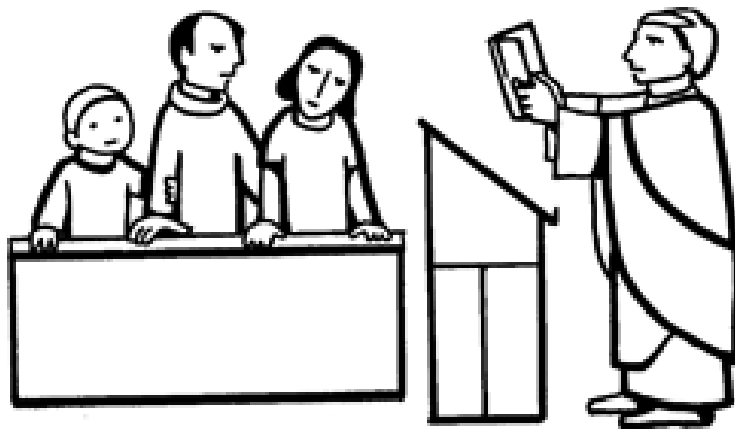


A Manual for Altar Servers at St. Stephen's

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(Note: this document was originally written by the Rev. Stephen R. Shaver for use at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Seattle. You are welcome to adapt it for your own use in your own congregations. Please include a line of attribution—thanks!)

*“The worship of God is an act that we undertake together, as a people. . . . In corporate worship we manifest ourselves as a community united through a shared faith in Jesus as the Son of God.”
(Louis Weil, A Theology of Worship)*



Every week at St. Stephen's we gather together to worship God as a community. We hear God's word and celebrate the holy meal of the Eucharist. Everyone matters, and everyone has an important role to play.

As an acolyte/altar server at St. Stephen's, you serve the community in a special way. You might be carrying a cross, torch, or banner; lighting candles; helping the deacon set the holy table; assisting in the distribution of communion; or attending to any number of the tasks that make our liturgy come together every Sunday. Whatever it is you are doing on a given Sunday, your work is a crucial part of our worship, a gift to God and to God's people. Thank you for your ministry!

Serving One Another In Love (Some Norms for Our Work Together)

“You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom for your own sakes; rather, serve one another humbly in love. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

Paul, writing to the Galatians (5:13-14)

- *Punctuality and Responsibility.* You are responsible for your scheduled services. If you realize you won’t be able to serve, you’re responsible for finding a substitute and notifying the schedule coordinator so the master schedule can be updated.
- *Check-in.* **Fifteen minutes before the service, the whole party should be vested and ready to meet with the clergy to check in and go over the liturgy together.** (For services in the chapel, meet in the chapel sacristy; for services in the church, meet in Resurrection Chapel.) **All liturgical ministers should arrive at least twenty-five minutes before the service** to vest and prepare (check books, find crosses and other items, etc.). The candles should be lit just before the check-in. If you are not present in time for the pre-service check-in, you will be replaced.
- *Dress.* The basic garment for all liturgical ministers is the alb—a white robe. This is an ancient symbol of the baptismal ministry of all Christians. It may be worn with a cincture (a rope belt). Under your alb, please dress neatly and respectfully. Avoid bold patterns or logos that will show through the white fabric. Wear comfortable shoes that you can move well in and that you would wear for a nice occasion. The goal is not to be visually distracting, but to blend with the rest of the altar party.

- *Training.* Altar server training and formation sessions will be held regularly twice a year. All active altar servers are expected to attend. In addition, special rehearsals are held before certain principal services (Christmas Eve, Holy Week/Easter, etc.).
- *Attitude.* Mahatma Gandhi said, “Be the change you want to see in the world.” Similarly, as liturgical ministers, we want to *be* the community we want our parish community to look like. Be engaged, caring, forgiving, and open to learning new things. Be flexible and ready to pitch in or change plans when needed. Above all, love one another and give thanks for God’s presence with us!

We all have things come up, and there will inevitably be mishaps, so these aren’t meant as hard-and-fast rules to stifle grace—we are a community and we love one another. Instead, these norms are meant to help us have a predictable liturgical life so our worship features a minimum of anxiety and a maximum of prayerful preparation.



Liturgical Presence and Practices

As an altar server, you have a very public role as a leader in worship. Because you are so visible, the way you carry yourself has an important effect on the congregation's ability to worship well. By being well-prepared, confident, relaxed, reverent, and prayerful, you can help God's people relax into God's presence rather than worrying subconsciously about what is happening next. Here are some principles of liturgical presence that apply to everyone:

- *Attention.* In general, your eyes and attention should be focused wherever the liturgical action is currently happening (at the lectern, pulpit, altar, etc.). This helps the congregation maintain their own focus. Pay attention to the flow of the service and be sure to make all the congregational responses clearly and confidently: this makes a big difference in the congregation's own sense of confidence in the liturgy.
- *Posture.* When standing and not holding anything, clasp your hands naturally just above waist level. When sitting, let your hands rest in your lap. Either way, try to maintain a relaxed but alert posture. Avoid crossing your legs, slouching, shifting your weight around, etc.
- *Movement.* In general, movement in liturgy should be simple and direct. Avoid extra movements when possible. When walking, pay attention to your pace—not too fast, not too slow. In a procession, leave plenty of space behind the person in front of you and be sure to match your pace if you're walking with a partner. When standing up or sitting down as a group, wait for the presider to stand or sit first and try to move in unison with the rest of the group.
- *Symmetry.* There are many times in liturgy when we arrange ourselves symmetrically—in processions, at the altar, etc. Pay attention to how far apart your counterparts are standing and position yourself accordingly.
- *Non-anxious presence.* The liturgy is a celebration of Christ among us. Liturgical ministers should strive for competence and excellence—but remember that Christ's presence doesn't depend on our performance. Don't be overanxious when mistakes happen. Instead, prepare for your role; do your best; and then enter into worship with a reverent, joyful spirit. As Aidan Kavanagh writes, "To be consumed with worry over making a liturgical mistake is the greatest mistake of all. Reverence is a virtue, not a neurosis, and God can take care of [God's] self."¹

¹ *Elements of Rite* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1990), pg. 31.

[Detailed descriptions of the 8:00 and 10:30 Eucharist services follow here in St. Stephen's customary. Most of this is omitted in this handout because, of course, they'll look very different in each congregation. But here's an excerpt from the 10:30 service description as an example.]

The 10:30 Eucharist in the Church: An Overview

The Team

Acolytes:

Crucifer

Gospel Book Acolyte

Torchbearer 1

Torchbearer 2

(Note: of the four acolytes, two are designated as Table Servers 1 and 2.)

Assisting Lay Minister (the ALM also functions as a Eucharistic Minister)

Eucharistic Ministers 2, 3, 4

Choir

[Deacon, if present]

[Assisting Priest, if present]

Presider

Gathering Rite

Prior to the check-in, Torchbearers light the candles. (The Paschal Candle is lit during the Great Fifty Days of Easter and on baptismal feasts. On these occasions it is lit before any other candles in the church.)

All meet for check-in in Resurrection Chapel, vested, at least fifteen minutes before the service. Five minutes before the service, all move to the side hallway ("the tunnel") and assemble for the entrance procession as shown:

Crucifer

Torch 1

Torch 2

Choir

EM3

EM4

ALM

EM2

Gospel Book

[Deacon, if present]

[Assisting Priest 1, if present]

[Assisting Priest 2, if present]

Presider

The opening hymn begins. When the choir is present, the procession begins as soon as the organ music starts. During the summer or at other times when the choir is not in the procession, the Crucifer waits until the singing starts to begin walking.

On reaching the base of the altar steps, the Crucifer and Torches stand together facing the altar and reverence by pausing (as long as it would take to make a low bow). The Crucifer then walks up the steps first, followed by the Torches, and all turn right in unison and walk to their seats.

Following the Choir, the Eucharistic Ministers arrive at the base of the steps in pairs. Each pair reverence in unison by bowing, then continue up the stairs and to their seats.

The Gospel Book Acolyte and Deacon walk directly up the steps to the altar without bowing. The Gospel Book Acolyte places the Gospel Book on the altar. Deacon and Gospel Book Acolyte then reverence with a bow and go to their seats.

Assisting Priests arrive at the base of the steps and stand facing the altar, leaving extra space between them for the Presider to arrive:

Assisting Priest 1 Presider Assisting Priest 2

All bow in unison (following Presider's cue). The Assisting Priests then step up and go to their seats, followed by the Presider.

Liturgy of the Word

All remain in place during the Old Testament reading, psalm, and Epistle.

During the sequence hymn, the Crucifer, Torchbearers, and Gospel Book Acolyte line up in the aisle next to their seats and await the Presider's cue. When the Presider turns and bows, they then walk directly out in front of the altar and continue without pausing down the center aisle.

When a Deacon is present, he/she carries the Gospel Book in the Gospel procession. If no Deacon is present and a priest is to read the Gospel, then the Gospel Book Acolyte will carry the Gospel Book in the Gospel procession.

Gospeller (Deacon or Priest)

Torch 1 Gospel Book Acolyte Torch 2

Crucifer

The Crucifer stops about a third of the way into the congregation (about the fourth pew forward from the Kids' Area) and turns back toward the Gospeller. The Gospel Book Acolyte also turns toward the Gospeller, who opens the Book and places it in the Gospel Book Acolyte's hands at the appropriate height. The Torchbearers turn inward and stand facing the Gospel Book.

After the Gospel has been read (and "Praise to you, Lord Christ" is said), the Gospeller steps aside to let the entire procession pass. The Crucifer leads the group back to the altar, where they pause briefly then turn right and return to their seats. The Gospeller follows and returns to his/her seat. Again, if a Deacon is the Gospeller he/she will carry the Gospel Book back; otherwise the Gospel Book Acolyte carries it.

Assorted Tips, Techniques, and Tricks of the Trade

Reverencing the Altar: The altar is revered in the entrance procession and in the exit procession. Additional reverences during the liturgy are not necessary. Pause in front of the altar and make a low bow from your waist. If you're carrying an object (like a cross, torch, gospel book, etc.), do not bow; instead simply pause reverently for as long as it would take to bow.

Turning: It's common in the liturgy for several people to turn around at the same time (for example, in the gospel procession). It looks best when people turn symmetrically: that is, pairs turn inward toward one another. If you're walking alone or between two other people (like a crucifer between two torches), the custom is to turn clockwise.

Carrying Liturgical Items: When carrying a cross, torch, etc., hold it formally but not stiffly. Remember that these are sacred objects used in worship, not toys or theatrical props. Treat them the same way outside the liturgy that you would during the liturgy.

- Carrying a cross can be a little tricky: hold it firmly with both hands in the middle of the pole and the pole a little way off the ground. Be sure the correct side is facing forward and that you're holding it straight. Watch out for steps, low ceilings, and other obstacles. (You might sometimes see people carrying crosses in a military-style pose with one hand turned upside down and elbows sticking out. This really isn't necessary except maybe for some huge, heavy crosses, and tends to be distracting.)
- Carrying a torch is a little easier but still takes attention; holding it straight is especially important to avoid burns and drips. Torches are always used in pairs, so it's important to keep your torch at the same height as your partner's. Usually your torch should be at about the height of the top of your head—but you may need to adjust this if one of you is taller than the other.
- The Gospel Book is a central symbol of Christ's presence with us through God's Word. Since it's a small object (unlike crosses and torches which take some heavy lifting), it can be easy to forget to handle it with reverence and care. Remember, you are bearing Christ into the assembly. When in procession, carry it at about the level of the top of your head (just make sure you can see under it!).

- When carrying a chalice, it's best to grasp the knob firmly with your dominant hand and steady the base with your other hand (which will typically also be holding a purificator). To avoid spills, try to minimize the need to carry a filled chalice from place to place. While you're using a purificator, folding it over so the embroidered emblem is inside helps keep wine stains off the emblem and makes laundering it a little easier.

Lighting Candles: Using a candle-lighter is fun and easy when you're used to it, but takes some practice. For some hard-to-light candles, you may need to bend the taper wick down a little. When the candles are all lit, extinguish your wick by sliding it inside its metal housing, then slide it back out a little way so the melting wax doesn't stick to the inside.

Extinguishing Candles: To avoid splashing wax around, don't smash the bell all the way down onto the candle you're trying to extinguish. Hold it half an inch or so above the candle and wait several seconds: the candle will still go out.

This document is a living work in progress,
so let's help it evolve together.
What tips and tricks do you have to share?