

Anglican Diocese of San Joaquin  
**Lay Eucharistic Minister Study Guide**

Introduction for all levels of license: Lay Eucharistic Minister (or LEM), Pastoral Lay Eucharistic Minister (or PLEM), and Lay Reader (or Reader)

## **Historical and Theological Background**

Over the past two or three decades, a major shift has taken place in what is considered the normative Sunday morning experience for Anglicans. Before that time, going back into the colonial era, the service of Morning Prayer—with a sermon and hymns—constituted the core of Sunday worship and the Eucharist was only offered once or twice a month, or even once a quarter.

With the adoption of the 1979 Book of Common Prayer, there could no longer be any doubt as to the official teaching: “The Holy Eucharist, the *principal act of Christian worship on the Lord’s Day* and other major Feasts...”. This is reiterated in the 2019 Book of Common Prayer, “The Holy Communion... is a chief means of grace for sustained and nurtured life in Christ. It is normally the principal service of Christian worship on the Lord’s Day and on other appointed Feasts and Holy Days.” (p. 7) It can no longer be said that celebrating the Eucharist at the principal worship hour on Sunday indicates a particular style of theology or churchmanship; it is no longer a badge of “party affiliation,” but is simply assumed.

These changes, however, produced a need that hadn’t been there before. With more frequent celebrations, the celebrant needed help in the distribution of the sacrament. In most congregations, there is only one priest, and no deacons. Hence, the use of licensed lay persons for this important function spread very rapidly, and is now nearly universal. At first, assisting the Celebrant by administering the chalice at the Eucharist was added to the duties performed by Lay Readers. (A Lay Reader was originally someone licensed to officiate at public worship—i.e. Morning or Evening Prayer—in the absence of a priest.) In time, however, the church created the category of Licensed Chalice Bearer, later renamed Lay Eucharistic Minister. More recently still, those who are so licensed have been permitted in certain circumstances, to administer both species of the sacrament—the consecrated bread as well as the chalice.

This was originally conceived as purely liturgical ministry. Over time, the church came to see the Eucharist as a sacrament of not only “vertical” communion with God, but also “horizontal” communion between the members of the Body of Christ. The desire to include those who, for reasons of health, repeatedly can’t come to the Eucharist became apparent. Hence, the designation *Pastoral Lay Eucharistic Minister* was created to designate persons who are specially trained and licensed to deliver the sacrament to the chronically home bound directly following the celebration of the liturgy.

In 2003 the canons on ministry were thoroughly revised. In the process, those formerly known as Lay Eucharistic Ministers (LEM) were named simply *Eucharistic Ministers*. Pastoral Lay Eucharistic Ministers (PLEM) were named *Eucharistic Visitors*. Lay Readers were included with the office of *Worship Leaders* and/or *Pastoral Leaders*. The Constitution and Canons of the Anglican Church in North America (ACNA) have not designated new titles for these ministries and so the same or previous titles continue to be used. The Canons of the Diocese of San Joaquin continue to employ the pre-2003 terminology, but regardless of the title used, the ministry is the same.

It is critically important to understand that all three levels of license— Lay Eucharistic Minister, Pastoral Lay Eucharistic Minister, and Lay Reader— are *extraordinary* ministries. The administration of Holy Communion is inherently clerical in nature; it is properly the province of the ordained— bishops, priests, and deacons. Sacramental ministry is one of the key distinguishing marks of the exercise of Holy Orders. Hence, licensed lay ministers are, paradoxically, not really performing lay ministry at all! They are deputized, in a restricted sense, to share in the functions of the clergy. It is a purely practical concession. In congregations which are blessed with a number of clergy there is probably no need for Lay Eucharistic Ministers, Pastoral Lay Eucharistic Ministers, or Lay Readers. Those who serve routinely in these categories need to bear in mind the conditional nature of their work, and be ready to cheerfully step aside on those special occasions (e.g. the Bishop’s visit, ordinations, institutions, etc.) when there is an ample number of clergy.

### **The Nature of the Liturgy**

Eucharistic ministry is, to state the obvious, inherently liturgical in character. The word “liturgy” comes from the Greek *leitourgia*, which is a compound of the word for “people” (*laos*—from which we get “laity”) and

the word for “work” (*ergos*, from which we get words like “ergonomic”). Hence, liturgy is “the work of the people.” “People” is a singular noun. The liturgical assembly is not a mere aggregation of individuals who come together to do the same thing at the same time. It is one united chorus of praise and thanksgiving. It is not a spectator event, but calls—in the words of the Second Vatican Council—for the “full, active, and conscious” participation of all the baptized. The liturgy may be compared to a dramatic production, but everyone has a role to play; the only one in the audience is God!

It is true—not every role is the same. Some parts are highly visible, and seem quite prestigious, while others are inconspicuous. This is consistent with Paul’s description of the church as one body (Romans 12, I Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4). All are necessary, and the whole is diminished when the variety of liturgical ministry is less than fully expressed. The priest (or bishop) who officiates is referred to in the Prayer Book rubrics<sup>1</sup> as the “Celebrant,” and represents Christ himself as the host of the banquet, the one who gathers the family and presides at the meal. Assisting priests signify the “college of presbyters” of the diocese, all in union with the Bishop, who is the chief priest and pastor. (“Presbyter” comes from the Greek word for “elder” and is the root of the English word “priest.”)

When one or more deacons are present, they signify, in a focused way, the vocation of all Christians to servant ministry—serving the Lord and one another in the community of the Church, and serving the cause of the gospel of Christ in the world. For this reason, it is the deacon who “sets the table” and “does the dishes.” Similarly, it is the deacon who reads the gospel (often in the midst of the congregation, signifying the taking of the gospel into the world) and leads the Prayers of the People.

It is the distinct role of the laity to represent the *laos*—the holy people of God, assembled to offer its holy sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, in union with the sacrifice of Christ “once offered” for the sins of the world, and to be nourished by the sacred Body and Blood. The members of the congregation are participants, not spectators. In traditional Anglican discipline, if there is no congregation, a priest may proceed with the liturgy up to the Offertory, but if there is no one to respond to “Lift up your hearts” with “We lift them up to the Lord,” the service comes to an end—the

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<sup>1</sup> Rubrics are the “fine print” of the Prayer Book. They give “stage directions” for the performance of the Eucharistic drama. Unless the word “may” is used, their observance is mandatory, not optional. In the BCP they’re italicized and printed in a smaller font.

elements are not consecrated and there is no communion. According to Prayer Book rubrics, it is normative for lay persons to read the lessons prior to the gospel and, in the absence of a deacon, to lead the Prayers of the People. On such special occasions as baptisms, ordinations, and institutions, lay people play a central and essential role in presenting the candidates to the Bishop or Celebrant.

### **Sacramental Theology—“Real Presence” and Its Implications**

The Eucharist is a sacrament. The classic catechism definition is that a sacrament is an “outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.” The outward sign in the Eucharist is bread and wine; the inward grace is *koinonia*—a New Testament word denoting a particularly intimate bond of fellowship and communion—“vertically” with the Lord, and “horizontally” among the gathered communicants. It is our means of participating in the very life of the Blessed Trinity, through the self-offering of Christ in his life, death, resurrection, ascension, and continued advocacy on our behalf at the right hand of the Father.

Historic Christian teaching, then, is that the Eucharist is the principal means by which the Church knows the risen Christ to be present in her midst. Broadly speaking, of course, Jesus is spiritually present in the midst of any “two or three” who are gathered to worship him. However, more specifically and concretely, Jesus is present in the consecrated Eucharistic elements. There are many different ways of defining and explaining the nature of this Eucharistic “presence,” and this has been a source of division among Christian bodies over the last several centuries. In classic Anglican terminology, we use the expression “real presence.” We do not specify *how* Christ is present in the sacrament, but we affirm that he *is*.

Moreover, this “real presence” is objective, which is to say that its reality is independent of anyone’s ability to comprehend it, or the state of anyone’s faith. A communicant’s level of faith may be relevant to the spiritual *effect* that the sacrament has on him or her, but it has no impact on the presence itself. Once they are consecrated, the Eucharistic elements of bread and wine are permanently changed. They are no longer signs merely of the ordinary stuff of human experience—food and drink—they mediate the presence of the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, and the power of his risen life.

This presence does not evaporate at the conclusion of the liturgical act. If there are “leftovers,” we do not simply return them to their original containers for use at the next celebration. Rather, according to Prayer Book rubrics, they are either “reverently consumed,” or reserved in a place of honor—a stylized “cupboard” known either as a tabernacle (if it is free standing) or an ambry (if it is mounted in a wall) or—in rare cases—a pyx (if it is suspended from a beam or the ceiling). This place of reservation is usually near the main altar, but may be in a side chapel or a special place designated for devotion to our Lord as he is present in the Blessed Sacrament reserved. The primary use of the reserved Sacrament is for the communion of the sick—when a priest or deacon brings Holy Communion to the hospitalized or homebound in the course of ordinary weekday ministry. A derivative—but, nonetheless, wholesome—use for the Reserved Sacrament is as a focus for prayer and devotion, either individual or corporate, at times other than the celebration of the Eucharist.

One of the implications of the real presence of our Lord in the sacrament is the appropriateness of honoring him with posture and bodily gesture. In the Anglican Church, customs vary widely between congregations, and those who serve at the altar should conform to the example and direction of the rector. In general, the classic gesture of reverence for Christ as he is present in the Blessed Sacrament is the *genuflection* (from the Latin for “bend the knee”). A *profound bow*—that is, from the waist, not merely from the shoulders—is also appropriate. Those serving at the altar should consult their rector for instructions on exactly when to make what sort of reverence.

### **The Spirituality of Ministry at the Altar**

“...that I may go to the altar of God, to the God of my joy and gladness.”  
—from Psalm 43

Serving at the Altar of God—whether as Celebrant, deacon, acolyte, or LEM—is an act of what the New Testament calls *doulia*. (*Diakonia* is also a scriptural word for servanthood, but *doulia* is the stronger of the two—implying something on the order of “slavery,” and is therefore appropriate for us who are “not [our] own, but have been bought with a price.”—I Cor. 7:23) It is an immense privilege, and can be a great joy, but it is an act of sacrifice, and there are certain attendant spiritual hazards.

A Eucharistic Minister is “up front” and on display. He or she is vested, sits up with the priest, and is probably listed by name in the bulletin. Most people are aware that it is a ministry requiring a special license from the bishop. Such a person obviously has “status,” at least within the congregation, and, by implication, within the diocese as well. There is ample territory here for the (deadly!) sin of Pride to take root and grow if one is not vigilant. It is vital to remember—and this may serve as a first line of defense against the potential incitement to Pride—that Eucharistic Ministers and acolytes are “stage hands” in the drama. The less attention they call to themselves the better they’re doing their job. The mentality of everyone at the altar must be to point away from themselves and toward Christ. The biblical model for this attitude is that of St John the Baptist, who said of Jesus, “He must increase, and I must decrease.” The theological model is none other than the Holy Spirit, whose eternal role in the life of the Blessed Trinity is to direct attention toward the Father and the Son.

It is a challenge either to work while praying or to pray while working. Clergy discover this fact very quickly after they are ordained, and Eucharistic Ministers inevitably encounter it as well. As a Eucharistic Minister, you make a gift of yourself to the Lord on behalf of His people. This will, to a certain extent, require you to sacrifice your own “experience” of worship in order to get your job done. For one thing, your priest may ask you to serve at a time when you would not otherwise have chosen to attend worship (a different hour on Sunday, a weekday or special service). Inasmuch as you are able to do so without breaking other commitments, honor these requests.

At a more profound level, though, Eucharistic Ministers participate in a shared stewardship of the liturgy for the sake of the *laos* gathered for worship. You are not your own; you are not “number one” when you are scheduled to serve. It is your job to be attentive to several mechanical details; there is less freedom to simply lose yourself in “wonder, love, and praise.” Rather, your role is to help make sure that the people in the congregation have that freedom, even while you do not. So there is the possibility that you will emerge from the celebration not feeling as “fed” as you have been accustomed to feeling, and this may become a source of spiritual irritation to you. Even so, such irritation can also be a tool in the perfection of your own holiness if you will offer that tool and make it available to the Holy Spirit. If you will embrace the spiritual hunger and irritation that result from service at the altar, and foster the attitude of

*doulia*, you will, in time, be refreshed and rewarded. It comes to different people in different ways, but it comes.

### **The Shape of the Liturgy**

If you have worshipped in different congregations you have noticed that there is a tremendous amount of variety in the way the liturgy is “performed.” While being faithful to the text and rubrics of the same Prayer Book, it is possible to construct two services which bear more resemblance to the worship of other church bodies—from Roman Catholic to Eastern Orthodox to non-denominational charismatic—than they do to one another!

Think of the liturgy as a human body—with a skeletal frame, covered by muscle and skin. While human skeletons vary in size, the essential form and the basic scale are constant. There is relatively little variety between them. The features which actually make one person visibly distinguishable from another are found in the form and distribution of muscle (and fat!), as well as in the color and texture of the skin. The same applies to the liturgy of the Eucharist. Outwardly, there is tremendous variation, so much so that it is difficult to identify contrasting styles as even members of the same “species.” Inwardly, however, at the level of the skeleton, there is an essential uniformity.

To extend the metaphor, there are two major “bones” in the “skeleton” of the Eucharistic liturgy. These are the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Altar. In the latter case, the words “Table” or “Sacrifice” are sometimes substituted for “Altar.” Alternatively, the Liturgy of the Word may be referred to as the “Mass of the Catechumens” and the Liturgy of the Altar styled the “Mass of the Faithful.” (This hearkens to the ancient era in which the unbaptized were dismissed after the sermon, and allowed to witness the entire liturgy only after they had received the sacraments of Christian initiation.)

To switch metaphors now, another way of understanding the structure of the liturgy is to think of it as a two act drama, with a brief prologue before Act One, an interlude between the acts, and a short epilogue following Act Two.

Act One is the Liturgy of the Word. At its heart, of course, is the reading of Holy Scripture. On Sundays and Principal Feasts<sup>2</sup>, the norm is to read three lessons plus a section of the Psalms. The first reading is usually from the Old Testament, though during the season of Easter it can be taken from the Acts of the Apostles. The second reading is usually from one of the epistles, though it may also be from Acts or Revelation. The final reading is always from the Gospel.

After the Word is *read*, it is then *proclaimed*—this is the function of the sermon.<sup>3</sup> The preacher’s task is to shine a light on some significant aspect of the appointed scriptural texts in such a way as reveals its relevance and application to the lives of those in the congregation. We then *respond* to the Word that has just been read and proclaimed—this is the function of the Creed. The Creed means more than it says; it serves as a symbol of the entire mystery of Christian faith and practice.

Act Two, then, is the Liturgy of the Altar. The focus of attention shifts from the lectern and/or pulpit to the Holy Table on which the sacrifice is offered. The heart of this section of the rite is the consecration of the bread and wine to be the sacramental Body and Blood of Christ. There is a simple sequence of action here, which is summarized by four one-syllable verbs: *take, bless, break, and give*. This sequence is plainly visible in two New Testament passages which have obvious Eucharistic overtones: the feeding miracles (see Luke 9:16) and the post-Resurrection appearance on the road to Emmaus (see Luke 24:30).

First, we *take* the elements of bread and wine and place them on the altar. It is significant that we are commanded to use bread and wine, not mere wheat and grapes. Wheat and grapes occur in nature, and are pure gifts from God. But to make bread from wheat and wine from grapes requires human skill and labor. The elements which we “take” represent us; we are, in effect, offering ourselves on the altar.

Next, the Celebrant, on behalf of the gathered community, *blesses* the elements. This is done through the Eucharistic Prayer (sometimes referred to as the “canon.”). In the Eucharistic Prayer, we remember the saving acts

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<sup>2</sup> There are seven Principal Feasts in our calendar. They take precedence over all other days, including Sundays. You should know what they are and when they fall. See p.688 of the BCP.

<sup>3</sup> The sermon is sometimes called a homily—there is no substantive difference, though sometimes there is an implication that a “homily” is shorter and/or less formally delivered than a “sermon.”



of God in history, we invoke the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, and we offer ourselves in union with the sacrifice of Christ.

Then, the Celebrant *breaks* the bread. The vocation of bread is to be broken. If bread is not broken, it cannot be eaten, and cannot give life. The breaking of the Eucharistic bread symbolizes the fact that the body of our Lord Jesus had to be “broken” in death before it could become the means of eternal life for those who are united with him.

Finally, the Celebrant (assisted, usually, by Eucharistic Ministers) *gives* the sacred Body and Blood to the people. In this act—indeed, in the very act of presiding at the liturgy—the Celebrant acts as *alter Christus*—“another Christ”—standing in as the gatherer and host of the banquet, who feeds his guests with the bread of eternal life.

The Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Altar are the essential elements in the Eucharistic drama. The initial liturgical action—that which gathers the people and forms them into a Eucharistic community—is commonly referred to as the entrance rite. This can be very simple and brief, or it can be fairly elaborate. The entrance rite consists of everything up to the collect<sup>4</sup>: the music which accompanies the actual entrance of the ministers, the opening acclamation, the collect for purity, and the hymn of praise (*Kyrie, Trisagion, Gloria*, or something else).

The material between the creed (which concludes the Liturgy of the Word) and the offertory (which begins the Liturgy of the Altar) is a sort of interlude. It consists of the prayers of the people, the confession of sin, and the peace. Then, after the Communion, there is what might be called an epilogue: the post communion prayer, the blessing, and the dismissal.

### **Broad Practical Issues**

Your rector will handle the practical side of your Eucharistic Minister training. However, a few brief comments may be in order here.

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<sup>4</sup> A Collect is a particular form of prayer. In its origins, it occurred at the end of a long litany, and served as a summation of the people’s offering of petition and intercession. It now usually stands on its own. In the Eucharist, it serves as a sort of hinge between the Entrance Rite and the Liturgy of the Word. The classic collect form consists of an Address (“Blessed Lord...”), an Ascription (“who caused all holy scriptures to be written for our learning...”), a Petition (“Grant us so to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them...”), a Result (“that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ...”), and, when it occurs in this position in the Eucharist, a Doxology (“who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.”).

### *On Liturgical Decorum*

Those who serve at the altar perform an invaluable service, but insofar as they call attention to themselves, by their appearance or behavior, that value is compromised. Certain conventions have evolved which may at first seem forced or affected to those who are not used to them, but which have the effect of moderating the distinctive impact of those who have a visible role in the liturgy. The cardinal rule here is that one's hands should never dangle. Whether you are sitting or standing or walking, but especially if you are walking, fold your hands in front of you. If you are holding an object—a chalice, a hymnal, the Bishop's crozier, whatever—with one hand, place your other hand on your chest. When you are seated (which usually means someone else is reading or preaching), be reticent about too much looking around the church or other gratuitous bodily shuffling; this can be very distracting to others. Also while seated, keep your feet both on the ground and don't cross your legs.

### *On Reverence Toward the Blessed Sacrament*

The objective real presence of our Lord's Body and Blood in the consecrated bread and wine demands some form of bodily reverence. As mentioned previously, this is either a genuflection or a profound bow (consult your priest). It can become awkward, however, for those who work habitually around a place where the sacrament is reserved. A good working analogy is that of military personnel saluting superior officers. If a sailor reports for duty to the bridge of a ship, he snaps to attention and salutes the skipper. Then he goes about his work. He does not stop to salute every single time his path and the captain's happen to cross. Then, when it is time to leave the bridge, he salutes once again before he departs. In most cases, you can apply the same pattern to reverencing the Blessed Sacrament.

### *On Cross-Training*

In an ideal world, a Eucharistic Minister could focus on his or her specific duties, and not worry about anyone else's; however, this is not an ideal world! Consequently, you should be able to step in to the role of acolyte, particularly those whose job it is to serve the priest or deacon in setting up the altar during the Offertory, and cleaning up after Communion. The same applies to the Altar Guild: sometimes they may overlook a setup detail, and if the Celebrant suddenly needs a corporal, purificator, extra bread, or wine, you should know how to find them quickly.

### *On Vocabulary*

The special items used in the celebration of the Eucharist have a “common” counterpart (for example, a corporal is essentially a place mat).

Nonetheless, it is a good idea to call things by their proper names. These include: pall, burse, paten, chalice, purificator, corporal, host, cruet, flagon, tabernacle, ambry, ciborium, alb, cassock, cotta, surplice, etc. Ask your priest which of these items can be found in your church

### *On Intinction*

Many communicants prefer not to drink directly from the chalice, but to consume a communion wafer dipped in the consecrated wine. This practice is called intinction. There are variations to how this is done. The most appropriate practice is for the communicant who wishes to intinct to simply leave the host flat in their hand. The minister bearing the chalice will take the host, dip it, and places it on the communicant’s tongue. Some communicants have been trained to indicate their desire to intinct by holding the host up between thumb and forefinger. Others will want to perform the act of intinction themselves, and this practice should be discouraged, both because it’s unhygienic for people to put their hands in the chalice and because it can lead to accidents and spilled chalices. If someone tries to self-intinct, politely and kindly offer to intinct for them.

### *On Technique*

Your priest will train you in the fine points of handling the chalice.

Remember, however, that, while it is your job to maintain the security of the chalice, and never let go of it completely, a good deal of leeway should be given to the communicant. A well-instructed communicant will grasp the base of the chalice and guide the rim to his or her lips, and control the angle at which it is held and the duration of their communicating.

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