



USHER'S DAY

CULTURAL RESOURCES

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I. Introduction and Historical Overview

A. Role of the Usher

The black church in the United States, as an institution, functions with, and is supported by, numerous auxiliaries, boards and departments. These working arms of the church enable the body of Christ to carry out its basic missions of spreading the gospel, attending to the needs of the people, and assuring the church's administrative, physical and spiritual components remain in accord with governing Biblical principles and accepted religious tenets.

Generally, the form of auxiliaries, boards and departments in individual black churches are determined by the age, denomination, size, location and specific needs of the church body. However, there is one auxiliary that most modern black churches have, regardless of their age, denomination, size or location: an usher board or usher guild.

The work of the usher board is considered a ministry of the church. 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.

A major part of the public role of the pulpit and music departments is oral service. In contrast, ushers perform most of their public role in the church in silence or through restrained speech. In many respects, the service that church ushers provide in God's house and to God's people is a testament of humbleness and selflessness. Only their service and uniforms speak for them.

Each Sunday, ushers are usually some of the first servants to arrive at the church house. They make sure things are in order and get into their positions to greet members and visitors. During

the worship service, ushers safeguard the entrances, aisles, exits and financial offerings of the church.

So as not to be disruptive, ushers master directional signs, so their work can be done in relative silence. They are purveyors of order and decorum, even during the most stressful moments of the church's services and proceedings. Also, they are often the last to leave the sanctuary, as they remain after the worship service to retrieve discarded church bulletins and other items that the audience has left on benches and the floor.

Usually, ushers are at their posts for most church services, including all worship services, special programs, celebrations, weddings and funerals. For this reason, the church family, in many churches, set aside a day once each year to celebrate the role and work of its ushers—**Usher's Day**. At the least, this annual day on the church's liturgical calendar is a statement of gratitude and a formal recognition of the importance of the role of ushers in the black church.

B. Dynamic Elements of the Worship Program

Recognizing this importance, Dr. Andrew Billingsley, the prominent black sociologist, in his book, Mighty Like a River, identifies "eight elements of a dynamic black worship program."¹ One of those elements is a "Faithful Set of Auxiliaries, especially Usher Boards."² Specifically, Dr. Billingsley writes that:

One element of a dynamic worship service is the auxiliaries, which come out on display on Sundays. The most impressive of these is the usher board. Ushers are essential. They seat the congregation, keep order, help members in distress, including those who get the Holy Ghost and cannot keep their composure, and lift the offering."³

While Dr. Billingsley's analysis is a studied recognition of the essential importance of ushers, it is not a comprehensive description of ushers' role in the black church. Ushers are more than seat finders. They are more than church decorum and order experts. And, they are more than caretakers of the church's assets and worshipers. As will be shown later, they are extremely committed to their servant role, and that role extends well beyond what is visible to the untrained eye on Sunday mornings.

For a more expansive discussion of the role of ushers in the black church worship experience, readers are directed to the African American Lectionary's 2008 Cultural Resources offering for Usher Day that was written by Dr. Bernice Reagon, the head of The African American Lectionary cultural resource division.⁴

II. Passing the Torch and Lessons of Discipline



Although I have never served as an adult church usher, I joined the Youth Usher Board at my Mississippi home church when I was in junior high school. I remained on the usher board through my second year of college. At times, I resented the weekly usher practice—I would often say to myself and my friends, “How many times do we have show our knowledge of these signs, offering collection, and tissue and fan handing?”

Mr. Patton, who was president of the Senior Usher Board and also trainer and leader of the youth ushers, constantly reminded us that “practice makes perfect.” He pushed us week after week to learn our usher signs. And, he also taught us the importance of self-discipline, timeliness and the rules of church decorum.

Mr. Patton and other senior ushers, without seeking reimbursement for gas or food, frequently took us to other churches for usher programs. We were taught how to represent our church, pastor and family at those churches. We were also taught the duty, necessity and purpose of giving to those churches and our own church. In that little usher department at the Holy Ghost Missionary Baptist Church, we were taught the meaning of service, and we were given a strong foundation for negotiating life generally.

At the time, I did not fully appreciate these gifts. Later, however, I came to understand that those weekly Youth Usher Board meetings were much more than repetitive instruction periods. They were character building periods. They were discipline building periods. They were youth investment periods, where our elders poured pounds of kindness, months of discipline, and years of knowledge and mother wit into us. Our parents sent us to them and trusted them for those purposes. And they honored that trust.

Without us fully understanding it, each week Mr. Patton and the other senior ushers were passing the torch—preparing yet another generation for life and service.

On the Sundays we ushered, the senior ushers were always there with a hand full of assistance, in case we needed help. They chastised us, if it was warranted. They praised us, if it was deserved. They helped raise money for our trips. They supported our programs and they supported us.

All of this was part of the senior ushers' service. They had a serious commitment to preparing the next generation of ushers—the next generation of black leaders. Most of the service performed by them was never seen by the general church on Sunday mornings. In pure usher fashion, most of it was done behind the scenes.

Those senior ushers “enriched us all with ... gift[s] of love.”⁵ It was agape love and it sought nothing in return. In the words of the late Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. agape love, “springs from the need of the other person—his need for belonging to the best in the human family.”⁶ While we, as youth, were not totally aware of our own need for the guiding hands of Mr. Patton and the other senior ushers, they were, and they met that need.

In many black churches, the usher board and the music department are the only auxiliaries of the church that systematically train and prepare younger people for their service in the church. In recent years, however, a few other departments of the black church have begun to systematically train young people. For example, a number of black churches now have junior deacon programs. Still, there is much room for improvement such as training trustees, elders, and religious education teachers and those with a mind for business for church administration.

III. Help Your Sister Board

In addition to being a day of celebration and gratitude, *Usher's Day* is also a major day of fundraising for the black church. The ushers' fundraising formula is a simple one: help your neighbor and your neighbor will you. Usher boards help each other throughout the year. They assist each other with big events such as anniversaries, conventions and large funerals.

On *Usher's Day*, usher boards from many different churches, including usher guilds from different denominations, are invited to participate in the annual day activities of the host church. On that day, the ushers of the host church do not work. For them, it is a day of rest, except for the grand usher march, which usually comes at the end of the program. Ushers from the invited churches do all of the work that is normally done by the host church ushers. It is not uncommon for usher boards from five guest churches to attend the anniversary service of a sister church.

Each of the invited churches comes with a major donation which is presented during the usher board roll call and march. These “gifts of love,” depending upon the number of sister churches invited, can, and do often, amount to thousands of dollars. Usually, all of the money, except for expenses, goes into the coffers of the host church. This is repeated year after year. Ushers refer to it as helping the usher board of a sister church.

In addition, some usher boards also use their annual day to make special contributions in the name of deceased ushers, to support special church projects, and to support their church's scholarship fund for college students.

IV. The Grand March

One of the highlights of Usher's Day is the Grand March. All ushers, including the host ushers, participate in the grand march of the ushers. Those churches with children and youth usher

boards add a youthful energy to the procession. The nurse's guild is also a special attraction. Modernly nurse's guilds have become part of usher boards and, most often, are present to assist persons who experience illnesses during a worship service, those who need bandages or similar items and, in some churches, to aid in the needs of the pulpit. The nurses can often be seen in white uniforms, with hats and, in some cases, with capes.

The Grand March is a time that the congregation eagerly awaits. Prodded by the organist playing one of the great marching songs of the church, the ushers line up in the back of the church and begin their march around the entire inner confines of the sanctuary, leaving their love gift on the collection table. In almost every church, one waits to see the ushers "cut the corners." Cutting the corners refers to sharp, precision-like turns made by ushers as they march around the entire church. The turns bring to mind a battalion of soldiers quickly turning from one formation to another or a marching band doing the same. Ushers of the host church march last. It is a time of high celebration.

When they get to the front of the church, the ushers, to the delight of the audience, move into an almost syncopated genuflecting movement, as they cut the corners during their grand march. By now, the crowd is on its feet, applauding the ushers on their day.

Over the years, I have seen older female ushers wearing three to four inch high heels and crisp uniforms participating in the grand usher march. I have also seen disabled ushers, some in wheelchairs, participating in the grand usher march. They marched, while singing along with the congregation and their fellow ushers, as if they had the energy of teenagers. This was done after many of them had stood at their posts for several hours, in perfect formation, throughout the Usher Day program.

V. Ushers, Maids or Cooks

When I was a young child, the senior (not the children, youth, or young adult) female ushers of our church wore all white during the summer months. The senior male ushers wore white shirts and pants and black ties. For the females, their summer usher uniforms were identical to the white uniforms many of them wore to works as maids and cooks.

On Sunday mornings, however, no one ever mistook any of them for anything but an usher. On this day, they were not maids. They were not cooks. They were ushers, and they were in charge of keeping and order and providing service in the Lord's house.

On any given Sunday, they were responsible for collecting and safeguarding more money than some of their employers would see in months. They were responsible for attending to the needs of a much more important group of people than those on their jobs: the pastor and the congregation. These men and women had a passion for what they did. They knew their work was important, much more important than their weekday jobs. This work was connected to a highway to heaven. The uniform for the two jobs may have been identical, but their service they provided on Sundays in that uniform was for a higher purpose.

VI. Bearing Burdens

The congregation celebrates its usher board on Usher's Day because the usher board, in its care of the church's worshippers, offerings and the physical church, celebrates the congregation all year long. Ushers are there through shouts of joy, moans of disappointment, and groans of grief. Throughout the year, ushers bear the burdens of the people.

I often wonder how, week after week and year after year, our ushers are able to bear what they bear. For example: funerals of babies, beloved elderly members and pastors; the funerals of Emit Till, the four little girls who were murdered during the Birmingham church bombing, and Martin Luther King, Jr.

During these stressful times, ushers are required to forget their own feelings and needs, because the needs of the people are so great. They are required to put on the mask and wear a stiff upper lip. Somehow, they manage to transcend self to provide agape love for others—gifts of love for those who most need it. What strong spiritual immune systems.

VII. Moments of Hilarity

Stress does not always color the usher's work. There can be genuine moments of hilarity while ushers are at their posts. I always find it funny when church folk raise one finger when exiting the church as if they were ushers giving a signal. I've seen this in churches in the north, south, east and west. I saw it as a child and still see it as a senior citizen. And if you ask people why they do it instead of just quietly leaving, most cannot tell you why. They just believe they are supposed to hold up one finger when leaving. Also, recently, I had a meeting with a black minister of music who reminisced about the times when he was a young musician and saw wigs flying across benches and isles, when members of the congregation were overcome with joy. With a wide smile, he said, "But everything that happened in the Baptist church stayed in the Baptist church."

I have vivid memories of a fall revival when the youth usher board was ushering. The choir had sung us into another realm. The preaching was good. Then, one of the elderly worshippers created a spectacle that the community still recalls. Years later, I would write a short poem about it:

Revival Time

It was revival time
Friday night and the
Preacher was getting down

He groaned and moaned
And primed the crowd
The babies even quieted
When he got loud

He leaned over the pulpit
And let out a scream

Women fainted and souls
Were redeemed

The preacher shifted gears
And the place went wild
Fire and brimstone flowed
From his mouth

The choir sang and the Church
Swayed
The ushers fanned and the
Deacons prayed. The
Children talked and the
Nurses calmed the shouters
With smelling salts

The Mother's Board began
To shout
Miss Gray dropped her purse
And her pistol fell out.⁷

VIII. Songs for Usher's Day

There are staple songs in the black church for any Usher's Day celebration. Three of the most noted are "Walking Up the King's Highway," "When the Saints Go Marching In," and "Till We Gather Again." Other staples include "We are Soldiers" and "In the Army of Lord," both of which were highlighted in last year's cultural resource unit for Usher's Day.

Walking Up the King's Highway

It's a highway to heaven, none can walk up there
But the pure in heart. It's a highway to heaven,
I am walking up the King's highway.⁸

When the Saints Go Marching In

O when the saints go marching in
O when the saints go marching in
O Lord, I want to be in that number
When the saints go marching in.⁹

Till We Gather Again

Till we gather again, God be with you
Till we gather again, God be with you.
May he give you his love, give you
His kindness, keep you in perfect peace.
God be with you till we meet again.¹⁰

Notes

1. Billingsley, Andrew. Mighty Like a River: The Black Church and Social Reform. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1999.
2. Ibid., p. 174.
3. Ibid., p. 179.
4. Bernice Johnson Reagan. Online location: <http://www.theAfricanAmericanLectionary.org>. (At the home page, click on “Cultural Resources,” then click on “Click Here for Year One Archives,” after which, click on “Usher's Day.”)
5. King, Martin Luther, and James Melvin Washington. A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr. San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1986. p. 63.
6. Ibid., p. 19.
7. Wheeler, Ralph. Revival Time. Unpublished poem. 1994.
8. “Walking Up the King's Highway.” African American Heritage Hymnal. Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, 2001. #402
9. Ibid., “When the Saints Go Marching In.” #595
10. Ibid., “Till We Gather Again.” #638