

On Being a Hospitaller or, “Welcome to the SCA!”

by Elise Fleming (Countess Alys Katharine, Society Chatelaine 2006)

With additional suggestions from Jeanne Russell (Mistress Jehanne le feu du Christ, Gold Key of Atenveldt; Liz Georges Emrich (Lady Luce Antony Venus, Chatelaine of Atlantia); and Allison Sarnoff (Lady Angharad Rhos ferch Rhain, Chatelaine of the East)

What is a Hospitaller and What Do They Do?

Hospitaller? Chatelain/Chatelaine? Castellan? Gold Key? Regardless of the title, this office has one main purpose: Welcoming newcomers to the “Current Middle Ages”. The specific title is not important; the scope of the office is.

While each kingdom defines the duties slightly differently, it is primarily the office designated to coordinate the education and orientation of new members. There are three distinct areas that generally fall to the Hospitaller: Recruiting new members (usually through “demos”), talking to newcomers (educating in SCA customs) and lending clothing (“garb”). Besides providing introductory information for new members, the Hospitaller is faced with the challenge of gently continuing the education of the established members regarding the “care and feeding” of newcomers.

Ideally, all of the local group’s members should serve as informal hospitallers, seeking out new people and welcoming them, which would be consistent with the SCA’s ideals of courtesy. Since SCA members are occasionally preoccupied with other activities (such as martial arts or hosting an event), most groups designate one person to serve as their hospitality representative in carrying out the duties and responsibilities of providing a courteous and welcoming environment for the newcomer to the local group. Depending on the size of the group, the Hospitaller may have deputies to assist with the various aspects of the job. Having deputies permits the Hospitaller to occasionally be absent from a meeting or to be involved in other activities. While there may be an “official officer” it is still in the best interest of the group for all members to be watchful for newcomers.

Qualifications

Tact, sensitivity, courtesy, good communication skills, and a love for the SCA are vital qualities. Can you remember what it was like to be a newcomer? Tact and sensitivity will lend prudence to know when to comment on a newcomer’s attempt at period costuming or when to be accepting of their efforts. Be sensitive to “newcomer overload”. Bear in mind there are so many aspects to learn about life in the SCA that the newcomer may be quickly overwhelmed by too much information. For example, it is tempting to respond to a new person’s question by telling everything that can be known about making armor, sewing a houppelande, or the correct form of address for every “brass hat” but unless this is of interest to the newcomer they may feel “it is too much to have to know to be accepted”. Unless the person is prompting you with questions, make your comments brief. Then ask the newcomer if he or she wants to hear more details.

Patience, a sense of humor and a sense of proportion are also necessary elements for the Hospitaller. Despite striving for authenticity in our re-creation, we are also here to have fun. Realistically, how soon can one expect a new person to have authentic clothes? Most newcomers are very sensitive to making mistakes. Go easy on the “helpful suggestions” that may be perceived as criticism. Guide and encourage, support and help. Be mindful not to serve as the “authenticity police”. There is a fine line between helping a newcomer grow and being perceived as criticizing.

Paperwork and Reporting

Reports seem to be a stumbling block for many local officers. The rule of thumb is “keep it simple”. Your kingdom superior does not expect a college thesis or even multiple pages in your regular reports. When you initially take office, follow your kingdom’s procedure to introduce yourself to your superior officer, become warranted (if required in your kingdom) and to inquire about reporting dates and approved methods such as e-mail. At least one kingdom allows you to file your report online!

Each kingdom superior may have a different outline of required information. In general, re-state your name, contact information and local group in every report. Discuss what you did since the last report (demos, events, newcomers spoken to, information used to represent the SCA), what you plan to do before the next report, any successes you may have had, and any problems or questions. If there was little activity, send in a report that says so in one or two sentences. The point is, send in **something!** Why? It gives your kingdom superior an idea of where there is – or isn't – activity regarding newcomers.

Even a report stating, "There is nothing to report", in essence is a report and lets the kingdom superior know all is well in your office. When several reports in a row have not been received (the policy varies from kingdom to kingdom), the Kingdom Officer may become concerned that the Hospitaller's Office is not being represented for the group and the newcomers' needs are not being met.

Reports help you plan. Take the time to assess what you have done and then make plans for the next reporting period. Planning is the key to success in any job, and this is no exception.

Local officers: Reports are your kingdom superior's way of keeping in touch with your group. Try to respond with several sentences rather than just saying "Fine" when asked, for example, how a demo went. The report is a chance to inform your kingdom superior about the activities of your group as they pertain to hospitality. Do you have difficulty convincing people to participate in demos? Ask your kingdom superior. Want to start a collection of loaner "garb"? Ask your kingdom superior for suggestions. Your kingdom officer is there to help, but can't help you unless you communicate!

Kingdom (or Principality) superiors: Keep in mind that it is not easy to maintain the energy level necessary to greet newcomers on a continual basis without some kind of feedback from you. It takes little effort to send a quick e-mail response saying "Received. Thank you!" when you get an e-mail report. If you can read the report and make a brief comment such as "Sounds like everyone had fun at the demo" or "What did you include in your new handout?" then the local officer will believe that someone actually reads all those reports and they don't fall into some black hole!

Reports can offer clues that the local officer is beginning to suffer burn out - which is rarely recognized by the individual! Consistently late reports, terse reports or no reports often indicate that there is a problem that needs to be addressed. If you, as an officer at any level, begin to dread handling some of the aspects of your job, then you may wish to think about whether you are starting to burn out. Seek advice from your friends who know you. Consult with your superiors about either taking a deputy or stepping down. Working with newcomers is a demanding job and needs the best that you can give!

And finally, keep in mind that the local officer's report helps the kingdom superior complete *his or her* report!

Local Meetings

Keep an eye open for visitors. Welcome them. Introduce them to other SCA members including officers, guild heads, households, persons with similar interests, and local nobility as the group climate warrants. Bring them into the activity whenever possible. Give a brief description of the activities taking place. Answer any questions and suggest questions to them. Newcomers often report they don't know enough to be certain what to ask. Help them out! (There are two articles on SCA's website to assist with ideas for questions: "Advice to Newcomers", and "Newcomers are Nice: Advice for Established Members". (See "Resources" for the URL.)

Provide a sign-up sheet for newcomers to contact them about upcoming meetings. Have them check off any activities of interest to them. If you have two or three newcomers, do a mini-"Welcome to the SCA" session. (This helps newcomers to feel less "on the spot" and gives them someone to share the adventure.)

One way to help people feel comfortable in the SCA is to offer materials explaining various customs and activities. They have just entered a whole **new** world. Include such things as:

- A “welcome” letter from the Seneschal or Hospitaller, including group officer or guild head contact information and meeting times and places,
- A glossary of common SCA terms and definitions (available on the Newcomers’ website – See Resources),
- The URL for the main SCA website (www.sca.org) or the Newcomers’ website, and your Kingdom website’s URL,
- A local newsletter,
- How to make basic clothing and where to find inexpensive materials.

You can tailor the materials to suit the activities of your group. For example, if the newcomer is interested in dance and your group has a dance guild, you could add a list of dance terms as well as information on when and where the guild meets. Make sure to include information that is relevant to the SCA in general as well as information that is specific to your group. If the newcomer is interested in martial arts, you might include a list on “how to authorize”, necessary safety equipment, and safety rules for the specific style of combat.

If a particular meeting is being held “in garb” or for a newcomer’s first event, help provide loaner clothing. You needn’t have an extensive wardrobe, especially if your group is small. We would like the newcomer to feel important! So, even if the clothing has been contributed to the group’s stores, please make certain it is clean, in good repair, and something you would not be embarrassed to wear if attending your first event. Sometimes theatrical costumes can be altered for SCA use. Another option is to make simple clothes, especially if your group is willing to donate the materials and the labor. Shop at thrift stores for bedspreads, curtains or tablecloths that look “period”, are low cost, and are easy to transform into tunics, pants or skirts. At fabric stores, shop in the “irregulars and mis-dyed” section. T-tunics and tabards work well for both men and women. Belts and pouches help complete the outfit and can be made from scraps. Have a selection of all sizes, especially for larger people and children. Be careful of including overly elaborate clothing or items that are difficult to clean. Have an auction at a local event with the proceeds going for purchasing inexpensive fabric. Then, hold a class on making basic garb. You get to educate your newcomers and build up your clothing collection with simple donations.

There is a fine line between being accessible to the newcomer and being over-solicitous. Some people need frequent contact because they are more timid. Some may have come to the meeting by themselves. Others may find constant contact to be annoying. Introduce the newcomer to several other persons in the group so they may feel comfortable if they attend an activity you cannot. The newcomer will also feel more welcome if other people recognize them besides just you. Until the newcomer isn’t “new” or has friends within the group and seems established, continue to greet the newcomer with a “hello” each meeting.

Still another fine line exists between doing “all the work” in seeking out information for the newcomer versus not providing enough assistance. A person truly may not know where to go or may be too shy to ask someone “important”. Make a mental or written note to check back later with the newcomer to learn if they found the answer, especially if you offered to find the contact information or assistance in the original conversation. Newcomers need to know that someone is interested in them.

Large or in-grown groups sometimes give the impression they do not need newcomers, which can severely hurt the health of the established group. The first few meetings may seem almost an initiation rite to see if the newcomer can weather the indifference. While the perceived indifference may not be intentional, the newcomers may reciprocate the “indifference” and never come back again. The new people a group attracts may be valuable to your group’s continued growth, by bringing soon-to-be-developed skills, talent, energy and a fresh perspective.

Newcomer Orientation

In general, each kingdom charges the Hospitaller with the responsibility for the education, orientation and preparation of the newcomer into the customs, courtesies, and culture of the Society. This is often done on a one-to-one basis simply by chatting with the new person at several meetings. This is a most important and frequently challenging job. The key to success is to get new people involved as well as making them feel welcome.

If your group receives several new members at once (as often happens on university campuses) you might prefer to hold specific newcomer sessions. You should not necessarily be expected to be the teacher but you certainly can organize the activity. Use the strengths of your group. Ask local nobility or peers to speak. Utilize the group's officers and guild heads. Deputies may also feel more included and important if asked to hold the newcomer session.

Some topics to consider are listed below. This is neither a complete nor a detailed list of everything that could or should be covered. It can serve, however, as the beginning of a checklist when you are working with newcomers.

- What is the SCA? Background, brief history, general purpose
- Being a paid member; types of membership
- Local activities, local organization, officers
- Making "garb"
- Basic heraldry; choosing a name
- Going to an event; what to take (i.e. feast gear, lunch, chair); what to expect (tournaments, court, etc.)
- Manners, courtesies, what to do (or not do), what to wear (or not wear)
- Customs: local and kingdom
- Protocol: forms of address, "brass hats"
- Starting basic research; library and/or web resources
- Fighting/archery
- Crafts and skills practiced locally
- Dance, music
- Calligraphy, illumination
- Households
- Awards: local and kingdom

Additional Newcomer Activities

You may prefer to have a special "newcomers' guild" or "newcomers' household" to provide support and education through a closer-knit, but temporary, circle. Some groups have found a "graduation ceremony" to be effective in helping the newcomer feel he or she is an established and welcome member. If your group receives and retains new members, and if the new members seem active and are included in group events, then you are being effective in your job. Some groups use a system of "mentors", matching up a new person with an experienced member for a few months. The experienced person can answer questions, help the newcomer prepare for an event, introduce the newcomer to other members, etc. This is especially effective if the newcomer joins the group prior to a large SCA event. Mentors can provide a wonderful opportunity to learn about the SCA in an SCA environment. Mentors can assist in appropriate introductions to persons and customs.

Encourage activities that help both newcomers and experienced members to interact. These can include garb-making sessions, cooking, a class on calligraphy, the group's preparation for an SCA event, or any hands-on activity. One group hosts a "mock event" for newcomers with an introduction to martial activities as well as a mini-feast where the new people are seated next to more established members. Sometimes they hold a "mock court" or dancing to end the evening and show the newcomers what to expect at upcoming events. The mini-event is an opportunity to explain what to take to an event and how to act. It is never too early to educate the newcomer regarding expected standard of behavior, and may alleviate the "fright" and pressure of a full first event.

With increased travel expenses consider planning car pools for new members. Take a van-full to (for example) Crown Tourney, complete with a brief tour of the site, an explanation of what will occur on the field, what to expect at Court, as well as who or what some of the "hats" and traditional symbols are at the event.

Invite the new members to do some non-SCA activities with local SCA members such as a movie night, a pizza party, or joining a group for a snack after the meeting. Give the new people a job to do and get them involved in

what is happening. If you are planning an event, invite them to help with the pre-cooking or the chopping of vegetables in the kitchen. Ask for their help with a specific activity such as assisting the gate steward. Beware, however, of putting a new person into an office just because you have a vacancy. Some new people are experienced enough in the modern world to take on such responsibilities but most newcomers need some time to become familiar with the SCA before taking on an SCA office and responsibilities.

If the newcomers are a family, remember to include the children. Work with your group's other officers to learn about activities of interest to everyone. Youth combat activities are now common in many kingdoms. Period dance can be accomplished by just about any age if the instructor is patient! Work with your group's (or your kingdom's) Minister of Youth to provide education and orientation for all members of the family into the SCA. (The SCA Chatelain's web page has an article on "Your Teenager and the SCA – Some Answers for Parents". (See "Resources" for the URL.)

Do not expect everyone to have the same SCA interests. College-age members will often have very different interests from older members. Respect those differences and let people be themselves. Level of activity and participation is also to be considered. Some newcomers may not be able to participate on a continual basis but are still interested when their schedule permits. All persons should participate in the SCA at the level in which they feel comfortable.

Newcomers to your group from other kingdoms can be a special challenge. Generally they need little orientation as to how the SCA works. However, they may need information about how your specific kingdom functions. Consider discussing the sumptuary laws of your kingdom, regulations governing fighting styles and equipment, arts and sciences competitions, entrance rules for Crown Tourney, etc. Introduce them to the officers to offer specific support information. Basically, the same ideas work for helping the transplanted member feel at home. New member information sheets, (minus the general information on the SCA) with the local officers' contact information and group activities can be helpful. Getting the experienced SCA member involved is usually easy but is still important or they may drop out of your group. One way to begin their involvement is to encourage a discussion with them as a source for "interkingdom anthropology". Ask, "How was this done in your previous group/kingdom?" If there are things of substantial difference, use that as a way to explain how customs are in your area and gently introduce them to their new "home".

If someone from your group is moving to another kingdom, remind them to use the SCA's web site to find the new kingdom's web site and to locate a group in their new area. Suggest they contact the new kingdom's Hospitaller or Chatelain for additional assistance or if the resources are available to you, offer to assist by introduction.

Helping Your Group Accept New Members

In an ideal Society this would not even come up for discussion. We would all be eager to see new people interested in the Middle Ages just as we are interested in the Middle Ages and Renaissance. However, some groups experience difficulty in accepting new people. A group that does not grow will eventually stagnate. Here are some suggestions to help your group assimilate newcomers.

- Have a populace meeting before recruiting and ascertain whether the group is willing to help the new people who may show an interest in the SCA. Encourage everyone to talk to the newcomers and help them feel welcome.
- Ask the established members what helped them feel welcome when they were new to the SCA. This may give you ideas as well as remind the established members what it feels like to be new.
- Provide the group with an article such as "Newcomers are Nice: Advice to Established Members" (See "Resources" for the URL) or reprint the article in the local newsletter. The article offers succinct suggestions on how to approach newcomer with questions such as "May I explain...", "Are you interested in...?"
- Help the group plan activities to encourage the interaction of both new and experienced members.
- Introduce the new member via an interview for the group newsletter including their interests, considered possible SCA names, possible period of interest for their persona, how they found the SCA, etc.

Retaining and maintaining new members is not a one-person job. It requires a commitment on the part of the entire group, including Peers! Simply talking about the need for group involvement may help your members realize how important it is to make the newcomers feel welcome. Be generous with praise when your group does something to be more “open”. “Thank you” is the most important thing you can say if you want to encourage repeat behavior!

Above all, remember to take some time for yourself and enjoy what you love most about the SCA. What is it that keeps your fire kindled? If the SCA is not “fun” for you this will become apparent to the newcomer. Involving a newcomer can be as easy as, “Can you hand me that?”, or “Could you please carry this for me”, and walking with them while you draw them in to conversation. Nothing is *more* important than introductions and a sense of belonging. Newcomers generally only want to be accepted. One of the attractions of the SCA is finding the courtesies that have been lost in the modern world. Encourage your established members to guide the newcomer into the customs of chivalry and courtesy.

Resources

Aside from the resources available from the main SCA web site (www.sca.org), The Society Chatelain’s website (<http://socsen.sca.org/society-chatelaine>) has a Newcomers’ Information section which includes:

- Newcomers’ Guides and Advice
- Information for Parents of Children/Teenagers participating in the SCA
- Details of how to Contact a Local Group

and many links of interest to newcomers for costuming, SCA activities, heraldry, etc.

Specifically for group officers, there is a Chatelains’ Resources section where you can find guidelines for the office, information on putting on demos, advertising brochures and flyers, and more!

Several kingdoms have their own “in-house” e-list for local officers. If you are not already subscribed, contact your kingdom Hospitaller/Chatelain to see if there is one available in your kingdom. Yahoo Groups has at least one e-list for Hospitallers/Chatelains open to all Hospitality Representatives in the Known World. And, there is an “invitation only” e-list for the nineteen kingdom-level Hospitallers/Chatelains.

“Why do reports?” Many of the suggestions in this article were gleaned from reports submitted by local group Hospitallers. These were sent to their kingdom Hospitaller and from thence were reported to the Society Chatelaine and the information now shared throughout the Known World to the other nineteen kingdom-level officers. The local problems you report are important and shared (anonymously!) up the reporting chain for others to offer suggestion or solution. Your successes on the local level help inspire other officers to try something similar and can prove to be one of the best resources for new ideas and for problem-solving.

Thank you! Thank you for representing your local group, your Kingdom and the Society! Within your office lies the key to the continued growth and future of the SCA.