



USHER'S DAY

CULTURAL RESOURCES

Sunday, July 13, 2008

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I. Historical Notes

A. Information on the term Usher

The etymology of the term usher, as a noun, dates back to 1380 meaning, “servant who has charge of doors and admits people to a chamber, hall, etc.” The term is from the “12th century Anglo-French ‘usser,’ which is from the old French ‘ussier,’ from the Latin ‘ustarius,’ doorkeeper, from ‘ostium,’ door, entrance, related to ‘os’—‘mouth.’ The feminine form ‘usherette,’ dates from 1925. The verb meaning to conduct, or escort, dates from 1594.¹ See the lectionary commentary for today for a theological treatment of the term usher.

B. The National Association of Ushers

The first convention of the National Association of Ushers, an interdenominational organization of ushers, was held July 24-26, 1919 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Elijah A. Hamilton was its founder. Hamilton desired a national organization of ushers “to broaden the field of Church ushering and to break down the barrier of interdenominational, discrimination and prejudice.” . The result was the first national

convention of ushers at Varick A.M. E. Zion Church in Philadelphia, and Hamilton was elected as the group's first president.²

C. Historical Information on One of the Largest Body of Ushers

The National Baptist Convention USA, Inc. (NBCUSA) is the second largest African American faith community in America; and until the end of the 20th century was the largest until eclipsed by The Church of God in Christ. The gatherings of NBCUSA ushers are famous for their enormity. The NBCUSA Ushers Auxiliary has its own place within the annual convention. This however was not always the case. The NBCUSA Ushers Auxiliary was organized by Mrs. Minnie E. Anderson in 1943, She served as its head for 43 years. Initially the ushers had no assigned space until the NBCUSA parent body allowed them to assemble with the Laymen Auxiliary, where they were permitted two hours of meeting time on Wednesdays and Thursdays. Funds collected by the Ushers were reported to the parent body, and attributed to the Laymen. At the 1944 convention, when their request for meeting space was rejected, the ushers walked out of the convention and after walking the streets of Chicago met in a funeral home. The president of the convention, Reverend J.H. Jackson, upon learning of the walk-out requested that the parent body accept the ushers as an auxiliary and provide them with the same accommodations as other auxiliaries. The Young People Department of Ushers was not organized until 1973. It was developed in an effort to increase the involvement of youths and young adults in ushering.³

D. Pledges, Mottos, and Scriptures

A variety of pledges, mottos, and often used scriptures exist among African American ushers in historically black denominations and faith communities. The following are some of the most often used.

Sample Usher Pledge

I pledge by the help of God to do my best to serve my church with a pure heart and clean hands. I further pledge to abide by the rules and regulations of the board and my superior officers to attend meetings and to serve when called upon, unless I can give sufficient reason why I cannot serve, and to keep my financial obligations to the board in good standing.

Usher's Mottos: Ready to Serve. Always At the Post.

Scriptures: I had rather be a door-keeper in the house of my God, than to live in the tents of wickedness (Psalm 84:10). Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers (Hebrews 13:2).⁴

II. A View of Ushers by Nancy Crawford Sanders

Usher's Day usually used to (and in many churches still does) consist of a program held once a year where guest church ushers were invited to participate. This program was a service with a devotional section and sermon. In the days before choirs, when church service music was congregational, it seemed that the Usher Boards had some of the

strongest singers. On Ushers' Sunday, each visiting Board would stand as a group and proceed to the front of the church singing, and leave a donation in honor of the host Usher Board. For me, while growing up, in some fashion every Sunday was Usher's Day. These called out doorkeepers stood at their post ready to serve, Sunday after Sunday. Before the devotional period, before prayer was given, before the choir sang, and before the pastor preached, you saw the movement of the ushers. Ushers had complete control over the movement of the worship. There were three intricate times within the worship that you did not walk: the reading of scripture, during prayer and the invitation to discipleship. If you attempted to walk, ushers would carefully aid you, knowing that you were confused or unaware of the customs of the church.

When the clock hands fell upon 11:00 am ushers were at the door. As I child, I believed that every usher I saw had been in the military. Standing at attention, they stood with superior posture, shoulders back and heads up. Every man wore black suits, white shirts, black ties with white gloves. Every woman had on a black dress with a white sash tied around their neck, and white gloves. The only exception was Communion Sunday, when everyone wore white

Besides the duties of opening the door, extending hospitality, distributing programs, and assisting in seating, they were the ones who collected the offerings of the church. Being an older adult, I have witnessed some ungodly behavior within the confines of the church. There is one thing that I have never heard of happening in the church, and that is an usher taking from the Lord's offering. Thank goodness some things have not changed.

III. Spreading the Feast Table of Hospitality

The Invitation

The Doors of the Church Are Open!

Come on over here where the table is spread
Come on over here where the table is spread
Come on over here where the table is spread
Know that the feast of the Lord is going on

Joy over here where the table is spread...
Love over here where the table is spread...

The text in this spiritual invites us to come to the feast; the feast being the creation of a worship service that is, according to the tradition of the congregation, where all who enter and are open can be spiritually fed. There is a practice in older styled African American worship services, where the preacher ends the sermon with a signature song and then lines (leads in the singing of) the following Dr. Watts hymn:

That awful day will surely come
The appointed hour make haste...

And as the congregation follows the raised hymn, the minister proclaims that “the doors of the church are open!” The invitation is to those in attendance seeking a church home. They are invited to come to the front of the sanctuary to commit to being a part of this particular Christian community. New members are greeted by ministerial staff, elders, and officers. Ushers are in attendance. Having greeted these new members at the door, they are now watching and standing ready to assist in guiding new members through their first steps within the community.

IV. Ushers as the Infrastructure for Process and Order

With the creation of any ritual tradition an infrastructure is created to ensure process and order. Within the world of African American worship rituals, ushers (watchmen and watchwomen) create welcome, guidance, protection, and care of the collected congregants as the need arises. They also hold the trust of the church family and are the path through which contributions are collected and transferred to financial officers who then oversee that aspect of church life. Ushers are the guardians of many rituals of the church. They are essential to the smooth functioning of the gathered. They ensure that the sanctuary is properly prepared for the specific rituals that are to take place.

Ushers are the initial source of love and welcome to those entering the church. They stand at the open door of the church building welcoming all to enter and taking very special care of those who have come for the first time. In packed houses, they make sure all who can be seated are seated, urging those seated to shift to make room for one more. Throughout the service they stand in a position of **watchfulness**, ready to move and come to the aid of anyone who needs support of any kind. Within congregations where spirit possession occurs, the ushers are actually trained to take care of the member who is sometimes physically expressive and sometimes falls out as if unconscious. Ushers are taught as many as 23 silent hand signals. A right hand to the throat or neck tie is a signal for an usher to pay attention. If the Usher-in-Charge then lifts the right hand to the side of the mouth in a quick movement (as if brushing something off the face) it means that all ushers should take their stations. Many are also trained to administer CPR and basic first aid. The Nurses Guild is an auxiliary of the Usher Board and in churches large enough to have both it is the Nurses Guild that provides CPR and administers first aid.

I never want to go to a funeral or memorial service without ushers. Without a word they beckon the quiet that we need. There is a countenance about them. You know as you enter that the air of the sanctuary has been transformed. You walk through the doorways and enter a sacred space of honor and remembrance and care. It is a space of tenderness, a time to be held by those gathered at a time of loss. Ordering the air through which we move, letting us know where we are and why, these treasured stewards...

They stand at the ready
Watching over as we gather once again
creating the ritual of worship.

Without a sound,
they move around us
as the living church
comes into being.

From the pulpit,
they are called forward
and they move in concert form
without a sound.

When we,
the congregants are called to witness
through offerings.
It is they,
-one hand to the back-
who structure the process.

And in wondrous order
as the choir sings,
row by row,
we are gently motioned
up and out of our seats
down the aisle to the front,
placing our offering in a tray
or
within baskets
then moving back to our seats.

We know them by their dress
we know them
by their collective stance
within and around
guiding and guarding
that which is taking place
the sanctuary becoming alive
with the breath and need
of those who enter
seeking
a community of worship.

V. Usher Songs

After they have structured the process by which the entire congregation can come to the front to extend the 'right hand of fellowship,' or to give an offering to support the work of the church, the ushers line up in the back of the sanctuary and make their processional

to the front with a very distinct signature step. For many years one would hear a certain song raised when ushers marched. It was the old battle shout, "Soldier in the Army of the Lord." "We Are Soldiers," "I Will Trust in the Lord," and "We've Come This Far by Faith" are also songs traditionally sung by African American ushers especially on Usher's Day.

Soldier in the Army of the Lord

I'm a soldier,
in the army of the Lord,
I'm a soldier,
in the army.

I got my war clothes on
in the army of the Lord,
I got my war clothes on,
in the army.

I'm a sanctified soldier,
in the army of the Lord,
I'm a sanctified soldier,
in the army.

If I die, Let me die,
in the army of the Lord,
If I die, Let me die,
in the army.

I'm a soldier
in the army of the Lord,
I'm a soldier,
in the army.⁵

We Are Soldiers

We are soldiers in the army
We have to fight although we have to cry
We have to hold up the blood-stained banner
We have to hold it up until we die⁶

We've Come This Far by Faith

We've come this far by faith, leaning on the Lord
Trusting in his holy word, He never fail me yet
Oh ----- can't turn around
We come this far by faith.⁷

I Will Trust in The Lord

I will trust in the Lord,
I will trust in the Lord,
I will trust in the Lord, 'til I die;
I will trust in the Lord,
I will trust in the Lord,
I will trust in the Lord, 'til I die.

I'm gonna stay on the battlefield x3
I'm gonna treat everybody right... x3⁸

VI. Books About Ushering

One of the earliest usher guides was published in 1924 by the Fleming H. Revel Company. It was entitled Church Usher's Manual. This book was widely used for more than fifty years. The Universal Church Usher's Manual, by R.H. Boyd Publishing, is another usher's manual widely used by black Baptists. The Work of the Usher, by Alvin Johnson, published by Judson Press in 1966 and A Guide for The Church Usher, by Thomas L. Clark, published by Broadman and Holman Press in 1984, are also widely used. Many denominations have developed their own manuals for ushers.

Notes

1. Random House Unabridged Dictionary, 2006
2. The National United Church Ushers Association of America, Inc., (NUCUAA) is one of the largest interdenominational church usher's organization in the country. Online location: www.nationalchurchushers.org accessed 3 April 2008. The group's 90th convention is scheduled for Philadelphia July 27-31, 2009.
3. National Baptist Convention USA, Inc. Online location: www.nationalbaptist.com/index.cfm?FuseAction_Page&PageID=1000202 accessed 3 April 2008
4. Sample pledge, mottos, and scripture references provided by Reverend Nancy Sanders.
5. "A Soldier in the Army of the Lord" Traditional African American hymn
6. "We Are Soldiers" Gospel Hymn. African American Heritage Hymnal. Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, 2001. #488
7. Goodson, Albert. "We've Come This Far by Faith."
8. "I Will Trust in the Lord." Negro Spiritual