

2. Beginning A New Congregation: Northminster Presbyterian Church

On Easter Sunday, April 5, 1953, Northminster Presbyterian Church was organized as a congregation within the bounds of the Presbytery of Buffalo-Niagara. This was nine months after we had begun worshipping in the Elmlawn Chapel on July 7, 1952. We received into the membership of the Northminster Presbyterian Church sixty-three persons who had signed the covenant of organization. Among those who had signed, eight people were making their confession of faith for the first time.

Northminster Presbyterian Church was one congregation within the stream of new church developments which characterized the decade after World War II. The post-war years were to see phenomenal growth in congregations, particularly suburban congregations, in all denominations. The exodus of families from the inner cities set in motion a tide which became the suburbanization of the United States. The record books show that, at its height during the decade of the Fifties, the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. was organizing a new church a week.

One of the early Presbyterian prophets of new suburban church growth was Jacob A. Long. Jacob Long, a former building contractor, had spent the decade of the Thirties as a pastor of a new church development outside of Philadelphia. In the late Thirties he was called to be an executive in the Presbytery of Philadelphia, and for there went on in 1941 to the job of Secretary of the Unit of City and Industrial Work in the Board of National Missions.

Jacob Long foresaw the outward growth of cities after the war and envisioned thousands of families leaving the inner city to begin a new life in the suburbs. Long was one of the first to recognize the phenomenon of "white flight" as people from their traditional neighborhoods bought new homes in the expanding suburbs. As the Secretary of City and Industrial Work, Long initiated a number of strategies for the church. One was a commitment to take seriously the churches' ministry to the residents of inner city communities who were

supplanting the older residents moving to the suburbs. Another of Long's initiatives was the creation of the Presbyterian Institute of Industrial Relations, which he envisioned as a program to train seminarians, pastors and laity in a ministry to working people. The third was a strategy for new church development.

Northminster Presbyterian Church was a beneficiary of this last strategy. The Board of National Missions, through the Presbyteries, had been providing loan funds to purchase property and to help build churches in new suburban developments. In my last year in seminary I was considering two job possibilities: one in Detroit and the North Elmwood project in Buffalo. I was leaning toward the North Elmwood project both because it was a new church development and by the fact that it was located in an industrial suburb. I believed that my calling was to be in industrial ministry. My decision had been shaped by my participation in another of the projects in which Jacob Long had a stake: the Presbyterian Institute of Industrial Relations.

The Presbyterian Institute of Industrial Relations had been created in November 1945 under a program Jacob Long had presented to the Board of National Missions. The program was begun on January 1, 1946 at the Labor Temple in New York City and directed by Marshal L. Scott. As Long envisioned it, the program was to be a center for "acquainting ministers, lay workers and students with the basic issues in the field of industrial relations." It was to be a laboratory for experimentation and a common ground for drawing together leaders from the church and from labor. Marshal Scott immediately developed three to four week resident seminar programs to introduce the issues of industry to ministers, laity and seminarians. By 1950 he had begun the summer seminarian-in-industry program which employed seminarians in industrial jobs for the summer correlated to an evening seminar program. It was my experience in the first "Ministers-In-Industry" program in Pittsburgh that helped shape my thinking about industrial mission.

Over half of the people who had signed the covenant of membership of Northminster Church worked in the industries of the Buffalo-Niagara frontier. Most of those people were in blue collar jobs, with a smaller percentage in lower management positions. I considered myself fortunate that I had rapport with

the people I was calling on during these early days in the life of Northminster Presbyterian Church. I easily associated my own background growing up in a worker's family, particularly during the Depression, with the job uncertainties and the stresses faced by the people I was visiting. At the same time my years at Wooster and at Union Seminary among middle class people, helped me also identify with the professionals in our congregation.

Early in my ministry at Northminster, I learned, with great drama, about the industrial context in which I was working. One bright Wednesday morning in September of 1953 I was preparing my sermon for the coming Sunday. Eunice had taken Scott for a morning stroll. It was a time of quiet in the apartment. As I was gathering my thoughts from my reading, a distant explosion broke my peace. It was followed by a resounding impact against the outside wall. My window shook with the force of the impact. I jumped to my feet and ran to the window. Off in the distance, in the direction of our church property, a high mushroom-like cloud was forming in the air. I moved quickly out the door, pulling on my jacket as I raced down the stairs. I jumped into our car and headed in the direction of the cloud. The cloud hovered in the air against a clear blue Fall sky. As I drove down Sheridan Drive toward Elmwood Avenue, the cloud was spreading out over the Military Road area. I turned onto Elmwood and stopped at Homewood Avenue leaving the car at our property site. I hurried down Homewood. Several of our church members were in excited conversation in front of their houses. "What happened?" I asked Marie Krauss. "There was a terrific explosion at the Lucidol plant. It shook everything in our house. We lost some windows." Marie Krauss told me. Elva Graf added: "There are bodies all over the place."

I ran toward Military Road, which was at the end of Homewood. Military Road ran north and south. It was dotted with industrial plants built to access the cheap electric power of Niagara Falls. A crowd had already gathered outside the chain fence of Lucidol, one of the many chemical plants which dotted the Military Road. The police began moving people back to the other side of Military Road away from the fence. Fire engines were on the grounds of the plant inside, some were still arriving. The sirens of ambulances from the Kenmore and Buffalo hospitals could be heard coming in all directions. The police continued cordoning off the area around the plant and moved the crowd to the other side

of Military Road. One glance showed the extent of the destruction. Crumpled steel, and loose boards and bricks were strewn across the ground. One building had been blown apart - the site of the explosion. The Lucidol plant had been a low level plant, probably no higher than two or three stories. Smoke and low level fire were still coming out of several buildings. One could see bodies lying in disarray across the plant property. It was difficult to tell how many people had died in the explosion. I knew that none of our members worked at Lucidol, but felt that I should be of some help. I saw at least one priest on the grounds bent over a lifeless body giving the last rites. It was a moment in which I felt completely helpless. The Roman Church had the last rites, but what could we offer. This thought ran through my mind as I sought to be of help. I realized as a Protestant pastor my task was in the comforting and in the counseling of the living.

On the next day, September 24th The Buffalo News reported that eleven people had died in the explosion. In addition there were seventeen injured. On Sunday, September 27th I preached a sermon on "Beyond Tragedy." My text was from Romans 8:18 - 29. My question was: "Is there any answer we can give to this terrible event? On our human level all we can say is that this accident had no meaning....that it was without reason. So we call it a tragedy because we cannot understand it. A tragic event happens in human history where men (sic) see life only from within these bounds, In God's history there is no tragedy. In God's history all lives are numbered. In God's history all events have a meaning." I tried to give an answer: "God speaks to us in this event of our love of one another. We are involved in each other. We read of one million Indians starving to death and it leaves little impression. We hear of hundreds of Japanese drowning in floods and we are not moved. But eleven men lose their lives in our midst and we are brought up short. Only when disaster strikes close to home, do we realize we are involved in all men's (sic) lives...Our community responded to this disaster - people offering homes for those whose homes were destroyed, others sending money to care for the needs of those hurt, others fighting the fire, still others treating the injured. All because we are involved in mankind." In the days after the explosion, when the effects were still taking hold in the community, I carried on my pastoring with our members and others I met. In our conversations we explored the meaning of the Lucidol event both for those who had lost loved ones and for those who were distraught by the sudden death.

From my day to day ministry, I learned that the strength of the church would depend upon those chosen as leaders in the congregation. As soon as we were organized, we immediately moved to the nominations of elders and the first congregational meeting for the election of a session. Two weeks after the organization, the congregation elected to the office of elder six men Earl Johnstone and Charles Gerber for three year terms; Clyde Brown and George Allan for two year terms; and Jack Fox and Stewart Watson for a one year term. Earl Johnstone was the only person who had previously been elected as an elder. He had been a member of the Covenant Presbyterian Church. On June 7th, the congregation elected the trustees. Harry Watson and Jack Fox were elected for three year terms; Geoffrey Krauss and George Myers were elected for two year terms, and George Master was elected to a one year term. In a run off election Elva Graf, our first woman officer, was elected to a one year term.

We were now one year old as a congregation. The acquisition of the Waverly House boosted the life of the congregation. It not only served as the basis for our Church School and Adult Bible Study, but it became the center of all other social activities. By the month of May 1953 we were holding all our official meetings there, our session meetings and then trustees. Our calendar in May included the women's sewing group, the men's council, teacher's meetings, parent-teacher meetings, choir rehearsal and a planning session for the rummage sale. By the summer of 1953 we were also ready to plan the campaign for our church building. We appointed a General Commission for the Building Program of Northminster Church on which sat Earle Johnstone and Stewart Watson for the elders, Jack Fox and Geoffrey Krauss for the trustees, and Dorothy Felton for the church at large. The committee was a temporary committee, we would be expected to elect a permanent committee after the congregation had become acquainted with the long range responsibilities of planning, financing and building a church. By September the initial building committee was ready to meet with a committee from Presbytery to discuss what we would be expected to do as we planned for our church building campaign.

In the meantime, a great event happened in the Poethig family. Eunice had discovered in November that she was pregnant. This revelation added a spirit of expectancy to our lives during the first half of 1953. During this time I learned

the meaning of sympathetic sickness. It was good to learn early in the experience of parenthood. In the late Winter I began feeling more than the usual winter blues which are a common ailment in the Buffalo region. I had pains and great discomfort in my groin. I was moved to seek the advice of a doctor. The doctor I chose was a woman generalist in the Kenmore area. She was German by background, and had a very assuring manner in her examination. She sat me down in her office and with her distinct German accent, pursued a line of questioning about myself, my family and all their illnesses. She listened to me carefully and after I had finished my essay on the life and health of the Poethig's, she asked: "Your wife and how is she?" I told her that she was fine, but that she was about five months into her pregnancy. She shook her head knowingly and with a half-quizzical smile told me: "Mr. Poethig I will give you some pills to calm down your intestines, but what you really have is a sympathetic sickness. You are feeling the same discomfort as your wife in her pregnancy. This is common with young fathers. I think you will live."

Even with the good doctor's advice, as July 4th approached I lived in great suspense. Eunice's time had been set for the last week of June. One of the responsibilities of the younger pastors in the Presbytery was to serve as counselors in the summer camping program at Camp Duffield. I had been signed up to serve in the third week of July - from Sunday July 19th to Saturday, July 25th for the junior high camp. By the second week of July Eunice had not yet delivered. I considered calling the camping committee asking them to find a substitute. This was not a kind action, since there were few substitutes around now that we were in July. On Thursday evening, July 16th, Eunice began her labor. We moved with deliberate haste from 110 Chatsworth through Kenmore down Delaware Avenue to Millard Fillmore Hospital in Buffalo. Dr. Louis Farris, Eunice's obstetrician, was called. He arrived and my anxious waiting began.

After considerable pacing back and forth in the waiting room of the maternity ward, I was notified by Dr. Farris as he exited the delivery room on Friday morning, July 17th that I was the father of a nearly 10 pound Richard Scott Poethig. As I got my first glimpse of Richard Scott, I saw a robust, rotund, reddened face. Distinct clamp indentations marked the side of his head. He was making a lot of noise so I knew he was a healthy child. When I saw Eunice I

was even more relieved. Together we celebrated the beginning of the Poethig family. Juliet Blanchard came hastily to our aid. As she welcomed her first grandchild into the world, I headed off to Camp Duffield with great chagrin to do my duty with rambunctious junior highs.

In the last two weeks of August we took our first vacation. I had heard much about "the Lake" in Wisconsin and now I, along with five week old Scott, was to be initiated into the wonders of Lake Archibald. Scott had a special distinction as we arrived at the Lake. He was the youngest guest to visit Pine Knot - the family log cabin. As we drove past the stone gates and down the road to the Lake landing, I had my initiation into the rites of passage. I discovered there were two islands, the much larger Holt island on which there were two main cabins, and the smaller Blanchard island. Guests identified who they were visiting by signaling a special honking code. The honks would produce a boat at the Lake landing. Four short honks were required to rouse the welcomers at Pine Knot on the small island. I was beginning to sense the specialness of the place. As we were escorted across the lake to Pine Knot, there suddenly appeared a boat with a large white banner inscribed in big red letters "Welcome Poethigs." We had arrived.

The dock on the small island was the entrance into an enchanted world. For a person who had known only the man-made structured textures of Central Park, here was a natural world of green, growing things - all contained within a small island. Hemlocks, six feet around, extending eighty feet into the air, provided a canopy of green through which random rays of the sun fell on a soft brown carpet of needles. The intermingling of light and shadow were a delight to the eye. As I walked up the path toward the cabin I breathed in deeply - the air was filled with pine fragrance. My lungs were unfamiliar with such pure green air. The cabin was a welcome sight. One had the feeling that it had been waiting for us to arrive. It was the beginning of a romance for me. Over the years I was to learn many things from Pine Knot - chief of which was the respect for the natural world and a new understanding of the mystery of Creation.

A new dimension was added to life at 110 Chatsworth. We had to rearrange our world. We first began with the furniture. Scott was with us and he needed his share of space. There needed to be a crib, a play pen, and a low chair and then a

high chair. Furniture had to be reorganized. There also were feeding schedules, in which Eunice was the major player. When it got around to bottles, I was dealt into the game. Soon all breakables had to be moved out of reach. Then books had to be bought and reading time scheduled. Scott had come at the right time in the life of Northminster Church. He had many companions in his social world of the church school. Eunice had a live example of how one related church school materials to a growing child. On October 11th, 1953, at nearly three months of age, Scott was brought into the Christian church family. I baptized our first born in the Little Chapel of the Elms.

Northminster entered into the family of churches in the Kenmore and Town of Tonawanda area when the Kenmore Ministerial Association asked me to preach at the community Thanksgiving Day service. The service was to be held at the Kenmore Presbyterian Church. It was the largest gathering I had preached to in my year and a half of ministry. The year of 1953 had seen the rise of Senator Joseph McCarthy, the junior Republican Senator from Wisconsin in his unconscionable attacks on anyone he thought was a Communist or Communist sympathizer. His campaign targeted and ruined the careers of many people, many of whom were not remotely affiliated to Communist organizations. His tactics created a "red scare" and stirred up a hysteria of accusations and condemnations within the U.S. which was to visibly affect U.S. politics. In my sermon I had chosen to draw upon the example of the Puritans from several points of view. One was the inclusivity which was the basis of our nation's strength. "We are all pilgrims in this land whether our ancestors landed at Plymouth Rock or Ellis Island." I pointed to the interdependence in relation to other countries in the world which was both our need and our strength. I underscored the importance of religious freedom which was the basis for the pilgrim's journey to the new world. "The pilgrims began that flame of freedom and others came to feed that flame until it burst into the conflagration of the American Revolution. To preserve this flame of freedom for all, our Founding Fathers put it into words in the Constitution and in the Bill of Rights. Today, as always, there are those who would see this flame go out...Some there are today who would sell their freedom in a fit of blind hysteria. Hysteria can do strange things to a person's mind...It can take away their reason and leave them as a tool to be used by any demagogue that comes along. In its blindness, hysteria can make you strike out at anything....So in order to save the tree of freedom,

hysteria will urge you to cut down the whole tree...There is a need for cool-headedness in dealing with those things we see as a threat to our freedom. Freedom is a spiritual blessing and by its nature it involves all of our life. We cannot begin by taking away freedom at one point without endangering it at another. We cannot treat our Bill of Rights as a Bill of Fare from which we can select at random that which we like or don't like at any one time and then change our order to suit our present emotional temperature....We cannot say I will have freedom of the press and not freedom of speech, or I will have freedom of religion and not freedom of assembly. They are all part of the same spirit of freedom. "

Freedom, I pointed out, is not a reason for lawlessness. Freedom is founded upon responsible action. "Freedom does not mean you can plot to overthrow the government of the United States...This is irresponsible action and is treasonable under U.S. law. Nor should your freedom give you the right of character assassination, nor should it give you the right of judging someone guilty by association, nor should it give you the right to accuse persons of disloyalty on uncorroborated evidence and without the right to reply to their accusers. These are irresponsible actions and are the beginning of the breakdown of American freedom. Freedom is not taken away from outside, but it is undermined from within. "

Northminster Church continued to grow both in attendance at worship at the Little Chapel of the Elms and in our Church School at Waverly House. As attendance grew so did the pressure on the building committee to move the process of church building plans forward. During November the building committee set about visiting five new churches in the Buffalo area which had been built in the previous three years. On December 9th they met with the Presbytery's Committee on New Church Development to discuss plans for the possible building of a church in 1954.

On January 17, 1954 the permanent building committee was appointed. The general chairman was Earl Johnstone; the secretary, Mrs. Helen Severns; Jack Shepp served as chair of the Worship Committee; Eunice Poethig was appointed to chair the Christian Education Committee; Paul Markey headed the Fellowship

and Recreation Committee; Jack Fox led the Committee on Construction and Plans; Stewart Watson would direct the Promotion Committee; Katherine McMillan chaired the Finance Committee; and George Myers oversaw the work of the Committee on Equipment and Furnishings. As the committee structure was put into place I became aware of the various talents that were needed to build a church. What was even more amazing was that there were so many people, with such a variety of skills and a store of energy, ready to make it happen. So everybody would feel part of the process, the larger congregation was asked to choose a committee on which they would like to serve. Building committee forms went out to all members for them to state their preferences.

In the months of February and March the building committee pursued their search for a church architect. By Palm Sunday, April 11th, they informed the congregation that they had chosen Guy H. Baldwin of Duane, Lyman and Associates. On April 20th Guy Baldwin was to present the first plans for the church building to the General Building Committee. Our visits in the Fall of 1953 to the new churches built in the Western New York region had shown us the kind of thinking which went into church building. There was obviously a basic floor plan for a church sanctuary. After this floor plan was met, then the imagination of the architect was called into play. How did he, there were not many "she's" in the early '50s, express the spiritual nature of the faith in form and design. We had seen some very captivating church buildings - the Missouri Synod Lutherans seemed to have a corner of imaginative churches in our day. We soon learned, however, that the ability to let one's imagination run wild was limited by the budget raised by the congregation.

This was the next important step in the Northminster church building program. The "kick-off" to our church building campaign was scheduled for Sunday, May 2nd. It was to be the "Good Faith" campaign. Two teams "Good" and "Faith" were to carry out their building fundraising in two weeks. My sermon of May 2nd was called "Faith in Action." I reminded those gathered that morning that the Presbytery of Buffalo-Niagara had already placed its faith in the young congregation by making financial grants of over \$ 25,000. Most of this had gone into the purchase of the Waverly House, which would become the manse once the church was built. Further the Presbytery has committed itself to a grant of \$35,000 toward the building of the church. "But it does not stop there. Every

Presbyterian Church in the United States has good faith in us. They have contributed, through the nation-wide building program of the Presbyterian Church, USA, well over eleven million dollars to be used for new church development. So now it is our time to respond in good faith."

On Sunday, May 16th I was able to announce to the congregation the successful completion of the "Good Faith" campaign. Katherine McMillan, the chair of the Finance Committee, had done her job well. Three quarters of the way through the campaign the congregation had already met the goal set for it. Together with the \$35,000 pledged by the Board of National Missions of the Presbyterian Church from the national campaign, the Northminster congregation had \$ 70,000 available for its church building.

On that Sunday, I pursued some very practical thinking about the church building. I set before the congregation the options they had for their building. "Our immediate concern is whether we shall build a one story or a two story structure. The plans we have received establish the alternative of building with or without a basement. The advantage of building with a basement is that in building lengthwise down Homewood Avenue we would leave a greater area in which to expand at some later date. Two further advantages would be that such a building would cost less to build and in over-all maintenance should be more inexpensive to keep up. "

" On the other hand, the one floor plan - or the unit plan - would include the Sanctuary with the Christian Education building extending at a right angle. The advantage of the one floor plan is that there is more opportunity to develop style and design in the building. The trend today in church architecture is away from building basements, on the grounds that they are usually unfinished and unattractive and that it is not a good place for Sunday School to be held. Another option is to erect a building which will serve now as both a sanctuary and a fellowship hall. In this plan provision would be made to curtain off the chancel when the building is not being used for worship. The advantage of this plan is that the main sanctuary could be built later when the congregation has grown. Then the first building would become the Sunday School. The disadvantage of this plan is that the reverence which is due the sanctuary might

be lost if the same room where worship is held were used the night before for a family supper or dance.”

“Before we can consider anything we must have the foresight to see what our church will mean for this community. We have to see ahead to the needs of the future. From the experience of other new churches in this area, the Sunday School will outgrow its facilities within the first year in the new building. Our Sunday School had doubled each year since the beginning. Starting in the Spring of 1952 with twenty-five youngsters we now have two years later one hundred students. This may taper off but we should still be prepared to have a Sunday School of between 150 to 200 when we enter our new building. On the other hand, our immediate need for floor space in the sanctuary will not be as great as in our Church School. Most new churches have accommodated their increased membership by holding two church services. ”

After the July 25th worship service, the congregation approved Guy Baldwin’s plans for a two story church building. The basement was planned for both a fellowship hall and for Sunday School space provided with moveable partitions. A call for bids on building the church was put out to contractors. On November 1st an official meeting was held in Waverly House at which Paul Heath, the General Presbyter and Jack Fox, chair of the Trustees, presented the financial arrangement of the Northminster building program for acceptance by the congregation. On November 29th, the congregation meeting as a corporation approved the contractors’ bids preparatory to breaking ground for the building of Northminster Presbyterian Church on December 12th, 1954.