

Mary's Funeral

The Challenge of an Upstairs Sanctuary

ISABEL GARDNER

Slowly and carefully Mary struggled up the stairs. In my second month of a new appointment it was the first time that I had met this elderly woman with her lively humor and sense of style. Mary was determined to climb the flight of stairs that led to the nave. Each step required effort, and she paused for a moment on the small landing before finishing the flight that led through the doors to worship.

Mary's effort was important. Not only was Mary determined to be part of worship in "her" church, but she was playing that Sunday's offertory. Sitting at the piano, her concern that her shaking hands would interfere with her gift was unrealized as her fingers moved precisely with the life and rhythm of the old hymns. Her hands were unfaltering, her spirit strong, her giving uplifted us in vital worship.

In the months that followed, Mary

grew frailer; she was unable to come to worship. For the Christmas music service, her family mobilized to bring her to church. Unable to struggle up the stairs, Mary rode the old chair that slowly twists its way upstairs. She had come, she said, to hear "my daughter" and "... my choir sing." Her face during that service was one of joy. That was Mary's last service.

Week after week when we visited and prayed together I never ceased to thank God for her faith. Sometimes I would begin an old hymn and she would join her voice with mine. And each time she shared her constant concern, a prayer, a hope that one day she could return to "... my church."

One bright spring Sunday morning, Mary passed away. As I prayed with her

daughter, she tearfully raised up the desire for Mary to be "buried out of the sanctuary." I held my breath, for I knew that in the church's 177 year history, no funeral had ever been held upstairs. I felt a call to respond to that prayer, and so, Mary's struggle to climb the stairs also became mine!

When I shared plans for a church funeral with the congregation, I felt the folks murmur. An upstairs sanctuary—what if the casket should fall? How could anyone lift a casket around the bend in the stairs? How... how... how? And why? Why have a church funeral when the funeral home was local, a family business, and did a good job? Word got around fast. The local coffee shop clientele speculated on the need for the church funeral; they shook their heads in disbelief that I was going to make folk carry the coffin upstairs. Yet, after a few discussions I awoke fully to the fact that logistical concerns were masking spiritual

ones. As the conversation swirled, Mary's family and I held strongly to our belief that a church funeral could, and should, be done.

In my previous appointment, where families of the faithful routinely had church funerals for their loved ones, I had been converted to the importance of church funerals—that in life, as in death,

we are not separated from God in the midst of our worship family. In my experience, services for the faithful held outside the church, divorced from the community worship, do not have the same spirit and "feeling."

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I believe that those who attend church funeral services often experience a closer understanding of God's love and eternal promise. For the "Christmas and Easter Christians," it is a way to give greater meaning to their finite church experiences, while those mourners who are unchurched have an opportunity to experience more closely the hearts of the faithful.

The days between Mary's death and her funeral became a fulfilling time of education, and eventual celebration. With a friend, I took a careful look at the height of the railing and the twist in the stairs: The pallbearers had the needed muscle, and I assured folk that with God all things are possible. (Although, each night I prayed that God would get that casket upstairs!)

Meanwhile "the meal" was beautifully set up in the fellowship hall. Willing hands ran errands, made food, prepared the worship space, produced the bulletin, and even weeded the walk! There was a great sense of energy and anticipation as we worked to celebrate Mary's life in the midst of our church family.

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The first service of death and remembrance would indeed be celebrated where joy, peace, hope, promise, and eternal life were regularly lifted up through preaching and worship! Some of the congregation entered into a lively discussion on the subject. The word on the grapevine was that several of the faithful decided that if Mary could get up the stairs, so could they! It was a time of testing and anticipation while we all waited to see if the "impossible" could happen.

The struggle to take Mary to church continued to the hour of the service. The funeral home in our town is wonderful and caring, but some worried about the potential for a precedent. One of the funeral directors remarked, "Whew, you need to be careful about promising a church funeral to folk," and went on to say that the casket would likely have to sit downstairs during the service. The other director informed me that we should never have even been told "we could try."

Early on the day of the funeral the casket arrived at the church and went relatively smoothly up the stairs. Despite the sharp

turn, it did not tip or slide, and there were none of the direly predicted injuries. The service proved a powerful celebration. Voices lifted up Mary's favorite hymns, prayers and scripture. The witness to her gift of music was able to be lifted up near the piano she loved to play. The nave was filled with the faces of our family and the past and present memories of Word and Sacrament, affirmation that we were bound together, and would be forever, through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. □



Isabel Gardner is pastor of Bethesda United Methodist Church in Middletown, Delaware.

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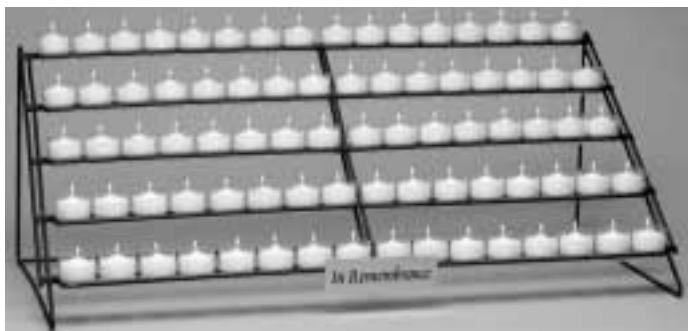
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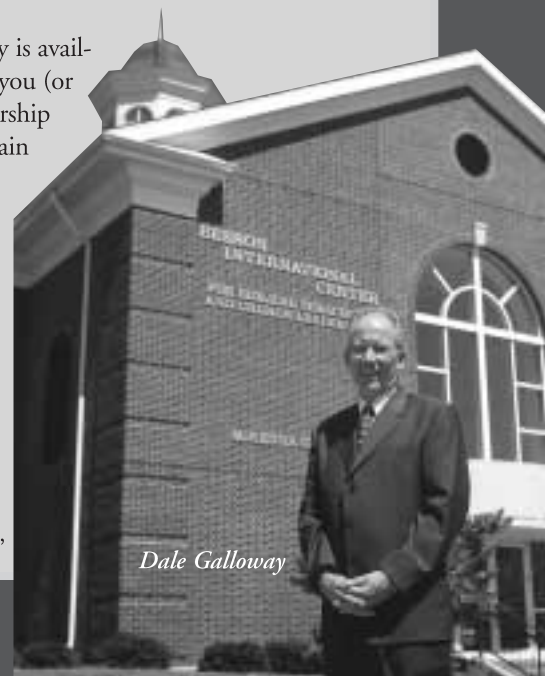
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