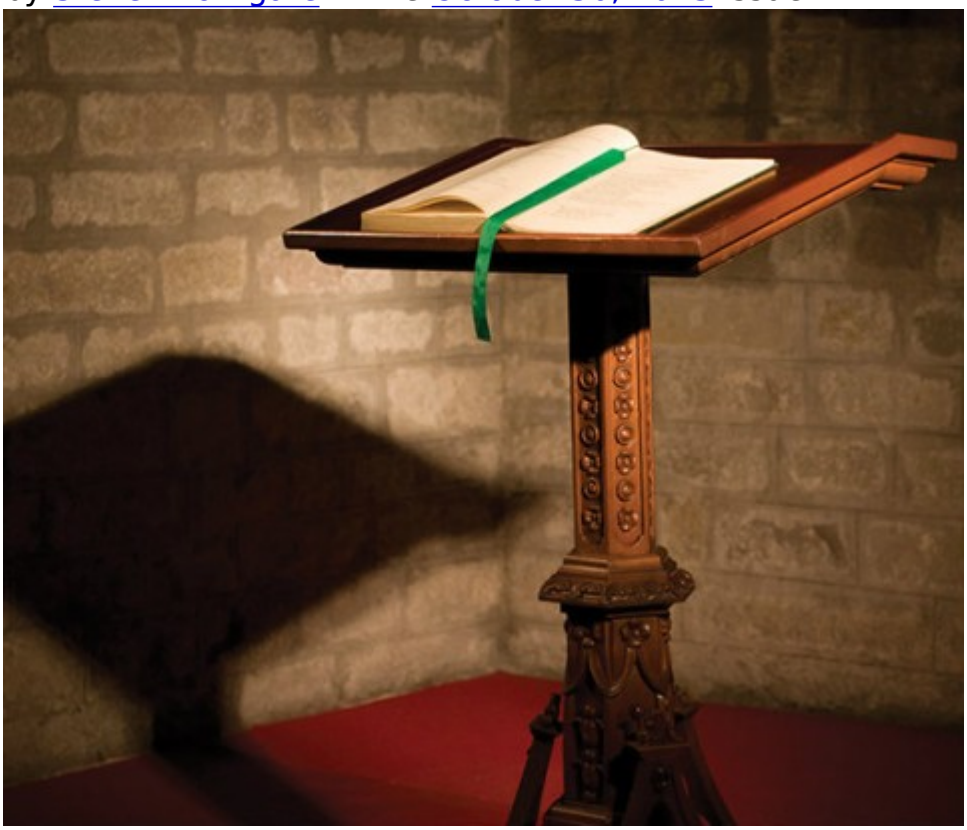
What's the text: Alternatives to the common lectionary

The *RCL* includes a few "optional" readings, to be subbed in as needed. Of course, it's all optional.

by Steve Thorngate in the October 30, 2013 issue



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Whenever I plan a Maundy Thursday service, I get annoyed with the lectionary. Why isn't the second reading 1 John 4? I get that Paul's account of the words of institution for the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians is assigned to cover for the lack of an account in John's Gospel. Still, the day is named for the New Commandment. Jesus, gearing up for the most terrifying experience he and his disciples will ever know, commands them to love one another. It'd be nice if 1 John's gloss—that such love *casts out fear*—also made the cut.

This fairly arbitrary objection may be mine alone. But lots of us worship planners have pet frustrations with the *Revised Common Lectionary* (1992). My Facebook

newsfeed—a place much like the wider world, if half the population went to seminary—attests to these regularly.

Why pair these readings? Why skip those verses? How will we survive an entire month on Jesus the long-winded bread of life? Does Christ's appearance to Thomas really need to come up *every* Low Sunday (leaving young associate ministers—preaching while the senior pastor takes the week off—with thick files of sermons on doubt or woundedness or bodily resurrection)?

Most of all: how could the *RCL* leave *x* out altogether? Lectionary Jesus goes easy on the religious authorities in Matthew; come John, they remember his kindness by not once trying to stone him. The *RCL* silences Zechariah before Gabriel can—leaving only an anonymous Benedictus—while Stephen doesn't turn up until his gallows sermon, a martyr without a ministry. Lectionary James praises good works but demurs from overmuch denunciation of the rich. There's not space here for even a brisk highlight reel of what's missing from the Old Testament.

Even Paul suffers some notable omissions. Take his teaching in 1 Corinthians 11 on the ethics of receiving communion, a relevant word at a time of little consensus on the subject. In the lectionary, all that remains is the aforementioned institutional narrative, extracted to plug a hole on Maundy Thursday.

Yet Maundy Thursday is also a good example of how the *RCL* improved on its predecessors. It added the New Commandment verses to John's foot-washing story. Anyone in the pews who actually knows what *maundy* means, and why this Thursday is maundier than any other, has the *RCL* revisions to thank.

The *RCL*, after all, didn't insert itself into a status quo of a rich biblical diet in North American worship. Decades ago, Catholics used a one-year lectionary, and those Protestants who used a lectionary at all typically employed variations on the Catholic one. Many churches rarely cracked open the Old Testament.

Then came the Vatican II reforms and the *Ordo Lectionum Missae* (1969). This Roman lectionary established the now familiar pattern: three weekly readings plus a psalm, with a different synoptic Gospel the main focus in each of three years. Protestant churches took notice and soon adapted the *OLM* to their own needs, resulting in several lectionaries with minor differences. In 1978, the Consultation on Common Texts—formed after Vatican II to develop English liturgical texts for ecumenical use—turned to the task of harmonizing these into one.

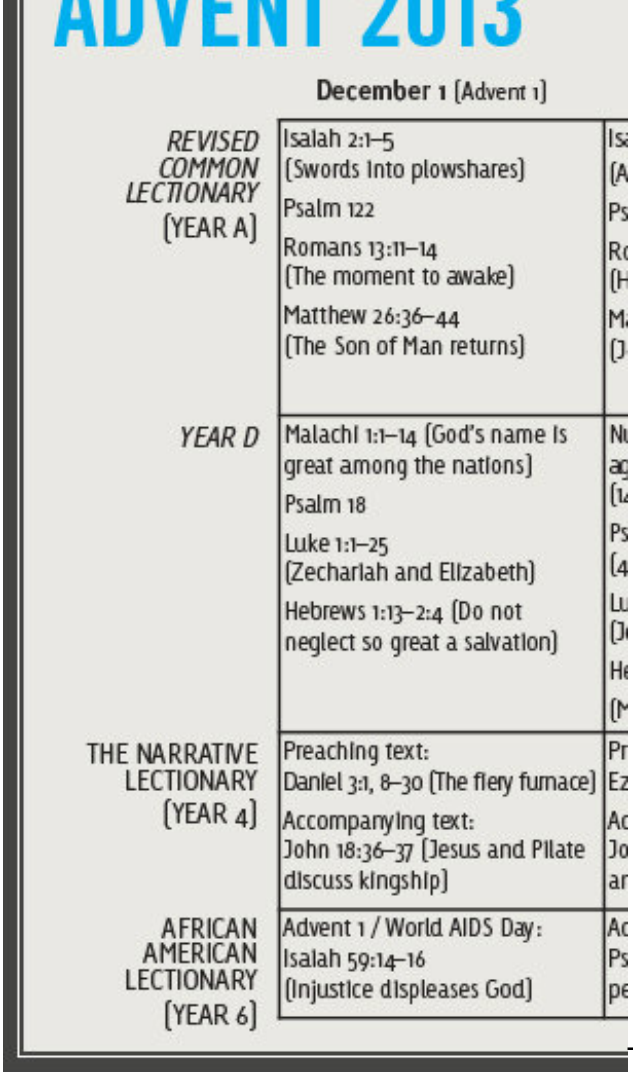
The CCT lectionary committee was also charged with revising the *OLM*'s OT lections—chosen to echo the Gospel readings—in favor of a less typological approach. It accomplished this by treating the first readings in Ordinary Time much as the *OLM* already treated the second: as an independent, semicontinuous stream. This was the major innovation of the *Common Lectionary* (1983), which Taylor Burton-Edwards of the CCT characterizes as a "first draft." The plan was always to solicit feedback and produce a revision.

Among other things, the *RCL* added a lot of important texts: the wages of sin, the day of salvation, the tree of life, the nontaming of the tongue. The lectionary Herods—once practically nonviolent—now slaughter the Holy Innocents and execute John. And there are many more women mentioned, especially in the OT selections.

The *RCL* has lots of space for OT texts, because its biggest revision was to include two separate OT tracks during Ordinary Time: one complementary (like the *OLM*), one semicontinuous (like the *CL*). This development and the subsequent popularity of the complementary track might be seen as a setback for the *CL*'s antitypological aims. But Burton-Edwards—who is also the United Methodists' director of worship resources—views such flexibility as all upside, noting that "there has historically been much wider divergence" during Ordinary Time than elsewhere.

And even within each OT track, the *RCL* offers improvements. For instance, it retains the *CL*'s Davidic sequence but introduces Goliath, Saul, Solomon and the adult Samuel. Still generally omitted: David's ambiguous relationship with Jonathan. The 20th anniversary edition of the *RCL* (2012), which details the above history, also explains some omissions. With Jonathan, the CCT was concerned about subjecting such a story to the first reading's common fate—read aloud, never mentioned again—so it added it as an *optional* lection, subbed in at the preacher's discretion.

Of course, for most of us, it's all optional. Local control over worship is the Protestant norm. And in recent years, several people have offered alternatives.


ADVENT 2013

December 1 (Advent 1)

REVISED COMMON LECTIONARY (YEAR A)	Isaiah 2:1–5 (Swords into plowshares) Psalm 122 Romans 13:11–14 (The moment to awake) Matthew 26:36–44 (The Son of Man returns)	Isa (A Ps Ro (H Ma (J
YEAR D	Malachi 1:1–14 (God's name is great among the nations) Psalm 18 Luke 1:1–25 (Zechariah and Elizabeth) Hebrews 1:13–2:4 (Do not neglect so great a salvation)	Nu ag (1 Ps (4 Lu (J He (M
THE NARRATIVE LECTIONARY (YEAR 4)	Preaching text: Daniel 3:1, 8–30 (The fiery furnace) Accompanying text: John 18:36–37 (Jesus and Pilate discuss kingship)	Pr Ez Ac Jo ar
AFRICAN AMERICAN LECTIONARY (YEAR 6)	Advent 1 / World AIDS Day: Isaiah 59:14–16 (Injustice displeases God)	Ac Ps pe

TIMOTHY SLEMMONS THINKS the *RCL* is pretty good as far as it goes—which isn't far enough. Slemmons, who teaches homiletics and worship at Dubuque Theological Seminary, appreciates that the *RCL* expanded the American pulpit's canon. He'd like more such expansion. In his book *Year D* (2012), he offers an impressive start: a cohesive and expansive fourth year of lections.

The seed for *Year D* was planted when Slemmons studied with Walter Brueggemann, whose emphasis on the lament psalms inspired Slemmons to compile the *RCL*'s omitted psalms and distribute them to his classmates as "The Psalter of the Disappeared." Besides including these psalms, *Year D* introduces missing OT books to the cycle—and gathers up most remaining NT passages, excluding only synoptic parallels and parts of Acts and Revelation. Taking the *RCL*'s three years as given,

Slemmons builds a fourth year out of what's left.

Slemmons's guiding principle is that worship texts should be chosen from the whole canon. But his point isn't that all canonical texts are by definition equally suitable. It's that local leaders should discern this question for themselves. Slemmons insists that "if a text is canonical, it deserves a hearing"—in the preacher's study, if not necessarily in the pulpit. Yet "preachers often defer to the lectionary, with little thought to what is missing from the church's diet."

Year D encourages local picking and choosing by assigning up to nine readings for a given day. Here Slemmons is motivated partly by the constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), which both calls for texts to be drawn from the entire canon and charges ministers with seeing that it's done. He's thinking practically about context, too: "Some community somewhere is bound to find new use in worship for texts previously deemed unsuitable," even if others appreciate having alternatives when the weird stuff comes up.

Slemmons also has specific objections to the *RCL*'s exclusions. Perhaps his biggest beef is that it "tends to stress grace to the frequent exclusion of texts that call for repentance."

Burton-Edwards counters that it's the New Testament that prefers grace, not the lectionary.

In any case, Slemmons wants more balance. And because *Year D* packs this corrective into a single year of lections, he worries that it "may be perceived as too hard-going."

Indeed, there's a lot of law here. But worship planners may be more startled by some of *Year D*'s unlikelier assignments. Slemmons offers Gospel texts from Jesus' adult ministry for the nativity propers; on Easter it's the resurrection of the dead discourse from John 5. Of course, Slemmons's whole point is to bring in texts not otherwise assigned. He also favors semicontinuous readings over the calendar's topical demands. It's easier to appreciate all this in theory, however, than it is to imagine focusing on the adulterous woman story on Maundy Thursday—simply because, as *Year D* explains, it's "the last remaining unused text from the middle chapters of John assigned to Lent."

Year D does offer compelling arguments for some of these choices. But it still feels like the preacher is being handed a stacked theological deck, a particular take on a central story in place of the story itself. Slemmons argues that a lectionary is always doing theology when it matches text to occasion. Still, many preachers feel that their primary task on a high holy day is simply to tell the story, and *Year D*'s lections don't help here.

Besides, it's one thing to interpret a holiday through a particular text based on tradition or consensus. It's quite another to do it because one guy says so. While Slemmons's work is deeply informed by conversations with colleagues, it's fundamentally his. He allows that this is a fair criticism—of his OT selections. But *Year D* uses all remaining psalms, epistle texts and unparalleled Gospel material. Here Slemmons makes the good point that "we have the benefit of an objective norm": the canon itself.

Promoting the canon as the norm—not arranging lections—is Slemmons's main project. He feels an urgency about this, because "the church today is like a body depleted of essential nutrients." His goal is to recover "the sense of expectancy with which we should approach even the most seemingly irrelevant text."

To be sure, Slemmons also hopes that more churches will use *Year D* as he's arranged it. The book includes helpful strategies for implementing it with minimal disruption, and Slemmons's current project is a series of resources built around Years A through D. He's also encouraged by similar fourth-year proposals elsewhere (see sidebar).

Slemmons hopes for an eventual seven-year lectionary. This could greatly increase the amount of scripture proclaimed in worship. But how much would be heard? The *RCL* expanded the pulpit's canon, but this has hardly led to stronger biblical literacy among the laity. What would?

IF *YEAR D* IS ABOUT attending to every word from the mouth of God, the Narrative Lectionary is about understanding those words that are proclaimed. The decline of biblical literacy is a complex cultural problem, not the fault of any lectionary, but Rolf Jacobson and Craig Koester, who started the NL in 2010, are convinced that the *RCL* isn't helping.

“The *RCL* includes a wide range of texts,” allows Koester, who teaches New Testament at Luther Seminary. “But it does not foster a sense of movement.” The NL’s priority is not inclusion but sequence—it seeks “a coherent sense of the whole.”

Churchgoers “have grown used to not understanding the public reading of scripture,” adds Jacobson, Koester’s colleague in Old Testament. “So they don’t complain, and worship leaders do not realize how little congregants grasp the overarching story.” Especially with OT lections determined by Gospel themes, “listeners are given basically no context”—because “the *RCL* intentionally reads the biblical story out of narrative order.”

Of course, the *RCL*’s semicontinuous track avoids this issue during Ordinary Time (also known as most of the year). But Jacobson points also to rearranged Gospel passages, such as the synoptic sequence of John’s appearance, Jesus’ baptism and the temptation. The *RCL* spreads these across three different seasons.

Koester highlights the apocalyptic material in Mark 13. In Mark this material points to Jesus’ imminent death, but the *RCL* assigns it to Advent and just before. Koester recognizes that this move serves the movement of the liturgical year, which “begins with the anticipation of Jesus’ birth and culminates with the anticipation of his coming again. But the story of Jesus belongs within a much larger story that stretches from the creation.”

Burton-Edwards maintains that “the calendar closely attends to” this larger story. But if so it does this via multiple, simultaneous tracks—not the most accessible pattern for the biblically illiterate. According to Burton-Edwards, the *RCL* assumes a slightly higher standard—that “a good number of [congregants] may have participated in some kind of class involving the Bible, or read it themselves.” And he stresses that “worship cannot and should not be expected to carry the entire burden.”

Yet the burden is often simply dropped. So the NL starts over from scratch, taking narrative sequence as its norm. Jacobson recounts that he “wondered out loud” at a synod assembly why churches don’t “‘preach the OT in big brush strokes from Labor Day through Christmas, preach one Gospel from Christmas through Easter, and preach early church stories and Acts until Pentecost.’ After my talk, a pastor came up and said, ‘I have just talked 11 other congregations into doing it.’” Word spread, and several hundred congregations recently participated in the NL’s third year.

The NL's accessibility is appealing. Each week it focuses on a single text, so churchgoers are asked to follow just one ongoing story. According to Koester, this also "allows the OT, Acts and Paul's letters to function as word of God more clearly, since they are not simply a preface to the Gospel."

Koester and Jacobson initially conceived of the NL as a nine-month experiment. They now offer a four-year cycle—a year per Gospel—with discrete series options for the summer. They call these series the Unnarrative Lectionary, because they mitigate what Jacobson acknowledges is a downside: the NL's relative "lack of attention to non-narrative texts."

Another objection is that one risks missing the OT trees for the forest. Each fall the NL leaps from highlight to highlight, covering the same characters each year but via a different reading. "The goal is to expose people to preaching on the major stories," explains Jacobson, in a way that "reinforces the importance of the biblical story."

But does a different David lection each October reinforce *David's* story? The *RCL* gives him ten consecutive weeks. Of course, *RCL* preachers are liable to ignore this. By assigning a single text, the NL overthrows the homiletical tyranny of the Gospels. From Labor Day until just before Christmas, it's the OT.

Advent, then, focuses on the prophets. That's a common angle but not the only one—the NL's approach opens some doors but closes others. It schedules the Magi on or right after Christmas Day. But 12 days of Christmas is a valuable tradition, and not just for the opportunity to explain the song. In Mark's year, NL Jesus goes from the manger (on loan from Luke) immediately to adulthood—because the Roadrunner Gospel, not the church year, sets the pace.

And something is surely lost—homiletically as well as liturgically—by having only one reading. As Jacobson observes, the *RCL*'s thematic connections can be thin. They're even thinner when the readings aren't meant to be complementary and preachers find connections anyway. Yet elsewhere the connections are rich, and the fact that preaching on multiple texts is sometimes done poorly isn't a reason not to do it well.

Actually, the NL does assign two readings: shorter Gospel lections were added last year to complement the OT and epistle readings. These are optional "accompanying readings," not preaching texts. They're a response to requests from Episcopalians, for whom a Eucharist without a Gospel reading was a bridge too far. The addition

was well received, and this year the NL made a similar move with the Gospel preaching texts, adding accompanying readings from the psalms.

Such feedback has shaped the NL throughout its short life. (The summer series came about this way, too.) Koester says the NL has benefited from an “ongoing sense of collaboration”—and much affirmation. Preachers appreciate being nudged out of the Gospels. Sunday school teachers find it easier to connect curriculum with worship. Congregations report growth in faith and understanding. Meanwhile, NL-based resources are steadily growing.

THE NL MAKES a good case for starting with the overall biblical narrative and prioritizing formation. But as we’ve already seen, there are other starting points, narratives and priorities. The African American Lectionary raises these good questions: Whose formation, and in what story?

The AAL took shape in 2007, when Martha Simmons received a Lilly grant and commissioned colleagues to help create a new lectionary. Cain Hope Felder, James Abbington and Mitzi Smith formed a planning team to work with Simmons, president and publisher of *The African American Pulpit*. They wanted to “ground the project in African American religious, liturgical and cultural history.”

The AAL is not dictated by the liturgical calendar shared by what its materials call “historically hierarchical faith communities.” It offers a different calendar, one that includes the major holidays but as part of a cycle of prevailing black church observances such as Women’s Day, Men’s Day and Watch Night. Each week has a theme. While most themes codify existing practice, Simmons estimates that 30 percent reflect “practices that the lectionary team came up with due to the needs of congregations.” These change somewhat each year. Additions for 2013 include Restoring the Peace/Community Action Day, Caregivers Sunday and LGBT Sunday.

Grounding the project in African-American history also means that maximal biblical exposure isn’t the goal. “For more than 100 years, it was illegal in many states for African Americans to learn to read,” explains Simmons. “This did not anchor the reading of the Bible in our faith communities”—and today “every faith community is reading the Bible less and less.” While reading more Bible is important, “even more, we want [people] to fully understand whatever they read.”

The AAL follows the common black-church pattern of a single weekly reading. And even this is framed as more suggestion than assignment. “Our aim,” says Simmons, “is not to get all preachers to use the same scriptures” but “to get them to discuss the same issues.” The themes are the main point, and the AAL offers a rich array of resources to support them—text-specific commentaries but also thematic liturgical, musical and cultural-historical materials by leading practitioners and scholars.

The fact that the AAL is designed by and for African-American Christians is only the most obvious of its differences from *Year D* and the NL. It’s also deeply collaborative—a priority with Simmons, who appreciates the varied voices sharpened through dialogue. But “sometimes the views are so different, consensus is difficult” on a given issue—and Simmons recognizes that, rightly or wrongly, consensus views are often exactly what pastors are looking for.

Another difference: the AAL is clearly a tool for worship, not just or even mostly for preaching, so its offerings go far beyond sermon prep. The same is true of the *RCL* and its less centralized constellation of resources. But while the creators of *Year D* and the NL wouldn’t claim that a lectionary is exclusively about preaching, it’s primarily the pulpit they have in mind.

Of course, *Year D* and the NL are essentially just tables of readings, the creators of which would be thrilled to see a grant-funded panoply of additional resources. The AAL is much broader, parallel in scope not just to the *RCL* but also to the calendar it follows and the materials that follow it. You could say the AAL isn’t exactly a lectionary; you could also say that developing a calendar, lectionary and resources as one cohesive project is pretty much the ideal way to do it.

For all its uniqueness, the AAL echoes other lectionary projects, too. It begins with a calendar and themes and follows with lections; so does much of the *RCL*. Like the NL, the AAL is more interested in people understanding the Bible than hearing all of it. And both the AAL and *Year D* emphasize context and local choice.

The AAL’s reception “has exceeded what I imagined,” says Simmons—among both nonlectionary churches and *RCL* churches. The latter have mostly reported using the AAL’s resources with the *RCL*’s lections, creating a sort of hybrid that speaks to multiple narratives and traditions.

ERIC LEMONHOLM IS ENTHUSIASTIC about such mash-ups. The Lutheran pastor's 2011 D.Min. thesis at Luther, which he turned into *The Open-Source Lectionary*, calls for a more fluid approach to lectionary use. Lemonholm embraces the *RCL* for its broad ecumenical reach and the "feeling of solidarity" its use instills. His criticism echoes others: "missing and disconnected texts."

Lemonholm's most striking example is "love your enemies." The *RCL* actually assigns both Matthew's version of that text and Luke's. But in both cases it's slated for the seventh Sunday after Epiphany, one of the Ordinary cycle's odd benchwarming weeks—used only when the liturgical calendar's stars align. Week seven didn't make it into the Year A or C calendar between 2001 and 2011. "A ten-year absence of Jesus' command to love our enemies occurred," says Lemonholm, "during the first ten years of the war on terror."

Another complaint, one common among *RCL* critics: John's exclusion from the Gospel-a-year club. Of course, the fourth Gospel is well represented in the *RCL*; it even gets read semicontinuously for a couple of stretches. And the CCT has detailed its reasons for avoiding a John year, including the precedent set by the Roman lectionary and the history of anti-Semitic interpretation. Also, there's the difficulty of carving pericopes from so much monological gabfest. "Personally," says the CCT's Burton-Edwards, "I think a whole year of [John] would likely be overwhelming."

Lemonholm tried half a year. Last year, his church—the Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd in Rockford, Illinois—benched Mark from Advent through Eastertide and read John instead, with good results, he says. He addressed another concern, the *RCL*'s patchy journey through Revelation, by expanding it into a fuller series. Lemonholm tries to balance a commitment to the *RCL* with attention to context, to his congregation's "hunger for going deeper."

Along with a John year, *The Open-Source Lectionary* proposes a more flexible, modular approach to the non-Gospel readings—the better to support locally chosen series. Lemonholm's website offers several examples. "With the widespread use of online resources," he says, "lectionaries do not need to be set in stone" as the *RCL* appears to be. This summer, Lemonholm used an NL series.

"Moving forward, we will have multiple lectionaries," he says. "We will need to be flexible and wise in our choice."

WILL ALTERNATE LECTIONARIES grow and their use expand? If so, the gains could mean a loss for the whole notion of a common lectionary.

But what if what grows is the sort of intentional yet flexible *RCL* use that Lemonholm favors, systematized by well-constructed alternatives? Churches that don't follow the *RCL* rigidly sometimes follow it carelessly. They jump haphazardly between tracks; they go briefly "off lectionary" with little attention to what's disrupted; they skip the first reading but faithfully sing its companion psalm. Worship planning hours are, of course, limited. So choosing from a whole folder of well-tested options could be a big improvement on choosing between the *RCL* and whatever you can come up with on the fly.

Or maybe the CCT will undertake another revision. No such plans currently exist, says Burton-Edwards. "Given continued growth worldwide in the reception and use of the *RCL*, we see our energies being better spent on making it even more useful" via publications and support for new contexts. Still, "when a critical mass . . . call[s] for a major revision," the CCT "would very likely offer [its] services." Such an *NRCL* might not include a fourth year, John's or otherwise. But it would no doubt attend to other criticisms, including finding ways to include new texts.

Perhaps it could even move toward a more modular approach to the non-Gospel readings, as Lemonholm outlines. Such an approach would be a continuation, not a departure; the *RCL* already does some of this during Ordinary Time. And it's easy to imagine a new lectionary generating mostly digital resources—enabling it to continually adapt, to be not revised but revising. Burton-Edwards allows that a more fluid lectionary is possible but maintains that there "will always remain considerable value in having a core reference text, arrived at in deep ecumenical collaboration."

What the CCT wholeheartedly supports, however, is local choice in how best to use the *RCL*. The lectionary is "a starting place," Burton-Edwards says. "We see the *RCL* truly as our gift and are glad for the churches to use it or leave it aside as best fits their purposes."

On this point everyone quoted here agrees: a lectionary is not a rigid rule. Maybe the future looks much like the present: an unchanged *RCL*, with relatively marginal alternatives. Some *RCL* churches will follow it strictly; others will depart from it. All would do well to follow or depart with intention and care—and one good way of departing is to try another lectionary. The *RCL* is indeed a tremendous gift. So is

being charged with planning for our own communities how best to proclaim the Bible in worship.

Read the sidebar articles on options for Advent 2013 and the many lectionaries that are available. Read related posts on the RCL *and its alternatives.*