

'Let's hope bells draw interest in Riverside'

In the Jan. 26 LIFE Religion Section, it was noted that St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Riverside "has erected a peal of eight rare and historical bronze bells" in its outdoor courtyard.

As a participant in the bells installation and change-ringer, I would like to elaborate on the event and shed some light on the special significance of these bells.

The bells which were hung are rung by the ancient art of change ringing. Bell towers like the one in Riverside are ubiquitous in Britain, where most every local parish has a band of ringers who ring for Sunday service, but there are fewer than thirty towers in North America.

There are change ringing bells at the University of Chicago's Mitchell Tower, but the next nearest tower is in Kalamazoo, Michigan, and most other American towers are in the East. (One of this country's earliest and most famous change ringers was Paul Revere of Boston's Old North Church.)

St Paul Church's peal is unique because it was originally designed to be a travelling set to be rung at expositions, rather than to hang in a permanent tower. The bells were cast by an English foundry and were owned by an Englishman

until their acquisition by St. Paul's. Their first appearance in the United States was in September when they were rung for the dedications of the newest ship in the Princess Cruise line in New York.

It is a relatively light peal: the eight bells together weigh approximately 500 pounds, which makes them somewhat more portable than the average peal. They are accompanied by a steel girder structure that is relatively simple to assemble but still strong enough to support the bells and the force they exert when rung.

The bells were purchased with money donated by a former parishoner, and much of the labor for the installation was donated by parishoners and change-ringers, most from the Chicago area.

This is an exceptional event for the area, not only because of the local rarity of this type of bells, but because of the special way in which they are rung. While many churches broadcast recorded music or play electronic carillons before service, change ringing bells must be rung by hand in an exercise that dates back to the early seventeenth century and requires long hours of practice to master.

The bells, which hang in a descending scale, are mounted on wheels and when rung, swing

in a nearly 360-degree arc, ringing once each arc. Because of their considerable size, it takes each bell a few seconds to complete the arc, so it is impossible to ring them to conventional tunes, in which one note might be repeated rapidly.

Instead, they are rung in a continuous cascade of changing patterns, thus the name of the activity. A sequence in which each of the bells rings once is called a change. One of the ringers will conduct, calling the bells into chosen sequences or calling a method, a set pattern determined by ordered rules, in which each successive change is different from the last, and no change is repeated.

Change ringing requires group effort and offers a participatory aspect of the call to worship to parishoners, but it also offers a rewarding activity in itself. Ringing is a joyful and captivating process with a extremely loyal following.

Something about this ancient activity, which requires surprisingly little strength but keen physical control as well as intense mental concentration, holds and addicts most who are drawn to it. The changes produced, if rung precisely, are compelling and musically pleasing to non-ringers and ringers alike.

Change ringing is presently experiencing a resurgence in this country with several towers being erected in the past ten years. I hope that interest will spring up around Riverside, especially as the weather improves and ringing conditions become more pleasant for this unique outdoor peal.

Meanwhile, visitors are welcome at Mitchell Tower where practice is held Mondays from 6:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. and Saturdays from 11:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m.

Kathryn Almy
La Grange