

The Ministry of Verger

What is a Verger?

A verger may be very different thing to each parish or cathedral in which one is found...and not all parishes or cathedrals have vergers. A verger may be person filling primarily a ceremonial role as "door keeper" or leader/organizer of processions. A verger might assume the duties of the church's manager of operations, leaving the clergy free to attend to pastoral duties and ecclesiastical details. A verger might be a combination of sexton, MC, and warden of lay ministers. A verger is always a layperson serving at the will of the parish pastor or cathedral dean in whatever capacity, and with whatever authority is given to him or her: administrative assistant, overseer of grounds and facilities, director of ritual, rector's right-hand.

In some parishes, the verger is on the staff and payroll, but usually vergers are non-stipendiary lay ministers. In either case, the highest level of commitment and dedication should not vary.

To become a verger is to answer God's call to a very responsible and sometimes complicated ministry with humility and honor.

History

In the early church the verger was known as the *ostiarus*, Latin for doorkeeper. This constituted the lowest of Minor Orders, which at one time were the steps leading to the priesthood. The Minor Orders of the Church included *ostiarus*, acolytes, lectors, and exorcists.

General duties for the verger included arranging of liturgical spaces, opening doors for services, lighting the lamps and candles, and ringing the bells. Vergers also protected the entrance from intruders, kept order among visitors, and cared for and ensured the safe custody of the premises and all the appointments inside. At times the verger was even physically responsible for the safety of the clergy. Vergers used their staves during large indoor and outdoor processions to make a pathway, or verge, for the ecclesiastical dignitaries who followed.

Other names the verger may be known by: beadle, apparitor, porter or *ostiarus* since 251 A.D., *man-*

sionarius (in Rome as early as the 4th century), *custos ecclesiae*, sacrist, sacristan, precentor, succentor, altarist, subdeacon, vesturer, or master of ceremonies. Still other positions encompassing similar duties may be the parish clerk, coordinator, administrator, or sexton. The use of any of these titles will vary from one place to another depending on the type of work done and the custom of the parish or cathedral church. Today the title will usually be verger, a title that appears to have originated in the 15th century and developed quickly in the 16th. Typically, the verger is the direct assistant to the Vicar, Rector, Dean, or Provost. In instances where there is a precentor and a verger, the verger is usually under the precentor's direction. Where there is a verger and a sexton, the sexton would be under the direction of the verger.

Vestments and Appointments

The Verger wears a cloak (gown) over dress clothes, or more formally, over a cassock. The verger's cloak is similar in appearance to an academic robe or a preaching gown. It should be considerably shorter than the cassock. The traditional cloak is black with "sleeves" or "lappets." These sleeves appear like tails in

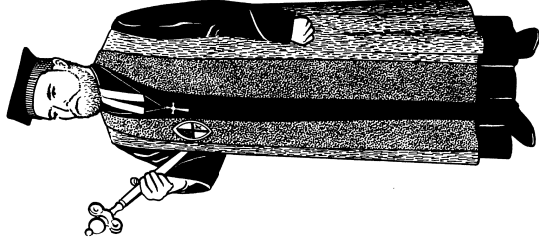
some instances, and are symbolic of the yoke shouldered by the verger. These tails allowed the priest's books to be carried, tied with a tail, while he was being verged. This left the verger's hands free to carry his verge, and to fend off then not infrequent attackers. The collar is large and square and is a remnant of the hood needed in the past when, several centuries ago, the cloak provided warmth outdoors. If desired, the collar may be of velvet, matching the stripes of velvet added to the sleeves, and velvet used to trim the front edges of the cloak extending downward from the neck.

A modern variation is a long vest-like cloak without sleeves that shows the cassock from the top of the arm at the shoulder. The large square collar is not included in this style cloak. The result is very similar in appearance to the chimere worn by a bishops. Since the front of either style verger's cloak is open and may tend to slip around, the use of a morse may be desirable to keep it from slipping and opening too far, especially in the wind when processing outdoors.

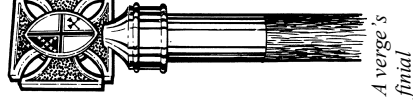
The title verger comes from the verge (staff), short for verger's wand, which is carried during the liturgy. This is the modern spelling, commonly used today instead of the original Old English virger and virge (Latin *virga*, a rod). A verge is about 40-inches long with a stave head or finial at the upper end, typically made of brass or silver, but may also be of carved and gilded wood. A matching metal ferrule at the lower end protects the verge or pole from damage, allowing it to be rapped on the floor if required. The pole is usually made of a hardwood such as oak, mahogany, or walnut.

A longer staff called the "beadle pole," alternatively carried by the beadle or verger, measures approximately 62 inches. Various customs might have a verger, acting as the beadle, lead the entering and departing processions, carrying a beadle pole. Assistant or ceremonial vergers in the procession would then be verging other groups or individuals; for example, the sanctuary party.

Other similar but much more elaborate relatives of the verge, are the mace and scepter, used in English universities and royal ceremonial functions.



A verger wearing a cassock, chimere-style gown, neck tabs, a Canterbury cap, and carrying a verge



A verge's finial

Responsibilities

Modern vergers, both men and women, have liturgical and non-liturgical responsibilities. Their presence during the service assists in preparing order and religious decorum and in maintaining the dignity of the liturgy. During the liturgy, they verge (escort) participants from one place to another. This allows the lectors, preacher, celebrant, and others freedom to focus on their prayers and the liturgy. Customarily, the verger would verge the lectors to the lectern, and the preacher to the pulpit waiting until they are finished and verging them back to their seat or stall. When the verger begins or ends verging a participant, they exchange a slight nod of the head only.

The verger may determine the order, path, and pace of processions, and choreograph the movements of the liturgy. A visiting priest or lay person taking part in a service will likely feel more at ease with definite instructions or a briefing beforehand from the verger. The verger will often be the person to whom other participants will turn with questions. Training of the thurifer, servers, and acolytes, directions to usher and sound engineers, and briefing of the lectors are often the verger's responsibilities. The verger should also know all of the various sanctuary guild procedures. Each of these guilds would likely have someone in charge, but the verger sees that all is in order and coordinated for the liturgy. Care should be taken that the verger does not take over and perform the duties more properly handled by members of a specific group. Much of the time, the verger should be an enabler, instructor, coordinator, and a liaison with clergy.

The verger has a place in all services of the church. This includes the Holy Eucharist, Baptism, Matrimony, burials, and daily offices. Often the verger will even direct wedding rehearsals. Some parish and cathedral churches use the verger as a lay reader, chalice bearer, and officiant for morning, noon-day, or evening prayer services. So it is not unusual for vergers also to be licensed readers and preachers.

A service may have one or several vergers taking part. Different participants such as the

Bishop, chapter members, chalice bearers and lectors, preacher, and choirs may be verged by a different verger in the procession. These vergers may carry a certain verge representing the particular groups or individuals. A verger may direct others or be involved personally with the movement of the gospel procession, baptismal procession, and offertory procession of oblations and alms. When leading any procession, the verger must always be aware of the time it will take those at the end of the procession to arrive at their appointed places. For example, the verger should not set a pace so slow or choose a path so long that the clergy will not arrive in the sanctuary before the entrance music concludes. The verger should see that the service is a smooth progression from beginning to end, with no surprises.

Non-liturgical duties of the verger may vary widely from one place to another. The verger may be strictly honorary, volunteer, or ceremonial and have none of these other assignments. Although if he is on the staff, he may be responsible for a number of pre/post-service duties, including picking up and cleaning the interior of the buildings. Or the verger may supervise the cleaning work being done by others. Administrative tasks might include updating the service register and recording services. Sometimes the verger is concerned with working with a budget or the maintenance of a petty cash fund. In general, most non-musical, non-sacramental, and non-Christian education duties may be assigned to the verger and his assistants.

When the verger is a paid professional. It is not a job, but a vocation. Verger employment, which is more common abroad than in the States, often includes housing on the close. Consequently, it seems that conducting tours is also a frequent duty.

Training

In 1932 a group of vergers founded the Church of England Guild of Vergers (CEGV). The Presidents are the Lord Archbishop of Canterbury and the Lord Archbishop of York. That guild was predated by a London society born in 1909, which later ceased activity. The Constitution describes the Guild as "a fellowship in

Christ, seeking concord amongst its brethren. It exists to assist us to appreciate the spiritual nature of our vocation and ministry as a verger in the House of God.

Formal instruction has been available in England since the first training conference given by the Guild in 1974. The training course is now made up of four units in two stages. The first stage, the foundation unit, deals primarily with the vergers' job. The second stage, with three independent units, is concerned with developing the ministry of the vergers. These deal with the vergers as an administrator, as a Christian and pastor, and as an historian.

Since 1979 the Order of St. Vincent helped further this ministry by allowing vergers in North America to be admitted into membership of the Order. Early in 1988 the CEVG was responding to vergers in the States who had expressed interest in establishing a branch in the Episcopal Church.

Vergers' Prayer

Almighty Father, from whom every family in Heaven and earth is named, who has called us into the fellowship of the Church: grant, we pray, that in all our parishes we may fulfill the duties and enjoy the privileges of our spiritual home. And on those who offer themselves as Vergers in the House of God bestow the fullness of your Grace; that united in love to you and to one another, we may show forth your glory and hasten the coming of your kingdom. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Definitions

Vergers (Latin, *virga*, a rod) An official who carries a rod or similar symbol of office before the dignitaries of a cathedral, church, or university; an apparitor; one whose duty it is to take care of the interior of a church, and act as attendant; in Sarum Rite the vergers heads the procession.

Beadle (Old French, *badeil*, herald) Announcer; constable; a parish officer appointed to keep order in the church and walk before dignitaries carrying a staff of office; in the Church of Scotland, ecclesiastical official appointed to care for the place of worship and perform other similar functions; "the minister's man"; one who carries books to the pulpit before divine service begins.

Apparitor (Latin, *apparere*, to attend publically)

The servant or attendant of an officer or authority; a herald, pursuivant, usher, a beadle in an university who carries the mace before the masters and faculty.

The Vergers' Psalm

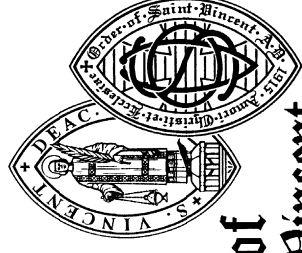
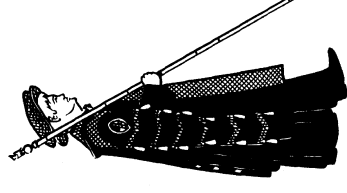
Psalm 84. *Quam dilecta!*

- 0 How amiable are thy dwellings thou LORD of hosts!
- 2 My soul hath a desire and longing to enter into the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh rejoice in the living God.
(*This reminds us of the care for the building and contents which the vergers provides. The second sentence represents the thought, which if kept in the mind of the vergers, will help prevent his job from becoming too tiresome.*)
- 3 Yea, the sparrow hath found her an house, and the swallow a nest, where she may lay her young; even thy altars, O Lord of hosts, my King and my God.
- 4 Blessed are they that dwell in thy house; they will be always praising thee.
- 5 Blessed is the man whose strength is in thee; in whose heart are thy ways.
(*After arranging for the smooth proceeding of services, the understood job of all vergers is actively participating in praise and worship.*)
- 6 Who going through the vale of misery use it for a well; and the pools are filled with water.
- 7 They will go from strength to strength, and unto the God of gods appeareth every one of them in Sion.
- 8 O Lord God of hosts, hear my prayer; hearken, O God of Jacob.
- 9 Behold O God our defender, and look upon the face of thine anointed.
- 10 For one day in thy courts is better than a thousand.
- 11 I had rather be a door-keeper in the house of my God, than to dwell in the tents of ungodliness.
(*The vergers should be humble, strong in his faith, and have the conviction of serving the Lord.*)
- 12 For the Lord God is a light and defence; the Lord will give grace and worship; and no good thing shall be withheld from them that live a godly life.
- 13 O Lord God of hosts, blessed is the man that putteth his trust in thee.



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