

2/10/2024

Traveling around the Diocese recently and visiting several parishes, I had the chance to interact with members of parish staff. I have a personal appreciation for the many ways these lay employees contribute to parish life.

As I have noted many times before, I am a convert to the Catholic faith, growing up in Blackstone, Virginia, and attending Crenshaw United Methodist Church. Diagonally across the street sits Blackstone Presbyterian Church. At Crenshaw, my Aunt Nan worked each weekday morning as church secretary, and at Blackstone Presbyterian, my Aunt Nene served in that role while maintaining a full-time teaching typing and business subjects at Nottoway High School.

Aunt Nene, as they say, was a character. As the only girl with five brothers, of which my dad was one, I imagine she had to roll with the punches. She was famously late for everything, peeling out of her driveway to get to school (relatively) on time, often with her coffee mug on top of the car. She probably didn't really have time for a second job as church secretary, but I'm sure her typing and bookkeeping skills made her the logical choice.

At Blackstone Presbyterian, one of her duties was to produce a bulletin, which in those times (the 70s) in Protestant churches was produced entirely manually on a typewriter and then run through a mimeograph machine to make copies. The church bulletin was not only a worship aid, but also contained announcements such as deaths and upcoming events.

Across the street at the Methodist Church, Aunt Nan would complete the Sunday bulletin by Thursday, in time for it to be received in the mail by the homebound. Aunt Nene, on the other hand, was usually running late, sometimes going to the church on Saturday nights after dark. I still don't know why, but when she did this, she took me, beginning when I was in pre-school, so she wouldn't be in the empty building alone. What protection I was providing, I couldn't say.

I was, however, a willing companion. I would watch her fingers fly over the typewriter keys, detailing what hymns would be sung, what scriptures would be read, and what events were not to be missed in the upcoming week. She would then put the stencil around the round drum of the mimeograph and crank out a hundred or so purple-inked copies to be distributed the next morning at church. If I got bored watching the production, sometimes I would roam around the dark sanctuary or go play with toys in the nursery.

I began to call Blackstone Presbyterian "the bulletin church," which is a lot easier to pronounce than its actual name, and some in my family still call it that.

I think Aunt Nan received a small salary for her work, but I have no idea about Aunt Nene. Regardless, they were dedicated to these jobs because of their love for the church and their devout faith. I know the same can be said for the staff of our Catholic parishes today.

God Bless,

Margaret