

3. Life on the Buffalo -Niagara Frontier

I was called to the Presbytery of Buffalo-Niagara for one task - to organize a congregation in the Town of Tonawanda. The Presbytery had conducted a survey in the early 1950's to determine if a new congregation was feasible in the Town of Tonawanda. After the Second World War both the Lutherans and the Congregationalists had built churches in the area. Was there room for another congregation? After the survey the Presbytery decided that there was and it would use the property it owned on Elmwood and Homewood for the site of a congregation. I was called to the Presbytery of Buffalo-Niagara to organize this congregation.

At the time there was considerable disagreement in the denomination over the calling of seminary graduates as organizing pastors. Organizing a congregation presumed wide ranging experience in leading worship, in preaching, in pastoral care and in developing and sustaining those programs which would under gird Christian faith and congregational growth. Most seminary graduates had only peripheral experience in the work of a congregation. Nevertheless, I jumped into the situation with both feet. I was aware that I had the support of Eunice and I counted on her experience in Christian education. I also recognized the central role of the Presbytery. I was being hired and paid by the Presbytery until I had the congregation underway. Over time my personal experience made me a strong supporter of the Presbytery in the governance of the Presbyterian Church.

The Presbytery had provided the initial funding for the demographic survey and had purchased the property for the church building. The Presbytery initially provided my salary and housing allowance of \$ 1800. When it was needed, the Presbytery granted the money for the purchase of Waverly House for Sunday School and church meetings. After Northminster was organized, the Board of National Missions, through the Presbytery, made a grant of \$ 35,000 toward the building of the church. I learned quickly that Presbytery was the linch-pin in the process of bringing about change in the church. I recognized early in my ministry the centrality of the Presbytery and participated fully in its programs.

One of the strengths of new church development after World War II was the church school. Newly established families provided the backbone for the creation of new churches. As families grew, parents saw the need for the religious education of their children. This created the need for new church school curriculum. The Board of Christian Education of the Presbyterian Church recognized this fact and invested heavily in the development of its Christian Faith and Life Curriculum. The Christian Faith and Life curriculum was conceived in the light of the new generation coming out of the Second World War and neo-orthodox theology. The theological consensus in the Presbyterian Church at the time was premised on a theology which saw God working in history.

Northminster Church was typical of new churches being organized and built in the 1950s. We concentrated our energies on the development of a lively church school with the full participation of both men and women. Fortunately for Northminster, and for Richard Poethig, we had a well-trained and dedicated religious educator in Eunice Poethig. Eunice played a vital role in the development of the Church School, never officiously, but always as a participant alongside other parents in the church. It also helped that within three years of our arrival in Buffalo we were the parents of two children.

From the beginning the development of the church school had the special attention of Eunice. She was acquainted with curriculum development and teacher's training. She became quickly knowledgeable of those people in the Buffalo area who might be of assistance to the development of skills of the teachers and parents in the Northminster Church. The Northminster Church Women's Association as well as the teachers' program were put in touch with the religious education program called the School of Religious Impression under Josephine Bliss at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Buffalo. The Women's Association was also introduced to "Religious Books for Young Children" by Sigrid Grottem of the Buffalo Council of Churches. Teacher training sessions were held to acquaint those teaching in our Church School with the resources developed in Christian Faith and Life curriculum. Eunice also helped initiate parent-teacher meetings in an effort to win parents' support in the home use of the Christian Faith and Life curriculum. Adult education was also included in

the neophyte church school program of Northminster. Charles Gerber, one of the early elders, taught a lively class on the Bible in this program.

In the decade following the war there was a deep commitment to the Christian Education curriculum of the Presbyterian Church. The Board had allocated a great deal of money to develop the Christian Faith and Life Curriculum and they recognized from the beginning the heavy theological content of the material. They had enlisted the sharpest and most respected religious scholars to write the curriculum and had published their efforts in attractive books for both the youth and adult education programs. The Board, therefore, saw the need for intense preparation of those who would be teaching the material. They also asked that parents be included in sessions explaining the curriculum. In the Spring of 1954 the Presbyterian Board of Christian Education called for a program in the presbyteries which would bring together pastors to discuss the preparation of teachers within the church schools. They wanted to assure that use of the curriculum would get off to a good start.

The meeting in Buffalo-Niagara Presbytery brought together pastors and Christian educators who had a commitment to education. Of those who had responded to the call for support of the curriculum a group of fifteen pastors decided to go one step further. We decided to meet monthly to discuss the major theological questions incorporated in the curriculum. Many of those who responded were concerned with seeing the issues in the light of the crises we were facing in the world. The Cold War was a reality. We were living in a nuclear age. Senator Joe McCarthy was threatening the basic foundations of Constitutional freedom with his broad scale red-baiting attacks. Political realism was the spirit of the day. Each month a pastor would prepare a paper, often drawn from one of the themes involved in the adult education materials in the Christian Faith and Life series. Half of the group were from among the older heads within the Presbytery, the remaining preachers tended to be more recent seminary graduates - mostly from Union Theological Seminary with a smaller contingent from Princeton. We moved around the Presbytery, meeting at a different church each month. The monthly meetings were high on the agenda of all those participating. The papers delivered were well prepared and the discussion provided an intense exchange of views - not all participants were of

the same theological persuasion. Even more important a genuine respect grew among those who took time out to participate.

I feel fortunate as I look back at these years that my commitment to the importance of Christian Education in the life of the congregation was shaped in such dynamic times and around such well thought out curriculum. Through my participation in the pastor's discussion group I made some crucial friends in the Presbytery. A. Ray Lewis, pastor at the North Presbyterian Church in Tonawanda, a near neighbor to our work, was a main player in the Christian Education program in the Presbytery. He was a thoughtful and effective pastor and became an important mentor in my early ministry at Northminster. One of my first sermons outside of my own small flock at the Elmlawn Cemetery chapel was in a pastoral exchange with Ray Lewis at his North Presbyterian Church. The comment of Charlotte Lewis to Eunice after the service at the Lewis dinner table was: "I see that you really have married a preacher." That made my day.

My support of Christian Education was also a natural consequence of serving in a congregation where the church school was central to the growth of the church. I recognized early on that among the adults who were becoming members there was a Biblical illiteracy, as well as a fundamental lack of knowledge about the beliefs and government of the Presbyterian Church. I fully participated in the recruitment and training of teachers. I also paid attention to those Sundays in the church year set apart for Christian Education, Youth and Seminary education. My sermons drew upon the resources within the curriculum with special encouragement of parents to participate in their children's education. Before summer vacation in 1954 in a sermon on "How Big Is Your God?" I dwelt upon this theme. "Our church, which has been in the forefront of Christian Education has made it quite plain that it is important how our Sunday School teachers teach and what they teach. It is important that they know what they are teaching and they seek to do their job conscientiously. Even then it is not the Sunday School teachers' whole responsibility. It is the sole responsibility of the parents that they show a concern in what their children are being taught, and that they assume responsibility themselves to help their child grow in their understanding of God - in the sense of God's greatness and mystery. "

The summer of 1954 was to be crucial in another way. The World Council of Churches was holding its Second Assembly in August in Evanston, Illinois on the theme "Christ the Hope of the World." The Evanston Assembly was to be the first, and the last, Assembly of the World Council of Churches held in the United States in its fifty year history. Both Eunice and I were excited about the Assembly meeting in Evanston. It meant that we could include the meeting during our summer vacation while we were in Wisconsin. Union Theological Seminary had prepared us both well for the ecumenical movement. Not only were we in one of the most well known U.S. ecumenical seminaries, but the consciousness of the world church which permeated Union Seminary had prepared us for the significance of the Evanston Assembly.

In preparation for the World Council of Churches Assembly, a pre-Evanston Little Assembly was held on Sunday afternoon and evening, May 23rd at Central Presbyterian Church in Buffalo. Eunice and I went as delegates. Three of our public school teachers from Northminster also went with us: Inez Knapp, Eleanor Gover and Marjorie Duly. Jack Shepp was our sixth delegate. That Sunday I preached a sermon on the Assembly theme: "Christ the Hope of the World." I began my sermon with this illustration: "On the front of yesterday's newspaper is an article calling Christians to a World Day of Prayer. Its heading reads: "Christians Join Hands in Prayer for Peace in a Troubled World." Beside this article is another which reads: "B-36s Can Take Any Type Bomb Anywhere in the World." This is Hope - 1954. Our tired world edges out on to the ledge and gets ready to take a nose dive into oblivion." I reviewed the six themes of the Assembly in the light of the biblical understanding of hope. (1) Our Oneness in Christ and our Disunity as Churches; (2) The Mission of the Church to Those Outside Her Life; (3) The Responsible Society in World Perspective; (4) Christians in the Struggle for World Community; (5) The Church Amid Racial and Ethnic Tensions; (6) The Christian and His (sic) Vocation. As I recall these themes in 1998 it is remarkable how the church's concerns in the world have not changed in fifty years. But the dynamism of each of these concerns, and the discussions which were to take place in Evanston, were to become major themes on the ecumenical agenda, stated in different ways, for the next four decades.

Eunice and I took our vacation in July and August so we could attend some of the World Council of Churches meetings. We drove down from the Lake while

Grandmother Juliet Blanchard took care of Scott. Eunice and I stayed with Aunt Marion Rumsey at her Elm Street apartment close by the Fourth Presbyterian Church. Our presence there brought a gathering of the Rumsey clan for a gala celebration on one of our evenings in Chicago. Two years after our wedding Uncle Wallace composed a rollicking poem, set to music, of the coming together of Eunice Blanchard and Dick Poethig.

A colorful array of people had come from all over the world to take part in the Assembly. The fact that it was held in the United States, and in the Mid-west, brought many visitors from our churches. There were very few official delegates to the Assembly, since these participants were limited and chosen by their national churches. There were a larger number of official observers who also had been chosen in addition to the selected delegates. Then there were the remaining number who were let into the Assembly meetings on a first come, first serve basis. Eunice and I chose those meetings in which we were particularly interested and stood in line to get in. Besides hearing some of the main plenary speakers, and here I still remember the moving speech of D.T. Niles, I was interested in the sixth section of the Assembly on The Christian and His (sic) Vocation. I had done my B.D. thesis on the meaning of the theme of the Biblical Understanding of Work and Vocation in an Industrial Society.

The Ministry of the Laity movement, which was to come out of this sixth section, became one of the main emphases in my ministry, especially as I became involved in urban-industrial mission. I used the Christian vocation theme immediately as I returned from our vacation on Labor Sunday, September 5th. I explored the implications of our faith as it related to the work people did, whether in an office, or factory floor, or classroom or in the home. "The work we do and how we do our work is an integral part of our life...That it should have no relation to our religious faith is the tragedy of our day. If we are Christians we believe that our faith is related to the work we do...It was this belief that every Christian was called of God that was embodied in the Protestant Reformation. This belief was the strength of the Reformation. It brought religious faith more vitally into the lives of lay people. It told them that God was concerned with the worldly tasks they did. God was concerned that they live out their Christian faith in their work - such was their calling." I followed this theme consistently in my preaching at Northminster. On October 17th we recognized Laymen's

Sunday with the assistance of three of our laymen in the service: John Richardson, Francis Stortz and Charles Gerber.

As I look back on the impact of the Evanston Assembly within the churches in the United States, I can see that the support and study of the work of the World Council of Churches and the ecumenical movement attracted only a select group of people. Very often they were people who were already involved in inter-church discussions through the national church agencies. Some were also attracted to the ecumenical movement as they served in mission overseas. By and large ecumenical consciousness in world church terms was not a strong suit in local congregations in the United States. After we had gone to the Philippines and had lived and traveled in Asia we discovered that the so-called younger churches were more dramatically related to ecumenical concerns and had a larger view of the world church. The fact that the New York office of the World Council of Churches was understaffed and underfunded reflected the lack of in-depth engagement that the ecumenical movement had on the local American scene.

Another part of our life in Buffalo were the friendships we began to develop. Early in our arrival I became involved in the Wooster Club. The Presbyterian affiliation of Wooster meant that many of the Presbyterian church folk in the Buffalo-Niagara area had Wooster connections. Northminster Church had benefited from one of those connections in John Richardson, a Wooster contemporary. John and Lois joined Northminster and John served first as a trustee and then as an elder. Lois was the mainstay of our music program, serving as organist and as choir director. John's additional contribution was as the main tenor voice in our choir.

The Richardson's musical presence was also a crucial element in the special Carol sing that Eunice initiated in our home. The Christmas Carol sing, begun in Buffalo, was to become an annual Poethig event. Wherever we have lived - in Manila, in Chicago, in Buffalo and in Louisville - we have invited friends who liked to sing, to this special singing of carols from many lands. Mary Lois and Jack Shepp and Marge Coogan whom Lois had recruited for the choir were part of those first Christmas carol sings. Doug Coogan, who claimed not to be a singer, dutifully joined Marge in the carol sings. Over the years we collected

non-traditional carols, beginning first with a selection from the early 1950s long playing record of Robert Shaw. Bob Shaw, who was the founder and director of the Collegiate Chorale during my time with Fred Waring, had cut two records with an amazing collection of culturally diverse carols. This was the initial base of our own store of carols. Later while we were in the Philippines, Eunice published a Carol songbook "Let's Sing Christmas" which brought together many of the Filipino Christmas carols she had discovered and, in some cases, she had urged to be written. But this all began with help from our Wooster connections.

My Wooster connection also brought me into the leadership of the Wooster Club in the Buffalo-Niagara region. This, of course, delighted Juliet Blanchard since she was a Wooster supporter *par excellence*. Alice McVetty, a Wooster graduate who was a long time resident in the area, prevailed upon me to take the presidency of the Wooster Club, which I did for a term from 1953 to 1955. Bill Jones, assistant pastor at Central Presbyterian Church, was treasurer and Alice McVetty served as secretary to the Club. Our major social event was a summer picnic which drew together many of the Wooster graduates living in the region.

The other opportunity which brought Wooster alumni together was the visit of the Wooster Chorus. Each year they toured different sections of the country usually in the early Spring, around Easter. In the Spring of 1955 Buffalo was on their swing through the East. We were able to prevail upon the Tonawanda Presbyterian Church to sponsor the Easter appearance of the Wooster Men's Chorus. The church's sanctuary could seat enough people to financially support the performance. Its chancel was deep and wide enough for the additional steps needed to hold the members of the chorus.

The visit of the chorus was well publicized through Presbytery channels and through the bulletins of the local churches in the Tonawanda and Kenmore area. The appeals which were made for housing the chorus received a good response. The members of the chorus were distributed throughout the region in the homes of church members and Wooster alumni. On Saturday, March 26th, the day of the performance of the chorus, Buffalo had one of its well-known late Lake effect snowstorms. Early Spring is as good a time to have a snowstorm as any other time! Our anxiety heightened as the snow began to fall in the morning and

continued to fall through out the day. By the evening of the performance the whole of the Buffalo-Niagara frontier was blanketed in snow. The snow drifts were high enough to cause traffic problems. Our immediate concern was whether the widely distributed chorus members would be able to be delivered to Tonawanda Presbyterian Church .

We should have had more faith. We learned after living in Western New York that the residents are hardy folk who are not put off by a good snow fall. It only encourages their risk-taking. When we arrived at Tonawanda Presbyterian Church the sanctuary was already filled. We had to edge our way to the front to find seats. The early Spring newly-fallen snow on the outside and the happy crowd on the inside set a warm and delight-filled scene for the appearance of the Wooster choristers. Their music selection added to the beauty and wonder of the occasion.

Among the songs chosen for the evening program was "The Kerry Dancers." For this number, the chorus had a woman soloist. She sang the song with a bright and lilting voice, capturing the hearts of her audience. Eunice and I turned to one another with the same thought. Eunice was now in the ninth month of her pregnancy with our second child. We had been having long discussions about names, both male and female. As we came away from the great evening of music, she told me: " If we have a daughter, we will call her Kerry. " My response: "Dem's my sentiments, exactly." On Saturday, April 16th, in 1955 a daughter was born. We named her Kathryn, but from the beginning we called her Kerry.