

MUSIC & MINISTRY

By Jan Kraybill, organist-in-residence, Community of Christ Headquarters

KIMBALL
CHICAGO



When I was 3 years old, my parents bought a used upright piano. I remember clearly the day it arrived: I thought the wood of its finish was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. I couldn't wait to hear what it sounded like! But Mom was very clear: This was not a toy or just another piece of furniture. She told me I was not to touch it until she showed me how.

That first lesson from Mom a few days later set me on my musician's journey, for which I am eternally grateful.

Many years later, just months after I became principal organist for Community of Christ, my dad, also an important part of my musical journey, died from a heart attack. At the meal in the church basement following Dad's funeral service, a person I'd never met introduced herself. Shirley Emigh, from a nearby town in western Kansas, had been asked to bring the support and condolences of my new friends at International Headquarters, hundreds of miles away. I was so moved by that loving gesture.

As Shirley and I talked, she said my maiden name sounded familiar. We went through our backgrounds, looking for common threads. Nothing seemed to mesh.

After a bit more conversation, Shirley suddenly asked if Dad had a distinctive signature. A strange question—unless you knew Dad. When he signed his name, it was a work of art. We kids used to say it could take him 20 minutes just to sign a check.

Shirley said she remembered, a long time back, selling a piano to a guy who had a very distinctive signature. It soon became clear: It was her piano that had formed the foundation for my musical education.

I have always believed that talents are God-given, and this experience made it clear that God had set me on a path much earlier than I'd ever imagined.

When I first was asked about writing this piece, COVID-19 was an unfamiliar term, and I was continuing on my musical journey as a busy traveling concert musician, church organist, and organ conservator. But this virus has drastically changed all of our journeys. We are faced with challenges unimagined a few months ago. But by the grace of God, on the other side of this global crisis, perhaps we all will have grown in ways we can't imagine now.

What I know for sure: Music remains important to us. I've watched people turn to music during this crisis for

entertainment, distraction, background, inspiration, faith, and connection. Music is still important to me, too. Without calendar commitments to direct my time toward practice and planning, I've felt the strong urge to make music anyway.

The intersection of music and ministry has always been strong for me, whether I'm playing for a worship service or a secular concert. During my preparations, I say the same simple prayer: I ask God to grant that I will be a window for someone to glimpse the Divine through the music I offer.

The connection to spiritual concepts can be very specific. When I prepare the musical meditation that is part of Daily Prayer for Peace services at the Temple in Independence, Missouri, I have made it a spiritual discipline to practice improvisation skills, rather than printed music. Then, during the service, I listen closely to the prayers offered. For the musical meditation I offer an improvisation on the congregational hymn we've just sung together. To conclude the piece, I weave in the final phrase of "Let There Be Peace on Earth": "...and let it begin with me."

It's my musical ministry in those moments to remind us all that we each have the choice of whether our next actions help bring about the peace we seek in prayer.

I treasure these moments when music and ministry intersect. When the COVID-19 crisis ends and I'm able to make music in public again, I'll treasure them all the more.

About the Author

Jan Kraybill, who lives in Stilwell, Kansas, is a GRAMMY®-nominated concert artist. Among many achievements, she has been named organ conservator at the Kauffman Center for the Performing Arts in Kansas City, Missouri, and organist-in-residence at Community of Christ International Headquarters in Independence, Missouri.

