

# We Wait Upon the Table of God

## Unlocking the Mysteries of the Altar Guild



### Here's What the People in the Altar Guild Feel About Their Experiences in this Ministry:

If you are reading this information chances are you have more than a passing interest in serving in the Altar Guild of the Church. When I first became interested in serving back in 1994, I was overwhelmed by the complexity and detail that was presented to me as part of serving in this ministry.

At that time, I wasn't ready to take the leap of faith required to participate. Since becoming involved in the Guild in 1997, I have come to develop a real respect and appreciation for this ancient traditional liturgy which we have been using in the church for many years.

As I have become more involved in the development of this ministry, I really felt that in order to be able to attract and train new volunteers for this devoted group, this recovering Pentecostal needed to do some research into the history and development of this sacred tradition. This led me to have lunch one Sunday with the head of the Altar Guild of St. James Cathedral - an Anglican Church where I felt I could best get the information I needed.

The following is the results of my research. I hope it helps you to understand why we do what we do.

– *Ira Carmichael, Coordinator*

The members of the Altar Guild assist the Presider of the Eucharistic meal as instruments of God's hospitality.

The ministry of the table is an ancient service as attested in Acts. First, we prepare the table, making sure that the host, the Presider, will find everything in its place when it is time to share the meal. We make sure that we use out best linen, our best silverware, and our best bread and wine - and that there will be enough for everybody.

When everything is ready and the guests are about to arrive, we light the candles, change into our best clothes and prepare to lead the assembled guests in procession to the table.

When the time comes to commemorate and share the Eucharist, we go to the main table to get everything ready so that the Presider will have every thing at hand.

At the end of the meal, while the assembly sings its last hymn of praise and thanksgiving, we gather together with the Presider and the Assistants to lead our brothers and sisters out of the sanctuary and back into the world to share the grace we have just received.

When everyone has gone, we wash up and prepare for the next banquet.

***We wait upon the table of the Lord.***

### The Instruments of Our Ministry:

Most of the items that we use have a history of tradition in the early Christian church. The items used in the procession as we know it, started from a very practical place to meet the worship needs in a time when there was no electricity or modern conveniences as we know them.

#### The Processional Cross

was and still is a symbol of our faith in Christ. It is a symbol of Christ risen calling the congregation to follow the cross. It is placed prominently at the beginning of the procession signifying the start of formal worship. The person carrying the cross is known as the Crucifer.

#### The Processional Torches

follow the processional cross into the worship service. In historical context, the torches provided light for the procession because churches were very dark in historic times. They have evolved into ceremonial function symbolizing the light of Christ coming into the Church.

#### The Altar Candles

started historically as a practical means to provide light for the priest to read although now they are mostly decorative. When we light the altar candles prior to service, it signifies that the service is about to begin.

#### The Altar Cross

is historically from the Roman Church and is a symbol of the church's authority. To us the cross is a reminder that the Eucharist is related to Jesus' sacrifice on the cross.

## Water and Wine

At MCC Toronto, we fully prepare the table (or altar) at the beginning of the service. This is what you would most often see volunteers in the Altar Guild doing each week. It is also notable that we use non-alcoholic wine at all communion stations.

At MCC Toronto we fully prepare the table before the service, placing the bread, water and wine on the table while the rest of the elements are laid out. Historically, it is during the Offertory Procession that the formal presentation of the elements of communion to the altar from the rear of the Church or a side altar takes place. The practice goes back to the ancient Christians meeting in secret in the Catacombs of Rome and in house churches. Early Christians would bring the bread, water and wine from their homes for use in Communion. Later, in the Roman Church, it came to symbolize the gifts of bread, water and wine - body and blood of Christ - from the congregation for use in the church.

## The Paschal Candle

Is an ancient tradition of using fire as a symbol of the presence of God and Jesus Christ.

The lighting of the Paschal Candle is a traditional Easter observance in many Christian denominations. Un-lighted, it symbolizes Christ's death and burial and lighted it symbolizes the splendour and glory of the resurrection of Christ. The wick symbolizes Christ's humanity and the halo of flame represents Christ's divinity. The lighting of other candles such as the Altar Candles from the Paschal Candle symbolizes Christ passing the Holy Spirit to the Disciples.

## Prayer and Votive Candles

The prayer candles are lit as a way of prolonging each of the petitions of prayer long after they have been offered. The light burns long after we have said our prayers to God. It represents the prayer, thought or concerns of the person who lit it.

## The Work of Our Ministry:

Volunteers in the Altar Guild care for and prepare the instruments used in our weekly services. Volunteer positions in the ministry include:

### Crucifer

The person who arrives before the service to set up the altar and Communion stations, participates in the Procession and Recession carrying the Cross, lights the Prayer Candles during the Prayers of the People and coordinates clean-up.

### Banner Bearer

Carries the Processional Banner during the Procession.

### Candle Bearer

Two people each carry one of the Processional Candles during the Procession and Recession.

Other volunteers in the Altar Guild include people who assist with set-up and clean up and those who, behind the scenes, maintain the equipment by polishing metal work and managing supplies.

## How would you interpret your ministry as a member of the Altar Guild?

There's a place for all types of people to share the joy of preparing and caring for the table of the Lord.

## For More Information About the Altar Guild, Please Feel Free to:

- ❑ Approach any volunteer near the altar after services.
- ❑ Call Volunteer Ministries at 416-406-6228 ext. 114 to arrange an appointment or to find out more.
- ❑ Check out our website at [www.mcctoronto.com](http://www.mcctoronto.com)

**All are welcome!**

**We look forward to hearing from you!**