

I Serve at God's Altar

THE MINISTRY OF ACOLYTES

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Introduction

IN THE ANCIENT CHURCH, as it continues today, the ministers of the church are those who have been baptized: laypersons, bishops, priests, and deacons. Some within the order of the laity are called to undertake ministries that are just as integral to worship as those who are ordained. These liturgical ministers are not “roles” in the theatrical sense because the liturgy is not a stage production, but a “work of the people.” All the ministers (lay or ordained) serve the worshiping assembly, and in so doing, they serve God. In serving at God’s altar, we also serve God’s people.

Despite the changing landscape of our churches’ membership, one worship-based ministry that continues but gets little attention is that of the acolyte. Whether they are second graders or adults, the ministry of an acolyte could be one of *the* formational experiences individuals have in the Episcopal Church. Whether it is a typical Sunday Eucharist, a marriage, baptism, funeral, or other worship service, an acolyte’s work and presence is a gift to God.

A LITTLE HISTORY

The word *acolyte* is derived from the Greek word *akolouthos*, meaning companion, follower, attendant, or helper. This ministry has its roots in the Hebrew Scriptures, where the prophet Samuel is seen assisting Eli, the Levite priest, and Elisha is seen assisting Elijah the Prophet. In the early church, we might think of those who carried the light into the dark catacombs, leading others who gathered to worship as the first Christian acolytes.

Mentioned as a minor order (a transitory step leading to a “major” order such as deacon, priest, or bishop) beginning in the third century, acolytes assisted deacons at the preparation of the table. The first written historical record of the term *acolyte* appears in a letter from Pope Cornelius to the bishop

of Antioch in 251 CE. In his letter, the pope lists the clergy of Rome, which included forty-two acolytes.¹ According to the ancient discipline of the Roman Church, the order of acolyte was conferred as the candidate approached adolescence, about the age of twenty, as the decree of Pope Siricius (385) to Himerius, bishop of Tarragonia in Spain, was written. In ancient ecclesiastic Rome, there was no solemn ordination of acolytes. At communion time in any ordinary Mass, the candidate approached the pope, or in his absence, one of the bishops of the pontifical court. At an earlier moment of the Mass, the acolyte had been vested with a stole and chasuble. Holding in his arms a linen bag carrying the consecrated hosts, he prostrated himself (lay facedown on the ground) while the pontiff pronounced over him a simple blessing before he carried fragments of the bread consecrated at the papal Mass to other churches.

Between the fifth and ninth centuries, the *Ordines Romani*, a series of ancient directions to the clergy, described acolyte duties that included leading processions preceding the pope as well as carrying candles to accompany the reader of the Gospel to ensure that he had enough light to read the text. In Gaul about the year 500, the candidate for acolyte was first instructed by the bishop in the duties of his office, and then a candlestick, with a candle extinguished, was placed in his hand by the archdeacon, as a sign that the lights of the church would be in

his care; moreover, an empty cruet was given to him, symbolic of his office of presenting wine and water at the altar for the holy sacrifice. A short blessing followed. Acolytes were unknown outside Rome and North Africa until the tenth century, when they were introduced throughout the Western Church.

The Council of Trent (1545–63) defined the order and hoped to reactivate it on the pastoral level, but it became only a preparatory rite, or minor order, leading to the priesthood. The history of acolytes becomes confused as churches in Europe broke away from the Church of Rome, including when England’s Henry VIII split the English Church in 1531, forming the Anglican Church of England. After the Reformation, many of these duties were taken over by lay clerks; in the late Middle Ages, when candles began to appear upon altars, they lighted the altar candles.

Eventually lay servers (sacristans) performed these duties as part of their training for the priesthood. Later in the nineteenth century, the clerks were suppressed and their duties were largely taken over by lay “acolytes” and sacristans or altar guilds, who did not serve at the altar but “behind the scenes” in helping to prepare the vessels and other paraphernalia for worship. During the Oxford movement in the 1830s, the Anglican Church, including the Episcopal Church, slowly returned to more traditional practices, and the ministry of acolytes

1. Donna H. Barthle. *Acolyte Leader’s Resource Guide* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2003), 1.

began to appear again in non-Roman churches. It wasn't until the late 1970s that girls and women were admitted to this all male ministry in the Episcopal Church. It should also be noted that it wasn't until January 1973 that Pope Paul VI decreed that the office of acolyte should no longer be called a minor order and that it should be open to laymen (in the Roman Catholic Church).

WHO ARE THE ACOLYTES TODAY?

Acolytes come in all shapes and sizes, and many churches encourage young people to take on these roles. Howard Galley wrote in 1989: "From the beginning, and for centuries afterward, the liturgical ministry of acolytes was an adult ministry. Today in contrast, it is largely a ministry of children and adolescents."² He then went on to question the tendency to restrict this ministry to young people alone, desiring that this ministry be encouraged for lay adults as well. We acknowledge this is a ministry for all ages; eucharistic ministers often serve as acolytes today and it would behoove those trained in that role to also be trained in acolyte ministry.

In preparing this book, we conducted a survey to learn more about the ministry of acolytes in our (Episcopal) congregations. Is there an average age? How are they trained? What roles do they take in worship?

We learned that there is a universal role of acolytes in Episcopal liturgy as well as diverse practices. Large congregations have a cadre of teams who serve; small congregations have a handful of adults with a couple of children. Fifty percent of those who responded to our survey have between five and ten acolytes involved in worship services. Ninety percent of acolytes serve as crucifers and torchbearers, light and extinguish candles, assist the clergy at the altar, offer the lavabo bowl, carry alms basins, and carry the Gospel Book in procession. Other roles include serving as a thurifer, boat bearer, or banner bearer, and ringing the Sanctus bells.

Acolytes often take the role of the bishop's chaplain during episcopal visitations. Other roles in much smaller numbers include refilling chalices, packing communion kits, carrying flags, and closing the altar rail. Reflecting the diversity of the vestments (and piety) worn in our churches, 66 percent of acolytes wear albs and cinctures, while the remaining 34 percent wear cassock and cotta. Most acolytes began their ministry when they were between ten and twelve years old.

Today, we see acolytes dressed in robes of red or white, quietly carrying torches, crosses, alms basins, and cruets. A vital part of worship, they blend into the background, helping our liturgies flow smoothly. We may see them hold the altar book open before the presider at the Eucharist or bear the Gospel Book in procession and at the proclamation; they may carry the vessels to the

2. Howard E. Galley, *The Ceremonies of the Eucharist: A Guide to Celebration* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1989), 34.

Lord's Table, wash the presider's hands (*lavabo*), bring additional vessels to the altar after the consecration of the bread and wine, or clear the altar after communion. When carrying a processional cross, they are known as the crucifer; called a thurifer when swinging the incense pot.

It would seem the ancient tradition is still alive and well in our churches today.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

We offer a simplified theology of how God is met in worship and how that affects the acolyte's discernment for ministry as well as a way of life. We also explore how to form empowered acolytes that bond together, grow together, and support each other—a model of Christian service and community. And yes, the practical stuff such as how to light the candles and carry the cross are included in our tips for training and mentoring, along with an extensive glossary and appendix that is full of illustrated handouts.

We have designed this book for the acolyte mentor—clergy or lay—who is called to walk alongside young people as well as other adults in learning what it means to actively serve God in a holy setting. We know that there is not one book that can reflect the various procedures, spaces, and “tools of the trade” found in every Episcopal congregation. Vestments and styles of worship differ from church to church; hopefully you will find your church's practices among these pages—whether you are liturgically broad, Anglo-Catholic, use a veiled chalice

and incense, or have a praise band. Adapt what you find to fit your own circumstances. You may choose to give this book to each acolyte, or you may duplicate the pages found in the appendix for use in your trainings.

OUR PRAYER

The ministry of an acolyte is built upon a formative system of development that is changeless, consistent, powerful, and transformative. We seek to reclaim the role of acolyte as a religious seeker, a minor order of the church rooted in discernment that will lift up this vital, yet quiet, ministry in our worship settings. We hope that the information, engaging illustrations, and outlines that are provided within these pages assist in lifting up the ministry of acolytes in our congregations as well as empowering those called to this ministry. May each of us embrace what we learn as we serve God as a way of life that will stay with us forever.

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. (Rom. 12:9–12)

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A New Order

- Q. Who are the ministers of the Church?
- A. The ministers of the Church are lay persons, bishops, priests, and deacons.
- Q. What is the ministry of the laity?
- A. The ministry of lay persons is to represent Christ and his Church; to bear witness to him wherever they may be; and, according to the gifts given them, to carry on Christ's work of reconciliation in the world; and to take their place in the life, worship, and governance of the Church. (Book of Common Prayer, 855)

TO BE AN ACOLYTE IS ONE MEANS by which children, youth, and adults can take their place in the life, worship, and governance of the Church. By virtue of the sacrament of Holy Baptism, all are full members of the Church. With "membership" comes responsibility, and for the Church this involves participating in God's mission of restoration and reconciliation. This is accomplished through prayer, worship, proclaiming the gospel, and promoting justice, peace, and love in living out our Baptismal Covenant. Striving to achieve these promises is a challenging and lifelong calling for every Christian. Being an acolyte opens the door to explore one's gifts and discern where God may be calling one to serve, the experience of serving at God's altar can provide the tools of awareness, calmness, servanthood, and prayer that can last a lifetime.

As noted in the introduction, at one point in time of the history of the Church, to be an acolyte was to be part of one of the minor orders of the Church. While at the time this was most likely one of the steps toward ordination to the priesthood, today it can be seen as a means to which a person learns what service is about and what it means to serve God. What if

we reclaimed the role of acolyte as a religious seeker, and rebranded the ministry of acolytes as one model of discernment? This could include discernment toward ordination, but also discernment to embrace one's place in the priesthood of all believers.

Former Presiding Bishop Frank T. Griswold describes it well:

The Episcopal Church is a liturgical church. Through ordered worship we open ourselves to the deep, sometimes dangerous possibility of being met by Christ. Through such an encounter we find that our lives are no longer our own. We have been cracked open and caught up in the ever unfolding of Christ's presence—Christ's continuing work of healing and reconciliation—in our own day and time.

Worship needs to be approached on the tiptoe of expectation. We need always to be open to its capacity to surprise and illumine us with the presence of Christ—the Lion of the tribe of Judah—who is always ready to pounce, paws first, into our lives.³

BEING FORMED BY THE LITURGY

Acolytes are formed by liturgy and the repetition of being a server, torchbearer, crucifer, thurifer, or any other participatory role

in worship over time. “Sacramental worship requires repetition because grace is developmental over time.”⁴ If this ministry is seen as a chore, it is more difficult to internalize. As a practice, it can form a foundation for a new life of prayer. Metaphorically, our spiritual lives are formed like a potter who turns a hunk of clay into a piece of art. As the clay is spun on a wheel and shaped by hands rolling up and down, inside and out, it begins to take the shape of the potter's imagination, forming a new creation. It is not an easy process, and oftentimes the shape falls in upon itself or needs to be pounded back down to start again. So it is with prayer and our openness to allow worship mold us into what the Spirit would have us become—a vessel of God's love.

Learning how to be an expert potter takes practice. So it is with worship and learning what it means to be an acolyte: repetition and practice of following the ebb and flow of the liturgy helps all of us—young and old, lay and ordained—be formed in the mind of Christ. Sometimes our youth (and those older) find the traditions of the Church to be archaic and out of touch with today's world. Some might feel going to church is part of one's weekly routine, a chore that has to be done. Worship is not a routine, but a ritual. Our prayers and liturgies have been fashioned and created over long periods of time

3. Frank T. Griswold, “A Message from the Presiding Bishop,” in *Liturgy as Formation* (New York: Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society, 2003), 4.

4. *Ibid.*

throughout the ages. Bishop Neil Alexander, currently dean and president of the Seminary of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee, delineates between the two:

A routine is an oft-repeated chore that simply has to be done with some frequency. It's not particularly fulfilling and if it were possible not to, the doing of it would not be missed. . . . A ritual is quite different. Rituals depend upon frequent repetition and sometimes they too can feel like a chore. When we fail to keep our rituals, however, be they personal or religious, we feel disoriented and disconnected.⁵

We learn by doing, and this includes learning how to be an acolyte. Like the clay, those who serve at God's altar (and we could also say those in the congregation) are shaped and reshaped, formed and transformed, by our willingness to be open to God's call in our active participation in the patterns and rituals of our worship.

ACOLYTES AND DISCERNMENT

For many who serve as acolytes, their choice to "join the ranks" may have come by personal invitation from a clergyperson or mentor, part of a confirmation requirement, or simply by being that warm body who consistently showed

up and was asked if they would be willing to carry a cross or light the candles. What if the invitation to serve as an acolyte—whether as a young person or adult—was rephrased: "How is God calling you to serve?" As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "However that may be, let each of you lead the life that the Lord has assigned, to which God called you. This is my rule in all the churches" (1 Cor. 7:17).

God calls each of us. There are a variety of calls, and no one call is inherently better or higher than any other. *Call* can be used interchangeably with the word *vocation*, which comes from the Latin word *vocare*, "to call." *Vocation* has a broad connotation, while *call* may refer to something specific. Suzanne Farnham and others state, "As our lives become more centered in God, we tend to grow in our sense that God touches others through our work, whatever that work may be."⁶ A "call" usually involves service or a benefit to others. As stated in the opening excerpt of this chapter taken from the Book of Common Prayer, all Christians are called to minister both to one another and to those around them by participating in God's work in the world. The difference between simply volunteering or doing work and discerning and answering a call is a mutual action with the recognition that it is God at the center of what we do and why we are doing it. In all duties, whether

5. J. Neil Alexander, "Liturgical Pottery: On the Shape of Formation," in *Liturgy as Formation* (New York: Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society, 2003), 82.

6. Suzanne G. Farnham, Joseph P. Gill, R. Taylor McLean, and Susan M. Ward, *Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community*, rev. ed. (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 1991), 107.

formal or informal, acolytes are a reminder to us all that through our baptism we are all called to live a life of service.

The authors of *Listening Hearts* name specific ways to prepare to hear God's call.⁷ What if we were to focus on these steps in our invitation to those who are interested in becoming an acolyte? What if we reinforced and mentored those who are already serving in this capacity to see their ministry through the eyes of discernment?

Trust

Acolytes learn their roles and responsibilities, trusting that the liturgy is the work of the people and they do not need to know it all or do it all. Together, those who serve at God's altar work together, following the ebb and flow of worship. While pieces of the service may change from time to time, there is comfort in being able to trust in God's presence at all times—and mistakes happen. Trusting in the forgiveness of God as well as the knowledge that one is never alone at God's altar is an example of how throughout our whole lives we can "put our trust in the Lord." This may take time and experience as one grows in confidence, but it comes.

Listening

Being an acolyte means listening to the rhythm of the liturgy. It is a somewhat silent call, as acolytes do not need to speak at all while serving. It

is all about paying attention, following the ebb and flow of prayer, hymnody, and scripture being read. Each piece of the dance of worship has a meaning, and each often has an action associated with it: standing to sing, bowing one's head during prayer, holding a torch still while the Gospel is proclaimed. While listening during worship perhaps the Word of God is recognized in a new, more personal way while the acolyte is serving.

Prayer

Before worship it is typical that all who are vested and ready to serve at God's altar gather for prayer. This may be done in the sacristy or hurriedly as everyone lines up for the procession. It is just the beginning. Throughout the liturgy, moments of silence in prayer and listening offer opportunities to ponder where God is acting—in one's own life as well as the community gathered.

Knowledge of Scripture

Those who serve and worship on a regular basis come to know the story of God's people. One does not need to be a biblical scholar to discover the themes of creation, sin, judgement, reconciliation, redemption, and love found throughout the stories shared in our lectionary and prayers.

Humility

An acolyte is humble by virtue of the ministry itself. Basically, acolytes are like good waiters

7. *The Listening Hearts* program notes each of the following seven ways one might use to prepare to hear God's call (pages 29–37). Here we take these points and apply them to the ministry of acolytes and how each is needed for this ministry and how each may help the individual discern where God may be calling them to a more holistic way of life.

who tend to all the details of a meal, often quietly working without being noticed at all. Being attentive to the needs of others, whether it be supplying the celebrant with the necessary implements or making sure a minister of communion has enough wine in their chalice, an acolyte is always at the ready to serve in humble silence.

Patience and Urgency

Sometimes it is like hurry, hurry, hurry, only to have to wait. Arrive early, vest, and light the candles. Then wait for that long prelude to conclude. Walk slowly in procession, but not so slow as the choir member behind you may bump against your heels. Watch and wait to enact your next responsibility, but when the time comes, move quickly and accomplish the task. Like waiting for God, being ready at a moment's notice is the ministry of an acolyte.

Perspective

Being an acolyte is being part of a team. All players are important. And while each may know something about the role to be played, no one is probably capable of filling all the roles. And

from a congregational perspective, most are clueless as to what the acolyte is doing—which means they are doing their job perfectly.

A New Order for Today's World

The Church recognizes three ordained orders today: bishops, priests, and deacons. In the early Church, four minor orders were also ordained: acolytes, lectors, exorcists, and *ostiarii* (known today as vergers).⁸ These early acolytes had functions very similar to those of today—they were to assist the bishop and clergy during liturgical services and help lead and define the tone of worship for the community.

The early acolytes gave strong witness to their Christian faith and were dedicated to their worship community. Tarsicus, an acolyte in Rome, was martyred in 258 when he was found bringing the Eucharist to those who were unable to attend worship. St. Vincent of Saragossa, the patron saint of acolytes, was a deacon who was martyred in 304 CE, now commemorated on the calendar on January 22. Vincent is remembered for his love of God, his faithfulness to his bishop, his unswerving loyalty to his responsibilities, and for his defense of Christianity in a Roman

8. "And whereas the ministry of so holy a priesthood is a divine thing; to the end that it might be exercised in a more worthy manner, and with greater veneration, it was suitable that, in the most well-ordered settlement of the church, there should be several and diverse orders of ministers, to minister to the priesthood, by virtue of their office; orders so distributed as that those already marked with the clerical tonsure should ascend through the lesser to the greater orders. For the sacred Scriptures make open mention not only of priests, but also of deacons; and teach, in words the most weighty, what things are especially to be attended to in the Ordination thereof; and, from the very beginning of the church, the names of the following orders, and the ministrations proper to each one of them, are known to have been in use; to wit those of subdeacon, acolyte, exorcist, lector, and door-keeper; though these were not of equal rank: for the subdeaconship is classed amongst the greater orders by the Fathers and sacred Councils, wherein also we very often read of the other inferior orders." From "Chapter II. On the Seven Orders" in *Doctrine on the Sacrament of Ordination* (The Fourth Session of The Council of Trent, July 15, 1563), accessed February 20, 2018, <http://www.thecounciloftrent.com/ch23.htm>.

court. Throughout the centuries, acolytes continue to be dedicated witnesses for Christ in both dramatic and mundane ways, witnessing to a piece of our apostolic tradition that spans at least seventeen centuries.

While these early Church acolytes may have been on a path toward ordination⁹ in one of the three major orders of the time, today's acolyte in the Episcopal Church may not be on that path but on another one, yet to be named. How might we view the ministry of acolyting as a minor order, offering a way of discerning one's life in Christ in the everyday moments of school, play, work, and friendships?

FAITH DEVELOPMENT, YOUTH, AND WORSHIP

We begin to know God at an early age from those who nurture us, our environment, and the experiences we see, hear, touch, and taste. As Jeremiah has written, "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you" (Jer. 1:5). A story has been shared by many of a toddler who sought to be alone with their newborn sibling, just home from the hospital. Parents listening in heard them ask the infant, "Tell me about God. I am beginning to forget."

Ana-Maria Rizzuto believes that children first become conscious of God between two and three years of age. Childhood images of God, she asserts, are powerful and influence us through a lifetime.¹⁰ At the core of Rizzuto's understanding of how individuals grow in a relationship with the living God is the concept of *transitional object representation*. This includes those sensory experiences we have at worship. It is also the place where adults' imagination and creative processes work, where we "play around" with our perceptions of material, relational, and spiritual realities to discover meaning and where we envision new ways of responding to God in the future. Serving at God's altar can create such transitional spaces. In each stage of our faith formation, the image of God must grow and be redefined, using new capacities of reasoning and relating so that the current understanding of God is adequate for the challenges of the new stage of life, whether it be childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, or full maturity.

Children need direct experience with the physical world if they are to develop cognitively. Faith and belief in God can be considered abstract concepts, so most individuals—children under the age of twelve especially—need to gather data from concrete

9. In the Roman Catholic Church, becoming an instituted acolyte comes during the first year when one is in seminary, the first step in their formation for ordination to the priesthood. As instituted acolytes, they have the responsibility of assisting priests and deacons in carrying out their liturgical ministry. As special ministers of the Eucharist, these acolytes may also give Holy Communion to the faithful at the liturgy and to the sick and they can expose the Blessed Sacrament for adoration.

10. Ana-Maria Rizzuto, *The Birth of the Living God: A Psychoanalytic Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 7, 178.

experiences and test the validity of ideas through active experimentation. Discoveries made through direct experiences are more transformational and exciting for children than lessons in which adults tell them what they ought to know.

Faith communities are called to partner with parents in raising up our children in faith. One way the church can assist is to provide a structure of small groups that bring people together to support one another in their spiritual growth. It can be stimulated through a relationship with a mentor—an older person who becomes a spiritual friend to a younger person. Acolyte ministry

provides for such an opportunity for children, youth, and adults.

In the Christian tradition, worship, at its heart, is an encounter with Christ. The words of St. Ambrose explain the encounter is available to us through scripture and the signs and symbols of our ritual's actions such as water and oil, bread and wine: "You have shown yourself to me, O Christ, face to face. I have met you in the sacraments."¹¹ As a community gathered in Christ's name, we repeat the ritual words and symbolic actions, allowing them to take root within us and, like a seed growing secretly, the fruit of the Spirit appears in its own time.

11. Frank T. Griswold, preface to *Enriching Our Worship* (New York: Church Publishing, 1998), 7.