

THE ANGLICAN CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA GUILD OF VERGERS



History of the Verger Ministry

The role of the Verger in the church today is not exactly as it was in the early days of verging and the verger, but we share certain similarities and traditions. The office of verger has its roots in the earliest days of the Church's history and it shares certain similarities with the former minor orders of "porter" and "acolyte." Generally speaking, Vergers were responsible for the order and upkeep of the house of worship, including preparations for the liturgy, the conduct of the laity, and even grave-digging among many other duties in the church.

Although there is no definitive historical survey of the office of verger, evidence from cathedrals in England (Rochester, Lincoln, Exeter, and Salisbury) indicates the existence of vergers as far back as the 12th century. A familiar sight in English cathedrals and on television broadcasts of royal weddings, funerals, and the sitcom, Vicar of Dibley, Vergers have maintained the buildings and furnishings of the Church, led the liturgy, and served God in the church for many centuries.

In medieval times, the Verger (spelled "virger" in England and older texts) was the Protector of the Procession. The Verger led the way for the procession as it moved from the vestry around the church or cathedral and into the front doors.

The procession often moved through crowds of people and animals, and the Verger was there to clear a pathway with his Virge (mace or "Staff of Office"). The Verger had to be the first person in the procession as they cleared the way for the Thurifer, Crucifer, Acolytes, choir, and sacred ministers by swinging the virge in front of them.

The Church of England Guild of Vergers (also known as the CEGV), was formed in 1932 and represents the fellowship of Vergers within the Church of England.

The Vergers Guild of the Episcopal Church (also known as the VGEC) was formed in 1989 to serve Vergers within the Episcopal Church in the United States and all Vergers world-wide.

The Vergers Guild of the Anglican Church in North America was formed in 2017 to serve Vergers in the Anglican Churches in North America.

A Verger (sometimes "Virger") is a specialized form of Sacristan; therefore a Biblical origin for their office can be found in those members of the Priestly Tribe of Levi set aside by King

David and the Prophet Samuel: *The gatekeepers were...in charge of the gates of the house of the Lord...as guards...and they had charge of opening it every morning. Some of them had charge of the utensils of service, for they were required to count them when they were brought in and taken out. Others of them were appointed over the furniture, and over all the holy utensils, also over the fine flour, the wine, the oil, the incense, and the spices* (1 Chronicles 9:17–29). Over time the same practical concerns appeared within Christianity and by the fourth century four “minor orders” of clergy had developed to provide assistance to Bishops and Priests; one of these — the Ostiarius, or Doorkeeper — is the beginning of the Verger’s history in the Church.

The early Christian Church, therefore, appears to have had good precedent for appointing Ministers to care for the practical needs of the worshipping community, to guard the holy sites associated with Jesus’ life and ministry, and to assist the Elders and Presbyters. By the end of the fourth century AD the role and ministry of these servants had been formalized, resulting in the creation of the "Minor Orders" of Ostiarius (Doorkeeper), Exorcist, Lector, and Acolyte, into which orders they were ordained, their collective duties being to assist the "Major Orders" of Bishop, Priest and Deacon. A fourteenth century illustrated manuscript preserved in Cambridge, "The Pontifical of the Three Bishops", shows the ordination of a doorkeeper in which the Bishop presents him with two gilded keys.

As the mediaeval Church elaborated its worship, the liturgy, (and therefore the preparations beforehand in the sacristy), became increasingly complex, requiring more men in Holy Orders to perform the liturgy and more Clerks in Minor Orders to prepare and assist. In 1390 Salisbury Cathedral had 130 ‘Clerks’. The Treasury (now the vestry) was "managed" on behalf of the Chapter by a Sub-Treasurer, who employed two Sacrists and "two Minor Clerks of the sacristy", who were in turn assisted by the Common Beadle and the Janitor. Their duties were many and various, and often very complex, with a multitude of services each day, festivals, anniversaries and obits, and of course a constant stream of pilgrims to the shrine of Saint Osmund.

The Use of Sarum (the mediaeval rules which governed the way services were to be conducted) includes on various occasions instructions such as: "*procedat minister virgam manu gestans, locum faciens processioni*" a phrase which means ["A Minister goes before, bearing a virge in his hand, making room for the procession"], and "*Imprimis Sacriste, virgas in manibus gestantes, deinde....*" which means ["Firstly Sacrists, bearing virges in their hands, then....."]

We can see from this that at some stage the Sacrists took on a ceremonial role as well as having care of the sacred vessels and vestments, guardianship of the doors and keys of the church, and watchers at the shrines of the saints, and they became one of the acknowledged 'dramatis personae' of the liturgy.

Eventually the virge-bearing Sacristan became known as Virgarius [rod-bearer] and thence through English as Virgifer [Virga in Latin means rod, and fero is to bear or carry - as Crucifer is to cross-bearer and Thurifer is to thurible-bearer], and later variants such as Virgerer or the shortened form Virger together with the French form Vergerar or Verger.

Saint Paul's Cathedral in the 13th century had four "Common Servants" or "Virgers" - one appointed by the Dean and three by the Canon Treasurer. None of the Vergers had been perpetuated since 1282 "when a certain manifest crime" had been committed, for which the Virgers were expelled. Thereafter all four Virgers had to hand their virges to the Dean each Michaelmas, and receive them back for the following year providing that their duties had been performed properly.

During the English Reformation in the sixteenth century many of the mediaeval and "Popish" rites and ceremonies of the Church were seen as superstitious and unnecessary and were abolished or simplified; most of the Minor Orders became redundant. However, practical servants were still required to attend upon the congregation, keep the buildings secure, clean & lit for Divine Service and the churchyard maintained. In addition, following the abolition of the Latin services and the introduction of English as the language of the Prayer Book, the mostly illiterate population required a layman to lead their part of the service, answer the versicles spoken by the Minister and recite the psalms with him.

And so the office of the present-day Verger is, like the hymn book, both ancient and modern; their duties can include those of several ancient officials, and (depending on the particular needs of each Church) could include care of registers (as Parish Clerk), care of the Churchyard (as Sexton), care of the vestry, vestments and vessels (as Sacrist {sacristan} or vesturer), care of the linen, purificators and surplices etc., care of the church clock as well as the ceremonial duties of virge-bearer in procession.

Most have the custody of the Church buildings and their security (as Ostiarius); some are licensed Readers (the mediaeval office of Lector); others are also Altar Servers (as Acolyte) and some are licensed to administer the chalice. Some assist with Pastoral matters, help the Priests with home visits, and take part in Baptism and Confirmation preparations.

The Gatekeepers of the Old Testament would be more than amazed that their modern day counterparts not only look after the articles of the sanctuary, but also often have to operate a "sound system", control intruder and fire alarms and light their "temples" with magical "electric lights". The next millennium saw liturgies becoming ever more complex with a corresponding increase in the number of clerics required for their preparation and performance; as an example, there were 130 such functionaries at Salisbury Cathedral by 1390. That establishment's distinctive practice, the Sarum Use (or Use of Salisbury) — England's dominant "dialect" of the Roman Rite and the foundation on which Cranmer built his Prayer Book — contains some references to them of particular interest: *procedat minister virgam manu gestans, locum faciens processioni* (A Minister goes in front, bearing a rod in his hand, making room for the procession) and *Imprimis Sacristes, virgas in manibus gestantes, deinde...* (At the beginning: Sacristans bearing rods in their hands; then...) so some of these clerics — in addition to their curatorial functions — had become part of public liturgies and begun to carry the wands which would eventually become their badge of office and give them their name: the virge. In Latin such a one was a Virgarius (rod-man) or "virgifer" (made by adding "-fer" — from the verb "fero" to carry — to what was carried, following the pattern of Crucifer or Thurifer). The modern English form might possibly come directly from vergifer (several centuries of lazy pronunciation having removed the awkward "f"); but more likely it derives from the Norman French Vergerar or — Verger.

The Verger's distinctive dress is a gown, although today many wear the less bulky chimere — a garment proper to a Bishop in the Anglican Communion. Both of these — like almost all garments worn by clergy in the middle ages and renaissance — are nothing more than late medieval/early modern academic dress: as all academics were clerics (and many clerics academics), such garments were worn by Catholics and Protestants alike. One of the earliest images showing a Verger (below) looking very much as he does today depicts that of Saint Paul's Cathedral, London, in 1616, five years before John Donne became its Dean (it is very probable the man pictured conducted Donne to the pulpit to deliver his famous sermons).



VERGERS IN THE ANGLICAN COMMUNION

Henry VIII's break with Rome destroyed much of the establishment of the Church — both literally (all those romantic ruins dotting the English and Irish countryside were once thriving monastic communities) — and organizationally. In the latter sense, many minor clerics found themselves without a job as “Popish” rites and ceremonies were abolished; the Office of Verger, however, was retained — partly because his practical functions were necessary: as in the days of King David and the Prophet Samuel, Gatekeepers were still required. This was just as true elsewhere, however — yet only in England did the Verger survive and thrive to the present day. It seems something about ceremonious, wandbearing attendants is deeply appealing to the English sensibility; for they continued outside the church doors as well, at every level of society: from the Mace borne into Parliament — representing the Sovereign herself, without which it may not lawfully sit — through civic government, academia, and as the first policemen — Beadles were so called from the staves they carried as their badge of office (as do Vergers in outdoor processions). The Verger's most public duty is to accompany processions and persons within the liturgy. In this regard it is important to note that, although the Verger comes before everyone else in a Procession, he is not leading it — he is actually not even part of it, merely walking ahead to ensure the way is clear for it.

A Verger's additional duties can vary extremely depending on the needs and circumstances of a given church. In America, the mere presence of a Verger is somewhat ad hoc, as are their duties. In England, both are much more formal, often involving licensure. On both sides of the Atlantic, "behind the scenes" duties may include record keeping; upkeep of the building and property, care of the vestments and other items in the Sacristy, or assisting the clergy pastorally; in public worship they can include serving as lector; acolyte, and administering the Precious Blood as a Chalice Bearer (aka: Lay Eucharistic Minister) during Holy Communion.

VERGERS IN THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

Most Catholics have never seen — or heard of — a Verger; yet the office became "Anglican" only as a survival of Catholic practice. What happened? A quick — if surprising — answer might be: Protestantism. It's an irony that Anglicanism preserved many aspects of medieval Catholicism the Church herself would discard in reaction to the new situation. Her means was the Council of Trent (1545–1563) and the "new ways" would remain in place for 500 years, until another modernizing Council: Vatican II. Both Councils wished to update and streamline the Church's liturgical practices; at Trent, medieval ways were — in large measure — were out: only where the Church's writ did not run (such as in England) could they remain. Within Catholicism, the City of Rome and the Papal Court itself (as always) retained the old ways the longest: Vergers survived there for many centuries: papal mazzieri (who carried a silver wand called a mazza) and Swiss Guards functioned as Vergers in papal chapels; Cardinals were preceded in the street and processions by mace-bearers; and the *cursores apostolici* (papal messengers) also carried wands. Today only Mazzieri are seen — very rarely — at the Consecration of a Bishop (if you watch Otto Preminger's admirable epic *The Cardinal* of 1963 you will see one — briefly, but close up — when the main character is raised to the Episcopacy; he carries a mazza of exactly the pattern shown in the engraving).

Interestingly, there is some evidence the Office of Verger may have been reestablished in the Catholic Church, along with the English Hierarchy in 1850 (or, at the very least the attempt was made or possibility left open): the Priestly rubrician (and 1846 convert from Anglicanism) Rev. Fr. John Duncan Hilarius Dale's enormously influential *Sacristan's Manual*, or, *Hand Book of Church Furniture* of 1854 — a business-like work scrupulous in following not only the decrees but practice of Rome, varying only when officially approved by or for the Diocese of Westminster — contains this intriguing paragraph: 58. ***Verger's Staff, the use of which is recognized in the Ceremonial of Bishops (Book 2, chap xxvii, n. 5), is usually surmounted by an emblem of the Patron Saint of the Church, or some other appropriate design (the baton cantoral is a continental example of the patronal finial described by the author).***

This is the past history of the Verger but within our own parishes we are making history by expanding the role of the Verger. The role of Verger is different in each church of our ACNA community today. One of the most important functions of our Vergers is that of making sure the Priest is freed from worry about who is doing what in the altar area during the service.

In addition to many of the duties listed above, in our church (*St. Timothy's – Spring, TX*) the Vergers train the Acolytes, the Lay Eucharistic Ministers and the Lectors in their various duties. We have a formal training for Acolytes and LEMs at least once a year. Included in our Acolyte program is the role of Junior Verger. This program has already borne fruit, as we recently had a past Junior Verger come back after college to join our staff once again as Verger.

