



Smithsonian Institution

National Museum of African American History and Culture

Delegate Magazine 1980

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[[uncaptioned images]]

[[image - group picture]]

[[caption]] Hospitality Committee [[/caption]]

[[image - A Federal Employee of the Year Award presented to Mr. John A. Hindsman]]

Church ushers practice so not to mix signals

By PAULA HERBUT
Of The Bulletin Staff

A woman stood in the center aisle while 400 pairs of eyes fastened on her. She held her left arm behind her, her white-gloved fist against the small of her back, as she demonstrated for the gathering.

It was the "service position," Paris L. Watkins, a church usher for 20 years in Detroit, Mich., whispered to an outsider. It is a standard waiting position. Also, it is useful "if someone wants to slip a note in your hand for the pastor," he said.

Then, the woman in the aisle touched the corner of her left eye with her right hand. "It's as though you're brushing something from the corner of your eye," Watkins said quietly. With that motion "you're asking other ushers in the aisle how many available seats there are," he said.

In this way yesterday, about 400 novices and long-time church ushers gathered to hone their skills. The session was an ushering workshop conducted by the George T. Grier School of Ushering.

Should you be in the service position when you are "coming to do a duty?" a woman asked. What happens, another said, when you are wearing the large-framed eyeglasses now in style and can't touch the corner of your eye - which part of the glass frame do you brush?

And what about the people who push past the usher to find their own seats, saying "I've been here 20 years," another asked. "Let them go," Isaiah Tatum replied with a broad smile from the podium on the stage.

Tatum, a tall, solidly-built letter carrier from Los Angeles, is the national chairman of the association's school of ushering.

Now 50, he started as a church usher when he was 6. His wife is an usher, as are his two daughters, 18 and 21, he said. To him and others, church ushering has become, he said, both an art and "a profession."

The association of church ushers was founded 60 years ago in Philadelphia "to bring uniform ushering" to churches, said Alma C. Hawkins, of Washington, D.C., a church usher for more than 50 years and a spokeswoman for the convention.

More than 50,000 ushers from Protestant, and some Roman Catholic, churches across the country now are members.



The association's school of ushering, established in the 1940s, is given free by ushers volunteering their time. The school is offered at the local level to students who attend classes, usually at a local church, one night a week for nine months. Graduates receive diplomas.

Uniformity means that an usher from one church can go to another church across the country and use the same 21 hand signals, creating an unobtrusive way of greeting, seating and making worshippers feel comfortable in church, officials said.

"You don't want to stand up in a church and have to start beckoning," Mrs. Hawkins said.

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