

2nd Opinion: Keeper of the house

March 8, 2013

The final Sunday morning worship service of February was to be Roger Stewart's last with his congregation. Instead, we held his memorial service.

After nearly two decades as pastor of Covington Church of Christ, Roger was retiring. On the Saturday morning before his last service with his congregation, Roger and Linda headed east from Covington on a mission. The couple needed yogurt. Unfortunately, they never made it to the store. As they crested a hill, angels winging their way to a spot east of Covington met them and took Roger home, while leaving Linda unscratched. At least, that's how I like to picture the scene.

✘ Roger Stewart I received the call shortly after the ambulance left the accident, and I got to the hospital as soon as I could, entering through the Emergency Room door to find a stunned gathering of family and friends. I joined them, too stunned to ask what happened, how it happened and why it happened. An elder from the Church of Christ talked about holding some sort of memorial service for Roger the very next day, and I didn't know any better but to tell him we would cancel our services at First Baptist Church in order to join them.

We stood around together a while longer, hugging each other, wondering, trying to find things to talk about, and then we slowly left the hospital. Before leaving the parking lot, I started calling people who needed to know about Roger and about the change for Sunday morning. More importantly, though, I didn't want to ride home in silence.

The next morning, we met for Sunday school and then walked next door to

the Church of Christ to join them for Roger's memorial service. Many were gathered from the whole community, including people from each of the local churches. Despite our sorrow, we reveled in the joy of Christ's body being together. We sang songs Roger loved, we shared words of hope, and we took communion together. Later that afternoon, I thought about telling Roger how incredible the service was and then realized I'll have to wait.

A couple of days later, I had the distinct honor of eulogizing my friend and fellow minister with the following words:

Stewart is a good name. It means "keeper of the house." That was Roger. Keeper of the house of Christ.

As "keeper of the house of Christ," Roger understood his duty was not that of the typical steward. He knew the door to Christ's house stands open, and invitations to enter flow freely. Such openness is unnerving to many Christians but wasn't to Roger. He embraced it.

A steward must guard the integrity of the house, and the openness of Christ's house leaves many wondering how the truth can be guarded in such an environment. To be sure, Roger guarded the truth. There is no doubt about that. However, Roger understood that guarding the truth does not mean holding people at arms length with it. He knew truth embraces and envelopes us, for truth is a person, Jesus Christ.

A steward is generally solemn, stoic, not one with whom to trifle. But a keeper of the house of Christ is to be a keeper of joy, and Roger did that full well. With his handshake, his smile, his hug, his laughter, he kept us close to joy. With his Facebook posts and his teaching, his music and his cooking, he kept us close to joy.

Roger Stewart, pastor of Covington Church of Christ, welcomed me, the pastor of First Baptist Church of Covington. He taught me what it means to be a keeper of the house of Christ. And he was my friend.

-Eric Black is pastor of First Baptist Church in Covington, Texas.