

Let us now praise church custodians

If I were to put up a plaque at church, I'd want it to honor our crew of sextons.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [January 17, 2018](#) issue



Plaque at Trinity Church in Boston

The word *sexton* doesn't exactly communicate sexiness any more than *janitor* and *custodian* connote glamour. Yet ask me in a given week who makes the quietest difference in the well-being of our congregation and I will tell you it's the custodians. Title them what you will, these servants are living proof that God hides the blessings of the kingdom in ordinary but remarkable places and people.

Neither fame nor fortune guides the best church custodians. They give attention to little things—like toilets that don't flush, Cheerios lodged between pew cushions, and dead birds that mistakenly thought a shimmery window offered a chance to mate

with a really good-looking bird. I've watched one of our custodians make a barehanded catch of a mouse running down the trunk of a freshly cut Christmas tree. I've witnessed a custodian coax two neighborhood ducks back through the propped-open doors that they entered as uninvited guests, after he spotted them angling for the donut counter.

A few months ago, my wife and I dropped in to the Sunday night compline service at Trinity Church on Copley Square in Boston. The sexton was the lone greeter. Silence, candles, and incense met us inside the cavernous sanctuary. There were people present, too, though it was too dark to see how many were spread among the pews. A cassock-clad octet sang a Bach chorale, which I mistook for heaven.

When the 30-minute service concluded, we weren't ready to leave, so we lingered in the entryway, studying historic photos of this landmark church. My wife put a \$5 donation into the slot atop a tall blue barrel, which caused me later to fetch the sexton, who helped retrieve our money from the bottom of that blue recycling bin.

I took a photo of a bronze plaque on the wall. Something about this memorial to a man who gave 42 years of his life to mundane tasks struck me as beautiful.

My congregation has a policy that prohibits memorial plaques of any kind. There's not one in the entire facility. A wise predecessor of mine determined long ago that no gift or person deserves more elevation than any other. Every gesture of Christian love, he reasoned, is first and foremost about honoring God. We're in no danger of altering that policy in my years.

But if I were to put up one plaque, I think I'd want it to honor Matt, Jim, Harris, and Todd—our crew of sextons. Their spirit fits perfectly with the two words I found, digging through the history of Trinity Church, that were often used to describe Harold Emerson Miller: faithful and indefatigable.

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