



Usher's Day

CULTURAL RESOURCES

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Lection – 2 Kings 22: 3-6

The Old Testament is full of references to those individuals referred to as the doorkeepers of the Temple. In the selected lection for Usher's Day, we find an account that speaks to the importance of the doorkeepers and how their ministry impacts all of the inner workings of the Temple. It becomes clear that if the doorkeepers failed to function properly; the day-to-day operations of the Temple would have halted. This level of importance of ushers/doorkeepers can still be witnessed today. While it is one of the familiar symbols of the Black Church, few understand the cultural importance of the church usher.

The usher board has historically been a “catchall” for those who did not know exactly where they fit within a particular congregation. But over the years, as pastors and parishioners have come to understand the function of the usher, such practices have been restricted. Similar to other auxiliary roles like that of deacons and trustees, certain spiritual attributes have become criteria for acceptance onto usher boards in a small number of churches. Leslie Parrott asserts in the book Serving as a Church Usher, “The usher board is now generally viewed as the fourth great ministry of the church, behind preaching, teaching and music respectively.” Participants within the ministry of the usher board view their primary responsibility as tending to the details of each service and insuring that, as the Apostle Paul wrote in I Corinthians 14:40, things are done “in a fitting and orderly way.”¹

This orderly way extends beyond just philosophy and is at the center of an ethos that has developed within the auxiliary. This ethos is constructed around the belief that the usher is there to maintain order within the context of the service, assist as necessary as the Holy

Spirit moves, and welcome parishioners and visitors into the sacred space of the sanctuary. This is done through intricate practices that range from rules for walking down the aisle to the proper manner for distributing offering plates. Manuals and help aides, as well as “usher schools” and “conventions,” which instruct beginner and veteran ushers in the intricacies of this ministry have also shaped a code of conduct that stretches across generational and denominational lines.

Although many usher boards have moved beyond the traditional white dresses and black suits that defined the traditional view of ushers, their role as one of the foundational ministries within the worship life of the church remains. For additional information on the etymology and history of organizations such as the National United Church Ushers Association of America, see the cultural unit written by Bernice Johnson Reagon.² For more information regarding more traditional practices such as the “Grand March,” which was an important part of Usher Day celebrations, see Ralph Wheeler’s contribution to the lectionary from year two.³

II. An Usher’s Story - “It was military!”

Each experience as an usher, or the perspective of others about ushers, is vastly different. This account represents Tonya Jones’ maturation as an usher and her observations regarding the ministry in the church she grew up in during the 1970s in Cincinnati, Ohio. Although she no longer participates in the ministry, she recounted fondly how important it was in shaping her experience in the church.

It was military! It was order! No kids running down the aisles of the church all willy-nilly. Nothing like what you see today! My momma was an usher. That was her pride and joy. She was always on the back door and on guard. Crisp uniform, white gloves—snap, snap in the military style. I became an usher because there was a rule in my house. If you didn’t sing in the choir, then you ushered. No one in my family was going to sit on a church bench and do nothing. So I came from a family where my momma and brothers ushered. And my aunt was one of the instructors at the usher school in Cincinnati.

But know that even if this was something you wanted to do, you couldn’t just stand up and be an usher. You had to be trained because everything was intricate and there were expectations as to how you were to act and look. There was an usher book, a manual you had to go through before they would let you out on the floor and you had to go to usher school. Usher school met every Saturday, and churches from all over the city of Cincinnati would participate. The school would move from church to church each week. But the instructors remained the same and you learned a lot. Everything from the way you were suppose to turn, all of the hand signals and all of the requirements regarding your uniform, were drilled each week. You see, there were so many rules to follow. For instance, you couldn’t turn your head when ushering; you had to use your peripheral vision. The only usher allowed to turn was the one in the middle and she would signal to the rest of us. The door usher was the head usher, and she gave all of the commands and determined who went where and did what. With an usher in each aisle it meant that complete order was kept in the service. Every usher kept their left arm behind their back,

especially when you went out on the floor. You didn't scream, "I need a fan! I need an envelope!" You performed the hand signals. If you needed an envelope, you put up two fingers on your right hand. The demeanor of an usher was serious and disciplined.

The youth ushers went through the same training as the adults. What I liked was that they partnered you with an adult—like a buddy system—and they helped you learn the ins and outs. You were gradually worked into the regular rotation and not just thrown into the service after a certain point. It was like one generation passing the torch to the next. It made us (the youth) feel that we were really contributing something to the church. My church had one Sunday a month where the youth ushers functioned alone. But even then you had to have proven to be disciplined and serious about it. I can't believe I can remember all of the signals and rules after all these years; especially since I haven't ushered in twenty-plus years. But being an usher made me feel important and I knew that I was contributing to the church and my family in what I was doing.

As a *greeter*, some took discipline and control too far. They were a little too serious and could be scary at times. We all know of or have heard stories about the "mean" usher. You know that one usher who kept the children and *adults* in line. It was Ms. Louella at my church. She was all about respecting the holiness of the sanctuary. There was no talking, eating of candy or excessive walking when she was on duty. She would give us kids a look and we would all get scared, because that meant that we were in trouble and she was going to tell our parents. I remember her so clearly because she turned out to be a nice lady. But she was one of those serious ushers, who was about maintaining order in the sanctuary. I grew to really like her, and she ushered for years until she was physically unable to participate. She was very committed.

I don't usher anymore, and when I look out from the choir stand these days I see how things changed. No one talks about the usher's manual anymore, and the usher school is now defunct. Most of the ushers remain in the back of the church and wait until offering time or something that requires their assistance. The military precision that I witnessed and was a part of as a child is no longer evident. While many people felt it was obsessive--all of the stuff we used to do--there was something special about it. People were very serious and professional about their roles as doorkeepers for the Lord.

III. Stories and Prose

The following excerpt details one of the many workshops that takes place during the National United Church Ushers Association of America Convention and how the practices associated with ushering have changed over the years.

A. "Ushers: There's Method in their Mission"⁴

Jayrus Nero is a little guy taking on a big responsibility. The big-eyed, big-cheeked 7-year-old from Phoenix is on his way to becoming a church usher. He looked solemn in his dark suit and perfectly knotted black tie at the first class of the School of Ushering at a Washington hotel Tuesday. Jayrus listened hard, still

as a stone - for about five seconds. And that's when he got in trouble. His mother snapped her fingers sharply and pointed at him from across the aisle, laser-beaming telepathic warnings: Sit still! Pay attention! Don't slouch! Jayrus got the message. Discipline is key for church ushers. Passing around the collection plate may seem simple, but ushering is quite an intricate church ministry. You can't just toss the collection plate down the pew like a Frisbee.

The following poem was written by Raymond Foss in honor of Al Leavitt, one of the ushers who served at the Wesley United Methodist Church in Concord, NH. Foss wrote the poem in 2007 commemorating Leavitt's "retirement" from the ministry after 62 years of service.

B. "Your Usher"

Leading us to our seats, watching the congregation,
Caring for the flock from the back of the sanctuary,
From the aisles, sharing the joy of worship
The community of believers one bulletin, one smile,
one greeting, one handshake at a time.⁵

IV. Songs

There are many traditional congregational songs associated with the Usher Board. Some of the most common include "We Are Soldiers," "It's a Highway to Heaven" and "Come on in Where the Table Is Spread." The following songs I have selected also speak to the spirit of servitude and submission that is at center of this ministry's mission.

If You Can Use Anything Lord You can Use Me

Chorus:

If you can use anything Lord, you can use me. (2xs)
Take my hands Lord and my feet.
Touch my heart Lord, speak through me.
If you can use anything Lord, you can use me.

Verse 1

Lord, you called Moses from the wilderness. You put a rod in his hand.
You used him to lead your people over to the promised land.
Lord, I'm willing to trust in you, so take my life and use it too.
If you can use anything Lord, you can use me.⁶

We're Marching to Zion

Come, we that love the Lord. And let our joys be known.
Join in a song with sweet accord. Join in a song with sweet accord.
And thus surround the throne. And thus surround the throne.

Chorus:

We're marching to Zion. Beautiful, beautiful Zion.

We're marching upward to Zion. The beautiful city of God.⁷

I'm On the Battlefield

Chorus

I am on the battlefield for my Lord.
I'm on the battlefield for my Lord.
And I promised Him that I would serve him 'til I die.
I'm on the battlefield for my Lord.

Verse 1

I was alone and idle, I was a sinner too.
I heard a voice from heaven say there is work to do.
I took the Master's hand, and I joined the Christian band;
I'm on the battlefield for my Lord.⁸

Notes

1. Parrott, Leslie. Serving as A Church Usher. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Practical Ministry Guides, 2002.
2. Reagon, Bernice Johnson. "Usher's Day." Cultural Resource Unit; year one of *The African American Lectionary Project*. Online location: <http://www.theafricanamericanlectionary.org/main.as> accessed 10 February 2010
3. Wheeler, Ralph. "Usher's Day." Cultural Resource Unit; year two of *The African American Lectionary Project*. Online location: <http://www.theafricanamericanlectionary.org/main.as> accessed 10 February 2010
4. Mui, Ylan Q. "Ushers: There's Method in their Mission." The Washington Post 11 January 2002. Online location: http://www.amarillo.com/stories/011102/fea_methodin.shtml accessed 10 February 2010
5. Foss, Raymond A. "Your Usher." Online location: http://famouspoetsandpoems.com/poets/raymond_a_foss/poems/24123 accessed 10 February 2010
6. "If You Can Use Anything Lord You Can Use Me." By Dewitt Jones, Kim Jones, and Ron Kenoly.
7. "We're Marching to Zion." By Issac Watts and Robert Lowry.
8. "I'm on the Battlefield." By Sylvana Bell and E.V. Banks.