

# Playing Piano in an Empty Church

David S. Bell, director of stewardship with the General Board of Discipleship of the United Methodist Church, tells the story of Rosemary, a woman who seldom came to the church and never on Sunday.

Rosemary lived in the urban center of a metropolitan city. Perhaps she called home a small apartment above a storefront or maybe it was one homeless shelter or another.

“I never knew,” Bell said. “She would arrive on a weekday morning – sometimes with bags of possessions, sometimes empty-handed. It was difficult to communicate with Rosemary. I could not follow her lines of logic. Her sentences seemed incomplete to me. Her words did not fit together in a comprehensible way.

“There was, however, one exception when her words did make sense to me,” Bell said. “She told me why she had come to church. She gave the same reason each time. Rosemary had come to church to play the piano. ‘The piano. I would like to play the piano,’ she would say.”

The first time she asked Bell if she could play the piano, “I was hesitant, but led her downstairs to the piano in the fellowship hall. It was an old piano. I do not think that it had been tuned since last year’s Lenten series, but I thought that it would fulfill her need,” he said. “Her disappointment was obvious. She did not want to play this piano. She wanted to play the piano in the sanctuary – the one that stood silently still except for Thursday night choir practice and Sunday morning worship. Didn’t she know that only the music director or the accompanist was supposed to play this piano?”

Bell conceded to let her play, thinking that no one from the church music committee would stop by in the few minutes that she would be playing. Rosemary entered the sanctuary, which was lit only by the diffused sunlight penetrating the stained glass windows.



She sat down on the piano bench and placed her hands on the piano keys. She began to play. Her music filled the apparent emptiness of the sanctuary and filtered through the hallways and into offices. Sometimes she would play for 15 minutes; other times, for hours. She played hymns – old ones, new ones, all types of hymns.

(more)

“Her preference was always to play the piano in the sanctuary,” Bell said. “And I do not think that she played that one because it was tuned the best. She was giving back to God a portion of the gift that God had given to her. When she had finished, she would leave quietly out the side door – apparently more at peace with herself and with God than when she had arrived.”

Bell’s story about Rosemary is insightful. You see, God welcomes the exercise of all our gifts, and He encourages us to be cheerful in how we use them. He looks to us to give not for recognition, but as a response to God’s love for us. He wants us to connect with Him and to praise Him, whether in music, the glow of a purple/orange sunrise or the warmth of a golden sunset, quiet times of meditation on a lakeshore, or the encouragement we give to others.

It could be playing the piano in an empty room with our Lord as the only audience.

*Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone (1 Corinthians 12:4-6 ESV).*

– Beecher Hunter