



NATIONAL CHAIRMAN'S REPORT 2007/8

I would like to begin my report for 2008 by remembering that this time last year we were part way through our 75th year celebrations, and all that remains is for me to say a heartfelt "Thank You" to everybody who contributed in any way to our Anniversary last year. Whether you hosted a special event, organized a special service, bought a copy of our specially written "History" book*, proudly display one of our calendars* on your vestry wall, sent one of our brilliant new greetings cards* to a friend, came to the Training Conference, were interviewed for or listened-in to our feature on *Radio 4*, read the little article about us in the *Church Times*, made a donation towards the cost of our new processional banner in memory of Fr Bill McLaren, taught your choir to sing the new musical setting of *The Virgers' Prayer**, helped to provide facilities towards or joined us for one or both days of our brilliant National Festival in London and St Paul's Cathedral, joined us on a trip down the Thames or ate some of the spectacular cake, or simply enjoyed reading about it all in the special colour supplement of *The Virger* magazine – we thank you (you know who you are !).

*It's not too late if you haven't bought your copies yet - the Shop Manager will happily oblige !

We sent both Archbishops and various other national figures in the Church of England copies of our souvenir calendar; they were much appreciated. This year they will be getting a copy of our history book ! May I suggest that you remember our Patrons as they prepare for the Lambeth Conference of Bishops, meeting in the Mother Church in Canterbury this July. Remember us, the hosts of this international gathering, and all who are involved in planning, funding and providing for the needs of these church leaders, and in turn, the future shape of the Anglican Communion.

Since we last met as a Conference we have enjoyed the spectacular two-day Festival at St Paul's Cathedral in September, a very different, but no-less-enjoyable Festival in Doncaster Minster last month during which Simon Lindley told us that he is working on a variation of the setting of the *Vergers' Prayer* for different combinations of voices.

As you know, in recent years the Guild has tried to be innovative and creative in its thinking, and this year is no exception. Thanks to the eagle-eye of one of our members it was noted that the very day of the Guild Festival in Doncaster was an issue date for a new set of Royal Mail stamps celebrating the power and the glory of six British cathedrals, and a collection of four stamps of St. Paul's Cathedral. For the first time (we think) the Guild has issued two "First Day Covers" containing these stamps, on specially designed envelopes incorporating the Guild logo and the Guild's Festival in Doncaster; these covers have been especially postmarked on the day of issue in Doncaster and are a unique souvenir of that event; they have already proved popular and not only with stamp collectors ! If you would like a set for yourself, or any children or grandchildren who collect stamps, please contact our resident expert – the National Chaplain.

I was very impressed recently by an article in the *Church Times* about Fr. Giles Hill OSB, Abbot of Alton Priory in Hampshire. In an earlier life he had been a cathedral virger, although it wasn't mentioned in this particular article. In it he spoke of St Seraphim of Sarov who was

an ordinary monk – unlike Giles he never rose to be abbot – who was prepared to do things that others were not. Fr Giles' philosophy as abbot is "not to rule by command, but to enable by service". The phrase "enable by service" struck a chord with me as an excellent rule of life for vergers. As always with any great enterprise, it's the unseen and unsung work that enables so much of the "public face" of a company, building or community to function. Without the hard work of the ship's engineers deep in the bowels of the boat, none of the pomp and ceremony of the First Class lounge would be possible ! The late Roy Macdonald (onetime Head Verger of Manchester and Dean's Verger of Lincoln Minster) was oft heard to quote those famous lines from Bishop Walsham-How's hymn "For All the Saints". He would point at himself whilst reciting "We feeble struggle" and then point at the clergy in all their finery and sing "They in glory shine!"

Our ministry of enabling often comes at a price; many vergers that I have known have come to this work following on after another busy or demanding career, some undertake this work alongside a busy workload in the secular world and do their duty in their supposed "spare time" in a voluntary capacity, some have come across this ministry by chance and have been carried along into a world far removed from their original chosen career where high salaries and good prospects might have seen them well placed for their future and a secure pension, some have left better paid work to follow a calling that they believe is more important or fulfilling or satisfying than the work they were first trained to do; often these have not been easy choices and the knock-on effects on family life, career prospects, housing security and pensions can and do take their toll. The Guild is well placed to help in these circumstances with the free advice and knowledge of its officers, in this area particularly the Welfare Officer and Chaplain. But we are often frustrated that there is little "official" recognition of this work.

It is now 20 years since the General Synod commissioned a working party to report on "The Verger in Today's and Tomorrow's Church". I believe the time is right to get that out again, dust it down and re-examine where we are, and where we would hope to be in the near future, and maybe 5-years hence. I think it is unlikely that we would be able to persuade the Synod to co-opt another working party, and I suspect that its findings would not have any more teeth than before. Instead I venture to suggest that we should examine our own image, what we are about, how we deliver it, and how we can improve on that in the 21st century. Between us we have friends in high places who are well placed to advise and support us. With more co-operation with other organizations for other types of Church workers, i.e musicians (The RSCM, The Friends of Cathedral Music, Guild of Church Musicians) bell-ringers, the Council for the Care of Churches etc.. I would hope to make this a major agenda item for us in the next three years. However.....

I speak to you at the end of my four year term as your National Chairman; it has been an enjoyable time and a privilege to be of service. I hope in a small way I have been able to enable others by my service. It has been great fun meeting so many of you at Guild Gatherings, in some cases coming across you in your places of work, and in some cases meeting you when you turn up un-announced at mine – you know who you are ! As some of you will know I have indicated that I am prepared to stand for a second (and final) three-year term so this may be "farewell" or it could be "felicitations" !

Chris Crooks,
National Chairman;
Canterbury, June 2008