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Gary Tallman

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# Church Ladies

## Reflection of Christian Women From My Childhood

by Gary Tallman

I am six years old (going on six-and-a-half), and October is my favorite time of year. Sunday school is over for the morning, and on the way into the auditorium I ask Grandma if I can sit with Aunt Allie. She's not really my aunt, but Grandma says that she and Aunt Allie have always been like sisters, so I should call her Aunt Allie. Aunt Allie never married, and Grandma says, "Sure, go sit by her. It will make her feel good, since she never had kids of her own." Aunt Allie always sits in the same pew on the left side of the building near the front. I like this spot because the sunlight filters through the yellow leaves of the sycamore trees, and the light streaming through the venetian blinds on the oversized windows is the color of burnished gold.

I take my seat to the left of Aunt Allie; she hands me a Bible and a songbook from the rack on the back of the pew. She always wears a cotton dress with big flowers, and a hat with a big rose on top and a white veil. She wears lots of red rouge and lipstick, and she smells good. Aunt Allie doesn't talk all that much, but when she does everyone listens. She puts her arm around me and gives me a quick smile. Her brother Harry always sits in the back pew on the right side of the building. His job is to ring the church bell. He rings it for two full minutes, one-half hour before service is to start and then for one full minute just before the service begins. The bell can be heard up and down the little valley. The first bell warns saints and sinners alike; the second confirms the saved and cautions the lost. Grandma says that Aunt

Allie and Harry's dad went to the first world war and left them on the farm with their mother. He promised to come back, but he never did. Their mother died during the depression, and they just stayed on and ran the farm.

Mrs. Juanita Matthews sits down to my left. This is also her usual seat. Her husband, Virgil, moves to the front pew because he will be directing the song service. Aunt Allie says, "I brought you some cucumbers. I know you like to make pickles, and we've just got more cucumbers than we know what to do with this year. If you can't use them, just give them to somebody else." "Oh, we'll use them," Mrs. Matthews says. She looks at me with a thin smile and asks, "And how are you?" "Fine," I say, stretching the word for several seconds to get that cute boyish effect. Mrs. Matthews is a school teacher, and so Grandma says I must call her Mrs. Matthews. She is a thin, frail woman with dark black hair tied up in a tight bun on the top of her head. She is the object of some talk from time to time because she was married once, before she married Virgil. Her first husband owned a lumber company, but he was a drinker, and Grandma says he was mean to her, so she left him and moved back with her parents. When the divorce was over she met Virgil, and they have been married for about twenty years.

Just before the service starts, Betty Ferrell arrives with her husband Herbert. He is in a wheelchair, and the men, who stand outside the building and talk before services, help lift his chair up the



steps. Betty wheels him to the far right-hand front corner of the building. He is there at every service. He was wounded in World War II. My dad says they

## *The women of my church inhabit the sanctuary.*

removed most of his innards and that he has been paralyzed ever since. All the women in the church say Betty Ferrell's name with a sound of pity; Grandma says she is "courage defined."

After the bell rings, Virgil begins the service by leading the congregation in a song. He sings loud, but mostly on key. Mrs. Matthews has sort of a squeaky voice, but Aunt Allie has a beautiful alto voice. If the singing falters, she takes command, and she has the voice to do it. Grandma says that she and Virgil have a friendly arrangement so that he is not offended, but relieved, when she takes control. Listening to Aunt Allie makes me want to sing like her. While we are singing, Mrs. Matthews always points on my songbook to how the notes go up and down.

The sermon is "Women's Role in the Church." I get fidgety, and Aunt Allie gives me her purse to look through. Its contents are a little different every week, but there's always a piece of gum or candy hidden somewhere inside. I see why today's sermon is not about eternity—because there is no use to hear a sermon on something when you are experiencing it. We all bear up under the preacher's fiery delivery. At the end of the sermon an "invitation song" is sung. The preacher, hoping for a response to the invitation, stares at the row of teenagers who have reached the "age of accountability." The young men drop their heads and shuffle their feet. Their fathers pretend not to notice. The young women hold their heads high and stare right back at the preacher. Their mothers hold their heads high, sing the song with vigor, and smile politely. When the service is over, Aunt Allie says, "Come on, Harry, let's go home before the roast burns." Grandma says Aunt Allie only says she has a roast in the oven so she can break away politely from conversations that could last all day. She and Harry have worked out this signal, which sends him trotting to start the car.

My grandfather died last spring. It was hard on the family. I have never seen my father cry before, so it was hard on me too. My family spent a lot of time at the funeral home. While we were there, Aunt Allie, Mrs. Matthews and Betty went to the house. They washed the windows, swept the porches, did the laundry, fed our dogs and cats and prepared food. When the family returned from the funeral, they were in the kitchen serving chicken and dumplings, cured ham, mashed potatoes, lima beans, home canned apple sauce and homemade pie. They moved through the crowd of family and friends like shadows. Occasionally, one of them would whisper, "My, wasn't he a fine man" or "Didn't he have a lot of friends." Never mind that my grandfather drank and chased women all his natural life they only had good things to say about him on that day. And that is the way they are.

At my church, the men stand outside the building before services and talk about things. Most of them are farmers, and they talk about the weather or the price of chicken mash or fertilizer. And they say, "So and so's barn burned down over on Little Sanko last night," or "Johnny Roberts bought a new Allis Chalmers—I never did like an Allis Chalmers—give me a John Deere."

But the women of my church inhabit the sanctuary. They talk about people. When a young girl gets married, they plan the shower, make the decorations and flower arrangements for the wedding, cook for and serve at the reception, and clean up afterward. They have a shower for every new baby and take food to the house when the mother comes home. They raise the children and teach the Sunday school classes, and when the circuit-riding preachers come to preach on "Women's Role in the Church," they put fresh sheets on the bed and prepare meals fit for royalty. They care for their elderly parents and their husbands' elderly parents, and when someone dies they clean and cook and comfort with soft whispers. And the men talk about things temporal, but I know, even at the age of six-and-one-half, that the church ladies are eternal.

**Gary Tallman** is a professor of biology at Pepperdine University.