The Acolyte — Attendants in Worship

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I can remember eagerly awaiting my tenth birthday so I could finally train to be an acolyte. I was excited to wear a robe and to learn to tie a cincture. When the day finally came, I put on my robe, tied my belt, picked up a flag, joined the procession, took my seat, and waited for the end of the service so that I could do all that in reverse. That was the beginning of my ministry as an acolyte and was the beginning of my love of the movement and rhythm of liturgy.

Since that time, I have served as an acolyte as a youth and as an adult. I have also served as an "acolyte master," both as a layperson and as a deacon. Working with young people and adults to incorporate them into the life of service in worship is perhaps one of my favorite things. No matter the size of the church or style of liturgy, developing a ministry of acolytes is a wonderful way to invite youth and adults into the life of the liturgy.

The term acolyte comes from the Greek word akolouthos, meaning "follower" or "attendant," and those words sum up nicely the work of the acolytes. Acolytes date to at least the 200's C.E., and began as one of the levels of ministry required for those preparing to be ordained. In the days before modern lighting, acolytes' chief responsibility was tending and carrying the candles needed to illuminate the worship space and texts. Now with modern conveniences, the service of acolytes can be quite varied. Depending on the size of the parish and the style of worship, acolytes can number from one to a half dozen or more. A basic team of acolytes and their traditional duties are:

- Crucifer: basic job is to carry the cross. The crucifer frequently serves as the senior acolyte and provides some supervision for the acolyte team. The crucifer may carry the Gospel book in the Gospel procession and assist the clergy in preparing the altar for the Eucharist.
- Torchbearers: basic job is to carry a candle or torch. A torchbearer may also be tasked with lighting and extinguishing the altar candles.

These basic duties can be expanded to include a thurifer (responsible for the incense and thurible), a boat bearer (carries the incense boat when a thurible is used), a banner bearer (carries the banner), and a book bearer (carries the Gospel book). For larger services, additional roles might be appropriate.



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To develop a healthy team of acolytes, parishes should hold regular training sessions. This allows new people to be included in the ministry and a chance for continuing acolytes to be trained on new positions. Training should include an explanation of the liturgy, vestments, equipment, roles, schedule expectations (frequency, arranging substitutes, and special services), and contacts for lay and clergy leadership. To provide a resource for acolytes, leaders should create a handbook that covers the basic information for the customs of their parish.

A careful balance is needed between the style of worship and the number of acolytes. It is important to provide an opportunity for service, but scheduling should not turn service into a burden. It may not just be the nine-year-old in the pew eager to serve but also the young adult, adult, or senior looking for an opportunity to serve in worship. By including both youth and adults in acolyte ministry, you can create an opportunity for intergenerational service, involving laity of all ages in the liturgy. ✞