

Beyond The  
Red Door



## **ACOLYTES: TO SERVE AND TO WORSHIP**

By E. Ray Walker

Journeys to faith have countless starting points. For many Episcopalians, that lifelong trip really kicked into gear while serving as an acolyte.

Acolyting isn't for everyone, but for those who choose to serve, it can be a life-enhancing experience.

Acolytes are an essential part of the Episcopal worship service, helping to make the liturgy beautiful and orderly.

The term "acolyte" comes from the Greek word *akolouthos*, meaning follower, attendant or helper. Acolyte responsibilities vary slightly from one church to another, but at St. Stephen's they generally carry the cross (crucifer), receive the offering, and assist at the altar during Communion.

Beyond the practical duties, serving as an acolyte provides spiritual growth and personal development opportunities.

A worthy experience, certainly.

Ian Hess, now a student at the University of Mary Washington, remembers his acolyting at St. Stephen's with pride. "One hundred percent positive. I got to meet so many people, and a lot of people knew me. I wouldn't trade it for anything."

He recalls an event that made a lasting impression. “A fond memory that I have is from when Emmetri (Beane) was still deacon and I was first starting out as crucifer. I tend to sway when I stand still, and she came up to me and said, ‘For the love of God, stand still.’” Lesson learned.

Plus, Ian adds, acolyting “looks good on a college application.”

*(Pictured right: Ian Hess receiving his Senior Cross)*

Anyone interested in becoming an acolyte should contact Elizabeth O’Reilly, who was an acolyte for six years at St. Stephen’s. During her acolyting tenure, she was guided by — among others — three current SSEC parishioners: Wayne Duncan, Ashton Franklin and Barbara Hallett.



There are a few requirements to becoming an acolyte. Prospective acolytes:

- Must be baptized.
- Must have an interest in serving and an ability to sit through the service.
- Must be in the fourth grade or above. (The Acolyte Ministry is also open to adults and teenagers.)

Elizabeth and Becky Walser are the SSEC acolyte trainers, which involves learning to light/extinguish candles with a snuffer, assisting with communion vessels, holding the Gospel book for the priest and moving with dignity.



Becky was also an acolyte at the two churches she attended near Buffalo, N.Y., one “high church” (formal), one “low church” (less formal).

At the “low church,” Becky says, “I learned that worship happens wherever you need it to be. We would gather with friends in a park, and a church service would break out. The adults would grab a few children to be acolytes, so we’d be carrying a cross or helping the priest with the sacraments in an open field!”

At the “high church,” Becky acolyted in larger, more traditional and structured services. “We used the candelabras behind the altar every Sunday, and extra candles on the altar, pews and edges during high seasons. I loved the pomp of lighting them and the services we had.”

*(Pictured left: Crucifer Jack Warner with acolytes Charlie Kincheloe and Jackson Moore.)*

She adds, “St. Stephen’s seems to be in between the two churches in tradition. It melds the tradition and pomp with welcome and love. I have enjoyed being a part of the teaching and training of our children, and have, hopefully, been able to impart the humble honor of serving Christ at the altar.”

One more memory from Becky’s acolyte years: “My mother was on the Altar Guild. The Altar Guild and vestment room shared space off the sanctuary. After service, we’d all be in the rooms together to disrobe and clean up the altar items. I won’t say this is why I continued acolyting, but at times my

mother would have me help her finish the blessed wine at clean up.” (Note: For the record, that is not in the official Acolyte Manual.)

How much training is involved in becoming an acolyte? Elizabeth, the lead trainer, says: “We usually train after the 10:30 service for about 15 minutes every couple of weeks — I gauge by how many acolytes have attended the service that day. :)”

St. Stephen’s has eight young acolytes, and two or three adults who serve. They wear vestments, generally a black cassock (long robe) with a white surplice (shorter over-garment) or an alb (white, full-length robe) with a cincture (cord belt).

*(Pictured right: Elizabeth O'Reilly with two veteran acolytes (Jack & Grace Warner) and two new acolytes (Abram & Emaline Harmon))*



The church provides the vestments. “We actually need to replace a few,” Elizabeth noted.

For their service, acolytes are awarded a Senior Cross (a Canterbury cross) in the fall of their senior year in high school.

As fans of youth sports activities know all too well, some parents of aspiring athletes can be a pain. Not so with parents of SSEC acolytes. Elizabeth boasts: “Parents are an awesome blessing — they cheer on their acolytes and get them to the services. We have a great group of parents.”

While acolytes must be at least age 8, there is no mandatory retirement age. In fact, St. Stephen’s has several adults who fill in at the 10:30 service when needed.

Acolytes are obviously a visible part of the church service when they are moving, but it is important that they not draw attention to themselves unnecessarily. Acolytes participate in the prayers, hymns and other facets of the service just as do all other members of the congregation.

In addition to the spiritual growth, serving as an acolyte also boosts personal self-confidence by performing in front of the congregation.

A win-win for all. So be it.

### **PATRON SAINT OF ACOLYTES?**

St. Tarcisus — a 3rd-century holy acolyte, courageous protector of the Blessed Sacrament and martyr — is honored as the patron saint of altar servers. His feast day is August 15.