

4. New Beginnings

Worship at Northminster in the New Year's 1955 began with Holy Communion. Communion meditations have always challenged me. Every communion was a new opportunity to reflect on the mystery of life. The Holy Eucharist provides a key to looking at life from many dimensions. Since I used the lectionary, I related Communion to the text for that day.

On January 2nd, 1955 the Communion text was from II Corinthians 5:17: "If anyone is in Christ, he(sic) is a new creature, the old has passed away. Behold the new has come." "Suppose." I began the meditation, "that life went on without any change in the calendar. No weeks, no months, no years. Just a steady state existence. Pretty boring, having nothing to look forward to."

"We continually need something which is new in our life. We get bogged down in routine and crave some new experience. Our possessions grow old. They outlast their usefulness, so we save to replace them. There is a refreshing feeling when we buy something new. It gives us the feeling of a new start."

"So it is with the New Year. We need the calendar. God made the seasons, but man made the calendar. We need it to mark our years, to record our history, to do our business, but more than these we need it to give us a new lease on life. Behold the new has come, says the Apostle Paul."

And 1955 was a new beginning for the Northminster Presbyterian congregation. All attention was focused on the church building. The ground had been broken for the building on December 13th, 1954. In the midst of Winter work was pushed ahead. The bull dozer and the shovel were already on the church property to begin the digging and the leveling of the property. The consistent topic of conversation among members was the progress of the building. They would stop by on their errands to see how things were going. The building committee was planning ahead. They met in January to discuss the interior needs of the sanctuary with plans for the style and the color of the sanctuary furnishings.

The first members of Northminster Church, those who had been the nucleus before the Presbytery called me as organizing pastor, were the most anxious. It had been three years since they had first gathered and now they were ready to have their own church building. They agreed - the Elmlawn Cemetery chapel had been a blessing. It was a worshipful place to meet, but its space was limited and the pump organ left much to be desired. Waverly House had served its purpose well for church school and for committee activities. Better if both the worship and the Christian education and social activities could be in one place. Each week the conversation turned to the schedule of the church building and when we could expect to occupy the building.

In the meantime other changes were happening on the Presbytery level. Paul Heath, the General Presbyter, who had negotiated my coming to Buffalo, had been called to become executive of New York City Presbytery. His term was to begin on January 1, 1955. He had been a great support to Northminster in the purchase of the Waverly House and in channeling National Missions new church development monies toward our church building. His attendance at the ground-breaking on December 13th was one of his last official acts for the Presbytery of Buffalo-Niagara. It was a fitting final act of his support for the Northminster Church project. Martyn Keeler, the former pastor of North Presbyterian Church was named interim General Presbyter. Marty Keeler himself had been part of a project which saw the move of North Church, which he had served, out from Buffalo to the rapidly growing suburb of Amherst/Williamsville.

As we moved into the new year we were becoming a fully programmed congregation. The choir under Lois Richardson had begun with women's voices. Now Lois was on a campaign to add men's voices to the choir. Lois knew she could count on John Richardson, who had been a mainstay tenor in the Wooster Men's Chorus. Soon Jack Shepp, another engineer, came forward to become our bass section. Jack's wife Mary Lois joined the soprano section of the choir which also included Marge Coogan, Inez Knapp, Shirley MacDuff, Hortense Burdick, Brita Mayfield, Clara Pfister, and Delores Reins. Mary Lois was also elected as president of the Women's Association. This helped the choir since the Women's Association was instrumental in raising money for the choir's robes. The choir, with the assistance of the Women's association, held a dinner on May 23rd at

Kenmore Presbyterian Church to raise the money for choir robes. The Charles and Helene Gerber helped even further by making a gift of some choir robes as a memorial gift. Helene added her voice to the alto section with Eunice and Betty Berg. An organ fund was also begun to make sure we had the proper accompaniment for our expanding choir. The goal was to have a mixed voice, robed choir supported by an organ by the Fall in time for the dedication of the church building.

Besides the Senior choir, our church school had expanded so that we started a Junior choir under the direction of Lois Alapas. By the Fall the ranks of the Junior choir had grown so rapidly that the choir was divided by age and a Cherub choir was organized. Shirley MacDuff took on the Junior choir from ages nine to fourteen years and Mr. George Howe led the Cherub choir ages five through eight.

The Waverly House and the Cemetery chapel were separated in location - the Waverly House was about a long city block from the entrance of the Cemetery. Younger children were cared for at the Waverly House during the worship hour. The older children met before church worship and were encouraged to be remain during worship. Enough children were at Sunday worship that I gave children's sermons on the first Sunday of every month. I began the practice to begin Lent with a sermon on "Spring Training." I likened Lent to the spring training which baseball players go through to prepare to play baseball. "Like the baseball players who are heading off to spring training camps to get themselves in shape for the baseball season, during Lent Christians get in training for Easter. To be prepared for Easter we have to get our souls in shape. They have gotten plenty rusty from all the mistakes we have made. We haven't always told the truth. We have not always been kind when we should have. And more times than we can count we've thought of ourselves before others. So if we're going to be in shape for Easter, we've got to be in training, to give up the mistakes we've made, so God can give us a new spirit."

There was an abundance of spirit among the people of the congregation. The fact that the church was visibly going up, that their faithfulness was showing signs of fruition, was an under girding force to their activities. The Women's Association was a source of strength for the work of the congregation from the very

beginning. They held their regular monthly meetings at Waverly House and wherever there was a need they worked to see that it was filled, whether in raising money through church suppers, or in planning and carrying out bazaars, or in finding church school teachers, or in getting the choir robes ready for Easter, or in getting floral arrangements for the worship service. They also held special programs which brought speakers on a wide range of church and world concerns. On May 12th, 1954 they invited Juliet Blanchard, who at the time was a member of the U.S. commission for UNESCO to give a slide presentation "We're All in the Same Boat " on one of the U.N.'s early projects among the fishermen on Patzquaro Lake in Mexico. In October 1954, Eunice and I reported on the role of women as it was demonstrated at the Evanston Assembly of the World Council of Churches. The Women's Association was also the early site for discussions of the religious education of children in preparation of the use of the Christian Faith and Life curriculum in the congregation.

More amazing in those years was the effectiveness of the Men's Council. One of Northminster's first organizations was the Men's Council. This was, in part, due to Earl Johnstone who had been active in the Presbyterian Men's organization at Covenant Lebanon Church. He had been an elder at that congregation and was one of the first elected to Northminster's session. In the early 1950's the men in the Presbyterian Church, USA had an active national organization. Besides the annual national meeting which drew thousands of men, there were meetings of the Presbyterian Men on the presbytery level. The strength of the Buffalo-Niagara Men's Council, in turn, assured active participation of men in their local congregations.

At Northminster the Men's Council held their own supper meetings at Waverly House with the men taking turns cooking. Four men from the Buffalo-Niagara Men's Council came to speak at one of the Northminster Men's supper meetings. During December 1954, the Men's Council sold Christmas trees on the church lot, the proceeds going to the Church Building Fund. Whenever things needed to be fixed or equipment needed to be found for the Waverly House, the men were enlisted. As we came closer to the completion of the church building, the Men's Council saw the need to rehabilitate and re-equip the Waverly House for our family's occupancy. By January and February of 1956, the Waverly House was

remodeled: new lighting was installed, painting and wall-papering brought a brightness to the rooms, and the kitchen was re-equipped.

The major role the men played was in the governing and program structures of the congregation. They filled the elder, trustee or deacon positions. There was no difficulty in finding nominees for these positions. There was such a surplus of men ready to serve, that women were not nominated for the session. In order to assure that women would be on the newly organized board of Deacons, three places out of twelve were set aside for women nominees. In the earliest election to the trustees one woman, Elva Graf, was elected. In my preaching I laid emphasis on the importance of the ministry of the lay person. During my vacation I gave the elders responsibility for conducting worship and preaching.

The men were also active in a Friday night Presbyterian Men's bowling league. There were two divisions with about six teams in each league. I was a regular on the Northminster Church team. This helped create a solidarity with the men who played on the team. It also helped that I was a better than average bowler. My teen years of bowling on the alleys at the Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church finally counted for something.

One other outcome of the men's commitment to the church was their willingness to engage in a visitation program. Every effort was made to integrate new members into the life of the congregation. This was even more important at Northminster since there was no visible church building by which new members could identify themselves. The "Visitation Campaign" which was conducted under the leadership of Elder Wallace Marsh for two Sunday afternoons, April 24th and May 1st, drew upon the men of the church. Under the New Life Committee, which Wally Marsh chaired on the Session, the men did new member calling within the church. The men took seriously their responsibility for becoming acquainted with new members and in encouraging them personally to become active participants in worship and church programs.

In the Fall of 1954, it was decided that the congregation should begin a Junior High fellowship. From the beginning of Northminster, the Christian Education program had been focused on children of elementary school age. Most of the couples entering the church were just at the beginning of their families. A large

number of infants were being born in the congregation. Eunice and I were representative of the younger couples in the congregation. By 1955 we had two young children. In the early morning of April 16th, 1955 Kathryn, nicknamed "Kerry", was born at Millard Fillmore Hospital and Scott was approaching two years of age. Baptism of infants were one of my regularly scheduled events at Northminster. We also had among our membership families whose children were moving into the Junior High. George Master, who had no children of his own, offered to sponsor a Junior High Fellowship We began the Junior High Fellowship on September 12th. Besides being part of the church school, the Junior High held monthly meetings and scheduled social outings.

As we approached Summer of 1955 it was obvious that we would soon be in our new church building. Each Sunday after worship a number would gather at the church property to inspect the building and estimate when we could count on dedicating the new church building. We needed to tie down a date for the dedication service so we could make an invitation to a speaker for the event. We had decided on Hugh I. Evans, the pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church in Dayton, Ohio. Hugh I. Evans was the pastor of Eunice's home church and had married us. He was also the Moderator of the 162nd General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. and president of the Presbyterian Foundation. In the Spring we asked him to preach at the dedication service on October 2nd, 1955. He accepted our invitation. Now we had to press for completion of the church by the last week in September. This meant that by the middle of September we would need to have all the church furnishings in place. We had a contract with a well known church furniture manufacturer. They had given us assurance that the furniture would be in place by the time of our dedication.

September began with a sense of elation. Only one month more and we would have our church. Then all activities would be together in one place. Beginning September 4th, the worship bulletin announced the Church Dedication schedule for October 2nd. A World Wide Communion service would be held at the Chapel of the Elms at 11:00 A.M. - a proper closing service for our friendly cemetery chapel. The dedication service was set for 4:00 P.M. People were urged to be outside the Northminster Presbyterian Church at Elmwood Avenue and Homewood Street at 3:45 P.M. At 5:30 there was to be a buffet supper in the Recreation hall and a reception for Dr. Hugh I. Evans. At 8:00 P.M. there would

be an open house for the community. At 9:00 P.M. we would hold an evening service of music for organ, choir and congregational singing. The program was announced enough times that people had the schedule indelibly imprinted in their consciousness.

By the third week of September the church building was ready for occupancy. We had one problem - the church furnishings had not arrived. We were dealing with the major church furnishings producer, so we expected that our shipment would arrive within the week. The last week of September arrived and no sign of the church furniture. We began to envision a Dedication service without pews, without a choir loft, without a pulpit or lectern. Panic began to set in. George Myers and Jack Fox, who were in charge of internal furnishings, began long distance calls to the furnishings company. By the middle of the week the company had tracked down our furniture on a railroad siding somewhere in upstate New York. They apologized and assured us that the boxcar with our furnishings would arrive by Friday. That was two days before the Dedication Service. On Friday morning, George Myers received a call from one of the company's installers. The furniture was being unloaded at the Buffalo Rail Freight yard. It would be there by the afternoon. He assured George that he and his companion would work far into the night to see that the furniture was installed.

By Saturday morning, the two company installers were working furiously to set the pews in place. George Myers and Jack Fox joined them just to make sure that nothing was left to chance. By evening, less than twenty four hours before the Dedication service, installation of the chancel furniture was being completed.

Sunday morning, October 2nd, arrived. After Saturday night's dramatic finale, my anxiety level had receded. But I was not without tension. We now awaited the arrival of Dr. Hugh I. Evans. He had decided to take the train to Buffalo. He was to preach at both services: the 11:00 A.M. World Wide Communion Service and the 4:00 P.M. Dedication Service. His train had been announced as arriving at 8:00 A.M. He said he would call when he arrived. By nine o'clock we had not heard from Dr. Evans. I called the railroad station: "Has the eight o'clock train arrived?" "Yes, sir. That train came in on time this morning." Another anxiety attack. Where was Hugh I. Evans? Maybe he decided to get breakfast at the

station. I hurried down to the train station. I checked the cafeteria. No Hugh I. Evans. I asked for the location of the 8 eight o'clock train. I was informed that they had put off several of the sleepers on a siding. I climbed into the Pullman sleeper and began checking each room. I found one door locked. I knocked. A sleepy voice called out: "What is it?" "Dr. Evans, is that you? You're in Buffalo." "Oh, I must have overslept. I'll be out just as soon as I get dressed." We hurried back home for a brief breakfast and then on to the Chapel of the Elms just in time for World Wide Communion.

Sunday was a bright day and our little Chapel of the Elms was packed to the doors. Seventy-five people jammed into the chapel. Dr. Evans warmed up to his task with a communion meditation on "The Meaning of Prayer." He prepared the worshippers well for the service which was to happen in the afternoon. At 3:45 in the afternoon a large crowd had gathered outside the glass doors of the Northminster Church. Above the glass doors was a large aluminum cross imbedded in fluted glass windows. I realized now the importance of the entrance to the church building. I had written about the church in the foreword to the Dedication Service:

" From the street the passer-by can see, through the glass doors, the center of our worship - the Communion Table which invites all people to know the fellowship in Jesus Christ. Passing beneath the Cross, those who enter are reminded that they are here through the sacrifice of our Lord. Within the sanctuary there is an air of reverence in the subdued light of the nave windows which brings one to silence before Almighty God. In the chancel the brightness of God's glory breaks through from above, lifting the worshipper's heart to songs of praise. Behind all this is our chancel wall. Here is the strength of God who is our Rock and Redeemer."

The cross which was to hang on the chancel wall had to wait until after the Dedication Service. Jack Shepp and John Richardson, who had been waiting for the chancel installation to be finished, then hung the large wooden cross on the chancel rock wall under the skylight. They had calculated that they could hang it by piano wire. Since they were engineers nobody questioned their judgment. The rock chancel wall and the wooden cross, which was lighted at night, were fully visible to those passing by the church building.

At 4:00 o'clock on Sunday afternoon I stood outside the doors of the church with Hugh I. Evans, Earl Johnstone and the Architect Guy H. Baldwin. The choir and the congregation were on the steps and on the path up to the church. I began the worship with the words: "Open to me the gates of righteousness. I will go into them, and I will praise the Lord." The architect, Guy Baldwin then gave the keys of the church to Earl Johnstone, chair of the Building Committee. Earl proceeded to open the doors of the church and Dr. Evans and I entered, followed by the choir and the congregation singing the processional hymn "The Church's One Foundation."

Two hundred and twenty people streamed into the new building. The choir and congregation entered into the sanctuary with joyous singing. Hugh I. Evans preached with inspiration on "What Makes A Church Great." He spoke to the hearts of all present about their dedication to their own gardens right where they were, knowing that the Lord will give the increase.

The choir, whose fifteen voices was a blessing to the worship of the day, also performed in the evening. At eight o'clock they presented a service of music. Lois Richardson played the Suite from Handel's Water Music and the choir sang five anthems including three solos. Many folk had participated in the whole day's activities from World Wide Communion in the morning at the Elmlawn Chapel down through the evening service for music in the new building. The evening worship closed with "Abide With Me" as the Northminster congregation had seen their efforts come to fruition. These were new beginnings for Northminster Presbyterian Church.