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Church Services

The history of the livery companies is closely linked to the church, indeed some suggest that is from where the term ‘worshipful’ originates. So it is unsurprising that church services continue to play a significant part in the activities of most livery companies to this day.

A few annual services (usually held in St Paul’s, some in the Guild Church of St Lawrence Jewry, and elsewhere) are open to (or exclusively for) all liverymen, and these are described here.

Often they involve processing masters or other ceremony.

All are listed with dates at the Diary page of this website.

The asterisks shown below indicate a possible level of duty for masters to attend.

United Guilds’ Service (UGS) ***

Held in St Paul’s usually two Fridays before Good Friday, starting at 11.15am (but you are requested to be in your seat by 10.45am). Each company is allocated 22 places in the company pew (if the pew seats < 22, other seats are allocated elsewhere), plus one for the master’s spouse or consort. They are in a different (and much better!) pew. [failure to fill these individually reserved ‘mistress’ seats is highly conspicuous, and a great waste!]

Tickets are issued automatically to clerks.

Though of relatively recent origin (see below), the UGS is the “big daddy” of such services. Attended by the Bishop of London and the Lord Mayor, who arrive with considerable ceremonial, and a distinguished preacher, the Cathedral is invariably packed to capacity. The procession of livery masters is limited to the Great 12, plus 12 others by rotation. However all masters and wardens are expected to attend, fully badged and robed! [the night before will invariably have been the Lord Mayor’s Mansion House Banquet for all Master and Prime Wardens.]

Arrangements are overseen by a board of UGS trustees (Charity Commission Registration Number 1060419) administered by the Fishmongers’ Company; all liveries are expected to make an annual fixed contribution towards the cost of arranging the service (£150 in 2015).

Most companies will individually or jointly arrange a lunch after the service.

History. The UGS was established in February 1943 as a coordinated response to the challenges faced by the City of London following the Blitz of 1940-41.

It was also a reminder of the religious origins of the Guilds. The first service to be conducted was held on Lady Day – 25th March 1943 - the first day of the year by the old calendar.

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The King was petitioned to attend, along with Masters and Prime Wardens in their robes with such of their livery as 'may be able'. The King did not attend; but the Lord Mayor and the Aldermen did. Dr Fisher, the Bishop of London, gave the address. The Lord Mayor (Sir Samuel Joseph, father of Sir Keith Joseph) hosted an 'austerity luncheon' after the service for the Masters and Prime Wardens. The Lord Mayor hoped that the service would be held annually as an opportunity for the Livery to 'approach God with one voice of united prayer'. His hope has been fulfilled!

Clergy Support Trust annual Festival Service (previously Festival of the Sons of the Clergy) **

Held in St Paul's usually on the second Tuesday in May, starting at 5.00pm. Whilst UGS is a City (secular) led event, the Festival is very much an event for the church and its clergy. Hardly surprising as it is a celebration of thanksgiving for clergy, and is what until fairly recently was the Sons of the Clergy charity, then combined into Sons and Friends of the Clergy, but is now the Clergy Support Trust (Charity Commission Registration Number 207736). The Archbishop of Canterbury usually attends, as do the Lord Mayor and Sheriffs. A first class preacher (perhaps unsurprisingly) is the norm.

A letter (or email) from the Festival Coordinator inviting applications for tickets is sent to clerks in February.

The Festival service has a number of other significant differences from UGS. Its main distinguishing feature is its choral tradition. Three cathedral (or similar) choirs come together, and whilst the Cathedral won't be full, the music will be memorable.

All masters are invited to attend and process, and most do. Seats for liverymen (and their guests) are allocated by ticket, but they are freely available online

<https://www.clergysupport.org.uk>

For a modest annual contribution (min £50) anyone may be listed in the order of service as a Steward (and process if they wish to), and for £100 may become a Life Governor. These two groups may apply to attend the dinner, now at Plaisterers' Hall, after the service.

History. The first service was in 1655 and more may be read at this link

<https://www.clergysupport.org.uk/festival>.

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Musicians' Company annual Evensong **

Held in St Paul's, ostensibly to mark the Feast of St Cecilia (patron saint of musicians). The service is usually held on the first Wednesday in October having been moved to avoid a clash with the Festival of Saint Cecilia (see below).

The Musicians' Company invite all masters, wardens and clerks to attend, and to process, and many do. A reception is usually arranged after the service (in the Crypt), Masters and their consorts are guests of the Musicians' Company, and there is a small charge for other Liverymen and their guests who wish to attend.

History: The Musicians' Company originally celebrated the Festival of St Cecilia in the 18th Century at St Bride's Church but this petered out and was revived at St Paul's Cathedral in 1906. A feature of the service is the playing of Edward Elgar's *Elegy for Strings* written for the Musicians' Company in 1909 and performed at this service since 1914.

Not to be confused with:

Festival of Saint Cecilia *

The Festival is in aid of the Help Musicians UK (Charity Commission Registration Number 228089), formerly the Musicians Benevolent Fund (who co-ordinate it) on the Wednesday nearest to St Cecilia's Day, 22nd November.

The Festival Service is held in the morning and rotates annually between St Paul's Cathedral, Westminster Abbey and Westminster Cathedral, with the combined choirs of the three Cathedrals. Masters and Clerks of all the Livery Companies are robed and formally process, though there is no obligation on masters to do so. There is a minimum donation suggested for Livery Companies that wish to process (£250 in 2014).

The Service is followed by a reception for those that have donated to the charity.

History. In 1942 Benjamin Britten, whose birthday was on St Cecilia's Day, revived the practice of composing an Ode in honour of St Cecilia. Sir Henry Wood wished to recreate the Festival but died before its revival in 1946. Since then, the Musicians Benevolent Fund has organised the Festival to give thanks for and celebrate music and musicians, and to raise funds. This Service is the only time in the year when the three choirs come together. A new anthem is specially commissioned each year.

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Service immediately before the election of the Lord Mayor ***

All masters, robed and badged, process from Guildhall to St Lawrence Jewry to attend this service each Michaelmas Day (29th September, or nearest weekday). Afterwards, they process back, prior to formally entering the Great Hall for Common Hall, and the election of the Lord Mayor.

Service after the Silent Ceremony (swearing in of new the Lord Mayor)

This is a relatively informal service of thanksgiving, usually in St Lawrence Jewry, starting at 6pm. It will be on the Friday evening before the second Saturday in November (LM Show Day).

Attendance is limited to the family, friends and colleagues of the new Lord Mayor, but that definition may be wide and self-selecting.

Spital Sermon

Delivered each March in St Lawrence Jewry. Open to all – no ceremonial.

More at <http://www.stlawrencejewry.org.uk/services/other-events-and-services/spital-sermon.php>

This is just one of many special services arranged in the Guild Church, to which liverymen are welcome. Details at <http://www.stlawrencejewry.org.uk/calendar/>

City New Year Service

This service takes place at midday, usually on the Friday of the first full week in January, at St Michael Cornhill, St Michael's Alley, London, EC3V 9DS
www.st-michaels.org.uk

These last two are not really “livery” services, though liverymen would certainly be welcomed.

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Dress

Generally speaking, the dress code for all City church services is “day dress”, ie suits for gentlemen and smart attire for ladies, who may also wish to wear hats at the day time services (not evensong).

Morning coat is not appropriate or required.

At the UGS, masters & wardens wear gowns, and at the Festival in May, processing masters also wear their gown & badge.

Summary

This list above is not exhaustive, and of course each livery company holds its own services, of thanksgiving, carols, or to mark the installation or election of a new master, or other tradition. Services in St Paul’s Cathedral to mark major anniversaries in the history of individual livery companies come around quite regularly, and often the Company celebrating its landmark year will invite others to attend the service (usually Evensong) ***.

Other institutions sometimes hold church services at which livery masters are invited to process, and care may be taken in assessing the relevance of such invitations to the livery company.

Nigel R Pullman

16th March 2015 (*updated January 2024*)

Was this note helpful? Do you have comment? Email nrpullman@btinternet.com