

Beyond New York: Into the World

1. Buffalo: Beginning a Ministry

June 1952 was to be a memorable month in my life. On June 7th I was married to Eunice Blanchard at the Westminster Presbyterian Church in Dayton, Ohio. We had known one another for less than a year, nine months to be exact. The nine months had sped by quickly. It is amazing to realize that though we were living on opposite sides of the city and were intensively engaged in completing our studies, we had time to engage one another and to develop over those nine months a deepening love and an appreciation for each other's history and person. If we had any doubts about our coming together they were buried in our determination to begin a life and ministry together.

We took off on our honeymoon heading for Canada and Quebec province, with stops in Wooster and at a camp site in a New York State park along the way. We were fascinated with Montreal and even more taken with the walled city of Quebec and the shrine-filled countryside of the province. Outside Quebec we visited the Roman Catholic shrine of St. Anne de Beaupres famous for its many healing miracles. We continued on our journey from Quebec City into Maine, where we had our last experience of camping out. Early June was black fly season in Maine. We barely survived the swarms that descended upon us as we set up our tent in the late afternoon. We fought a defensive action all the way through cooking supper. We had been given a Coleman stove as a wedding gift. Setting up a Coleman stove, while fighting off the black flies was a troublesome combination. So much for Coleman stoves.

When morning broke we moved on in haste to the more civilized parts of New England with a stop off in West Hartford to attend the wedding of the sister of Reg Arvidson, Eunice's high school and DePauw College friend. From West Hartford we made our way into New York City with a stopover to see my father and sister. The summer heat in New York City had an early

start in 1952. My ordination in the small chapel of Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church was a warm occasion in more ways than one.

The ordination service was the second high point of June 1952. It was the fulfillment of a twenty year journey. Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church had loomed large in my life. My religious path had begun at Good Will Sunday School in March 1931 where my mother enrolled me at the age of five. The next six years at Good Will were filled with good friends and lasting memories. Religion was a fun time. There was sound religious teaching and a rhythm band and a choir. There was play acting Bible stories and picnic trips into the countryside with Mr. Riker, a dedicated teacher. There was the mock League of Nations and Christmas parties. My six years at Good Will was a solid grounding in Christian community. The people at Good Will, both the teachers and the students, were my "religious family."

My next seven years at Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church expanded my appreciation for the church as an institution. Madison Avenue Church had the buildings and the staff to carry out programs. Behind the programs was a commitment to become a meaningful part of the lives of the young people it welcomed into its activities. Madison Avenue Church taught me leadership and helped me discover myself. It raised my sights to see that I had the ability to grow: to move on in my education.

My decision to go to college was made at Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church. When I approached Philip Jones, the minister for Christian Education at Madison Avenue, he welcomed the declaration of my interest in the ministry. My ordination service on June 27, 1952 at Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church was the visible fulfillment of that decision. The Presbytery of New York proceeded with my ordination in response to my call from the Presbytery of Buffalo-Niagara to begin a new church development project in the Town of Tonawanda. The gathering at the ordination service was small. The people gathered were largely my immediate family and Eunice's mother and brother. By late June many people had already departed from the city.

The chapel held sad memories. The last time our family had gathered there was for my mother's funeral six years before. The decision I had made for college had been a difficult one. During my high school years my mother's health had been a continual concern. Her tuberculosis had taken its toll on her energy. She continued to visit Dr. Harry Dick, our family physician. He advised an operation to collapse one of her lungs. She continued to work in our tenement even with diminished strength. Her state of health was continually on my mind as I thought about my future. I was torn between loyalty to my family, which meant earning money, becoming a wage earner to help with family expenses, and knowing that what my future held would be determined by continuing my education. Madison Avenue Church had awakened within me a calling which had become an undercurrent in my life.

Beyond the recognition of Madison Avenue Church's importance in my life, the ordination service in the chapel brought memories of what my decision had meant for the family. There was never any assurance that my putting off my education would have averted my mother's death. But it weighed heavily on my mind. I knew that my own resolve had brought me to this place. I could only take comfort in the fact that my mother recognized this determination, and had given her silent approval to the road I had taken. My ordination into the ministry was a fulfillment of her own decision to see me "become a minister."

The ordination service was to be the prelude to a challenge. We had taken the call to the Presbytery of Buffalo-Niagara with the knowledge that the early efforts at beginning a Presbyterian congregation in the Town of Tonawanda had been troubled. This fact Paul Heath, the General Presbyter had let me know before I took the call. There had been some anxiety on the part of the pastor of Kenmore Presbyterian Church, the closest congregation geographically to the new church site. Those in the immediate vicinity of the site who had responded to the first inquiries of the Presbytery about establishing a congregation had begun meeting. Friction had developed within the group over leadership. There was also dissatisfaction with the Presbytery in its slowness in finding an organizing pastor. My meeting with the founding group in May had moderated some of this initial unhappiness.

They responded to our meeting with approval and with an eagerness to get the church under way.

When Eunice and I had heard about the possibility of serving in a new church development project, we responded without hesitation. The growth of the church in the post-war period, particularly in suburban areas, was phenomenal. The rapid growth of the suburbs was a mark of U.S. metropolitan development in years immediately following the war. For a young seminarian just finishing studies it was a place to learn the ropes. It was also a place to falter badly if there was not the right chemistry between pastor and the prospective membership. It took a lot of *chutzpah* to believe you had the necessary abilities and the personality to bring together a wide range of people from different backgrounds and mold them into a worshipping and working congregation. We went blithely on our way to Buffalo, praying that the Holy Spirit would make up for our shortcomings.

The site for the new church had already been chosen. The Presbytery had bought property at the corner of Elmwood Avenue and Homewood in the Town of Tonawanda. They had called it the North Elmwood Project. The site was large enough for a medium sized church building with a generous space for a parking lot. The site was next to the neighborhood public school. The initial group who had responded to the Presbytery's plans for a congregation lived within a five block radius of the church site. The homes in the area had been built, for the most part, under the G.I. Loan program which the government had established for veterans of World War II. Many of the new residents in the Town of Tonawanda were those who had moved from the center city of Buffalo on their return from overseas. The majority of the residents were wage earners - blue collar workers or those working in service or small business occupations. There was also a growing number of professionals and those from lower management positions moving into the area.

The geography of the area chosen by the Presbytery as a site for a church had disadvantages. The area was bounded on three sides by major roads. Two short blocks to the south was Sheridan Drive, a four lane road running east and west with a grassy divider in its center. One long block to the east was

Delaware Avenue, the major six lane thoroughfare running north and south. One long block to the west was Military Road which was zoned for major industries in which many of the residents of the area worked. Going north on Elmwood Avenue, the wayfare on which the church site was located, the street dead-ended within a half mile at Knoche Road and farmland which still existed in the area. The prospective church members for the new congregation were located in an approximately one-third of a square mile area. A large portion of this area was the site of Mount St. Mary's Academy, a Roman Catholic girls' school.

When we arrived in Buffalo in late June, we were invited to stay at the home of Paul Heath, the Presbytery executive. The Heath's were going on vacation during the month of July and we were given the keys to their house. The Heath home was a wonderful place to settle in for a month. It gave Eunice and me breathing time to think about setting up our own residence. In the meantime we scouted the Town of Tonawanda area close to the church site for a suitable apartment. My immediate task was to get acquainted with those people initially interested in the church and to bring them together in worship.

One great advantage of the project was its temporary worship site. The Presbytery had arranged for the use of the Elmlawn Cemetery chapel for our worship services. The Elmlawn Cemetery bounded our church neighborhood on the north and was easily accessible to those who were our prospective church members. It also was an ideal spot for a worship service. Many of the people in the area had members of their families buried in the Elmlawn Cemetery. The chapel itself was set on a knoll in the midst of the cemetery. The cemetery was well cared for and the quiet surroundings, away from main thoroughfares, encouraged a meditative spirit. The Chapel of the Elms, as it was called, could comfortably seat forty people with space for seating an additional ten to fifteen more people. A vintage pump organ provided the accompaniment for the hymns.

July 6th was our first worship service in the chapel. Fourteen faithful attended that holiday weekend service. The sermon title was from the Acts of the Apostles 17: 1 - 12: "Those Who Have Turned the World Upside

Down, Have Come Here Also." After the service on Sunday we received a call from Ken Motter, the pastor of the closest Presbyterian congregation. He carried on a cordial conversation with Eunice. After some initial inquiries he got to the main burden of his call. His congregational numbers were down this Sunday. He offhandedly asked how many people had attended our service. Ken Motter had been anxious since the beginning that the organization of another church in the vicinity would affect his own congregation. He was relieved to hear that we had only fourteen people. It was coincidental that Ken Motter was the pastor when Pete and Juliet Blanchard had lived in Kenmore from 1931 to 1935. Eunice had begun her Sunday School education at Kenmore Presbyterian Church.

Thus we began our ministry in the Town of Tonawanda. Our stay would last four years. At the end of those four years a congregation would be organized, a manse purchased, a church built and a congregation of 200 set on the road to ministry in the Town of Tonawanda. Kenmore Presbyterian Church survived our presence in the Town of Tonawanda.

By the time the Heath's had returned from their vacation we had located a third floor apartment at 110 Chatsworth Street in the Town of Tonawanda. It was located on the corner of Delaware Road, four blocks south of Sheridan Drive. It was about a mile walk to the church site. What was to be my study window looked out on St. Mark's Lutheran Church next door. Across Delaware Road was one of the last remaining farms in the area. During July we busily acquired the furniture necessary to make our new domicile home. Eunice and I had been busy picking out a kitchen table and chairs and bedroom and living room furniture. We now were ready to receive the wedding gifts which we had left in Dayton. They happily filled in our cooking and eating utensils, our bathroom necessities, and some of our lighting needs.

August was a good month to get settled in at 110 Chatsworth. I had made one hundred and seventeen calls in July, visiting and getting acquainted with those who were the initial prospects for the congregation. In August, the hot month in Buffalo, Eunice and I spent time getting our apartment in order. I made forty one calls that month. I picked up speed in September and October

making a total of two hundred and one calls. By now my calling was reaching beyond the initial list of people who had indicated their interest in the congregation. I had discovered the Welcome Wagon.

The Welcome Wagon, a service to acquaint new residents of a region with the businesses and services within an area, had made a call upon us as we were settling into 110 Chatsworth. Their questionnaire included a question on religious affiliation. I discovered that the Welcome Wagon records were open to clergy and representatives of churches. I made regular visits to the Welcome Wagon offices in Kenmore, the locality just south of the Town of Tonawanda. I noted the religious affiliation of all the incoming residents, not only to the Town of Tonawanda, but also to Kenmore, a much larger municipality. I went back to January, 1952, to register those who had moved into the area earlier in the year.

My calls had widened my field of contact. I called upon the names I had with the hopes that among those who considered themselves Protestant there might be some Presbyterians. And if they were not Presbyterians, at least willing to accept our invitation to attend our services. I soon discovered from my perusal of the Welcome Wagon records that many Roman Catholics were moving into the region of Kenmore and the Town of Tonawanda. Actually more Roman Catholics than Protestants. It made sense to me, since there were major Roman Catholic institutions in the area: a major Roman Catholic hospital, Kenmore Mercy; an important girls school, Mount St. Mary's Academy; a Roman Catholic cemetery; and the fastest growing Roman Catholic suburban congregation, St. Andrews Roman Catholic Church. St. Andrews was just two short blocks away from our church site on Elmwood Avenue and Sheridan Drive. This made the area particularly attractive to Roman Catholic people.

When the initial survey had been done by the Presbytery of Buffalo-Niagara to determine where to buy property for a new church development project, the Town of Tonawanda had shown a two-thirds Protestant population. By 1952 when our work began on the North Elmwood Project, the percentages had shifted and the new families moving into the area were two-thirds Roman Catholic. This made the prospect of organizing a new Presbyterian

congregation even more challenging. One also had to consider the fact that there were other Protestant denominations planning congregations in the area. One thriving congregation, which already existed only three-quarters of a mile from our site, was The Church of the Nativity, a Congregational Church. Interestingly enough Charles Sangree, the son of the pastor Huyett Sangree of the church, was a classmate at Union Theological Seminary. Huyett Sangree was a cordial and helpful neighbor. He invited our congregation to hold their Christmas parties at The Church of the Nativity which we did in 1952 and until our church was built in 1955.

I continued diligently to make my calls on people on my list, especially those within the immediate vicinity of the church site. Many of the early prospects had given me names of their neighbors whom they thought might be receptive. Late in the Fall a familiar name showed up on my Welcome Wagon prospective list: John Richardson. Could this be the John Richardson I knew from the College of Wooster. Although he had gone on to M.I.T., which was a joint program Wooster sponsored for prospective engineering students, I had gotten to know him during his time at Wooster. I called ahead to see if this might be the same John Richardson. Sure enough, it was John Richardson. I made my call at John and Lois' apartment on Hazeltine in Kenmore with great delight. I had learned that they were newly married. In fact, John had to kick out another engineer who shared the furnished apartment so he could make room for Lois.

John came from Disciples of Christ background, in fact, the Richardson family historically had been one of the founders of the Disciples of Christ (Christian Church). Lois, who was from Connecticut, was from Congregational background. But since Wooster was stronger than former denominational ties, John and Lois said they would come to our chapel service. Better than that, Lois agreed to play our pump organ. She had attended the School of Music at the Boston University and was an accomplished pianist and organist. They told me that the only piece of furniture they owned in their apartment was the spinet piano they had purchased with their wedding money of \$ 750. A pump organ was a come down for Lois, but she and John had caught the spirit of being part of a new congregation and threw themselves wholeheartedly into the project.

This was a tremendous boost for our small congregation. Music is the heart of Protestant worship. The presence of Lois meant not only would we have music support for our hymn singing, but we had the possibility of beginning a choir. John Richardson, who had been part of the Wooster Men's Chorus, was ready to lead the tenor section. We were later to have discovered that on one of the Wooster Men's Chorus trips to Dayton, John and another man in the chorus stayed at the Blanchard residence. Eunice was in high school at the time and remembered the visit of the Wooster Men's Chorus and the guests her family housed on that occasion. By Christmas Lois Richardson had arranged for choral music at worship and in February 1953 we were ready to begin a full-fledged choir. Besides her work with the Church School, joined the choir.

Since the beginning of our services we had been carrying out Church School for the youngsters in the budding congregation. Many of the families in our area had young children, so the need for a Sunday School was a high priority. It was also a major factor in drawing people into the congregation. In August we held our first Sunday School classes out on the lawn around the Chapel of the Elms. We had as many children in the Sunday School as we had people attending worship. By September, we had decided to hold Sunday School classes at the same time as worship in the homes of four families of the growing congregation: the Charles Graf's, the Walter Johnson's, the Geoffrey Kraus's and the Stewart Watson's. By September we had also chosen a name for the congregation: Northminster Presbyterian Church. Other names suggested were Elmwood Presbyterian Church, Church of the New Covenant, Church of the Evangel, Faith Presbyterian Church and House of Hope.

The Church of the Elms served well as a center of worship, but there was need for a place where the congregation could hold its other meetings and could accommodate a growing Church School. In October, the Presbytery purchased a home in the area of the church site to be used for Christian Education and other church functions. The long range plan was to use it as the manse after the church was organized and built. The house, 25 Waverly Street, was purchased by Thanksgiving. It was ideally located at the northern end of our church's immediate sphere of possible membership. Its back yard

ended at the property line of the Roman Catholic Cemetery. It was one city block from the entrance of Elmlawn Cemetery, making it convenient for people dropping off their children on their way to worship at the Chapel.

Waverly House was a delight for everyone, especially Eunice who had given herself to the task of setting up the Church School. She had already been involved in helping plan curriculum and developing teacher training. The Waverly House, as we called it, was a two story Dutch style home, with four bedrooms on the second floor and a generous sized living room and dining area on the first floor. It was an excellent house for conducting Sunday School classes. The men and women of the now growing church pitched in to convert the home into a building to house the multiplying activities of the congregation. By the time it was ready in February, it was seeing regular service for the Church School teachers meetings, the church organization committee, the Women's Association, the Men's Council and a newly organized choir. An upright piano had been acquired to accompany the choir which was attracting new members under the inspired direction of Lois Richardson.

By late Winter, worship attendance at the Chapel had reached the fifties with an equal number in the Sunday School. The Presbytery had been meeting with a small committee from the congregation to discuss the organization of a congregation. On February 9th members of the congregation appeared before the National Missions Committee to present their petition for beginning a congregation in the Town of Tonawanda to be named Northminster Presbyterian Church. After acceptance by the National Missions Committee the petition came before the Presbytery of Buffalo-Niagara on February 24th, 1953. Prospective members of the new congregation appeared before the Presbytery to express their commitment to seeing a church organized in North Elmwood. The Presbytery eagerly approved their petition and set the date for organizing the congregation on Easter Sunday, April 5, 1953. During the month of March classes were held for those who had signed the petition of organization to prepare them to be organized into a Presbyterian congregation.