

PRACTICING FOR PERFECTION



Alma Walter, an organist at Christ United Lutheran Church in Gordon for 75 years, plays a selection for Pastor Jay A. Serafin, top photo. Even after all these years, Wagner admits to getting a little nervous.



Tim Leedy/The REPUBLICAN



Organist, 89, serves church for 7 decades

By Andrea Walker
The REPUBLICAN

Alma Walter shed tears of joy and appreciation as family, friends and church members sang her favorite hymn, "How Great Thou Art," in her honor.

Last Sunday morning started off typically enough for the Ashland woman as, dressed in her best clothes, she entered morning services at Christ United Lutheran Church, Gordon.

But Walter was shocked to find her family sitting among the congregation. Four grandchildren, two sons and one niece brought their families to honor the great organist.

For 75 years, Walter has been playing the organ for the church. She started at the tender age of 13 and plans to continue until she is incapable.

Walter began playing the piano when she was 11. Her father, Irvin Fetterolf, played the violin at local dances and encouraged his 12 children to be musically involved.

Walter, the seventh child, and her oldest sister were the only ones who played throughout their lives. Walter is the last surviving sibling.

Church members nominated her to play the organ in 1919.

"When I was a child, I used to make sounds with my voice trying to imitate the organ and I finally got to play it," she said.

Last Sunday, the 89-year-old woman's face glowed as church members lined up to hug and

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congratulate her. She laughed and joked as if they were all her best friends.

With just a touch of gray sprinkled in her auburn hair she looked younger than her years as she sat among her family.

She is modest about her musical abilities and says she plays out of pure enjoyment.

"I love it. That's my life," she said.

Walter has also served the church in other ways during her 75-year tenure.

She served as choir director from when she was a teen-ager and was Sunday school pianist for 50 years. She was also a member of the church council for three years.

Walter is very active and full of life. For instance, she plays piano one a week at Ashland senior citizens group meetings.

She gets up every day to practice the organ in her home and practices in the church when time permits.

"You never stop practicing," she said. "My piano teacher told me music is insanely hard and easy to forget."

Those who know Walter, admire her.

"She's extraordinary," said church member Forrest L. Shadle, Lavelle. "She still doesn't miss a beat even today."

Shadle met Walter 25 years ago when he sang in the choir as a young man. He described her as the mother of the choir.

"She was very instrumental in keeping us together not only while singing but with extra-curricular activities as well," he said.

Ruby V. Snyder, Ashland, sang in the choir for 15 years under Walter's direction.

"She's a wonderful, warm-hearted person," she said. "She's a great church worker and devout Christian."

Walter was honored June 19 in the church fellowship hall. About 100 people filled the small room.

She was presented with a bouquet of flowers and fan-shaped bills adding up to \$75. She also received greetings from public officials.

President Bill Clinton and Gov. Robert P. Casey were among those to write congratulatory letters. The state House and Senate also sent her citations sponsored by state Sen. James J. Rhoades, R-29.

She seemed almost overwhelmed by all the attention as she asked, "Is it almost over?"

But after the ceremony she said she could not thank the people enough for the honor. She said the church was like her family.

"I don't know them all, but I learn more faces as time goes on," she said.

Walter played the organ for St. Peter's Lutheran Church,

Lavelle, until December 1992. Then four area churches, which had united to form Christ United Lutheran Church in 1969, moved to a new building.

St. Peter's closed, and Walter was chosen from among four people to play for the unified church, which has about 500 members today.

Walter now shares her job with three other organists, but says she enjoys the help.

"This is the first time in 11 years I've gotten to sit in the pew and enjoy the service," she exclaimed.

While she said she felt no nervousness the first time she played, she gets anxious now because she does not play as often. But nervousness is natural and good for you, she said.

Walter has been an avid churchgoer since she was a child growing up in Lavelle.

"Playing the organ and directing the choir has been her life," said Connie J. Welker, who has known Walter for almost 50 years.

Although Pastor Jay A. Serafin has only been with Christ United for five years, he saw the deep bond she shared with the church right from the beginning.

"I have been impressed greatly by her musical ability, her love and care for her church, her steady faith and her unswerving desire to make the music program and worship service of Christ United as beautiful as possible," Serafin said.

Her two sons recalled growing up with a woman everybody loved. They remembered standing around the organ in the living room singing while she played the organ. But most of all they remembered getting up every Sunday morning to hear their mother play during church services.

"When momma went to church, we went to church," said Donald L. Walter, Montgomeryville.

Raymond C. Walter, Levittown, recalled sitting in the pew, playing with his father's pocket watch as his mother played the organ in the background.

"Even today her first priority is the church," Raymond said. "She can be visiting us on vacation and having a great time, but when it comes time to leave and go to church, she wants to go."

Born in Mowry to Irvin and Lucy Fetterolf, Walter spent most of her life in Lavelle. She attended Helfenstein High School and was later employed by the local school district.

With 75 years experience, Walter has become an admired and well respected church member. Some say they never want her to leave.

"We refuse to let her quit," said Shadle.