

Stories from the four churches

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Today is Pentecost Sunday at **St Ann's**. The church feels very different. Everyone is wearing something red, and it feels as if the whole church is ablaze with colour. The focus is an enormous crown suspended over the communion table, which was put there on Ascension Day to symbolize the kingship of Christ. Now there are flames all around and inside it as the theme moves on to the Lord, the Spirit. St Ann's has been having a discussion about the use of symbols and symbolic action, and divided them into three groups (see [here](#)). Today, the small dance group interprets a hymn to the Holy Spirit while the congregation remains seated to sing, so that they can see and be involved in the movement.

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At **St Bartholomew's**, just before the Peace, there is a noise at the back of the church, and the children enter in a procession with musical instruments (recorders, percussion etc.). This used to happen during the hymn after the Peace, but was brought forward so that the children could share in exchanging the Peace. At the end are two children with bread and wine which they take up to the sanctuary. The congregation have been learning about being on the move, and sometimes process outside the church, for example on Palm Sunday accompanied by a donkey.

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At **St Christopher's** there is deliberate and systematic use of symbols. They have decided which symbols require explanation and which are self-explanatory: they have learnt that taking too much time to explain to people what they are doing simply interrupts the worship, and that not everything needs explaining. They have also learnt not to be minimalistic about their symbols and actions. So, for instance, the fire on the Saturday night before Easter Day, from which the candles were lit during the Easter Vigil, was a large bonfire outside the church. Similarly, the movement in church is not over-solemn and slow: they recognize that movement is necessary and should be done well. Today they are trying something different as, at the offertory, people come from different corners of the church carrying the altar cloth, chalice and ciborium, bread and wine, and proceed to lay the table which has been bare until that point.

The church is sufficiently large for the whole congregation to get up and move to different parts of it for different sections of the service. This is more like a moving group of people than a solemn two-by-two procession. They did this very successfully at Epiphany and found that the children could take part more easily in something that moved from place to place.

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Though the usual symbolism at **St Dodo's** is that of dead flowers and failed light bulbs, things look brighter today with a fairly full church for the Christingle service. The children go to the sanctuary step to hand over money in return for lighted Christingles (no one seems to have thought through the implications of the symbolism of this exchange). Because things seem to be moving very slowly, with small children finding it difficult to hold the Christingle orange upright, the vicar sends some of them off in one direction and some in another, and the two processions meet amid great and dangerous confusion towards the back of the church, where angry parents, afraid of the danger, have to intervene to sort things out. They remember what happened on Palm Sunday a few years ago when an acolyte set fire to a palm frond with his candle. A server with great presence of mind picked up the burning palm but instead of throwing it on the floor and stamping the fire out, tried (solemnly but with difficulty!) to process out of church holding it in front of him, with the result that his hair was very badly singed. Remember the rule: when processing out of church with a burning palm, walk backwards.



Processions: some questions

Where is the procession going from and where to?

How will they know the way? Is it obvious or do they need leading by crucifer/acolytes/verger/musicians?

Processions should have a purpose, not just wander about. What is the purpose for this procession? What expectation do we want the procession to create? What is going to happen when it arrives? Is there a gift to receive, a banner to display, a prayer to say?

In what order are people to move off? There is no particular reason why the important people have to come at the end. It may often work best if they go first.



Symbols and actions

Symbols can be of very many different sorts:

1 Symbols people bring with them

For example, wearing clothes symbolizing respectability, purity, or some aspect of the season (e.g. bonnets at Easter or something white at Christmas), or simply being visually the people of God, a crowd or a number of smaller groups relating together.

2 Symbols and actions which are individual

Holding a book for worship (what is the message of that?). Bowing, making the sign of the cross, distributing nails to people on Good Friday, or candles at Candlemas: though these are individual, they also express relationship and unity among the congregation.

3 Symbols and actions uniting the congregation

Actions done together at the same time, such as standing and kneeling, exchanging the Peace, holding hands etc., are a way of drawing the congregation together.

Pictures, statues, icons, frontals and banners should be unitive and gather the attention of the congregation towards God – they can sometimes be fragmentary and disperse the congregation’s thoughts and responses. Should some things be moved away for some sorts of service, as happens with the stripping of the Holy Table on Maundy Thursday?

Dance is also something which can unite or divide. It might involve one person or a group ‘performing’ something which is usually rehearsed, for example as an interpretation of a reading or song or prayer. It can involve spontaneous solo dancers: this is usually easier during a hymn or song, expressing praise to God and often assisting the congregation to gather up their praise and worship. Large numbers of a congregation might also dance spontaneously to praise God, sometimes moving out to occupy the aisles and other spaces in the church.

Distributing communion: stories from the four churches

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At **St Ann’s**, five of the leadership team come and stand around the table to receive communion, which they pass from one to the other. Then, together with the president, they distribute communion in three pairs moving right round the rail, returning round the far side of the communion table to the point at which they started. The bread is part of a loaf, which they break as they go. (They have been taught that the breaking – ‘fraction’ – was something functional rather than ceremonial in the New Testament descriptions, and that the custom of chopping the bread into little bits before the service starts really undermines the strong image of unity in the body conveyed by ‘We break this bread ... we, though many, are one body ...’). As they pass the children, they lay one hand on them and pray for them; one or two of the parents break a piece off their own bread to share with their children. At the side of the long rail, one or two people remain kneeling, waiting for the ministry of the laying on of hands for healing. This is usually done by the same group of people, though others may join in or come forward to take over the distributing of communion if that seems in danger of being held up.

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At **St Bartholomew’s** the vicar is away, and the service is led by a Reader. During a hymn the consecrated bread and wine are brought from the

church in the next village, and placed on the altar. There is no consecration prayer, but the Reader uses the service from *Public Worship with Communion by Extension*. The Reader distributes the sacrament, following the local custom of saying the longer BCP words to the whole rail of people, followed by brief words to each. The communicants at the rail wait until everyone has received, and all depart together. The sidespeople encourage forward only the right number to fill the rail each time, so there is no queue.

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The distribution at **St Christopher's** is equally well organized, with one of the wardens gradually moving back down the church telling people when to go forward, and a server some yards from the rail to direct people where to go. The whole thing moves very smoothly. The three lay ministers of communion are not robed. One shares the distribution of the wafers with the president, and two follow with the cup. Everyone knows – because it is regularly announced – that those who come to the rail holding a book are not receiving the sacrament. When there is a large service, the congregation have got used to receiving communion standing, from two stations, one at the front of the church and one half way down the nave. Those who give the cup to people taller than themselves have realized that it is easier to put the cup into people's hands. At the end of the distribution, three people who have the bishop's permission to take communion to the sick come forward, with their pyxes, and after a prayer they go straight out to perform their ministry.

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At **St Dodo's**, no one is quite sure who is meant to be helping the president to distribute communion, so after a hurried conversation at the back of the church (and rejecting one of the women who offers to do it, because they think she is unsuitably dressed), one of the wardens moves forward as the president glares anxiously down the church. He has to lift the centre part of the rail out in order to get into the sanctuary, and by the time he arrives the president has begun to distribute wafers to the four members of the choir at one side of the rail. The warden is not quite sure whether he has the authority to take the cup from the table, so there is a hiatus. The delay puts a certain amount of pressure on the operation, and the distribution proceeds at a rapid pace, so much so that some people do not have any time to pray when they kneel down before the wafer is thrust at them. Those distributing also have no time to pray for each person, as disasters follow thick and fast. The president drops a wafer and the warden, following close behind, puts his foot on it (or was he trying to conceal it?). He then discovers a fly struggling to get out of the cup and tries to get it out with a flick of his finger, without even turning around so that his action is not quite so visible! The warden next gives the cup to a young woman carrying a small child who immediately reaches out a violent arm, knocking the cup so that a quantity of wine spills down the woman's front. A considerable amount of embarrassment and mopping up with purificators ensues, all of which might have been avoided had the warden, perhaps wise from previous encounters, held the child's hand or retained a firm hold on the cup. Before long, the wine runs out and he simply goes to the credence table and fills up with more.



Authorization of ministers of the sacrament

Canon B 12.3 says:

No person shall distribute the holy sacrament of the Lord's Supper to the people unless he shall have been ordained in accordance with the provisions of Canon C 1, or is otherwise authorized by Canon or unless he has been specially authorized to do so by the bishop acting under such regulations as the General Synod may make from time to time.

The Church Assembly Regulations made in 1969 are still in operation:

1. An application to the Bishop to authorize ... a baptized and confirmed person to distribute the Holy Sacrament in any parish shall be made in writing by the incumbent or priest-in-charge of the parish and supported by the churchwardens, and shall specify the name and give relevant particulars of the person to whom the application relates.
2. It shall be in the discretion of the Bishop to grant or refuse the application and to specify the circumstances or conditions in or on which the authority is to be available.



Blessings

Where children and adults who are not receiving communion are being blessed at the rail, it is good to vary the form of words used. Some possibilities are:

- * 'The Lord bless you and keep you';
- * 'The Lord bless you and give you joy in all you do for him';
- * 'The Lord bless and take care of you *both*' (for example, with a married couple when one of them is receiving communion and the other not);
- * 'The Lord bless and strengthen you as you seek to follow him' (especially suitable for those preparing for baptism or confirmation);
- * 'Christ fill you with his joy and peace';
- * 'The blessing of Jesus Christ rest upon you';

- * 'May God be with you';

- * 'May Jesus Christ bless you'.

(The last four may be more suitable for lay people to use in situations where there is some sensitivity about whether or not they may use a more direct form of blessing.)

As well as words there should be some gesture of inclusion. Some ministers prefer to lay a hand on the shoulder rather than the head, to avoid episcopal or priestly connotations, but laying hands on heads is a biblical gesture by no means confined to priests, and is unlikely to upset lay people. Another possibility is to make the sign of the cross, on the forehead for example. With very small children, rather than simply patting them on the head from on high, it may help to get down to their level and greet them briefly before blessing them. But it is best not to get into long conversations about teddy bears.



Training for those who distribute communion

This should be theological, spiritual and practical. It might include:

- * Something on theology and history;

- * Knowledge of differing approaches to the sacrament within the Church, so that those who distribute are prepared for different customs and can be sensitive to those with different views from their own;

- * Knowing the words by heart;

- * Prayer before and silently for each person during the distribution;

- * Recognizing those in distress;

- * How to distribute bread without dropping crumbs;

- * The best way to cope with intinction (whether by the president or by the communicant taking the wafer and waiting until the cup comes round);

- * Giving the cup to women with wide-brimmed hats;

- * What to do if wine is spilt;

- * How to tell the president quietly and without attracting attention if the bread or wine is running out;
- * What to do when the distribution is finished.

Note to the resources

These, or other similar responses, may be used at the beginning of the service, at the intercessions, at the presentation of the gifts, or before the blessing and dismissal. Some of them are suitable only when gifts of money or tokens of the life and work of the people, or of some particular aspect of service, are to be collected and/or offered to God. These might be placed on a table in the middle of the congregation or presented to the presiding minister. The last three prayers here come from 'Prayers at the Preparation of the Table' on page 291 of *Common Worship*, where more prayers suitable for use in the Holy Communion may be found.

Words for dedication

Some of these responses might also be used for the dedication of church officers and leaders, PCC members, stewardship or mission visitors, etc. This may take place at the intercessions or at the Peace, and the minister may first say, 'As mission visitors (or whatever ...) we dedicate *ourselves/you* to God's service.' For an Affirmation of Commitment, see [here](#).

I1

Christ has offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins.

He is seated at the right hand of God.

Through him let us offer up a sacrifice of praise to God:

the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name.

Do not forget to do good and share what you have.

Such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

I2

The free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

By his mercy we present our whole lives to God as a living sacrifice.

I3

Lord Jesus Christ, you emptied yourself, taking the form of a servant.

Through your love, make us servants of one another.

Lord Jesus Christ, for our sake you became poor.

May our lives and gifts enrich the life of your world.

14

Though many, we form one body in Christ.

We belong to one another.

By God's grace we have different gifts.

We will use them in faith.

Rejoice in hope, stand firm in trouble, be constant in prayer.

Filled with his Spirit we will serve the Lord.

15

Blessed are you, Lord, God of all creation;

through your goodness we have this money to offer,

the fruit of our labour and of the skills you have given us.

Take us and our possessions to do your work in the world.

Blessed be God for ever.

16

God of all goodness and grace,

receive the gifts we offer;

and grant that our whole life

may give you glory and praise;

through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

17

Let us pray.

Gracious God, accept these gifts,

and with them our lives,

to be used in your service;

through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

18

Yours, Lord, is the greatness, the power,

the glory, the splendour, and the majesty;

for everything in heaven and on earth is yours.

All things come from you,

and of your own do we give you.

19

Generous God,

creator, redeemer, sustainer,

at your table we present this money,

symbol of the work you have given us to do;

use it, use us,

in the service of your world

to the glory of your name.

Amen.

God of life, saviour of the poor,

receive with this money

gratitude for your goodness,

penitence for our pride

and dedication to your service

in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

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