

THE LITURGISTS AT CHRIST CHURCH

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### I. Introduction

"The liturgists" is a group of parishioners at Christ Church, Capitol Hill, who together with the rector, plan worship, assist in leading worship, do the sacristy work, preach, and in various ways promote education concerning worship and liturgical seasons. The liturgists began in the early 1970s in a small and informal way and have matured over the years into a liturgically and theologically literate group of parishioners. Consideration of functioning of the liturgists — the potential drawbacks, the actual challenges, and the various strengths of the liturgist program — demonstrates that its value for the church as a whole, the rector, and the liturgists themselves is profound.

### II. Description of the liturgists — Purpose of the liturgist program

The purpose of the liturgists is to assist the rector in the planning and carrying out of worship in a thoughtful and organized way. The liturgists take responsibility for the many facets of worship which are appropriately done by lay people. In Mutual Ministry, James Fenhagen writes of lay involvement in the planning and participation of worship:

“Although worship is by definition, God centered, it is an act offered by the entire Christian community. The test of vitality and life, therefore, involves the degree and way each member of the community is enabled to participate. This suggests, not only participation

in the act of worship itself but in the planning as well, as far as this is appropriate and possible.”

The liturgist group is an embodiment of the principle which Fenhagen identifies here as a sign of vitality of a parish. Although the liturgists have the primary lay responsibility for the underpinnings of worship, they promote widespread participation in worship by the rest of the congregation by issuing an open invitation to all to read lessons, lead prayers, and provide bread and wine for the Eucharist. Thus, the liturgists are both the center of lay involvement in worship as well as the means by which the entire congregation is invited into full participation in the community's worship.

### Past and present

The liturgists came into being in the early 1970's in an informal way. The rector at that time invited a few lay people to assist him in leading Sunday worship. They vested, led the psalm, and administered the chalice. The lessons were read by congregants who were not vested. Although an altar guild was in place, its history was short-lived, and thus no rigidity existed in its ranks.

In the late 1970's, a new rector was installed, and the liturgists began to take formal shape. They met monthly and planned worship by liturgical season, expanded and organized the congregation-wide participation in worship, and undertook to deepen their, own understanding of liturgy. They also began to take over the work of the altar guild, alternating among themselves the sacristy

work of preparation and clean-up, which included the care of linens and the polishing of brass and silver. The music director became a liturgist, which helped to integrate the music into the worship. A few of the liturgists had had theological education, and they preached occasionally.

During an interim period in the mid-1980's, new liturgists joined the group. However, the interim rector and some of the seasoned liturgists were at odds for a variety of reasons. Some of both the new and the seasoned liturgists left the group. By the end of the interim period, the liturgists were in a "faithful remnant" stage.

The present rector was installed in 1984. Because he is deeply committed to nurturing and developing the ministry of the laity, he recognized the potential strength of the liturgist program. The liturgists have increased in number, deepened their spirituality, and become more liturgically literate during his time at Christ Church.

### The liturgists at work

Monthly meetings. The liturgists meet once each month to spend time in reflection, to attend to administrative matters of scheduling, and to plan and evaluate worship. The meetings are chaired by the convener of the liturgists. The rector and assistant rector participate actively and exercise authority when the need arises. The convener meets with the rector to plan the agenda.

The meetings begin with a time of "checking in," during which each liturgist shares a little of a current personal concern,

struggle, or joy. Then one of the liturgists leads a time of spiritual reflection or short devotion. The remainder of the agenda concerns matters of administration and the planning and evaluation of worship. The liturgists close their meetings with a prayer.

Planning and evaluating worship: The planning of liturgical seasons and special services begins with a general discussion at a monthly meeting. The liturgists identify themes in the lectionary which might be emphasized. The discussion includes general concerns and preferences concerning the worship under discussion. Also considered are the issues raised during the evaluation of the previous year's celebration of that season or service.

The general discussion is taken under consideration by the two or three liturgists who are identified as interested in planning the worship in detail. Their responsibility is to determine ways in which the sense of the liturgists' discussion can be implemented through such means as preaching, choice of Eucharistic prayers and prayers of the people, special prayers, and use of silence during the service. This subgroup of liturgists also addresses special logistical matters in some services, such as "foot washing" on Maundy Thursday and "laying on of hands" at healing services. If the rector meets with the subgroup, the decisions go into effect. If the rector does not attend, the decisions are submitted to the rector as a proposal.

Evaluation of a liturgical season or a special service is done at a monthly meeting. A general discussion includes consideration of both what helped and what hindered worship. The notes from

this discussion are used when next that season or service occurs. The liturgists are gradually assembling a handbook for the liturgical year as an alternative to both the "oral tradition" approach to drawing on experience and the "It reinvention of the wheel" approach to planning worship.

Shared responsibility for Sunday worship services.- The liturgists sign up to take responsibility for a Sunday worship service on a loose rotation. The responsibility is to ensure that **all that** is necessary to the service is ready. The liturgist for a given Sunday typically has been part of the planning subgroup, but not always.

The liturgist contacts the parishioners who have signed up to read lessons and to lead the prayers to remind, to answer any questions, and to give any special instructions needed. For similar reasons, the liturgist also contacts those who have signed up to bring bread and wine. At the service, the liturgist is vested, leads the psalm, assists at the altar, and administers the chalice. After the close of the service, the liturgist stands at the main door to greet those who are leaving.

Shared responsibility for the sacristy work. The liturgists also sign up to take responsibility for the sacristy work on a loose rotation. This work is the preparation of the church for worship, posting the hymns, setting out bulletins, setting out the books and the accoutrements of the Eucharist, polishing brass and silver (the "holy hardware"), and caring for the linens (the "sacred software"). In addition, twice each year, the liturgists assemble in the

sacristy for a cleanup day. Typically these occasions occur during Advent and Lent.

Preaching. The preaching ministry of the liturgists has expanded. Originally only liturgists with theological education preached on Sunday morning. The present rector has encouraged all the liturgists to preach and expends considerable effort in training them for this ministry. Homiletics workshops are held for those who will be preaching in a particular liturgical season, to which all liturgists are invited but not required to attend. In addition, the rector meets individually with the preacher as often as it takes to prepare a sermon which satisfies both.

The expectation is that each liturgist will preach at least once each year, once he or she has reached the point at which readiness for this ministry is achieved. The lead-time between joining the liturgists and preaching one's first sermon varies considerably from one new liturgist to the next.

Retreats. Twice each year the liturgists go on a one-day retreat with the rector and assistant rector. The retreats are usually a few weeks before Advent begins and during Lent. The primary focus of the retreats is theological reflection, and frequently an outside clergy person is invited to lead it. Sometimes general discussion of an upcoming liturgical season is included in the format of the retreat.

Parish education. The liturgists also take responsibility for some educational events for the parish. The most visible of these are the adult forums which the liturgists lead twice each year. Typically these forums undertake to provide

information about a liturgical season or an issue of worship such as inclusive language.

A less visible kind of event serves two purposes, educational and administrative. Two or three times each year the liturgists hold open meetings to map out segments of the most active part of the church year, September through June. All are invited, but especially encouraged to attend are leaders from across the spectrum of the parish ministries, from the children's education program to the stewardship committee. These meetings serve to inform the liturgists of the concerns of the various ministries, as well as to provide information to the rest of the congregation concerning the concerns of the liturgists. In the process, the scope of awareness is broadened for all.

### III. Evaluation

#### The potential drawbacks

Elitism. Consideration of the liturgists program must address potential problems with respect to elitism. The congregation might perceive the liturgists as an elite or closed group in a special place with regard to the rector. A second problem is that the liturgists might perceive themselves in this light.

With respect to the congregation's perception, occasionally parishioners do express this sense to one or another liturgist. The matter is addressed both in the immediate moment and the monthly meeting. The educational events have as a tangential purpose to expose the congregation to the work of the liturgists.

However, the matter is complicated by the fact that becoming a liturgist is not simply a matter of joining a committee. It is a matter of discernment entered into with the rector. This precaution is taken because of the nature of the responsibilities of the liturgists: undergirding worship and supporting the rector. A willingness to work hard, plan thoughtfully, keep confidences, and deepen spiritually are necessary characteristics of a liturgist. Their presence must be discerned.

In addition, the rector clearly communicates to the liturgist group both explicitly and implicitly that it is an important and unique support group to him. The congregation at large is not necessarily aware of that dimension of the liturgists' ministry. However, that special place with the rector might lead the liturgists to perceive themselves as somehow above the rest of the congregation.

By the grace of God, that self-perception does not emerge. Three factors, in addition to the grace of God, may help account for this blessing. First, the discernment process helps ensure that the motive for becoming a liturgist is appropriate to the ministry. Second, because of the intensity of the ministry, the liturgists are well aware of their own foibles and are thus quite "reality-based." Third, the church as a whole, and especially the liturgists, place very high value on all lay ministry, and therefore the liturgists perceive their own ministry as simply one among many.

Power. A potential drawback is inherent in the amount of “power” centered in the liturgists. While it is true that their responsibilities are manifold and that they have relatively easy access to the rector, the liturgists perceive their role as promoting the diffusion of the responsibility for worship out among the congregation.

Work. Another potential drawback is the amount of work involved in being a liturgist. The work load is generally not a problem because there are *enough* liturgists and because they find the work satisfying. Holy Week, however, stretches their system in that eight major worship services are held from Palm Sunday through Easter Sunday.

#### The actual challenge: management

The primary challenge with respect to the liturgists is bringing their diversity into unity. That is, the liturgists are people of various and strong convictions. In addition, most of them are accustomed to taking leadership roles. This combination of characteristics gives great vitality to the group, but harnessing the energy can be a challenge.

Strong leadership ability is a necessity for the convener of the liturgists. Also crucial are meetings between the rector and the convener to plan the monthly meetings. This procedure would seem to be an obvious organizational matter, but it serves a more important purpose. Convener-Rector planning meetings provide the opportunity for the two of them to work out any differences between them outside of the context of the entire group.

#### The value and strength of the liturgist program

Support for the rector- The liturgists provide support for the rector in two ways. They provide support in the planning and carrying out of liturgy and, they are what James Fenhagen calls a “lay apostolate” who provide “the kind of collegiality that allows the clergy person to say, ‘I hurt’ or ‘I need help’ in an environment free from the fear of misunderstanding or reprisal.”

Strong lay involvement in worship. The value of lay involvement in worship has been discussed above, but this strength must be reiterated in the evaluation of the program.

Coherent organization of worship. Combining the planning and carrying out of all aspects of worship as the responsibility of one group of parishioners enhances the quality, of the worship experience of the community.

Liturgical and theological literacy. The work, planning, reflection, and education involved in being a liturgist produce liturgical and theological literacy. A group of parishioners with that kind of literacy is a great asset to a church. The community is built up by the high quality of worship that the liturgists help to bring about as a result of their literacy.

Spiritual growth. The spiritual growth which the experience of being a liturgist brings about is certainly a great personal benefit. The church also benefits from having in its midst a group of lay people who are engaged in the process of

spiritual development. Their presence contributes immeasurably to the spiritual dimension of the life of the church.

#### IV. Conclusion

The liturgist program is characterized by great vitality and effectiveness. The potential difficulty of elitism and the actual challenge of diversity are manageable through parish education and careful planning. The value and strength of the program are found in its contributions to the parish's lay ministry, to worship, and to the spiritual dimension of parish life. Thus, the benefits of the liturgist program prevail over the difficulties, and the parish as a whole is the richer.