



Warm Enough for You?

By Charlotte Johnstone

It seemed like a good idea at the time, Martha Ferguson thought some days later while wondering if she was perhaps a bit accident prone . . . although technically, what happened was not an accident—more like an incident. Not like the time she got stuck in the dishwasher, when she was trying to retrieve a lost fork and her long hair got entangled in the sprayer mechanism and she had to crouch there, half in and half out, for an hour until her husband came home and then he couldn't stop laughing. Or like the time she dropped a bowling ball down the clothes chute to loosen some impacted laundry and, when she opened the chute in the basement, everything shot out and the bowling ball broke her foot. Or like the time she flooded the bathroom trying to fix . . . oh, never mind . . . best forgotten . . . and, besides, unexpected consequences happen to everyone sooner or later, right?

No, she reasoned, what happened last Sunday at Forbearance was entirely Rev. Hustisford's fault, not hers. After all, she wasn't the one who made the recent rule that Forbearance's choir members had to wear their choir robes in the summer months—robes made of what felt like parachute material, guaranteed, in the church's unconditioned air, to trap enough heat and humidity to fell a bison. That was Rev. Hustisford's decision, acquiescing to complaints from Lewis Radtke,

Forbearance's starchy organist and choir director, that the choir's unrobed summer clothes left something to be desired, especially after Claire Flannery, sporting a skimpy tube top with considerable cleavage, appeared to the congregation to be naked while sitting in the second row of the alto section. It was robes all year after that.

And it also wasn't her fault that she had entered that time of her life when sudden hot flashes were being visited upon her, waking her at night and causing discomfort during the day. Who wouldn't, in her situation, take steps to ensure less sweat during a Sunday service when she had to sit up there in that sauna robe in front of everybody?

And who knew that five other similarly menopausal fellow sopranos would follow her example in the women's changing room, shedding everything, amid much laughter, except the barest essentials, before donning their robes on a morning when the temperature was in the 90s? She even brought a tiny handheld battery-operated fan along with her that day, passing it along the choir pew during lengthy scripture readings to her afflicted friends for welcome breezes spritzed up under the bottom of their robes—a discreetly billowing row of sopranos enjoying momentary relief.

And how was she to know that suddenly, just after he started his sermon, Rev. Hustisford, while unvisited by hot flashes, but nevertheless plagued by copious perspiration streaming here and there, would interrupt himself to take pity on them all, shed his own robe and instruct the choir to do the same?

"It's just too hot up here," he said, "and wearing robes feels like cruel and unusual punishment. So, choir, I know we made a robe rule, but today is going to be an exception. I invite you now to remove your robes—all of you—and I'm sure you'll be more comfortable for the remainder of the service."

Well, what followed was a general good-natured bustle of robe shedding, with the exception of six sopranos in the front row of the choir pews, who sat stock-still, seemingly frozen in place with remarkably blank expressions on their faces. There would be, it seemed, no merciful shedding for them.

"Martha," Rev. Hustisford asked, "wouldn't you and the others be more comfortable without your robes? It's really too warm for them today."

"Oh, no . . . really . . . thank you," said Martha, "but we're quite comfortable the way we are."

"Are you sure?" Rev. Hustisford persisted.

"Oh, yes," replied Martha, nodding emphatically. "Quite cool . . . really . . . no problems at all. We're sopranos, so we . . . uh . . . our voices work better in the . . . um . . . heat . . . so go right on with your sermon . . . so interesting this morning . . . really fine . . . and we're fine, too . . . so nice of you to ask . . . uh . . . really . . . don't give us another thought . . . please."

Looks were exchanged—perplexed between Rev. Hustisford and Lewis Radtke, amused among the altos, the what-were-you-thinking kind from the sopranos to Martha, and general puzzlement among the congregation. And there the

choir sat—in shirt sleeves, summer blouses and a few halter tops—with six formally-robed sopranos trying their very best, with varying degrees of success, to project poise and nonchalance about their noncompliance. In short, they were roasting, but it wasn't all from hot flashes.

After the service, there was much hooting in the women's changing room as clothes were hastily put back on. "Our voices work better in the heat?" . . . "Martha, that was priceless!" . . . "I thought I'd die!" . . . "I nearly dropped the fan!" . . . "You should have seen your faces!" . . . "If we'd taken our robes off, no one would have heard the rest of the sermon!" . . . "But consider this—the recessional up the aisle would have been sensational!" . . . "Well, I'll tell you one thing—I'm getting better underwear in case Martha has another bright idea!"

Nobody knows what the weather will bring to Forbearance for the next summer Sundays, but Forbearance's sopranos will be keeping their clothes on just in case, not about to take a chance on a pastor also prone to overheating. The little hand-held fan, however, proved to be a hit and, with five more purchased, the soprano section undoubtedly will be oddly billowing under their robes for the foreseeable future.

As for Martha, she was quite unrepentant. Women of a certain age, she thought, will do what women of a certain age need to do, whether anyone likes it or not—namely, air themselves out, cool themselves off and, yes, even shed some clothes when they can. A woman with a prolonged hot flash is a woman looking for relief any way she can get it. Besides, she assured herself, just like the bowling ball thing, it certainly seemed like a good idea at the time.

Charlotte Johnstone is a member of Immanuel Presbyterian Church in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. She wrote many "Dispatches from Forbearance Presbyterian Church" for *Horizons*, the magazine for Presbyterian Women.