

A woman in a red Salvation Army uniform is standing next to a large red bell kettle. The kettle is hanging from a red metal frame. The background is slightly blurred, showing what appears to be a store or warehouse setting with shelves and other equipment.

CHRISTMAS AT THE KETTLE

My life as a Salvation Army bell ringer | BETH ERNEST

In the spring of 2003, my husband was offered a position at a publishing house in Grand Rapids, Michigan. It was a good opportunity for him, and I had just finished an interim pastorate, so we loaded up two cars, two kids, fifty cartons of books, and all our other earthly possessions and headed west from New England to our new home.

As James settled into a new routine and the kids became involved with a new ballet school, a new violin teacher, and new friends, I was left to unpack and chauffeur offspring. Despite this activity, I was unprepared for the great void that came to my life. I had pastored five churches in New Hampshire, and my heart beat to the ebb and flow of parish life. An unfulfilled longing for my pastoral calling frustrated me in

ways my family could not understand. Sometimes I had to leave worship services (planned by others with no help from me) because I could not suppress tears of grief. My ears were alert to counseling opportunities among people who neither wanted nor asked for my pastoral care. Had God's call to me been revoked? It was a sadness I could not bear.

Continued unemployment was not an option as months passed and the family coffers felt the squeeze. But who would hire an out-of-work pastor? Ministry opportunities did not work out due to wrong timing or "wrong" gender or "wrong" denominational affiliation. I decided to try the secular route. An import-export firm declared me overeducated. A sewing store pointed out my lack of cash register skills! I

was desperate to provide for my family. God, where are you?

A sweep of the want ads in November revealed an opening almost anyone could fill—the Salvation Army needed bell ringers. Résumé in hand, I went to the largest citadel, only to be denied. I would have to be transported to my assigned location by a Salvation Army van leaving from a difficult location at an impossible hour, rather than driving my own car. Discouraged, I headed to a smaller unit. There, a kind officer took interest in my plight. Of course I could help. Of course I could drive myself. He would even keep his eyes open for other ministry opportunities for me. Thank you, God!

I was prepared to accept snow and cold for hours on end. I was willing (by that time, delighted) to accept twenty-

five cents over minimum wage. What was going to be hard for me was the very symbol of the job itself—the incessantly ringing, monotonous, tinny bell. Going out on a limb with my new employer, I asked if I might be excused from ringing the bell. Instead, I wanted to sing.

“Can you sing?” he asked. After I assured him that I had paid good money to learn to sing, he recounted the tale of a woman who had likewise insisted on singing and had gone on to offend the ears of everyone at her location outside a drugstore. She had been removed after customers and staff had complained.

Just short of an impromptu audition, he smiled and agreed that I could sing, ringing the bell only when my voice needed a rest. My location was to be a local Target store with an overhang that would, he said, act as a good acoustical backdrop for music. At last, a job I could do.

Back on the home front, my husband was bemused at my new-found purpose. I woke the first morning of my new position, wrapped myself in layers of wool, loaded up *The Oxford Book of Carols*, the Covenant hymnal, and my *Messiah* score, and headed to my very own kettle at Target. Since I worked the first shift, a Salvation Army van arrived shortly after my arrival, bringing the accoutrements of the bell ringer: a bell, an apron, an official nametag, and a ruler. Seeing that the ruler puzzled me, the driver explained that a bell ringer is never allowed to touch the money. The giver must put the money in the slot on the kettle. If it doesn’t go down, the ruler is used to stuff the money in, thus keeping the bell ringer free from suspicion of theft.

It is hard to explain how exhilarating that first day was. I thought I had signed up to help the Salvation Army raise money. What I found instead was that I had signed up to exercise God’s precious gift—the proclamation of the Word made flesh.

I had not preached in many months, but through the words of the ancient carols I found myself singing the gospel story again and again. We are used to

singing just a few verses of a few carols around the Christmas season, but my time at the kettle with the larger repertoire revealed a theological depth in these beautiful songs I had not heard before. Take, for instance, a timely verse usually left out of *It Came upon a Midnight Clear* (words by Edmund Sears):

*Yet with the woes of sin and strife
The world has suffered long;
Beneath the angel-strain have rolled
Two thousand years of wrong;
And man, at war with man, hears not
The love song which they bring;
O hush the noise, ye men of strife,
And hear the angels sing.*

Or words of pastoral wisdom from a Sussex folk carol:

*When sin departs before his grace,
Then life and health come in its place:
Angels and men with joy may sing
All for to see their newborn king!*

For the next two weeks I was touched not only by the carols from many centuries and cultures, but the effect this music had on the shoppers. Countless people thanked me for singing carols instead of secular songs: “We don’t hear the carols anymore.” Dozens of parents stopped so their children could listen: “They don’t learn carols in school anymore,” several told me.

The kettle was a natural for stewardship lessons, parents beaming as children’s little hands dropped money into the slot. I asked these young givers if they knew where the money went and we talked about the poor children their generosity would serve.

Often people asked for requests or asked to sing along. One man hobbled up to the kettle and said bluntly, “I want to sing one with you. One is all I can do. How about ‘Joy to the World’?” I asked him to pitch it for his voice and he let loose with a deep, sweet baritone that floated over the parking lot. After we finished, he said he had not celebrated Christmas in twelve years and thanked me profusely for allowing him to have Christmas again.

Another day, three college girls came forward giggling, as if on a dare. They

sang a delightfully off-pitch verse of “Silent Night” before giggling their way into the store to shop till they dropped.

Cups of coffee and hot chocolate appeared from shoppers leaving the store, deposited with a smile atop my songbooks. A security officer paid for my lunch before I could hand my money to the cashier. Another employee frequently stopped by to discuss his recent diagnosis and talk about the Dutch carols his father had sung. I prayed for him. A smartly dressed woman came up and stuffed a large bill into the kettle. Leaning in close, she said, “Thank you! If it weren’t for the Salvation Army, I wouldn’t have had Christmas as a child.”

Singing at the kettle gave me an opportunity to reach a wide audience with God’s word. These were not all people who would choose to attend a church service. They were not all people who necessarily believe that “Mary bore sweet Jesus Christ for to redeem us all.” Nevertheless they could hear the story of love that came to earth and participate in the generosity that Christ’s love awakens.

The financial gain from two weeks at twenty-five cents over minimum wage was lowly indeed. The real blessing came in the humbling opportunity to proclaim words of truth from a kettle pulpit, words sung by countless faithful voices throughout the ages. There was the welcome assurance to my uprooted soul that God’s call is not only for those times when we sit at trustee meetings or possess keys to every door of a church building. Rather, throughout fourteen glorious days, God reminded me that his call is irrevocable, and it belongs to him, not to me.

*O Holy Child of Bethlehem,
Descend to us, we pray;
Cast out our sin and enter in;
Be born in us today!
We hear the Christmas angels
The great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us,
Our Lord Emmanuel!* o

Beth Ernest, an ordained Covenant minister, is interim pastor of the Federated Church of Dowagiac, Michigan.