



## USHERS AND NURSES GUILD DAY

### CULTURAL RESOURCES

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#### **I. Introduction**



The role of the usher board (which can include a nurses guild) is considered one of importance and honor within black churches. Ushers are the first people we encounter during a worship service; they meet us at the door. They ensure that we are welcomed and comfortable. Their smiling faces and pleasant demeanors set the atmosphere for our worship experience. However, they do more than show us to our seat or tend to the congregation during worship. They are more than the collectors of the offering during worship. And their role is more important than readying the sanctuary in anticipation of that day's worship attendees.

Eli Wilson, Jr., who prepared today's worship unit, writes:

The doorkeeper's position is that of a spiritual conduit. The doorkeeper is the first responder to the people's anticipation and expectations. Worshipers who are trying to make their way to be in the presence of God are affected by the first persons they see and the look on the faces of those persons. The kind of hospitality extended in the house of God represents the spirit of God in the house where each doorkeeper and nurses guild member serves.

Ushers and nurses guild members are partners in the worship experience with other church leaders. These *volunteers* play an integral role in worship. Ushering can, at times, be a thankless job. However, it is very much a form of ministry within the church. This reality is clearly seen within black churches. Ushers are our first contact and our support throughout the worship experience.

The work that is executed by ushers and nurses guild members starts well before attendees arrive. In most cases, ushers arrive at the church an hour before service begins. They are responsible for ensuring that the programs and offering envelopes are prepared and organized, that the pews and surrounding areas are neat and clean, and that "post" assignments are made for those participating within the ministry on that day. And once service concludes, ushers are among the last few to leave. Nurses guild members are typically responsible for the church pulpit and more and more are the first responders to persons who may faint or suffer other moments of physical distress in church. Many nurses guild members and ushers are now even certified to perform CPR.

As a result of the work, sacrifice, and dedication provided by usher boards and nurses guilds, one day of every year is set aside for the church and its members to express their appreciation for the work and commitment given by these individuals. Often, ushers and nurses guild members from other churches will attend the festivities in support and celebration, and all programming is centered around showing appreciation to the usher board and all of its departments. We appreciate all who serve as nurses guild members and as ushers and are thankful as they assist in maintaining order and decorum and extending hospitality in the house of God.

## **II. History and What Ushering Offers**

Psalm 84:10 is lifted as the "ushers' text." The text highlights the role of the "doorkeeper in the house of God." Doorkeeper in the Hebrew is *caphaph*, a verb that means to stand at or guard the threshold.<sup>1</sup>

Ann Brock, on her blog, *The Old Black Church*, highlights the role of usher boards. She writes that one of the important roles the usher board—as well as the music department—plays in the church is the development and training of younger generations "for future service in the church."<sup>2</sup>

Regardless of one's age, gender, sexual orientation, economic status, talents, etc., anyone is capable of serving on an usher board. And it is through ushering that many learn about order,

precision, and obedience. In some cases, being on an usher board is similar to the military, without the physical training and head shaving.

Brock says, “The pulpit, music, and usher departments of the black church are often the three most visible ministries of the church. Each has an important servant role in the church’s overall ministry. Yet, each plays a different, but essential, role.”<sup>3</sup>

And these roles stretch all the way back to the Old Testament world of the Bible. Leslie Parrott writes, “Ushers in the Old Testament were called doorkeepers.”<sup>4</sup> Throughout the Old Testament there are several references to doorkeepers in addition to Psalm 84:10: 2 Kings 22:4, Jeremiah 35:4, 1 Chronicles 9:19, and Ezekiel 40:45-46. Ushers either served the role of receiving the collection or were keepers who kept charge of the House of God.

In the New Testament, we are provided with even more references, whether they were uniformed guards, or, in the case of the disciples, as they prepared the path for Jesus by “ushering him in.” Some scholars, like Parrott, believe the work of the usher is seen implicitly as well as explicitly throughout the New Testament.

### **III. Autobiography**



I must admit, I never really enjoyed being an usher as a teenager. However, I really had no choice. You see, in the church where I grew up, we all were required to be involved from as young as age five. If you were a young person in the church you were a member of the youth and mass choirs, junior stewards, and the youth/young adult usher board.

One Sunday in the month we were required to “man the doors” of the church. As members and visitors entered, we knew our assignments. First, say good morning; then hand them a program

and an offering envelope; then show them to their seats and wish them a blessed and enjoyable worship experience. As this all took place, she watched us from her seat in the front row.

She was the woman we called “Big Momma.” She *ran* the Young People’s Department at our church. And she made sure everything ran smoothly. She had us spread about the sanctuary. Two always at the front door as attendees entered—that was the prime place that every youth always fought for—three along the walls on both sides, and two standing post at the front pews just steps away from the altar.

You never wanted to be the two standing near the front pews. It was where people saw you the most. Every move you made could be seen. There was no way to hide from the eyes of those in the congregation. You were front-and-center. In the back you were able to get away with a few things. If you had to rush to the restroom, you could duck out rather easily. If you saw something that was amusing and you wanted to giggle, as teenagers often would do, you could easily do so and get away with it. But at those front two rows, you had to be serious, stoic, and lack emotion. Everything you did, someone saw you. It wasn’t that we did not enjoy the experience. But the fact that we were made to do something took away some of the fun. Also, we had to stand for most of the of the worship service; we were only able to sit down after the preacher gave his text, prayed, and announced the title of the sermon. Then and only then were we allowed to relax, but we still had to be aware of all that was going on. I mean, you never knew when someone wanted—or needed—something. Of course, it was the usher’s duty to oblige.

I never truly understood how important the role of the usher was until I got older. As a youngster, it was a chore, something I had to do. But as I got older and especially after I started visiting other churches in the city of Atlanta, I realized how important and how necessary the role of the usher could be. There is one visit to a local church that immediately comes to mind. There was an older woman attempting to get the attention of one of the ushers. “Psst, ursha. URSHA!” (those who know the black church know that you often hear the word ursha or usher and not usher). Anyway, the woman attempted to whisper unsuccessfully. It could have been an embarrassing experience for all involved, but the usher handled it professionally and gracefully. She made her way to the lady and engaged her so that no one was able to tell what they discussed or what the urgent need might have been.

I also never fully estimated the power the usher has in a worship service, nor the importance of their relationship with members of churches. My best experience, to date, has been with one woman at a large-sized church where I once held membership. I had the habit of sitting in the same vicinity on most Sundays. And after awhile, she and I developed a nice rapport; when she saw me coming, she made a path for me to “my seat.”

Now, some would suggest that it is silly for someone to consider a section of a pew as “their seat.” And I would submit that there is and was something remotely silly about it. My point is this, for an usher to ensure that I was happy and comfortable in “my seat,” especially given that the church was quite large, spoke volumes about the work and role of the usher. She made my time and my experience at that church special. It was as if it was her duty to ensure that my experience was positive every time I was in the sanctuary. It just goes to show how integral the

role of the usher is in the worship experience. I may not have appreciated it as a teenager, but as an adult I have the utmost appreciation and respect for the work ushers do.

Ushering is a ministry, very much a calling. And not everyone is cut out for it. I am glad she was.

#### **IV. Poetry and Humor**

##### **Your Usher**

by Raymond A. Foss

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<sup>5</sup>

##### **On Ushers—You Know You're in a Black Church If. . . .**

1. You know you're in a black church if the usher hands you a Martin Luther King Jr. fan before you're seated and the fans were donated by a funeral home.
2. You know you're in a black church if the usher board has matching suits in at least four colors and the nurses guild wears nurses hats.
3. You know you're in a black church if the pastor tells the ushers they may be seated during the sermon.
4. You know you're in a black church if the ushers pass out the hymnals and take them up before service is over or they ask you to please leave them on the pews.
5. You know you're in a black church if members of the nurses guild or an usher place a bottle of Olive oil on the side of the pulpit.
6. You know you're in a black church if the members try the usher's patience by trying to open the front door during prayer and the usher looks back through the door window with a look that says, "Touch this door again and I will come out there and deal with you."
7. You know you're in a black church when the usher says, "Excuse me, is your fur coat holding a seat for someone?"
8. You know you're in a black church when the ushers lock the doors during the offering.

9. You know you're in a black church if someone gets up during service and holds up their index finger (as if this is an usher's sign) and as if to say, "Excuse me for disrupting service."

10. You know you are in a black church if during Black History Month the ushers wear kente cloth.<sup>6</sup>

## **V. Songs**

There are numerous songs that come to mind to honor ushers and all of the departments within usher boards. Below are a few songs for consideration. The first is titled "Usher Me" and was written by Donald Lawrence. In it Lawrence pleads to be "ushered" into the presence of God. Church ushers lead the way in facilitating the type of worship experience that indeed ushers people into the presence of God. The second song, "Better Is One Day" by Matt Redman, contains the sentiments that represent the commitment of all ushers and nurses who love working in the house of God. One verse says, "Better is one day in your courts than thousands elsewhere." In the case of ushers and nurses, God's court is the house of God. The final song, "House of the Lord," also contains sentiments of ushers. One verse says, "I'd rather be a doorkeeper in my Father's house than to have a palace all by myself."

### **Usher Me**

by Donald Lawrence

#### Verse 1

Thank you for the roses to brighten up my day  
Thank you for the tenderness to wipe my tears away  
But when you see me drifting, sinking and needing lifting  
Usher me into the presence of the Lord

Sleeping beauty fell asleep, in her bed of sorrow  
It seemed like it was all she wrote, the end of her tomorrow  
But God never ends the story without bringing back the glory  
So usher me into the presence of the Lord

#### Chorus

Usher me, there my healing can begin  
Usher me, there my broken heart can mend  
Usher me, I need to be restored  
So usher me into the presence of the Lord

#### Verse 2

Don't let pain discourage you, you know just what to do  
When my heart is overwhelmed, I lay my head on you  
Though I still need mending, it's no offense to you.  
Just usher me into the presence of,

Usher me into the presence, Oh oh,

Chorus<sup>7</sup>

**Better Is One Day**

by Matt Redman

How lovely is Your dwelling place, Oh Lord Almighty  
My soul longs and even faints for You  
For here my heart is satisfied, within Your presence  
I sing beneath the shadow of Your wings

Better is one day in Your courts  
Better is one day in Your house  
Better is one day in Your courts  
Than thousands elsewhere  
(repeat)

One thing I ask, and I would seek, to see Your beauty,  
To find You in the place Your glory dwells  
My heart and flesh cry out,  
For You the living God  
Your Spirit's water for my soul  
I've tasted and I've seen,  
Come once again to me.  
I will draw near to You.  
I will draw near to You

Key of D:

How lovely is Your dwelling place O'Lord Almighty  
My soul longs and even faints for You  
For here my heart is satisfied within Your presence  
I sing beneath the shadow of Your wings

Better is one day in Your courts  
Better is one day in Your house  
Better is one day in Your courts  
Than thousands elsewhere

One thing I ask and I would seek to see Your beauty  
To find You in the place Your glory dwells  
One thing I ask and I would seek to see Your beauty  
To find You in the place Your glory dwells

My heart and flesh cry out for You the living God  
Your spirits water to my soul  
I've tasted and I've seen come once again to me  
I will draw near to You, I will draw near to You<sup>8</sup>

### **House of the Lord**

by Milton Biggum and Jerry Smith

Chorus

I was glad when they said unto me,  
let us go into the house of the Lord.  
There's no better place to be,  
there's peace and liberty,  
let us go into the house of the Lord

Verse:

A day in the house is better  
than a thousand days anywhere else  
I'd rather be a doorkeeper in my Father's house  
than to have a palace all by myself

Chorus

Vamp 1

Come and go with me to my Father's house

Vamp 2

Come on, go with me.

There's no better place to be  
there's peace and liberty.  
Let us go into the house of the Lord.<sup>9</sup>

### **VI. Audio Visual Aids**

- Joint Usher Board and Nurses Guild Anniversary (Part 1), First Baptist Church, Washington, DC, Sunday, September 19, 2010. Online location: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SrZAKLuNIHQ&feature=related> (accessed 18 April 2012).
- Joint Usher Board and Nurses Guild Anniversary (Part 2), First Baptist Church of the City, Washington DC, Sunday, September 19, 2010. Online location: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gu\\_LdVjIPjk&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gu_LdVjIPjk&feature=related) (accessed 18 April 2012).

- National Baptist Convention, USA Inc. Ushers perform a grand march after the offering in 2006 at the National Baptist Convention USA, Dallas, TX. Online location: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wLMc9hFLgxA&feature=related> (accessed 18 April 2012).

### Notes

1. Blue Letter Bible. Online location: <http://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strongs=H5605&t=RSV> (accessed 24 March 2012). Online Etymology Dictionary. Online location: [http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=usher&allowed\\_in\\_frame=0](http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=usher&allowed_in_frame=0) (accessed 24 March 2012).
2. Brock, Ann. The Old Black Church blog. Online location: <http://theoldblackchurch.blogspot.com/2009/06/happy-ushers-day.html> (accessed 27 March 2012).
3. Ibid.
4. Parrott, Leslie. Usher's Manual. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Practical Ministry Guides, 1970.
5. Foss, Raymond A. "Your Usher." Online location: [http://famouspoetsandpoems.com/poets/raymond\\_a\\_foss/poems/24123](http://famouspoetsandpoems.com/poets/raymond_a_foss/poems/24123) (accessed 4 April 2012).
6. Online location: <http://www.greekchat.com/gcforums/archive/index.php/t-4521.html>
7. Lawrence, Donald. "Usher Me." Location: Donald Lawrence and the Tri-City Singers. Go Get Your Life Back. Brentwood, TN: EMI Gospel, 2002.
8. Redman, Matt. "Better Is One Day." Location: Darwin Hobbs. Worshipper. New York, NY: EMI Gospel, 2005.
9. Biggham, Milton and Jerry Smith "House of the Lord." Location: Mississippi Children's Choir. Mississippi Children's Choir: When All God's Children Get Together. Jackson, MS: Malaco, 1998.