

Training your Chalice Assistants

Liturgy File 506

Authorisation

'At present the diocesan bishop may give permission to named lay people to assist in the distribution of the sacrament in both kinds in the course of a service of Holy Communion in church. In order for this to happen, request is made to the suffragan bishop by the incumbent supported by a vote of the PCC.' *Ad Clerum 8*

This permission does not extend to the administration of the elements by lay persons to those who are sick or housebound, for which further special permission from the Bishop is needed.

It follows that selection of such ministers (subsequently termed 'assistants') should rest on both the actual need within the church and that the parish priest and PCC should be content regarding their moral stature and good standing within the Christian Community. It should be emphasised to all that, episcopal permission is for a three year period only, after which this lapses. This provides a regular opportunity for review by the incumbent and PCC.

Theological training

Unlike some other English dioceses which have a formal course for candidates for this ministry, in the Diocese of St Albans, training is done entirely in the local church. It is preferable that some insight is given into the history and development of the Eucharist in the Church of England, and that as a result, candidates will have some awareness of the breadth of Eucharistic practice, both of administration and reception of communion in traditions other than their own. This is especially important when ministering to visitors from other churches. Some training should be given re. names and functions of vessels and linen, etc.

In Christ's name

All ministry is done in Christ's name and should be reverent yet natural and in the spirit of service. This will help to facilitate the kind of atmosphere in which the communicant will more easily experience this act as a moment of intimate communion with God in Christ.

Before the service

- **Punctuality:** Assistants should be encouraged to be in church in good time in order to 'check in', receive any instructions and be present for the whole service.
- **Hygiene:** Attention to personal hygiene (including fingernails and by using a mouthwash) is important.
- **Seating:** Depending upon local custom, they should take their place among the general body of the people, somewhere near and convenient for reaching the sanctuary easily.
- **Vesture:** Unless a robed server is to assist with the administration at a celebration of Holy Communion, it is not necessary for chalice assistants to robe. Functioning in smart, ordinary clothes emphasises the importance of the ministry of every member of the church and avoids the unfortunate creation of a semi-priestly caste.

Administration

- **Instructions:** Assistants should be trained not only where to sit and stand but also with regard to proper procedures to follow when approaching the altar to receive the vessels from the priest or deacon and how to return them. When vessels are returned to the altar, it is usual for them to be replaced upon the corporal. Instructions should be given about what to do in the event of insufficient wine and the procedure for 'topping up' and/ or further consecration *by the President*. Clear instructions should be given regarding the limits of their office in respect to the consumption and/ or cleansing of the vessels at the Ablutions. When carrying a vessel containing the sacrament in either form past the altar, the altar is not revered.
- **Movements:** should be done simply and with dignity. Anything which draws attention to oneself is to be discouraged.
- **Posture:** The exact posture for administration varies from church to church. In some churches communion is administered at a rail; in other it is administered standing at a 'station'. Each of these has its pitfalls and traps, which are considered below.
- **Looking ahead:** At both the rail and at a station, assistants will need to look ahead to see who has received the bread/ host from the priest and who has received a blessing instead.
- **Non consumption:** Especially at services with a large number of visitors (e.g. Midnight Eucharist on Christmas Eve) there will inevitably be those unfamiliar with Communion and yet present themselves, expecting to receive. An eye should be kept out for those who take but do not consume the bread/ host. Such should be gently, yet firmly encouraged by the assistant to consume there and then before receiving from the chalice. (But see also *Intinction*, below) Should there be any concern that the bread/ host has not been consumed and been taken away, then the president should be advised as soon as is practically and

decently possible (usually at the end of the administration) as this will need to be followed up by him/ her immediately.

- **Procedure:** Holding the chalice in one hand (usually around the stem) and the purificator in the other, the assistant shows the chalice to the communicant and says, 'The Blood of Christ', waits for the communicant to make his/her profession of faith: 'Amen', and then proffers the chalice.
- **Manner:** For the sake of those with hearing difficulties, it is important to speak in a clear, natural, audible voice and to ensure the communicant has eye contact with the assistant's eyes and mouth so that speech may be read. However, 'eyeballing' or allowing one's own personality to intrude in a well intentioned but misplaced attempt to be 'meaningful', is to be discouraged.
- **To let go or not to let go:** Practice varies, depending on local custom. The rubric in the Book of Common Prayer makes it clear that the bread and the cup (chalice) are to be 'delivered into their hands'. Notwithstanding this, it is the tradition in some churches that communicants do not touch the chalice; in others the communicant takes the cup entirely from the minister. In practice, although it is sometimes helpful if the communicant is allowed to guide the chalice with one hand and even in situations where the communicant takes the chalice from the minister, it is recommended that the assistant keep at least a light hold around the stem of the chalice to prevent it falling between them with a consequent accident. This is particularly advisable with those who are unsure (e.g. visitors), the very elderly and infirm. In churches where the chalice is completely handed over to the communicant, the mannered, ostentatious, exaggerated wide movement of the assistant's hands to indicate relinquishing of the chalice, although perhaps understandable, is a real distraction and can be most irritating. In summary, it is better for all if the assistant retains at least a light hold of the chalice.
- **Traps at the rail:** Assistants should keep an eye on the *meniscus* (the surface tension of the wine): the breaking of the meniscus indicates that the lips have made contact with the wine and the communicant has received. Ladies' hats (and moustaches!) are a real problem here as they obstruct the assistant's vision. Another problem can be caused by those communicants who drop their heads. It is usually easier for all if communion is given with the head slightly raised: try presenting the chalice at a slightly higher level and waiting, to encourage the communicant to lift his/ her head.
- **Traps at a standing station:** Communicating those who are significantly taller than oneself is the main problem here. Here it may be necessary to hand over greater control of the chalice to the communicant. This is especially the case with those communicants who drop their heads.
- **The purificator.**
 - This is best held, folded once over the forefinger. After the communicant has received the assistant takes the purificator and makes an upward wipe on the outer rim of the chalice. This is simply to prevent dripping and to remove any debris. The chalice is then turned around a quarter. Any debris remaining on the inner edge of the rim may be removed with a gentle and discreet flick with the edge of the purificator.
 - The practice of folding the purificator over the rim of the chalice and rubbing the inside and outside edge of the rim simultaneously is to be discouraged as it a) spreads bacteria rather than removes them, b) removes alcohol which may have a mild antiseptic effect, c) risks the soaking of the purificator in the wine with consequent contamination of the wine and d) looks awful and is distracting.
 - Care should be taken to ensure that the purificator does not become over damp. By holding it as suggested above, it is possible to keep it dry and continuously change the part being used to prevent over soiling of one part, thus promoting hygiene.
- **Intinction:** There are often some, who for reasons of health and hygiene (e.g. a cold or a cold sore) prefer not to receive direct from the chalice. These will need to retain the bread/ host for intinction (dipping it briefly into the wine). If there are any communicants who retain the bread/ host and who do not intinct at this point in proceedings, then the assistant should take the bread/ host from them, intinct the host in the wine and place it in their mouths. Assistants should also be made aware of the advice given in *Ad Clerum* 11, regarding Aids and the chalice which commends intinction for those who may be concerned.

Accidents

- Prevention of course, is better than cure. Following the advice given above will avoid the possibility of the chalice being dropped between communicant and minister.
- Spillages are best dealt with swiftly and quietly. If wine is spilt on the floor, the assistant should simply drop the purificator on top, to soak up the wine. If wine is spilt on clothes, the assistant should hand the purificator to the communicant.
- Servers should be briefed to deal with clearing up unobtrusively, so that the assistant can continue with the administration of communion.
- If the host is dropped, it is usually better if the assistant picks it up, intincts and places it in the communicant's mouth.
- Spare purificators should be placed nearby on the altar /credence table in case of emergency.