

VERGERS

An extract from, "Here's a church, let's go in", by Provost Conybeare:

"But let it always be remembered that the work of a cathedral is not confined to special occasions. No, a cathedral is at work day in and day out, Sundays as well as weekdays, all the year round. And that work, if it is to be well done, depends very largely on the vergers. They are always there. Visitors who come in such increasing numbers get their impression of the cathedral most usually from the manner and reverence of the verger. It is trying work showing visitors round, and always to be courteous, always interesting is a great mental and physical strain. Those who have tried to do it now and then know how exhausting it is. The cathedrals are likely to be thronged with visitors more and more, travelling is easier, and there is a wider intelligence about such national treasures than ever before. Therefore the verger's task will increase, and his responsibility to give a right impression will become more and more important. The Church Assembly has the matter in hand. Meanwhile let us hope that men with vocation for such a task may always be forthcoming. This is true not only of cathedral vergers, but in many an important church in towns and villages too. We cannot think of the Church at work and forget these dutiful servants of the Church, whether they be called Vergers or Sextons.

(There follows two very different accounts of the verger's role in the life of the Church, one by John Meredith while he was Head Verger and the other by Andrew Todd while he was Canon's Verger, before he assumed the role of Head Verger. Both are based on talks which were given to the Guild of Stewards).

MY WORK AS A VERGER, by JOHN MEREDITH

Having been a verger for 21 years and Head Verger for 10 I have learnt that the three main requirements for the job are:

- patience;
- a willingness to work without set hours;
- a good memory.

The title VERGER means one who walks in front of a cleric or a procession with a rod or mace (called a verge) to clear a path, i.e. to keep people on the verge. The verge I carry was presented in 1664 by Canon Thomas Wren, cousin of Sir Christopher. Traditionally in Southwell the verge is carried on the shoulder: it has been carried like this since at least 1730, as shown by an illustration of that date.



not sloping forward
as in most other
places.



(Since this talk was given in 1990 the Wren verge has been retired because the inscription was getting very worn, and it has been replaced by a replica verge which was paid for by the Friends of the Minster).

The verger's uniform is a black cassock for everyday wear; for official occasions there is a black gown with a velvet trim, the amount of velvet indicating seniority, and a badge based on the ancient seal of the Minster.

(Vergers who are members of the Vergers' Guild also wear the Guild badge on their gowns, and the Head Verger also wears the badge of the Province of York)

The Head Verger verges (leads) the Provost. The 2nd Verger, or Canons' Verger, verges the Canons, and the 3rd verger, the Choir Verger, leads in the choir. For practical reasons this is not always adhered to, and if one of the vergers is unavailable the next in seniority takes his place and there is a part time verger who fills the lowest gap.

The Head Verger also acts as Parish Clerk and is responsible for the parish registers: he is involved with baptisms, marriages and funerals and the placing of graves in the cemetery. He is responsible for the fees which come in and go out. He counts collections and pays them into the bank, and he also

empties the visitors' boxes and candle money every evening.

The Head Verger is also responsible for ordering and looking after all materials, e.g. wafers, wine, candles; cleaning materials, loo rolls etc; and for seeing that the altar linen and surplices are laundered and that cassocks etc are dry cleaned.

All of the vergers take parties round the Minster, give talks, clean the building, polish brass and silver, set up for services, both on special occasions such as a Bishop's Enthronement or the Royal Maundy Service (when, in 1984, June Meredith made history as the first woman to verge the Royal Maundy Procession), and for daily services for which they light the candles, mark service books, ring the bell and set out vestments.

They are responsible for all seating arrangements, both planning and fixing numbers and MOVING CHAIRS - a very demanding and time consuming part of the work, especially on Saturdays when they may be working until 11 p.m., then back to work early on Sunday. Nave chairs are moved about 2/3 times a week.

Security is another responsibility of modern vergers. There is a daily check of the alarm system (they are on call 24 hours a day if the alarm goes off). They unlock and lock the Minster each day - and ensure that no-one gets locked in! They also handle deliveries, dispose of rubbish, control the heating and lighting.

People come to the vergers with all sorts of questions, and wanting to look up their ancestors in old registers. Above all the verger has to be nice to everyone, give a good impression of the Minster, and SMILE!

Away from Southwell, the Head Verger accompanies clergy and choir to events such as the Three Choirs Festival, Songs of Praise from Lichfield and to Portland College for the Queen's visit there. There is a National Guild of Vergers which has two conferences, one for cathedrals. There are also area meetings of the Guild which our vergers attend.

THE JOB OF A VERGER by ANDREW TODD

It is almost impossible to define the job of a verger in a few words - you could in fact say that there are as many definitions as there are churches with vergers. Many factors affect the job that a verger is expected to do - the size of the church, traditions, volumes of visitors, ministerial set-up, type of employment, etc. etc. Any church, from the smallest, isolated village church to the largest city parish church, from the private chapel to the great abbey or cathedral can have one or more vergers. With decreasing numbers of ordained ministers and the changing expectations of congregations I believe that many more should look to having a verger.

In general terms the verger at the end of the twentieth century is, or should be, a key person in the life and work of a worshipping community. Being a verger is not just like any other job, it is a vocation, a form of ministry and service, and a way of putting your Christian faith into action. If the minister of a church is seen as having as their primary responsibility the care of the souls in their parish, the verger can be said to have as their primary responsibility the care of the church and minister in their parish; the minister is primarily people centred but the verger is primarily building centred.

Of course little in life is totally clear cut and this is true of the job of a verger. A verger does not solely have responsibility for and dealings with inanimate objects - inter-personal skills are vital too. Critics would say a verger is "Jack of all trades but master of none" - this may be true but versatility is a vital asset to a verger. Below is a list of duties which many vergers find themselves doing - I am sure that there are many more that I am not aware of but, as you will appreciate, my experience is limited.

Ceremonial duties - perhaps the most high profile thing a verger does, usually robed and with dignity - leading processions and escorting people around the church building and its

- precincts in a formal manner.
- Organising and planning - special services, ceremonies, rosters for various tasks, seating at events, teams of people for various tasks, and his or her own work.
- Welcoming - visitors of all sorts; sightseers, those needing help, worshippers, special guests, visiting ministers, groups of all types, and enquirers after information and spiritual help.
- Pastoral care - for fellow workers and church members, ministers, casual visitors and even the local hooligans.
- Cleaning - the building and everything in it and used in it.
- Maintenance - running repairs on almost anything, routine tasks like changing light bulbs, and even grounds maintenance in the churchyard etc.
- Administration - Record keeping, writing up registers, controlling stocks of consumables like bread and wine for the Eucharist, and ordering or purchasing anything that is needed.
- Security - Opening and closing the church, checking for signs of theft, damage and vandalism, and helping to maintain order.
- Preparation - for services, concerts and events - moving furniture, putting out books etc.
- Tidying up - after services, concerts and events - everything that was prepared has to be put back where it should be or was before; and keeping notice boards, children's corners, etc tidy.
- First Response - to whatever situation arises - the child who grazes a knee tripping up a step, the minister who forgets a book or something similar, the passer by who has lost the local supermarket, or the elderly person who has locked their keys in the car, and many more.
- Providing Information - local, ecclesiastical, or more general - both historical and current.

Yes, most of these jobs can be done by anyone, and many are in every church. A vergers would not seek to be the only person doing most of these jobs and it would be foolish of them to do so. Certain jobs need special training or knowledge that has been acquired from another person or a book, others just require the use of the gifts that God has given each and every one of us. The most important thing is that the vergers' vocation and ministry is recognised by the vergers and the church at which they work. The vergers should be a practising and committed Christian like any other person in that church with a personal rule of life centred around that faith, the Bible, and their own life of public worship and private prayer. The vergers is just another pilgrim on the way who has the same needs and temptations as any other but who has wider responsibilities than some.

The Church of England Guild of Vergers (CEGV) is not a trade union or anything like that but a body that exists to help its members. It provides a Training Course that can be taken like any other correspondence course, an Annual Training Conference, national and local events, a newsletter and mutual support. Members share together whether they are paid or voluntary, full or part-time, young or old, male or female, vergers or interested supporter, and thus try to form a common bond - that of faith, fellowship and fun. Membership is open to all who perform any of the functions of a vergers, regardless of their title, and anyone who is interested in the job of a vergers. Local and national events are open to all and even the Training Course may be undertaken by those who are not vergers.

Vergers can not exist in isolation - they are and have been for centuries - part of the way of life in churches. Vergers need encouraging, people need encouraging to take on these jobs, and churches need encouraging to have vergers. It is just a part of identifying a person's gifts and recognising their vocation, and encouraging them in that. It is part of our Christian calling and responsibility, and to those who do these jobs it is an integral part of their Christian Stewardship of talents, of time, and in most cases of treasure too.