

THE COMMUNITY OF READERS

A LECTORS' HANDBOOK

ST. THOMAS EPISCOPAL CHURCH

2025

INTRODUCTION

If you're reading this, you are probably already a "Lector," or Reader, in the Church, or have signed up to be one.

This handbook began as a workshop at St. Thomas Episcopal Church, College Station, Texas. We were looking for a way to bring our Readers together with a common vision and common practices.

We wanted to increase the Readers' comprehension of how they fit into the weekly worship service, why their service is of such importance, and to offer some guidance for best practices. (If you've ever stood to read and seen the name "Mahershalalhashbaz" from Isaiah 8 staring at you from the page as the congregation looks up at you expectantly, you will be grateful for the guidance in Part Two below.)

The vision that emerged was ***The Community of Readers***. It is our hope that sharing an understanding of what we do as a ministry of readers will draw us closer together in Christ, whose words we share each week.

PART ONE: WE, THE ORDER OF LECTORS

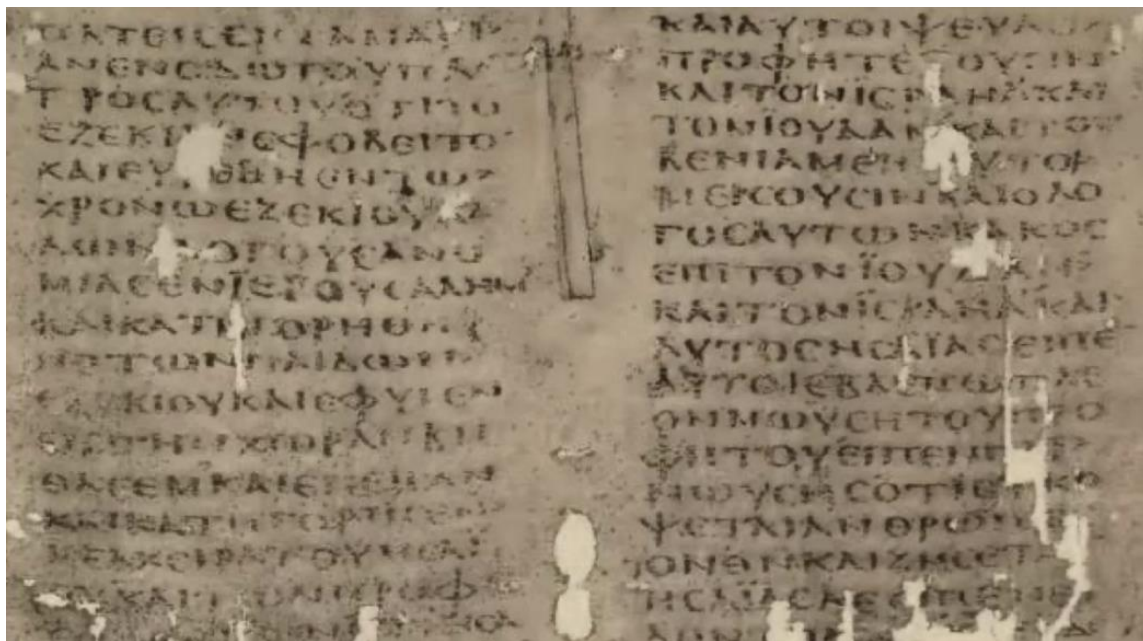
READING IN THE EARLY CHURCH

Maybe you wonder why we have lectors in the Church. After all, the text of Scripture is printed in the bulletin every week, and almost everybody in the congregation can read it there.

So why read it aloud? Why choose special people to read it?

There are two reasons, one historical and one theological. Let's look at the historical reason first.

Take a look at this snippet of a Greek manuscript below, such as the first or second or third generations of Christians would use in their worship services:



You don't have to know any Greek to notice something unusual: *there are no spaces between the words*. You might also notice that there's no punctuation, which wasn't really invented until the late Middle Ages.

If you happened to know any Greek, you'd notice too that there is no lowercase lettering.

So, when it came time to read the Gospel, here's what the reader would see:

ΕΝΑΡΧΗΗΝΟΛΟΓΟΣΚΑΙΟΛΟΓΟΣΗΝΠΡΟΣΤΟΝΘΕΟΝΚΑΙΘΕΟΣΗΝΟΛΟΓ
ΟΣ

If we were to render the same thing in English, it would look roughly like this:

INTHEBEGINNINGWASTHEWORDANDTHEWORDWASWITHGODAND
THEWORDWASGOD

Why did they write like this? Partly to save precious vellum (animal skin that was used as paper) or papyrus and ink. Partly because habits of writing and reading have evolved.

Someone, preferably someone literate with a strong sense of the meaning of the text and the ability to *pronounce it* in such a way that his hearers all could understand it, had to make sense of it.

And so, borrowing from the Jewish tradition of readers in the synagogue who fulfilled the same purpose, the office of *lector*, or *reader*, came into being.

In various times and places, readers enjoyed a certain status in their congregations. In Medieval Catholicism, for instance, the lector was a "minor office," and a certain amount of theological training was expected: one had to *understand* the words to deliver them properly.

In the Anglican tradition, Lectors were a minor order and often shared other duties such as bearing the chalice at Eucharist and leading the prayers. Women were first licensed as lay (not ordained) readers in the Anglican Communion during World War I.

READING IN THE MIDST OF THE CHURCH

The *theological* reason we read is even more important.

When most of us read, we are quiet, letting our eyes translate the letters and words and paragraphs into meanings that flow along neurons and produce effects that are wholly private.

But private, silent reading emerged rather late in the day, sometime around the 15th century most likely, when books and privacy both began to be far more accessible than they had been before.

The Church, on the other hand, is a *community*, not merely a collection of private individuals.

The Bible is the Book of the Church, and the Church is the community of the Holy Spirit. That is to say, while reading the Bible alone and studying it is one of the duties of every Christian, its final meaning(s) come from reading it *in community with the whole Church*. We read it as a community on Sunday mornings gathered in one building; but we also read it in company with all the saints and Christians who have gone before us and will come after us, in all times and places.

So, taking our (individual) eyes off the page, and lifting our (private) minds from our own reflections, the Church *shares* the Word of God just as we share the Bread and Wine at the Eucharist.

We gather around the words, and for that to happen, SOMEBODY has to make them audible, to fill the space with a clear proclamation.

And not just those gathered in our building, but all the Christians in all times and in all places are listening. You're connected to the first Christians and the last Christians when you announce:

Ho lógos tou Kuríou. The Word of the Lord.

And it isn't just the Congregants present on Sunday that answer back. It's the whole invisible communion of Saints in every language.

Eucharistōmen tō Theō! Thanks be to God!

PART TWO: YOU, THE READER

PRACTICAL GUIDANCE ON PREPARING AND DELIVERING READINGS

Our goal is to enhance the appreciation and understanding of the Word.

Understanding our role. We are not in the historical period where only a few people could read. However, reading aloud gives us the opportunity to tell the story with emphasis and spoken in a way that makes the Word clearer and more meaningful.

We know that the congregation has the service bulletin, so they already have the words. We know that the congregation is ready to hear the Word, because the officiating priest has just asked them to sit down and pay attention!

In Luke's gospel, the people were in the temple, and Jesus "stood up to read." The carpenter from Nazareth stepped forward and opened the scroll with the intention "to bring the good news." Imagine the anticipation among the people as you approach the lectern. Lay (not ordained) Readers also come from the people of the church to **bring the story to life**, to **make the Word interesting**, and to **emphasize the significance of the message**.

How can we meet these responsibilities?

BE PREPARED!

You should receive the reading(s) well in advance of Sunday. **Read through it carefully and see how the story unfolds and understand its significance. The context of the story** is often important, so if you are unsure where it fits it might be helpful to go the Bible and see what precedes and follows "the appointed reading" in the Lectionary.

Those first readings are the point where, in addition to context, there may be a need to look at **pronunciations of names and places** with which you are not familiar. It is our intention to provide a list of such names and places so that we can each feel comfortable when they appear, but if in doubt use Google or ask one of our priests.

For most of us, reading aloud often began by reading to children at bedtime. They, too, often have the book in front of them, often know the words, and may even have memorized the story. This may be true for some of the congregation too, but you might use the story-telling analogy as you think about your role as a Reader.

How can we make the story clearer and more memorable?

Although we may not be conscious of it when we have conversations with our friends, we often watch their lips as well as use our ears. If they are good friends we may be used to their phrases and some of their stories, and we can fill in the bits that we do not hear well.

If we miss something we can always ask, “please can you say that again,” but we can’t do that in church, so **we have to be very intentional about the way we speak and the way we use our voices.**

Making the printed text understandable through the spoken Word.

Words are made up of vowels and consonants, and it is really important to make sure the **final consonant of each word is distinct.**

Phrases are made up of words, and in storytelling **we need to understand which phrases are critical to the story and give them emphasis.**

Be especially **careful of the final phrase in a story and make sure your voice does not drop off.** It is often the ‘punch line’ that makes the whole story meaningful.

In addition to words and phrases, the written word has **punctuation marks,** and they are helpful to us in many ways.

Commonly, **commas mark a separation** between one piece of the story and another. They give us a natural opportunity to **pause to let the first piece of the story sink in** and they also **give us a chance to take a breath**.

A question mark and the phrase it ends usually have special significance in a story. We can look at the phrase, "Who do you say that I am?" How we read it is vital to the impact of the story. Jesus would surely have used a special tone of voice and focused on "YOU," and that should alert the congregation to the fact that He is addressing them directly through your voice.

As an example of other questions that require a very different speaking voice, God confronts Adam and Eve in the garden and asks them, "Where are you?" And God later asks Eve, "What is this that you have done?" We are not actors in a theater, **but expression and emphasis are part of the craft of storytelling**, and we need to use them without becoming theatrical.

Most of your preparation can be done quietly, but the Reader brings the good news aloud, so it is important to practice that too. **Make a time and find a place where you can imagine the congregation in front of you and READ ALOUD!**

The choir rehearses to get the notes right, to know where to **breathe**, where to **sing loudly** (but not shout), where to **sing softly** (but not inaudibly), and what **sections of the words and music to emphasize**. Actors do the same exercises and, while we are not in a theater, those vocal techniques are important if we are to use our voices to their best advantage and help us tell the story with the greatest impact.

Understanding the acoustics of the room in which you are reading.

The 1994 church that we use for the 10:30 morning service is an “acoustically live” space. It has a hard concrete floor, hard walls, and a relatively hard sloped ceiling, though the wood absorbs some sound. Also, the congregation and the choir are seated around the room, surrounding the lectern on three sides so we have the challenge of reaching a dispersed audience.

The microphone helps, but we need to remember two things:

One, **the pace at which we read must be much slower than the pace we use in casual conversation.** The back pews receive the sound later than the front pews, though they are closer to the lectern than in the 1938 Chapel. To reach every member of the congregation without ‘overlapping’ words requires that we speak slowly and distinctly.

Two, the “live” acoustics mean that while lower frequencies (deeper voices) travel well, higher frequencies (lighter voices that are often less powerful) tend to dissipate quickly and can get lost before they reach the back of the room.

That in no way suggests that people with lighter voices should not read, it simply means that **each of us need to learn how to “project” our voices effectively** so that the instrument we use (our lungs, diaphragm, and vocal cords) is in good working order and used wisely.

Find a quiet place and read aloud before the service begins. The choir “warms up” and the readers need to do so too. I have been known to use the 1938 Chapel, but sometimes I just do a final loud voice rehearsal before I leave home.

Practice gives us confidence in our ability to speak well and clearly, and to tell the story to the best of our ability.

Practicing in the kitchen or bathroom is a start, but we need to **experience the actual room** to achieve the best results.

You might also like to read in the 1938 Chapel to see how different that feels, with its more traditional configuration and more absorbent surfaces.

IT’S YOUR SUNDAY TO READ!

In Part Three below, we will discuss the actual movement from your pew to the lectern, but this is what to do when you get there.

When you reach the lectern take a moment to pause and be sure that you have the reading properly placed on the lectern and take a good breath before announcing the name of the reading as printed in the service bulletin.

“A reading from _____.”

Then pause again to raise the level of anticipation, you are going to tell a story! Remember the bedtime story ritual: “Are you quiet and still ?” **Pause.** “Then I’ll begin.”

At the end of the reading the congregation needs to have a moment to understand that you have finished, so **count up to three before you say, “*The Word of the Lord*”** with a voice that supports the significance of that phrase. You have just told a story in place of God!

After the congregation has responded, “*Thanks be to God,*” you leave the lectern and step down from the chancel platform, reverence the altar (with the Psalmist if you read the First Reading) and return to your pew walking intentionally and inconspicuously, and not in a rush.

Again, in Part 3, we will discuss what to do when you are assigned the Second Reading or both readings.

READING ON SHORT NOTICE

Occasionally you may be called to read at short notice. Here are some suggestions to give you confidence:

- PRE-READ THE ASSIGNED TEXT FROM START TO FINISH;
- IF AT ALL POSSIBLE, FIND A QUIET PLACE AND READ IT ALOUD;
- UNDERSTAND THE BASIC STORY AND IDENTIFY THE CRITICAL WORDS AND PHRASES;
- CHECK WITH THE PRIEST ON ANY PRONUNCIATIONS THAT ARE UNFAMILIAR;
- READ IT ONE MORE TIME NOTING WHERE YOU CAN BREATHE;
- DON'T PANIC, REMEMBER NOT TO RUSH, AND READ THE WORD OF THE LORD!

How can we make our reading be an act of hospitality and inclusion?

Here again we need to note the difference between informal conversations between friends and reading the Word of God in church. We may touch friends as we talk, and our voices overlap sometimes.

The Lay Reader is a minister. The **slower pace that we use** in formal reading to allow words to reach across the room, and **the pauses between phrases or sections of the reading** each provide opportunities to engage the congregation to let them know that **we are speaking directly to them.**

When you are confident about the reading you can use those pauses not only to take a breath, but to **look up and reach out with your eyes.** It is important not to lose the flow of the story, and it does not need to be an exaggerated gesture, but a simple glance to assure the people of God that they are recognized. If it is helpful to you, **follow the text with your finger.** The choir is harder to engage, but if the reading is long enough and you can glance in their direction, they will appreciate it.

Other participants in the worship service are using the live stream, and they have some advantages. The camera that covers the lectern is immediately above the center door of the church used for the processional. The microphone on the lectern ensures that **the sound of your voice is sent directly to them,** and the camera is focused on the lectern to show your body above the lectern and **your face.** Unlike the congregants in the church, the live stream folk really can see your face “close up and personal.”

Reading to a live audience always has a certain tension, but if you are prepared and confident (and heed our Rector's regular assurance that "we can't get this wrong.") your **body language and your facial expression will convey the sense of the warmth** for which Saint Thomas Episcopal Church in College Station is well known.

PART THREE: THE CHURCH

APPROACHING THE ALTAR

This is a section about two words: joy and decorum. We are *Joyful* because we get to proclaim the Word of God. *Decorum* here means we fit into the flow of the service, not calling undue attention to ourselves but performing our role with dignity.

What this looks like:

- APPROACH:
 - Walk down the aisle closest to the organ. We always approach the altar from the left, and step up by the wall.
 - Avoid crossing the front of the church, which calls attention to our movements.
 - You can sit anywhere in the church SO LONG AS YOU DO NOT MAKE THE CONGREGATION WAIT FOR YOU. If you aren't moving towards the lectern at the right time, very often we do not know if you're there, and make snap decisions to fill in for you.
 - If needed travel unobtrusively around the back of the church to the left aisle during the Gloria or Collect to be in position. Wait near the back until it is time to read.
 - Start your approach down the left aisle when the person who precedes you is finished, not before.

- BOW:
 - We bow before entering the altar area as a sign of reverence for the presence of Christ in both the Word and the Eucharist.
 - The bow is not elaborate, but usually a gentle bending of the waist and / or the head.
 - We meet the psalmist and bow *with* him or her: if we are reading the Old Testament passage, we meet the psalmist on our way out of the altar area; if we are the New Testament reader, we must meet the psalmist on our way up to the lectern.
- READ:
 - We read carefully and slowly: see Part Two above!
 - We prefer that you read from the bulletin that will already be on the lectern rather than carrying your copy. In the past readers used the Lectionary, but using the bulletin avoids having to search for the right readings.
- LEAVING THE ALTAR AREA:
 - If you are the first reader and ALSO the second reader, you can sit during the Psalm in the chairs next to the choir to avoid walking down the aisle again.
 - Otherwise, walk to the back of the church and find your seat when the Congregation stands for the Gospel Hymn.

ATTENDANCE:

It is a very good idea to be in the church at least ten minutes before the service, to look at the text, to know who the psalmist will be, to check the copy of the bulleting on the lectern to make sure you know where your passage is. KNOW YOUR CUES: what happens before you approach the altar?

If you can't make it: you should find a substitute and if possible advise the Church Office (979-696-1728) so they know whom to expect.

ATTIRE:

Part of *Decorum* is understanding that you represent the Church of Jesus Christ. In earlier decades and centuries, the lectors wore albs (white robes) like other members of the altar party, but this is no longer widely done in the Episcopalian Church.

We don't need to be especially formal, but our appearance should reflect the significance of our ministry. We leave this to your good judgment, recognizing that we want people to listen to our words without distraction. In part that is why clergy have vestments with which we are familiar, so we can focus on their words and actions.

CONCLUSION

We welcome you as a member of The Community of Readers at Saint Thomas Episcopal Church, College Station.

We invite you to make this your prayer with us:

A Prayer of Dedication for use by The Community of Readers

Most Gracious God,

As You spoke the Word in the beginning, so grant that we may be vessels for Your Word.

As You loved the world through the Word, so let us bring the good news of Your redemption.

As You brought light through the Word, so help us to bring light to illumine Your people.

We worship You.

We give You thanks.

We praise You for Your glory.

In the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,

Amen

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