

'Church Piper' Shares Unique Music Ministry

Paul McNeill, of the Village of Hemingway, discovered his calling after a trip to West Africa for the U.N.

By **JAMES DINAN**
Daily Sun Senior Writer

Paul McNeill said his epiphany happened two years ago.

"In 2017, I went to West Africa as part of my work for the United Nations," the Village of Hemingway resident recalled. "I took my bagpipes, and the first months I was there I played in a couple of churches. Pastors and priests there must have monthly luncheons because suddenly I was being asked to play somewhere every Sunday. That was my epiphany, that playing inspirational music on bagpipes could be a music ministry."

Today, McNeill is a "church piper" who performs at houses of worship in and around The Villages, including St. Paul Parish National Catholic Church in Belleview. One of his more recent performances was playing "Il Silenzio" in honor of America's veterans Saturday and Sunday at St. Paul Parish.

"Paul is a brilliant talent," said the Rev. Fr. Mark Niznik, pastor of St. Paul Parish. "It's nothing but praise that Paul deserves."

Veterans Day ceremony at Veterans' Memorial Park of The Villages near Spanish Springs.

"I also played for hula dancing one time," he said. "That was unusual."

But McNeill sees himself, first and foremost, as a church piper. A regular church in his rotation has been St. Paul Parish, where he performed at services marking July Fourth, Labor Day and Veterans Day this year.

McNeill has a repertoire of 150 songs. Sometimes he chooses the music and other times it's the church or clergy.

"Some churches want me to play the processional and recessional," he said. "Others want a hymn in the middle of the service while the congregation sings."

Being a bagpiper may not have been on McNeill's mind after graduating law school.

After spending time as a tax lawyer, McNeill said he wrote to the U.N., pledging he could help solve many problems. That led him to working for the international organization in Africa and Asia for 25 years.

"When I was younger, I played bassoon in a symphony orchestra," McNeill said. "I drifted away from music, but that spirit came back when I retired to The Villages. I found the Sounds of Scotland band that teaches how to play bagpipes, and I learned from them."

He plays different styles, depending on what the church or clergy want. Sometimes inspirational or praise music at a faster tempo is requested. Other times, the church wants slower, reflective music.

And although he's not able to perform everywhere, McNeill has played for social clubs and golf tournaments. He also performed at Monday's

"St. Paul Parish has a loyal congregation with many Villagers," he said. "They are very open to having music be an important part of the service, no matter the instrument."

And St. Paul Parish appreciates what McNeill brings to the church.

"When he first approached me about playing the bagpipes, I found him to be a genuine giver," Niznik said. "And as he is confident, he remains humble

in nature, bringing joy to all our hearts here at St. Paul's. We are so blessed to have Paul with us."

For McNeill, playing bagpipes at church is a calling.

"One day it occurred to me that when I go to heaven, I'm going to be asked what I did to make the world a better place,"

he said. "And I couldn't think of what I'd say back then. Now, I play bagpipe music to churches. Calls to Christian service come in many ways. That was mine."

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PAUL MCNEILL
Village of Hemingway



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Paul McNeill, of the Village of Hemingway, plays the bagpipes with the Sounds of Scotland during the Veterans Day ceremony at Veterans' Memorial Park of The Villages on Nov. 11. McNeill regularly performs at houses of worship in and around The Villages.