

Postlude: In memory of a pastoral colleague

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [May 5, 2009](#) issue

There is not much applauding in the church I serve, and that's all right with me. When applauding in church becomes routine, it loses any meaning. But sometimes applause happens simply because it needs to happen. The gratitude and praise have to be released in that way.

My congregation applauds the children's choirs occasionally because we are so happy to see the kids in worship and want to make sure they know how we feel. A few weeks ago the chorus of Central State University, a historically black college in southwestern Ohio, sang in the morning services. The applause at the end of the singing was long and loud—an authentic corporate “thank you” that did not diminish the liturgy one bit.

Sometimes an ovation needs to happen because there is no other way for a congregation to express itself. Such was the case at the funeral of my pastoral colleague Dana Ferguson.

Dana was full of life. Her laughter filled every room she entered. Her wardrobe was anything but clergy-somber. The congregation loved her preaching, her prayers, her ability to find just the right words to gather up our deepest hopes, fears and longings. People pulled out tissues whenever Dana prayed. She brought to her ministry a strong commitment to social justice and to the inclusion in the church of all who wished to be part of it, regardless of race, gender, worldly condition or sexual orientation.

Last year Dana became ill. It was the return of a liver condition she had battled successfully five years earlier—not cancer, but just as deadly. She lost weight and became jaundiced, but continued to work. It is not possible for a person as visible in the life of a congregation as Dana was to prevent people from seeing and worrying. By the end of summer Dana went on medical leave in order to give full attention to treatment. She spent most of two months in the hospital enduring repeated

surgeries and procedures, none of which seemed to help. We tried to respect her privacy while honoring the concern of the many people who knew and loved her. On October 27, Dana died.

She had planned her memorial service, chosen the hymns and readings and instructed me to preach “a full 20-minute sermon, not one of those little bitty funeral meditations.” The sanctuary was full. The congregation took part in some great hymns, the choir sang, the brass ensemble played, her colleagues read and prayed, and I preached. At the end, after the benediction, three of us preceded the casket with Dana’s stole draped over it down the center aisle, following a bagpiper playing “Amazing Grace.” Dana’s husband and twin 11-year-old sons and family followed. The brass ensemble began the postlude, “Oh, for a Closer Walk with Thee”—and then, after one slow, somber stanza, modulated into up-tempo Dixieland jazz. Everyone knew how much Dana loved New Orleans. Smiles appeared through tears. People laughed as the strains of jazz filled the sanctuary.

When it ended, a most amazing thing happened: everyone stood and applauded. It was something I had never seen before—a standing ovation at a funeral. It was a corporate thank you for Dana’s life and ministry, for her laughter and friendship—a standing ovation, I concluded, for the amazing grace of God in which she lived and died.