

Whispering Hope

It was Sunday, early morning and early June, and our handball choir set out to find a little church in Orlean, Virginia, nestled in the foothills of The Blue Ridge. We rode through winding roads in the countryside to where we discovered Orlean United Methodist Church.

We were to provide bell music for their worship, a worship usually ministering to 25 or so congregants, perhaps counting the pastor, perhaps not. There were more that morning.

The church rather looks like one you'd find in a storybook. I found myself remembering the last scene from a movie called "Shenandoah," that scene taking place in a small church rather like this ... perhaps not as pristine ... in the countryside ... with its hardworking people coming to say prayers of gratitude ... to ask God's blessing ... and seek solace for their losses in the Civil War. A boy thought lost ... or killed in the War ... too young really to fight a war ... opened the back door of the church, and came into the room on crutches ... into the arms of a desolate father whose prayer had been answered. These Orlean people seem close knit like that.

From notes we see, the church's legend wound its way through various religious kinships beginning with The

*Church of England ... the Wesleyan movement in
England ... and the Episcopal Church.*

*The church was built in 1881 ... not long really after the
Civil War's end ... on ground in Fauquier County,
Virginia close to the towns of Warrenton and Marshall
... deeded specifically for the purpose of worship. It is
said that local carpenters and volunteers built the
church. It is said, too, that the now-called Methodists
in the community were hardworking people, among them
weavers, blacksmiths, wheelwrights, millers, merchants,
and farmers, with the more affluent estate owners being
part of The Episcopal Church.*

*While we organized our tables, bells, and mallets and
practiced our songs, we had moments to look at this
room of worship. The people gathered one by one, two
by two, the worship table was dressed, flowers from
someone's garden put in lovely places, and the pastor
placed his "books" on the pulpit and put on his black
robe, and worship began. I'm imagining that the main
book is the same "pulpit Bible" presented to the church
in 1883.*

*We rang "When Morning Gilds the Skies" as the Prelude
or beginning of worship. Its words begin*

*"When morning gilds the skies ... my heart awaking
cries ...*

May Jesus Christ be praised"

*The words seemed appropriate for this early time of day
... in this lovely place in a meadowland ... at the
foothills of The Blue Ridge.*

*We enjoyed the familiar ways of Methodist worship,
among them a rendering by the choir of an old familiar
song, one that I'd sung since I was a young girl ...
busily shelling beans in the summer ... on the front
porch of a cottage in a children's home ... singing its
melody with my childhood and lifelong friend. We had
no music to accompany us, but found our notes in
harmony one with the other ... always true ... as if
written on the original page ... knowing that our
kindred spirits would find us the tune. The song is
"Whispering Hope," and if you're old enough ... you
may remember and love it.*

*My old Cokesbury Hymnal gives credit for the song to
Mrs. J.T. McClelland and Clyde Willard, and the 1926
copyright to The Rodeheaver Company.*

*Its words sing to the morning ... to darkness and new
light. To "faint dawn" and to seasons of heaven. To
beginnings ... and endings and goodness in between.*

*"Like the faint dawn of the morning,
Like the sweet freshness of dew,
Comes the dear whisper of Jesus,
Comforting, tender and true.*

*Darkness gives way to the sunlight,
While His Voice falls on my ear;
Seasons of heaven's refreshing,
Call to new gladness and cheer.*

*Whispering hope,
Like the song of the angels,
Jesus, Thy love
Is sweet music to me."*

I was entranced by the small Victorian oak pump organ that sits up front by a tall window that let Sunday's light come in. It came to play a part in all these Sunday worships over the years when it was placed there in the early 1900's. I was touched by the harmony that came from the voices and the sound of the organ, as the organist pumped and played and sang all at the same time with the choir. I thought it so practical and so lovely to see that this treasured antique organ had circular "candle stands" attached to it, one on either side, perhaps needed in times gone by to give light to the music.

The tall windows that tower over the room ... over the old pine pews ... and the quaint little organ ... are said to copy early prairie style architecture ... intending to let in the natural light of day to enhance worship. On the chancel wall are stained glass windows rescued from

a demolished church in Philadelphia, one on either side of a tall wooden cross.

In this little church in the valley ... where joy abounds ... where its people are welcoming and gracious with others, where they will say to you, as they feed you delicious midday foods, "we're simple country folk, and we like it that way," our ringing of "Do, Lord" seemed a right song to ring because of its own joy and glorifying of the Lord. I was reminded of the beauty of simplicity ... and its way of not losing sight of true beauty ... of the earth ... of the light of the morning ... and the Light of Christ ... the light that we can find in one another.

Somewhere in that holy room "Baby James" heard the ringing of his mother's handbells and the voice of his dad in the pulpit. And surely other good sounds that will become part of his life over time.

It was a Sunday in Orlean. In early June.

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Preludes ... Postludes ... and A-mens: Songs of Life