

# Liturgical Presence

Liturgical style for those serving at the altar



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Liturgical presence is the ability of people serving in some formal liturgical capacity to do so with grace and dignity. It is grounded in the understanding that our service is not simply about functional activities but about “the self” that we offer. Our “being” in liturgy is as important as our “doing.”

Not everyone is called to serve in roles that require liturgical presence. Some have the gifts needed, others don't. Those with the gifts need training and ongoing coaching to equip those gifts.

There are two elements to liturgical presence – behavior and stance.

## Behaviors

### Prepare yourself

Arrive early. Greet others who are serving. Arrange any books or materials you may need during the liturgy.

Then engage in any practice that helps center you. This will vary from person to person – some say the Office, sit in silence, or offer a prayer in the church before going to the sacristy. Be available in the sacristy with all those serving at the time appointed.

### Your hands

When standing or walking from one place to another, join the hands so one fist is within the other or with the

fingers interlocked. Do whichever is comfortable for you. Hold them above the waist and just below the chest. The practice of holding the hands together with the fingers touching once communicated solemnity but increasingly comes across as an affectation.

The exceptions are when carrying something such as a processional cross or a hymnal or when performing a ceremonial action such as crossing yourself. When seated place hands in the lap or allow them to rest just above the knee.

## Movement

When going from one place to another move in a dignified manner, maintain a pace that is natural and unhurried. Show appropriate reverence toward the altar when passing in front of or near it.

## Eyes

In general, either keep eyes focused on the liturgical action or look straight ahead across the chancel. For example, face the reading of the gospel and look toward the altar during the Great Thanksgiving. Avoid looking at the congregation, unless in a role such as chalice bearer that requires noticing the flow of people. Attempts to make eye contact with, or to observe, the congregation is likely to distract people from the celebration. Save eye contact for coffee hour. It can also be distracting if liturgical ministers close their eyes.

## Posture

Maintain a posture of “relaxed formality.” Hold the body straight with your head erect. Avoid affected or exaggerated positions and attitudes. When sitting keep the back relatively straight; do not slouch, cross the legs or fidget.

## Stillness

Seek a centered stance, confident and self-aware. Avoid scratching that itch, indulging that yawn, fussing with the bulletin, or looking up hymns during the sermon. In general avoid twitching and showing restlessness. Allow yourself to be still.

## Clothing

Ministers of the Altar are usually in albs and an appropriate vestment. Most liturgical assistants are vested in an alb or a cassock and surplice. Avoid wearing crosses or other religious jewelry or items over the alb or vestments as it may create a disordered appearance among those serving or draw attention to server and away from the community’s liturgy. The cross or medal of a religious community may be appropriately worn over a cassock but under the surplice or cotta. The street clothing worn under the alb needs not to draw the congregation’s attention because it shows through or seems out of place.

## Communicating with one another

When communicating with others move close to the person, with the back to the congregation, and keeping the voice low. Don't talk across space or make gestures.

## Participation

Know the Liturgy. Join in the prayers and hymns as liturgical duties allow. Make the appropriate responses in the rite. Join in all the liturgical practices that are part of the parish's tradition and as instructed by the rector, e.g., bowing, making the sign of the cross, genuflecting and so on. Avoid acts of personal piety that are not normative for those in a liturgical role.

## Stance

### Humility

The task of everyone functioning at the altar is to be in the background, including the celebrant. This is about submitting to the virtue of humility not about disappearing. The assembly's attention needs to be on the worship of and communion with God and not be distracted by those of us serving at the altar.

In fact, this submission to humility is done while being obviously present and in leadership.

This translates into avoiding expressions of individual piety, overly individualized ways of carrying ourselves, religious jewelry, and exaggerated gestures that draw the community's attention.

Probably the most important thing that supports the expression of humility is to develop a high degree of competence in liturgical presence and functioning. Our openness to learn and grow is an essential element of this ministry. Servers who appear confused or clumsy can be very distracting to the congregation.

## Non-anxious presence

Rabbi Edwin Friedman introduced the concept of “non-anxious presence” to many Episcopalians as a way to understand an aspect of leadership. The idea is directly related to our liturgical presence.

We are all anxious at times. A degree of anxiety about how we function liturgically is useful. Having a non-anxious presence in liturgy doesn't mean that we are expected to be free of anxiety. It means that we are paying attention to how we are managing our anxiety. We are working to not allow our anxiety to take over our functioning. Being a non-anxious presence means being present and connected to the people and activities of the liturgy.

## Openness to direction

This is a stance of listening and responding: what Saint Benedict called obedience. In accepting a role in the liturgy we are agreeing to pay attention to the parish's customary and to the directions of those appointed to facilitate a graceful liturgy. It is the responsibility of the rector of the parish to establish the parish's liturgical norms. In any particular liturgy follow the directions of the celebrant or officiant or the Master of Ceremonies if there is one.

We all have our opinions about liturgical matters. Many rectors have established ways to gather the impressions, ideas and feelings of people in liturgical roles. If we have suggestions about how something is done in the liturgy, communicate them during such occasions or privately to the rector.

**Solemn, not glum, not informal, not pompous**  
Liturgy is a dignified, formal, and seriously joyful activity, meant to inspire wonder and awe, and to catch us up in God's beauty: it is solemn. The joy of liturgy is at a deeper level than simple happiness. So, our functioning in the liturgy requires a stable, disciplined involvement. We are entering into and engaging mystery and paradox.

Aidan Kavanagh wrote, "*Solemnity should skip rather than trundle, dance rather than lumber. Solemnity and*

*simplicity are close to being the same thing, and each is native to a liturgy which is divine service.”*

Live the paradox: Do things perfectly *and* don't get upset about mistakes

Functioning well in the liturgy requires commitment and competence. Read, receive training, participate in rehearsals, and be open to guidance. Do everything you can to offer your part in the liturgy with as much grace and skill as possible. It is also true that it undermines the climate of good liturgy to allow yourself to obsess over your own or others mistakes.

## Competent

Be competent in this ministry. Know how to bow, genuflect, walk, and sit with dignity and simplicity. The work that has been done in many organizations on empowering employees and members is clear – commitment grows as competence grows. That means that the parish needs to offer training, coaching and feedback to everyone serving at the altar.

That can be a bit tricky because some of us are easily offended by any critique. There are organizational methods that can make the process easier and we can each take initiative by requesting feedback and guidance.



## Maturity in Faith & Practice

It's part of our spirituality as Episcopalians and Anglicans to be committed to our own maturity. We show personal congruence and respect for the congregation by living a "Sacramental" Christian life -- meaning that we have given ourselves to participation in the church's organic life and by frequently receiving the Body and Blood of Christ. The practice in some parishes of allowing people to serve who are irregular in attendance undermines the growth of the person and confuses the congregation.

## Function as part of a system, a body

Our liturgical ministries are not about doing a particular role correctly but being in harmony with the whole. The liturgy is an act of bringing diversity into unity, God's work of bringing into completeness and harmony the diversity of personalities and gifts present in the assembly. It is our tasting of the heavenly banquet, our glimpse of the Glory, our participation in the very life of God.

## About children and teens

There are two things to hold in mind. First, teens and children are capable of doing all this (if they have a gift for liturgical functioning.) The practice of some parishes of holding low expectations and tolerating sloppiness, from adults or children, is really a lack of respect for the dignity of people (server and congregation). It may help

to remember that the servers we treat this way are in martial arts classes and playing sports that require considerable self-discipline and skill.

Second, we can take care to not allow some liturgical functions to become the turf of the children or teens alone. Work at mixing the ages involved. It communicates the importance of the ministry and leavens the server group with adults who can set an example.

## What the parish needs to offer

The parish can equip and support those who serve at the altar by:

- Providing training sessions several times each year.
- Offering regular feedback and coaching in a direct, timely, constructive and competent manner.
- Having clear norms about liturgical functioning and presence.
- Giving as much attention to shaping a capacity for liturgical presence as we give to the specific acts and steps.
- The rector accepting responsibility to see that all the above happens.

*We are to be transformed, consecrated, made sacred to his creative purpose; and so fulfill the meaning of our life.*

-Evelyn Underhill

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