

In the Custodian's Care

Then Solomon said, "...I have built you an exalted house, a place for you to dwell in forever." 1 KINGS 8:12-13

Just who *did* clean the temple? Who buffed the cedar? Who polished the gold? Who wiped the noses of the cherubim and cleaned between their toes? Jumping ahead to today—who cleans the church after a reception? Who resets the chairs? Who straightens hymnals in the pews and removes debris from the stairs?

An ever-present tension within the body of Christ is the overestimation of the value of “up-fronters” when compared to those who minister “behind the scenes.” Of course, the tendency to forget those who offer ministry in the shadows is nothing new in the church. We remember eloquent Apollos of Alexandria (Acts 18:24) but barely recall the nameless people encouraged “to devote themselves to good works in order to meet urgent needs” (Titus 3:14). Custodians have pulpits all right, but theirs are to be dusted and polished; they have platforms to be sure, but theirs are to be vacuumed and put aright because Sunday is always coming.

Most Friday mornings find me on my hands and knees cleaning bathrooms. In our household it is part of a shared workload. As my wife con-

cludes her work week with a half day on Friday, I begin my day off cleaning tile floors, shower grout, toilet bowls, porcelain sinks, and bathroom mirrors. It is necessary and good work. When finished with the upstairs bathroom, after I've reset the shower mat, water glasses, and soap dispensers, I shut off the light with its monotone fan and head downstairs to conquer one more bathroom, and then the kitchen floor. The vacuum also awaits its workout.

With regularity, on Fridays I pray for church custodians. When my hands are gloved and the only incense in my nostrils comes from cleansers, I remember those who find themselves similarly gloved, alone in bathrooms or corridors, bending and stretching to reach corners unseen and untouched by anyone else. Their routines are ever before them. And the unexpected can undermine the best of intentions of their day.

I gladly pause to pray for them for at least two reasons. First, for several weeks during a high-school summer I was a custodian at my home church. The church had a need and so did my wallet. A sizable building demanded extra hands for special summer projects. Basically, I was a buffer, the operator of a circular floor machine that first removes excess wax from tile floors and then buffs them back to life. They are tricky to operate.

Too much tilt and the machine darts off like a scared rabbit, dragging its operator along with it. Like cleaning bathrooms at home, being the buffer at our church brought some satisfaction. It also meant that I could no longer walk the corridors of that church without glancing at the floors, on the lookout for fresh scuff marks. I knew who cleaned the temple.

A most surprising lesson that summer came from a few stalwarts who would remind me that they always prayed for the church staff, including the custodians. While I was guiding the buffer, that truth never left my heart. Cleaning the temple takes work and dexterity. It also welcomes prayer.

Second, my Friday prayers for custodians arise from years of local church ministry. Looking back, each congregation I served had a unique custodial structure for cleaning the temple. The Scotts Valley church had a live-in relationship with a retired couple. They literally lived on the grounds in their motor home. The Princeton church mustered the congregation into cleaning teams. The savings helped pay off a mortgage years ahead of schedule and became an intergenerational ministry. The Chicago church, given its size and complex calendar, employed a full-time custodian plus other part-time workers.

In every ministry setting the custodians, in offering their work



to God as servants meeting urgent needs, enriched my pastoral service. Numerous conversations about joys and needs within the overall ministry were often productive. Their insights about physical plant and maintenance concerns were often strategic. And times of laughter and mutual support often kept the demands of cleaning the temple and of pastoral work in healthy balance. Consider several key custodial roles in the cleaning of the temple.

Custodians steward. Just as other staff members and church leaders

steward time and resources, custodians are also stewards of intent. Ministry inside the facility has its routines. Ministry outside the facility often has custodians serving as stewards of the earth as they tend the properties. What people see *before* they enter the doors of the church can prepare hearts to find grace on the inside of the church. Do our properties invite or do they repel? Are they full of seasonal beauty and creativity, or do they indicate death before the door?

Custodians condition. Recently our dentist moved to a newly remodeled

location. A fresh sense of hospitality pervades the lobby and the exam rooms. The preparation of the church facility through the efforts of the custodian conditions an environment for the Spirit to work. Busy, often cluttered lives can find peace in a place of order and beauty. People can sense when they've been expected. People can feel the hospitality of God's house, conditioned by a ministry of intent.

Custodians assimilate. Custodial roles cannot be assumed only to be predictable; they are not merely confined to things and places. Custodians can become assimilators of newcomers as well as caregivers to the

Cleaning the temple takes work and dexterity. It also welcomes prayer.

wider church. Drop-in visitors, early arrivers, others who would like to get a sense of the church before they actually appear are sometimes met by custodians. Relationships often chart futures. A kind presence, even a tour of the facilities may have already happened before the greeters ever shake their hand.

So the next time there's a special event at your church with doors open and hallways clean, remember to give thanks for the custodian. The next time you enter a classroom for study or the sanctuary for worship, a wedding, or a memorial service, give thanks for the custodian. When you sit down at tables to enjoy a church potluck or a reception, give thanks for the custodian. And, if you find yourself on hands and knees at home, doing all that must be done, pray for the custodians who keep cleaning the temple, in season and out. ■

Doug Johnson is a chaplain at the Samarkand, a Covenant Retirement Community, and member of Montecito Covenant Church in Santa Barbara, California.