

LEXINGTON'S FIRST VERGER

Dr. Dixon Barr became the first verger in the Diocese of Lexington, when on May 19, 1991 he was officially commissioned verger of Christ Church Cathedral, thereby becoming the first verger in the 200 year history of the diocese.

The office of a verger is a special one – a marvelous blend of the old and the new – very old to the Anglican Church and brand new to the Diocese of Lexington.

Christ Church had never had a verger, not during its years as a cathedral nor during its longer history as a parish church, yet vergers are as much a part of cathedral lore as bishop or dean or provost.

Most cathedrals and lots of parish churches in England have vergers, and they are becoming more and more prevalent in the Episcopal Church in America. There is now a guild called the Vergers' Guild of the Episcopal Church (VGEC), formed during the 1980s, of which Dixon was a member.

One of the principal duties of a verger today is to act as a master of ceremonies, leading the procession down the aisle and verging (leading) the lectors to the lectern and the preacher to the pulpit, waiting until they are finished and verging them back to their seats. He may direct others or be involved personally with the movement of the gospel procession, baptismal procession and offertory procession of oblations and alms.

Through the ages vergers have also served as parish clerks, acolytes, chalice bearers, lay readers, sextons, tour guides, parish historians and even as grave diggers. Some vergers who hold full time positions in churches or cathedrals have varied duties, such as maintenance of the buildings, church security, sacristan, etc. They can be found in large cathedrals or small parishes, even in missions they may be full time, part time, volunteer or salaried.

In the early Church the verger was known as the *ostiarius*, Latin for doorkeeper. In the Middle Ages they were called protectors of the procession, as they led and protected the clergy as they processed..

The dictionary defines a vergier as “an official who carries a verge before a scholastic, legal or ecclesiastical dignitary; specifically, in English cathedrals and collegiate churches, one who carries the mace before the dean or canons.”

The word *verga* in Latin means rod or staff or wand. The verge, actually a mace, was used to beat back unfriendly animals or rowdy citizens – anything or anyone who might try to harm the clergy. It became the symbol of strength and authority and an emblem of office. In some churches and cathedrals the verge was used not only to clear the way for processions but also to discipline unruly choristers and members of the congregation.

Verges, with the passing of time, have become more and more ornate and varied in shape, size and design since they took on their ceremonial role. The modern verge is approximately 40 inches long with a cross or other ornament at one end. The pole is usually made of hard wood.

Christ Church Cathedral's verge is a black wooden wand surmounted by a silver archangel. It was made in London in 1918, and was bequeathed to the Society of St. Margaret in Boston by the Rev. Andrew Chalmers Wilson in 1952. It came to Christ Church Cathedral through the Sisters of St. Margaret at St. Agnes House.

The vergier's gown started as a type of coat that protected the wearer from the elements. Gowns today are available in several styles, colors and materials and may be worn over either cassock, alb or business suit. More often an academic gown is worn by today's vergiers, such as the doctoral gown from Columbia University worn by Dr. Barr.

Historically the vergier is responsible for insuring that all of the various components of the worship of the church are attended to and run smoothly. His role is to do this for the clergy so that they may be free to lead the people in the worship of God without distraction.

Amid changing liturgies and changing styles vergiers go about performing their necessary functions. They play an important role in several churches in the Diocese of Lexington.

By Frances Keller Barr