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# Symbols and Traditions

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Anglican Symbolism and Traditions for  
Holy Trinity Anglican Church - St. George, ON



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*2nd Installation*

# What Are You Talking About?

## *Symbolism and Traditions*

### *Introduction*

The Anglican worship service is rich with symbols and traditions. These symbols and traditions are part of what makes us who we are as Anglicans. Many of these traditions and symbols are found across the Christian faith, and are not necessarily exclusive to the Anglican faith, but are most certainly of great significance to our expression of faith in this tradition.

The definition of the word, 'symbol' I am using here is "something used for or regarded as representing something else, or a material objects representing something immaterial, or an emblem, token or sign."<sup>1</sup> Over the years people have often added their own or different symbolism to the variety of items and rituals we experience today. If you have heard or understand the symbols differently, I encourage you to have a more in depth conversation with a priest.

In this series of writings, I will endeavour to share some history, some theology and some general information regarding the various traditions and practices we follow in our parish.

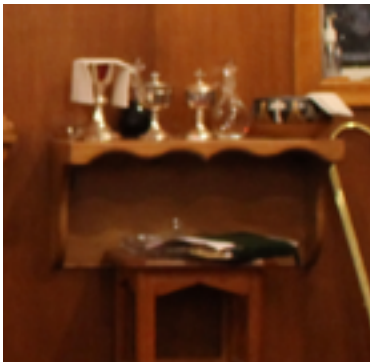
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<sup>1</sup><http://www.dictionary.com/browse/symbol>

# Pre-Worship Preparations

## *A Quick Look Behind the Scenes*

In the Anglican tradition, as in others, a variety of preparations take place prior to the beginning of the worship service itself. The altar<sup>2</sup> is often set for communion with fair linens<sup>3</sup> and vessels and items used in the celebration of Holy Communion. (I will give more detail on that in a later chapter)



The credence table<sup>4</sup> is also often laid out with the elements of communion – bread, wine, water.

Immediately prior to the beginning of worship, the servers will light the candles in the worship space and on the altar. These are always lit from right to left (facing the altar).

The right side of the church and altar (as facing the altar) is called the Epistle side. Traditionally and historically, the first Scripture readings (Old Testament and New Testament not including readings from the four Gospels) were read while the priest stood on this side of the altar. He would then move to the other, 'Gospel side' before reading the Gospel. The Epistle candles are always lit before the Gospel ones, indicating that the Gospel never stands on its own, but only in conjunction with the rest of scripture.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gotquestions.org/what-is-an-altar.html>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.episcopalchurch.org/library/glossary/fair-linen>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/04476a.htm>

Historically, candles were used as lighting in the early cathedrals and worship spaces as they were usually created from stone and were quite dark and their placement and movement within the service was critical for reading and proclaiming the Good News.

Today, candles remain in our worship space as a traditional element to our worship, but they also hold symbolism on their own. We will look deeper into that in another chapter devoted specifically to candles.

The priest robes in a variety of vestments, but usually can be found in an alb and stole and possibly chasuble, for a communion service. The alb, a long white robe, represents a baptismal robe symbolizing purity and new life in Christ and symbolically removes 'personality' from the role of the priest.

The stole represents the yoke of Christ, and is sometimes kissed by the priest before putting it on.

The chasuble represents the robe that Jesus wore before his crucifixion, "without seams".

Traditionally, robing prayers were said by the priest as they put on their vestments. In the BAS (Book of Alternative Services), a remnant of these has been moved to the start of the service in the Collect for Purity, however, many priests still appreciate those few moments alone with God while preparing themselves for worship in not only their attire, but also in mind and spirit. We will explore altar setting, communion vessels and vestments in the future, but once the space and celebrant or priest is appropriately prepared, worship is set to begin.

# *The Church Building*

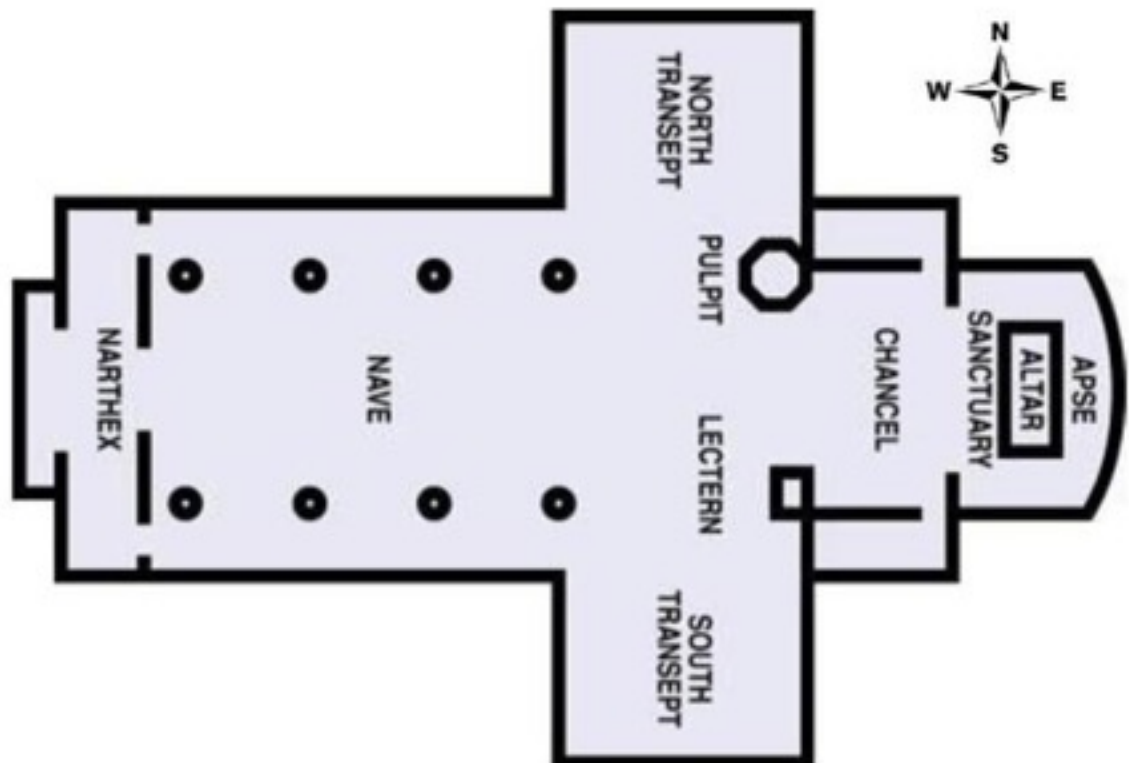
## *Mapping Out What Goes Where*

Church buildings, themselves, also lend themselves to symbolism. Churches come in various sizes and configurations but some of the features that we find here at Holy Trinity, are the same in name and function as in other Christian churches, although the placements or aesthetics may be different.

Many of our older churches (such as our Cathedral of St. Paul's in London, ON) are created in a gothic style, mimicking the churches of old in England, which were very similar to the Catholic Churches of Rome. These old gothic cathedrals are glorious to behold, and carry the symbolism of the cross throughout, using the shape of the building to reinforce the image.



An arial view of the layout of St. Paul's Cathedral will reveal that the room in which worship occurs is in the shape of a giant cross, with the arms of the cross being called transepts. Often times, as in our Cathedral, each side of the transept will have it's own smaller altar, in addition to what is known as the "high altar" found at the very front of the church or at the top of the "cross".



As we look at the look at the gothic cathedral floor plan, you will notice that it doesn't resemble our little church of Holy Trinity very closely, however, we do have many of the same features.

The Narthex is otherwise known as the entrance. This is usually where the front door to the church is, and where worshippers will be greeted and handed your order of service. In a more traditional layout, one would move from the narthex into the nave of the church (we'll get to that in a minute) but here at Holy Trinity, we move from our narthex into our parish hall known as Founder's Hall. It is in this space that we often have meetings, as well as hold small dinners and social events. This space also doubles for us as our overflow area when the nave of the church is just too small to accommodate everyone.

As we move from Founder's Hall into the worship area, we step into the nave. Our nave extends from the back of the church up to the steps and the choir. "It is the place where the congregation is gathered... for the purpose of worship. It is most probably called the nave from the Latin *navis*, signifying a ship, the same word from which we get our English "navy" and "naval." The ship was the favorite [sic] symbol of the Church in primitive times."<sup>5</sup>

Here at Holy Trinity we do not have transepts but at the front of the nave we will find our organ and our lectern/pulpit. Traditionally, churches have both a lectern (found on the right hand or south side same as the Epistle candle) and a pulpit (found on the left hand or north side similarly to the Gospel candle).

In the Anglican church, the lectern can take the more ornate form of a brass eagle, or can be a simple wooden stand. Traditionally, this is where one would find the Bible placed and where the Old Testament and Epistles would be read from.

The pulpit, placed opposite side of the centre aisle, would be the place that the clergy would be preach from. Sometimes, the pulpit is raised or elevated. Historically this was seen to symbolize being closer to God, but also had a functional purpose as well - to allow the sound to carry farther in a time with no amplification devices.

At Holy Trinity, we only use one lectern and it's placement is simply based on nothing more than logistics. It only has one place it can be, and there is where it sits. Both Old Testament and Epistle readings are read from this location.



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<sup>5</sup> [http://biblehub.com/library/register/the\\_worship\\_of\\_the\\_church/symbolism\\_of\\_the\\_church\\_building.htm](http://biblehub.com/library/register/the_worship_of_the_church/symbolism_of_the_church_building.htm)



Hangings, or paraments are placed on the lectern (among other places). These are usually ornate tapestries or banners that bring colour and texture to the worship space. They are intended to be changed seasonally so that they reflect the colour of the season of the church calendar.

Behind the lectern and pulpit, one will find the area called the chancel. This is a large area of the church that includes many smaller sections. In many churches, as at Holy Trinity, the chancel area is usually raised by steps. Often there are three steps to reflect the Trinity.

Within the chancel area, we will find the choir and the sanctuary. The choir, is as it sounds, the place where the choir sits. Sometimes it is found on both sides of the chancel and sometimes, as at Holy Trinity, on only one side. In still other places, it is found within the sanctuary itself, behind the altar.

The sanctuary is the area that is often found behind a railing and raised again from the chancel. The railing, called an altar rail, is where traditionally worshippers would come and kneel to receive communion. While we do have a rail here at Holy Trinity, many churches have done away with the railing for many reasons.

Historically, the altar rail was intended to be used as a gate or barrier to stop animals from jumping on the the altar in the temple, but that's another story for another time.

For us in the Anglican church, it was, at one time, normal for only certain people to be in the sanctuary, past the altar rail. This area was, at one time, reserved for clergy and those leading worship. As our theology has shifted over time, we have come to understand that while this is a place of particular reverence, it is not an "off limits" area for people in the church.

In the sanctuary, we will find various things such as seating, tables, and cabinets. The chairs in the sanctuary at Holy Trinity are set out on either side. On the left/north/gospel side you will find the Bishop's chair. It is called this because this is where the Bishop or the Bishop's representative (the rector/priest in charge) sits. On the opposite side, the right/south/epistle side, one will find seating for the altar servers<sup>6</sup>.

We will also find an altar in the sanctuary sometimes placed on a still further raised dias. This is an anointed table where the Eucharist is celebrated. It is covered in special linens and is decorated



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<sup>6</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Altar\\_server](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Altar_server)

with paraments similar to the lectern. Symbolically, this table represents the table/altar on which ritual sacrifices were made in the temple.

In the Christian faith, we believe that the sacrifice made by Jesus Christ removed the need to offer other animal or blood sacrifices of our Jewish ancestors. Seeing our altar through the historic lens of the sacrificial altar in the temple makes the symbolism of the Eucharist (bread and wine, body and blood of Christ) all the more connected to our Jewish heritage.

Also interesting to note that the sanctuary space, and altar are most often found on an east facing wall. This is symbolically a reference to the scriptural reference that Christ's return will be from the East. "For as the lightning cometh out of the east, and flashes as far as the west; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be." (Matthew 24:27)

Now that we have the basic layout of the space, it's time to move into the body of our Eucharistic worship.



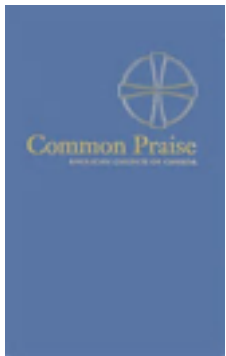
# Opening Music

## *Where do we begin?*

At the very beginning of the service, sometimes the Officiant will begin with a sentence of welcome as well as a sentence that is usually taken from scripture that will set a mood, tone, or theme for the service.

An Officiant is the person who will be leading worship that morning. During a Eucharistic celebration (a service with communion) this will be an ordained priest or bishop. During a Morning Prayer, Evening Prayer, or Service of the Word, among other types of services, the officiant may be a lay person.

Following a brief greeting and the opening sentence, worshippers are invited to stand to sing an opening hymn. Often times, this hymn is uplifting and well known. It can be a song of praise and thanksgiving, and will often times reflect the lectionary<sup>7</sup> for the particular week. Some use this as the official beginning to worship, a calling to order and attention. Others use it as a time of prayer and preparation for the holy moments about to be entered.



In the Diocese of Huron, the most popular source for worship music is the Common Praise Hymn Book, but we also can use older versions of this book<sup>8</sup> as well as other hymn books, or sources of music. Of course, it is imperative that we are compliant with copyright laws for distribution, copying and using music that is not found in the books made available in the pews.

During the singing of the opening hymn or song, the procession<sup>9</sup> begins, which is why the opening hymn or song is sometimes referred to as the Processional. You can think of this act as something simple- someone walking from the back to the front of the church, or something more elaborate - think of a wedding procession.

Here at Holy Trinity, we regard the procession as a reverent walk from the back to the front of the church in a particular fashion. The structure of the procession is specific and ordered. The first to enter is the crucifer. This is the person charged with carrying the crucifix, a large mounted cross. The cross enters first, a symbol that Christ is among us as we begin our worship.



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<sup>7</sup> <http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/faq2.php>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.anglican.ca/ask/faq/hymn-books/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Procession>

Following the crucifer, you may see a server carrying a Bible or Gospel book. You may also see a set of torch bearers - two servers that carry candles or “pavement torches” depending on the type that are used in the church. Here at Holy Trinity, the torch bearers carry the candles that are placed on the reredos<sup>10</sup>, behind the altar.

Immediately following is usually the choir. The choir sits at the front of the church to help lead the parish in singing throughout the service.

After the choir, there may be others such as a guest preacher, or visiting clergy, followed by the officiant or presiding priest.

If there are visiting dignitaries, such as an Arch Deacon or the Diocesan Bishop, he or she will follow the rector.



You will notice that sometimes the people in the procession will stop and genuflect (bow) as they approach the altar. This is a symbol of respect or reverence. Some see it as respect for the presence of God, some as a symbol of respect for the cross they have followed, some feel they are acknowledging the altar and others see it as an acknowledgement of the watching and waiting for the return of Christ from the east among other views. This gesture is purely a personal choice and should always be authentic to the faith of the person and never as a “must” or “just because” action.

Genuflecting may also occur when parishioners or worshippers cross in front of the sanctuary, or prior to moving into a pew to sit, as well as at certain points during the worship itself. Again, this is all personal choice and a reflection on a personal understanding of what one is doing and why one is doing it.

By the end of the processional or opening hymn/song, everyone is usually in their seats and ready to continue with worship.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/reredos>