

5. An Active Congregation

By the end of October, the folks of Northminster were already feeling at home in their new building. It was as if they had been in it since the beginning of the congregation. There was hardly a missed step from their life as a congregation meeting in the Elmlawn Cemetery Chapel and at the Waverly House and now in the Northminster Church building. This told me that the new building had little effect on who they were as a congregation. They had established that fact in their work together and in their building up the congregation through time at the Waverly House and in their worship at the Chapel.

What the church building did provide was a meeting place where all their activities could be brought under one roof. When I looked at the church use calendar at the beginning of November, after one month in the new church, there were thirty-seven scheduled activities and meetings. There were only eleven open evenings. This was era of organized activities. It, of course, added to the church's life, in the sense that those people who were waiting for the church to be built, now began to participate in the congregation. Some people did not like to worship in a cemetery, but now felt more comfortable in a church on a street corner. We were also a visible presence in the community and people were drawn to the church. Nineteen new people joined the congregation on Thanksgiving Sunday, 1955. This brought our membership to one hundred and sixty since we had begun with sixty-seven charter members on Easter Sunday of 1953.

One of the activities we immediately began was participation in the Released Time Religious Education Program. New York State had set up a religious education program which allowed for public school children to attend one hour a week of religious education in the church of their choice. The parents were required to sign a paper which allowed their child or children to be released for one hour on Mondays at 2:30. Since we were next door to the Philip Sheridan Elementary School this program was a natural for us. In October we already had thirty eight children enrolled in three classes at the church. The religious education instructors were drawn from our Church School teachers.

Life at Northminster was now a very steady affair. We were getting used to our church building. Our sanctuary was a simple but very worshipful space. The skylight which we had built over the Communion Table and the chancel wall, on which the wooden cross was hung, was effective in providing natural light on the center of worship. We soon discovered, however, that since the choir sat in the chancel, there were times during the year when on a bright morning they would catch the sun's rays. We had to find a way to provide shade for the sunniest days.

As we approached our first Christmas in the church building, activities began to multiply. For three years we had had to find other space for our Christmas programs. We were now at home and felt free in scheduling of events. Since I followed the lectionary during Advent I preached a series on Jesus (1) The Son of God: The Continuity with the Past; (2) The Messiah: The Hope of the Future; (3) Emmanuel: The Reality of the Present; (4) The Christ: The Lord of All Time, Past, Present and Future. We had a full panoply of choirs rehearsing for the Christmas services: Cherub, Junior and Senior Choirs. The Men's Council continued their practice of selling Christmas trees on December 11th. By now some of our Junior Highs had become Senior Highs and we organized a Senior High group. The Senior Highs scheduled their Christmas Party on Saturday, December 17th and held a hayride. A hayride in Buffalo in the middle of December was an audacious undertaking, but Buffalo young people grow up hardy.

On Sunday, December 18th we scheduled our Christmas Family Supper with a filmstrip on "Christmas Around the World" and a program of Christmas carols from many lands with the Junior and Senior Choirs in leadership. On Monday, December 19th the Northminster Carolers went caroling to the shut-ins in the church community. On Wednesday, December 21st, the Church School had its annual Christmas party. On Saturday, Christmas Eve, we held a candlelight service with the Senior High young people assisting in worship and the Junior Choir being the main choir. On Sunday, Christmas Day, the nature of the Northminster congregation was evident in the Cherub Choir. The Cherub Choir was the main event. There were thirty-three singers in the choir. One of the traditions which I brought with me from my youth at Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church was the telling of a Christmas story. George Buttrick, my

pastor, would tell a Christmas story on Christmas eve drawn from one of the many Christian legends told around the world. On Christmas Day, with so many cherubs in the congregation, I carried on the Buttrick tradition, I told a Christmas story, "Why the Chimes Rang." That Christmas Sunday there were one hundred and fifty in the congregation for worship: a good many cherubs, their parents and their grandparents, a proper Christmas atmosphere for a Christmas story.

The Church School had grown phenomenally. By the end of 1955 we had 183 in the Church School. We also had grown to a congregation of 160. The professional teachers in our midst, Inez Knapp, Eleanor Gover and Marjorie Duly, accepted this growth in the Church School as a challenge. In January Marjorie Duly offered her help in the training of both teachers and parents of Church School children. Marjorie Duly had become the Church School Superintendent when we moved into our new building. Besides being a Principal of a Buffalo public school, Marjorie Duly taught teacher's training courses at the Buffalo State Teachers College summer school. For four Monday evenings in January, she held classes for teachers and parents of primary school children, ages six to eight. The classes were designed to help both Church School teachers and parents understand the learning capacity of Primary children and the techniques of teaching Primary children.

Now that Church School was fully operative within the Northminster Church building, the Waverly House stood empty. In the original plan, the Presbytery provided the money for the Waverly House as an intermediate meeting place, but whose ultimate purpose would be as a home for the pastor and his family. In January, the Session of Northminster, with the agreement of the Trustees and the strong support of the Men's Council and Women's Association, moved to rehab the Waverly House and use it as a manse.

Since coming to Buffalo Eunice and I had been living on Chatsworth Avenue in the Town of Tonawanda. In the summer of 1952 we moved first to 110 Chatsworth Avenue, the last apartment block on Chatsworth before Delaware Road. Our first apartment was on the third floor. We had four rooms: a kitchen, a dining room/living room, two bedrooms and a bath. A washing machine in the basement served the five apartments. Clothes drying had to take place outside in the yard. One of the bedrooms became my study, which overlooked

St. Mark's Lutheran Church on Delaware Road. It was at 110 Chatsworth that Richard Scott came into the world. Scott shared our bedroom and at odd times his moveable crib was in the bathroom and in my study. As he grew one of his habits to sit up in his wooden crib and bang the back of his head on the crib end. In a back and forth motion he rhythmically hit his head so that he wore his hair off. When we put him in his low-lying moveable crib in my study, he would stand and get the crib moving in a back and forth motion. As he picked up steam, he would reach out of the crib and pull books off my shelves and throw them in the crib. Soon he was surrounded by a large pile of books, which he took to reading like his father. Some pages he had dealt with more energetically, had to be scotch-taped back into the books.

By the end of 1954, we were expecting a second child. Space at 110 Chatsworth would not be big enough for a new addition. We began our search for a new residence in our immediate neighborhood. Most of the residences in our immediate area were single family homes. The street on which we lived was one of the few with rental apartments and town houses. We knew that the plan after the church was built was to rehab the Waverly House as a manse. We settled on a town house in the middle of the block at 55 Chatsworth. It was two stories with a kitchen, a dining area and a living room on the first floor and three bedrooms, one very small, and a bathroom on the second floor. We moved to 55 Chatsworth in mid-Winter in 1955. Snow was on the ground and Eunice used Scott's sled to move smaller household items down the street to our new home. She was seven months pregnant at the time. We liked our new space. Especially the separation between the living space and the sleeping space. In the back yard there was play space with a sandbox and slide. There was a grill for picnics to which we looked forward in the Spring and Summer. Our next door neighbors were the Joseph Knipper's who were also young parents in the same state as we were. The Knipper's had a youngster Joe Knipper, Jr. the same age as Scott. Joe, Jr. provided Scott a built-in playmate. Joe, Sr. worked for the Pfizer Corporation. His wife, Jean, was a lay teacher at the nearby Mount St. Mary's Academy. They were faithful Roman Catholics, but of an open, liberal spirit. We had our first ecumenical discussions during our year at 55 Chatsworth. The Knipper's were a cordial family and we enjoyed having them as neighbors during our time on Chatsworth.

With the arrival of Kathryn Aileen Poethig on April 16th, 1955, Scott got a roommate. She quickly became Kerry to us, since she looked all the part of a sparkling Irish lass. From the beginning Scott, at one and half, took to his new sister. He became her protector. She added much life to the Poethig household. And like her brother before her she became an addition to the growing Northminster cradle roll. On June 12th, 1955 she was among the fifty-five children I baptized during my tenure at Northminster.

By the end of January 1956 work began in earnest on the Waverly House. The Men's Council brought out the men of the church to rehab the kitchen, repaper the four Sunday School rooms on the second floor which were returned to their original status as bedrooms and a study. The living room, which had seen much action during the two years it served as the social hall of the congregation, was provided with a new ceiling, the walls repainted and new lighting fixtures installed. Eunice, who had joined in the work, became nauseous from the smell of the paint. One of the women she was working with suggested she might be pregnant. By February, we had confirmation. Yes, Eunice was pregnant.

The men of the church gave their Saturdays to push through the finishing of Waverly House rehab. By the first of March most of the work was done. Only a few tasks needing completion in the kitchen. The first week of March we said "good-bye" to 55 Chatsworth and moved into 25 Waverly. Grandmother Juliet Blanchard came to Buffalo at the end of March for Easter and helped us settle into our house. On Easter Sunday, April 1, we had two hundred and seventy-six at worship, the largest gathering to come together at Northminster Church during our time.

Other changes were happening in the life of the Poethig family. As we moved closer to occupying the building of the Northminster Church, the event for me was filled with both great expectation and an underlying restlessness. The completion of the church building was the task to which I had been called. I had been fortunate in the support of the Presbytery since the beginning and in the dedication of the people who had become part of the Northminster congregation. After the dedication of the church building I began to recognize that the work to which the Presbytery called me had reached fulfillment. There was an inner

feeling that I should move on to more specific work in the field to which I felt I was called: industrial mission.

In the Fall of 1955, I had on my desk an application for mission assignment by the Board of Foreign Missions. I had sent for it earlier in the year, but had done nothing about completing it. There was still within me the original commitment I felt when at eighteen I had made an appointment with Herrick Young of the Board of Foreign Missions. I went to 156 Fifth Avenue, the offices of the Board. He welcomed me into his large office. I told him straightway of my desire to serve Christ and his church overseas - in radio evangelism in Latin America. At the time I was working for Fred Waring and His Pennsylvanians and I had become fascinated with the power of radio to reach people. Herrick Young heard me out and good naturedly told me that when I had completed college, I should then come and talk again.

In 1956 I was now at a different stage in my journey. I had completed both college and seminary. I had also shown my ability to organize and lead a congregation. My understanding of my skills and of my interest had changed. I was no longer interested in radio evangelism, but had a deep sense of the need to reach working people for the church. My limited experience had shown me that the Presbyterian Church had not been very successful at achieving this in the United States. I was not sure that my interest was even shared within the Board of Foreign Missions. I put the application in the top drawer of my desk and forgot about it. My immediate task was my continuing ministry to the Northminster congregation and the completion of the church building.

In April 1956 the churches in the Presbytery of Buffalo-Niagara were informed of a World Affairs Assembly being carried out by the Board of Foreign Missions which was to itinerate eight missionaries among the congregations of the Presbytery. The program was to be held on Sunday afternoon at April 15th at the Kenmore Presbyterian Church. Northminster had signed up to host Mr. Arthur William Marsh a teaching missionary who had served for forty-five years in China and who was now serving in Pakistan. He had been assigned to preach at Northminster on Sunday, April 29th after two weeks itineration in the Presbytery.

In the meantime several of our members had responded to the request to participate in the World Affairs Assembly and joined Eunice and me at the Kenmore Presbyterian Church gathering on April 15th. The meeting was well attended by members from congregations from across the Presbytery. There were lively presentations on the changing mission of the church in a post-war era. There was a good spirit of participation from those attending the meeting.

I was particularly moved by the new concept of mission presented by several spokespersons from the national church's mission agency. I learned about the new dynamic that was abroad in the world. We no longer spoke of mission churches, or receiving churches, but of national churches with which we had partnership relationships. We spoke of ecumenical relations in which we shared our mission with churches of other denominations. I also learned that we no longer spoke about missionaries, but about fraternal workers - those who worked beside national leaders overseas.

I felt more comfortable with these thoughts. It was actually a replay of what I had learned and known at Union Theological Seminary. At Union we were among people from many denominations and we met, studied and discussed theology with people from many lands. I came away from the World Affairs Assembly with a new appreciation of the meaning of mission. I wanted to know more. After the meeting ended at 9:00 P.M., I invited one of the main speakers to our home for further discussion of the evening's presentations. His name was Donald Smith who was serving with the mission training program of the new agency named The Commission on Ecumenical Mission and Relations. He told me that he had been raised in the Philippines where his father Stephen and his mother Viola had served as missionaries.

Over a late Sunday night coffee, with both Scott and Kerry soundly asleep, (Kerry was one day away from her first birthday) Eunice and I explored the new concepts of mission with Don Smith. I expressed my interest in mission, the kind of mission which he and others were talking about. I told him I had an unfilled application from the old Board of Foreign Missions. "Why haven't you filled it out?" Don Smith asked.

"I don't think you have anything in my field of interest." I replied.

“What is your field of interest?”

“ I came to this new church development because it was in an industrial area. I feel both my background and my interest have equipped me for industrial ministry, for work in urban areas where there are larger numbers of working people.”

“That’s splendid,” Smith said. “ That’s the kind of ministry we are looking for at this very moment.”

“What do you mean? What kind of work are you talking about?” I asked.

“We currently have two openings on our list for work in the area of industrial evangelism. One of the jobs is in Japan and the other is in the Philippines. We have requests from both of the churches in those countries for someone with experience in industrial evangelism. So there is something for you.”

“That’s amazing. Tell me more. “

We have a man who has been working in Japan for several years. His name is Henry Jones. He originally began in industrial mission in China, just after the war. In fact, he stayed on in Shanghai, even after the Chinese Communists took over the country. In 1951 he was asked to leave. Then he was reassigned to Japan, because the Kyodan - the United Church of Japan, was beginning a program of industrial evangelism. The Japanese call it “occupational” evangelism. He went there in 1953 and has been visiting other countries in Asia, exploring their readiness to engage in industrial work. One of the churches’ which had already been thinking about this field is the United Church of Christ in the Philippines. So there are now two positions open in the field.”

“You probably have to speak Japanese to work in Japan. “ I said. “ I’m not sure I’d be a good linguist. What language do they use in the Philippines?”

“The educational system is in English. Most Filipinos know some English, some are more fluent. But you would also have to learn Tagalog, the national language”

"That's good. At least we could get started in English."

"What do you do, Eunice?" Smith asked.

"My field is Christian Education. I have my Master's from Teacher's College in New York. I have been working on the Christian Education program at the church.

"I'm sure the United Church of Christ could use your skills. There have an excellent deaconess training program. In fact, my mother still teaches at that school."

"What do you think about this possibility - about going to the Philippines?" I asked Eunice.

"I think we should explore this possibility. We have two children under two years and we are expecting another in the Fall. We need some time to talk about this."

Don Smith interceded: "The best thing is to fill out the application you have. We will also need one from Eunice. Her skills in Christian Education will be invaluable overseas. Knowing the Philippines, I'm sure there will be a job for her. When you complete the applications send them in, so we have something to respond to. You can get the process going while you are discussing your plans."

"My only qualms right now is about leaving the congregation so soon after the completion of the church. This has been a great congregation and we will be leaving many friends. I do believe that the congregation is on solid ground. It has some great leadership. In fact, that's what has made this work such a great satisfaction."

"It sounds like you are ready to take your leave. But it would be good for you to discuss your thoughts. To give you a time line, we have a training program that

begins in July. We will be waiting to hear from you." Don Smith told me as I took him back to the hotel.