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## Just give 'em that old-time religion

*By Sloan Brewster, Record-Journal staff*

SOUTHINGTON — With men seated one on side of the church and women on the other, a drum roll sounded as the Rev. Gordon E. Ellis and his magistrates entered the First Congregational Church, signaling the start of a Colonial service.

During the service, Bob Mansolf, dressed in breeches and a white ruffled shirt, wandered throughout the church carrying a long pole with a knob on one end and a feather on the other. Mansolf, who played a colonial tything-man or beadle, was there to keep people awake during the service. If a woman were to fall asleep, he would tickle her with the feather; to a man, he would give a good smack.



Drummer Adam Szulczewski signals the start of Sunday's Colonial-era service at the First Congregational Church in Southington. The church's deacons are lined up in front of a deacons' bench. (Chris French / Record-Journal)

During the service, Mansolf did not catch any sleepers, but he did tickle a few faces of people he knew.

"Last year, I did wake somebody," the tything-man said. "That surprised me."

The 18th century service was part of a series being held at the Main Street church. Called "Worship through the Centuries," it demonstrates how services have changed over time.

Each Sunday morning for five weeks, the congregation will participate in a service from a different time. The series began Jan. 4 with a third-century service, which included singing psalms and reading scripture.

The series then took a 1,500-year leap, to Colonial America, bypassing the period before Protestantism, when Roman Catholics held Masses in Latin.

Before beginning the Colonial service, Ellis gave a brief lesson in worship from that time. There was no heat in the meetinghouse, he said. Nor was there instrumental music.

"The organ was the devil's bagpipe," the minister said. Congregationalists did not start using organs until the 1700s, and even after that, in many churches, music was still considered the work of the devil.

In Colonial times, church services lasted the entire day, Ellis said. "I will not preach like they would have preached then, or we would be here for several hours."

Though the service was a short version of those held when the church was founded in 1724, Ellis gave a contemporary sermon, during which he spoke of prayer.

"In prayer we connect ourselves with God, and therefore with God's power," Ellis preached. "I believe everyday that God blesses people in extraordinary ways. Prayer has great power. It's not some pitiful last resort."

The theme of prayer was carried into another Colonial tradition, a period during which congregants could ask questions of the preacher. In the session, several members of the church asked about prayer, such as whether it should be formal and done for a specific length of time.

Prayer need not be formal, Ellis responded. "I believe it's a conversation."

But, he added that conversations with God should include 10 percent talking and 90 percent listening.

Church member Dee Violet said she would like to see the tradition of asking the pastor questions during the service continue, because it made the service feel more personal.

"I loved it," Violet said. "I really did."

The service concluded with a drum roll as Ellis and the deacons exited, the congregation following behind.

Next Sunday's service will mirror one from the 19th century American frontier; the following week, early 20th century service is planned. The series will close with contemporary worship on Feb. 1.

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