

Church After Dark by Paul Bishop

When most people think about church, they think about Sunday mornings. For me, some of my most memorable church experiences have happened at Third, after dark.

My first visit to Third was after dark. It was Christmas Eve, Deb and I were newlyweds looking for a church to call our own. After spending the evening with her family, we decided to venture to the big, beautiful Presbyterian Church on East Avenue. The service did not disappoint. The music was marvelous, the congregation friendly, and the sanctuary was a blend of welcoming and holy. The final act was the candlelight slowly spreading through the sanctuary, the familiar reprise of Silent Night and Joy to the World filling the air.

I have had the thrill of being a king in the nativity service on three separate occasions. Once each with Alex, Daniel and Evelyn serving as my page.

I've served as an overnight host for RAIHN on many of our 42 rotations hosting families in need. Most evenings are uneventful opportunities to relax with the guests and learn a little about their lives. But, I had the unique experience of standing next to Rod, in his pajamas, in the parking lot, while he politely explained to the police why we were there at 3 in the morning and no we weren't going to let them walk through the church and wake the guests.

Two summers ago, I spent most of a week with our youth while they participated in Mission ROC. Our evenings were full fellowship, fun and faith development. One night, we set up camp in cardboard boxes in the garth. Most of the twenty youth and a few lucky advisors settled in for a night outside. It was part of the goal that week for our youth to experience poverty and homelessness. It was almost quiet and then a roll of thunder, a flash of lighting and a summer downpour. The youth were able to

quickly move into the sturdy shelter of the church. And a lesson was learned that they were fortunate that a dry place to sleep was a few steps away.

That week, we also had the chance to spend some time in the quiet darkness of our sanctuary. It was an opportunity to pause and reflect in the stillness and holiness of the space lit by a single candle flickering in memory of those who are no longer with us.

This church is full of activities after dark – Mardi Gras, Advent fellowship, Maundy Thursday, music rehearsals, Living Water Wednesdays, and of course Qabats. There is also the core of the Presbyterian existence – committee meetings – the occasionally mundane but always essential activities that enable the rest of church life to occur.

For each of these experiences as well as those during the day, the sextons are a constant presence that supports the activities of the church. At all hours, they are setting up rooms, keeping things orderly, and assisting the congregation and visitors navigate the church. From experience, they are ready to troubleshoot when a breaker is tripped and they answer their phone at midnight when a strange beeping is coming from the alarm panel.

One last experience that I've shared with a group of dedicated volunteers begins just before sunrise on the first Saturday of November. For the last five years, regardless of the weather, a large cadre of our congregation assembles before dawn to put on the best road race in Rochester. A thousand or so runners and dozens of sponsors contribute their time and treasure to support Third's efforts to spread the light of the world into the lives of the hungry.

These experiences remind me that whatever darkness may surround us, there is always light inside the church.