

## 6. Answering the Call

The days following Don Smith's visit we had some serious discussion in our home. This would be a major change in our lives. What kind of living conditions would we find in the Philippines, especially in raising three youngsters under three years old? We got out a map of the Philippines and acquainted ourselves with the topography. The equator ran through the southern islands. Would we be able to stand the climate of the country? Neither of us had ever been to the Tropics.

This was a different era in the history of mission. We had learned this from the people we had met at Union Theological Seminary. Did the national churches really need missionaries? These countries had struggled to be free of colonial rule. Wasn't the missionary movement a continuing form of the old colonialism? The discussion brought us to deep analysis of our personal motives as well as to a recognition of the new dynamics shaping the so called "Third World." A decision to go overseas in the post-colonial era was not to be made easily. I thought back over my own knowledge of mission.

The world had changed dramatically since 1944 when as an eighteen year old I visited the offices of the Board of Foreign Missions. In the midst of World War II I was searching for meaning in my own life. I had a deep commitment to the church and knew the role it had played in my life. I was attempting to connect the work I was doing at the time with Fred Waring with the possibility of service to the church in radio evangelism. I went to talk with Herrick Young about service in Latin America.

At that time I looked at mission in light of the people I had met in my life. My first encounter was with Harriet Andrus at Good Will Sunday School. She had been raised and had worked in Turkey and in the Middle East. As a ten year old she gave me a vision of the exotic. Since I was an open and interested youngster she took me down to the "casbah", the Middle Eastern section in lower Manhattan. We moved in and out of the shops with their pungent smells of spices and the fruits of the Mediterranean, their picturesque hangings and

artifacts from the countries in the region. Since I was a stamp collector she gave me letters from Palestine with colorful stamps. She asked me to use the stamps to write stories for our Sunday School paper about Biblical events we were studying. Thoughts of the Middle East fascinated me for a long time. I can still see and smell the places in the "casbah" I encountered as a ten year old.

My long term encounter with the missionary story happened in my extended family. My Aunt Helen Poethig had married Bill Wagner. Bill had a sister Augusta Wagner who was teaching at Yenching University in Peking, China. I knew about Gussie from conversations I had with Bill and Helen whenever I visited my grandmother. My grandmother lived with Bill and Helen on East 84th St. I was twelve when I learned that Gussie Wagner was coming back from China for a visit. When she arrived, I was told by my aunt that Gussie and her co-worker Margaret Speer wanted to take the three cousins, George Spohrer, Richard Poethig (my Uncle Albert's son) and me to a Chinese restaurant. It was a never to be forgotten experience - much like my earlier trip to the "casbah." We went downtown, somewhere in the mid-Manhattan, to an elegant Chinese restaurant.

The headwaiter, after some conversation in Chinese with Gussie, seated us at an oblong table in the center of the restaurant. The food courses came out one after another. It was overwhelming to us. None of the cousins had ever been to an authentic Chinese restaurant. As I reflect back on the scene, it was probably northern Chinese, since Gussie and Margaret lived and worked in north China. The food was exotic for the tastes of twelve year old New Yorkers. I can still visualize one dish - after many courses, the waiter brought out a large platter and on it a great, long fish covered with sliced onions and basted in a deep red sauce. He set the platter down with the head of the fish toward me, the fish giving me a glassy glare. My cousins gave me a quick glance, and all three of us were ready to slide off our chairs under the table.

My next knowledge of Gussie and Margaret was their imprisonment by the Japanese after Pearl Harbor and their eventual repatriation on the Swedish ship "The Gripsholm" during 1943. I met Gussie again at family events at my Uncle Bill's where she was a special presence among the Poethig clan. By this time Gussie and Margaret Speer were working as co-deans at the Shipley School in

Bryn Mawr a suburb of Philadelphia. At one point during my early seminary years, I brought Ken Wright, a college friend with me to one of our Poethig family Thanksgiving gatherings at which Gussie was present. Ken was working on his graduate degree in economics and he and Gussie got into a lively discussion about labor economics. Gussie, who had a doctorate in economics from Columbia University, had written her thesis on Chinese labor policy in the 1930s. Gussie's story stayed with me as I thought about the work of the church overseas.

College had given me a larger framework with which to deal with the church's engagement in other countries. There were many children of missionaries at Wooster. Some of them had prison experiences during the war, especially those whose families were imprisoned in the Philippines by the Japanese. When I arrived at Union Theological Seminary, my context of the world church reached even broader dimensions. Union had a considerable number of graduate students from overseas churches. Those from Asia intrigued me particularly those from the Mar Thoma Church in South India. Tradition held that the Mar Thoma Church had its origins in the work of Thomas the Apostle. The fact that there might have been a church in India long before the church had its beginnings in Europe gave me a different perspective on the mission church.

At the time there was living on the sixth floor of Hastings Hall a graduate student from China. He had a small corner room at the end of the hall so we rarely got to see him. On one occasion I had to deliver something to him and knocked on his door. He opened his door and as I stood in his room I recognized a picture of Mao Tse Tung on the wall. In my second year I audited a seminar on Christianity and Communism being taught by Reinhold Niebuhr and John Bennett, but which included several missionaries who had left China after the victory of the People's Army in 1949. Our Chinese graduate left in the middle of the year to return to China. In the face of the events happening in China and in the former colonial nations now becoming independent, my view of the church's overseas mission was being dramatically reshaped.

When I got to Northminster one of my continuing themes was the mission of the church. I put mission in the context of the global church, seeking to broaden the congregation's view to the new dimensions of mission. During the church year

in 1955, the theme on February 6th in the Presbyterian Church was "The World Mission of the Church." "Unfortunately," I said in my sermon, "many of our ideas about missions are hangovers from the past century...There are no longer foreign missions...the emphasis is on the word foreign. In the Christian's vocabulary the word smacks of a superior feeling. Very often there is a condescending attitude on the part of the American church when it is called to give money to overseas mission. Underneath we feel ...' we've got to help them out because they can't help themselves.' Christians of Asia and Africa are sensitive to this attitude."

"We have arrived at a time when foreign missions is a misnomer. The mission of the church has always had but one purpose...that all may be one in Jesus Christ.' This is its world mission...In this world mission, one of the first things we have to recognize is that overseas churches have a stature all their own. They are no longer mission areas as we regarded them fifty years ago. Missions have grown into churches, just as our mission in the Town of Tonawanda has grown into a church." In some cases these younger churches, as they are called, have become examples to the older churches of Europe and America. They have by-passed disputes which have kept the older churches separated for centuries. The Church of South India was in the forefront of the recent world meeting at Evanston. The Church of South India has united the Episcopalian, the Presbyterian and the Congregational Churches into one church. Not only in India, but in Japan, in Thailand and in the Philippines."

I went on to make a second point that the revolution in missions had seen the leadership of the churches devolve to nationals. Missionaries were no longer "sent" to mission fields, they were called by the national church. The term "missionary" was no longer used, but had been changed to "fraternal worker." I explained: "These men and women from the U.S. [serving as fraternal workers] work side by side with national Christian leadership...they share and equal responsibility. " " A third factor," I said, "in this revolution in missions is not only are these churches developing their own leadership, but they are training their own missionaries...Asians who will preach the Gospel to Asians and to Americans. In 1953, the United Church of Christ in the Philippines sent out a missionary family to Indonesia and another to Thailand."

My decision to go overseas was being shaped by the message I was preaching.. I had come a long way since my visit with Herrick Young at the Board of Foreign Missions ten years before. My studies during College and at Union Theological Seminary had provided a new theological framework. World events had changed the dynamics within the world church. Independence movements had established new nations. The national churches within these countries had their own integrity. I saw that integrity in the leadership of the people I was studying with at Union Theological Seminary. The national churches from which they came were our sister churches. They had to be the ones determining their needs. They had to be the ones requesting help to fill those needs.

What I had heard from Donald Smith for the first time was that the churches in Japan and the Philippines had recognized a special need in the area of industrial evangelism. The Asian churches were the ones who had seen the need, and they were asking for co-workers in this particular field. This was the area where I saw my own calling - to work in the city and among working people. I felt this was a propitious moment in my life and I should respond. Eunice agreed and saw that she could also fulfill a role with the Church in the Philippines.

My more difficult task was to prepare the Northminster congregation for our decision. Eunice and I had to complete our applications and then get accepted by the Board of Foreign Missions as candidates for mission. We learned that there was a process before we would finally be assigned to a particular task. There was a period of candidacy in which people were tested to determine if they were ready for assignment overseas.

We learned from Donald Smith that there were two things happening to the church institutionally as we were preparing for overseas assignment. The first was one we were aware of as we served in the Presbytery of Buffalo-Niagara. It was the conversations which had been going on between the Presbyterian Church, USA and the United Presbyterian Church of North America to become one church. The United Presbyterian Church of North America was a real presence on the Buffalo-Niagara frontier. The UPC/NA congregations were in the Presbytery of Caledonia which covered the same area as the Presbytery of Buffalo-Niagara. During our time in Buffalo we had met on several occasions

with UPC/NA ministers for fellowship and had held joint Presbytery meetings. This was all in preparation for the uniting of the two denominations in 1957.

As a result of this imminent merger, our two denominations would be combining their two overseas mission agencies. The second fact to which Donald Smith alerted us was the renaming of the mission agency to be created out of the two. The Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church, USA would be no more. We would be serving under the Commission on Ecumenical Mission and Relations.(COEMAR).

Eunice and I had both been aware of this change. The change on the world scene after the Second World War made it evident that "foreign" missions were no longer acceptable in the language of the church. We were living in different times from the missionaries I had met in my youth. Eunice and I were prepared for this change. In fact, we looked forward to this happening. At the Evanston Assembly of the World Council of Churches we were delighted to see the many different delegates from the younger churches. We rejoiced in the "world-church" atmosphere of the Assembly. We felt that this is what the church was about. We affirmed the new ecumenical spirit which was evident in the discussions at the Assembly. We hoped and longed for this to become more evident on our local Buffalo scene. We knew that our Presbyterian Church had taken leadership in these ecumenical discussions and had been exploring relationships with churches with whom we had not had mission ties. When we heard the name of the new mission agency "The Commission on Ecumenical Mission and Relations" we were pleased. We were ready for this new day in mission. We were feeling like pioneers.

We set to the work of filling out our applications. Even though we were a family both of us had to be accepted for assignment overseas. There were cases we learned when one of a couple was really not ready for the challenge of working overseas. After Don Smith had left us, we spent a long time in discussion. Eunice was ready for the change, but she was concerned about the children. This was a decision we would be making not only for ourselves, but for Scott and Kerry. She also knew that she was three months pregnant with our third child. This was a challenge, to make a major move with three small children under four years old. We sat and discussed this until early morning.

When we woke on April 16th it was Kerry's first birthday. The thought of preparing a young family to live in a completely different environment was on our minds. If we were accepted to work in the Philippines, what would the climate be like for our children and ourselves? We soon resolved that by recognizing that it was better to make the change while children were young and still impressionable, then later when they had gotten used to a particular culture, had made friends and might find it difficult to adjust.

In the midst of our discussions, Dad Poethig made a trip to Buffalo to be with us. He stayed for a month and was a help in household chores, washing the dishes, cleaning the car and keeping his eye on his two grandchildren. It was a respite for us even though our minds were preoccupied with the unknowns about our future. We thought of both our families and what it would mean leaving them behind. In our spare moments, particularly in the evening when everybody else had gone to bed, Eunice and I continued in a quiet conversation about the "what if's" in our future. At each point we agreed that we didn't know. This was a life change that we would make on faith and in the sense of a call to a new work. We both filled out our applications in the next week, taking time to discuss different questions together. Eunice spent one morning on a bright Spring day gazing out the window, with her application in front of her, entranced by an apple tree in bloom. I worked on my application spasmodically during the week and we both finished by the week's end and sent them off.

In early June we had an event which provided a break from our occupational concerns. The Niagara Falls area was the site of a tremendous rock slide which destroyed the Schoelkopf Relaying Station. It was a natural disaster of major proportions since the whole of Western New York State was dependent upon the electric power generated by the Falls. Forgetting our own involvements for the moment we packed everyone into the car and, like so many other New Yorkers and Canadians, headed for the Falls. The traffic was heavy as we got into the Falls area, but we found space along the stretch of iron railing overlooking the Falls. Here we caught a glimpse of the catastrophe. The geology of the region is a prominent rock extrusion which runs across upstate New York and crosses over into Canada. A large chunk of the rock face had broken away and fallen on the Electric Relay Station at the base of the cliff near the Falls and crushed it like a

paper box. The destruction was considerable but fortunately it did not take any lives or wholly cut off power in the region. It was a reminder to us of how central and of how fragile the industrial system was to the life of the Western New York region.

In the meantime I had a congregation to tend to. I had not lost a step since our conversation with Don Smith. There was still the problem of being accepted as a candidate for overseas mission. So until we heard, I would think no more of our decision. The congregation had grown to almost two hundred members. In the process changes in the leadership had occurred. We had been receiving into membership many young couples and some middle-aged families. The composition of the congregation had become more professional. Although there were always new members who were wage earners, there was an increasing number of those who were salaried and held managerial and white collar jobs. Some of the early leadership in the congregation, those who had been charter members, was being replaced by those who had joined later. On the session in May 1956 there was George Crowell, Francis Stortz, and Stewart Watson in the Class of 1957; Wallace Marsh and Arthur Taylor in the Class of 1958; Douglas Coogan, Donald McMillan and George Sedita in the Class of 1959. We had twelve Deacons: Tony Amadori, Rodney Berg, Allen Crandall, and Clara Pfister in the Class of 1957; Inez Knapp, George Master, Charles Minnich, and Richard Olsen in the Class of 1958; Robert Norton, John Shepp, Ellis Knobloch and P.C. Tilley in the Class of 1959.

Northminster had bicameral boards with no duplication between the Session and the Trustees. Geoffrey Krauss, chair, John Richardson, E. Claire Robinson, and Donald Fairbairn served in the Class of 1957; Rodney Berg and James Jennings in the Class of 1958; Eleanor Gover, Walter Johnson, Ellis Knobloch and Richard Putnam in the Class of 1959. There were twenty-eight people serving in some capacity in the official officers of the congregation. Besides these officers there were those who served as superintendent and teachers in the church school and those who led the junior high and senior high fellowship. The choirs called for even more leadership, not only in voices needed, but in the direction of the cherub and junior choirs. Then there were the Women's Association, the Men's Council, the Couples' Club, the Mariners and the leadership of Cub Scouts, the Boy Scouts and the Brownies. There was a place for everybody within the

congregation. The leadership of the church was effective in conducting the programs of the church.

In mid-June we received news from the Board of Foreign Missions, soon to become the Commission on Ecumenical Mission and Relations, that our applications were acted upon favorably. There was one question, however, that I needed to clarify. The questionnaire had asked whether the respondent ever drank alcoholic beverages. I had answered that on odd occasions I had drunk beer. Since I had grown up in a predominantly European, particularly German, community, beer was available in family and social situations. The intent of the inquiry from the Board was that in some situations overseas the drinking of alcoholic beverages might be frowned upon, especially within the missionary community. My response to the inquiry was that I stood with the Apostle Paul, that I would always weigh my actions "so as not to cause a weaker brother to stumble." This apparently satisfied the Board, since I heard no further about this matter. I later discovered among my peers in the Filipino community that beer was a common drink. Three generations had separated them from the early missionary experience which had taught abstinence from alcoholic drink.

By mid-June, we were in serious conversation with the Board about our preparation for overseas training. We were expected to be in Meadville, Pennsylvania by early July for the first part of our training. This was to be an ecumenical program which would consume about five weeks of linguistics and intensive discussion about the current context of mission. We were to get acquainted with people from other churches who were also being commissioned to serve churches in different parts of the world. It was considered a good experience to begin one's overseas service with inter church connections. The emphasis was on cooperation. Competition was from a bygone era.

The second part of our training program was to begin in September and carry through early December. This was to be the Presbyterian part of the training program. We would be trained with United Presbyterian Church missionaries, most of whom were going to the Muslim world which had been a traditional UP/NA field. By the time most of us had reached our countries of assignment we would have become one church. The location of the Fall program was in a place called Mount Freedom, New Jersey. As we later discovered, Mount

Freedom was chosen because it was midway between Princeton and New York City, the location of the overseas mission offices. Mount Freedom also had the facilities to house families and conduct the training program. The particular facility chosen for the program was a Jewish summer resort which ended its summer schedule on Labor Day weekend.

After we had heard the news on Friday, June 15th, Eunice and I frantically had to think through our next steps. First, we needed to tell the Northminster congregation of our decision and our plans. We had held off telling anybody of our conversations with the Mission Board. We were uncertain about our acceptance and decided not to stir up any unwarranted anxieties. Second, we needed to develop a plan which would meet all the schedule demands for the summer program, our vacation and our leaving the congregation.

I immediately called the elders of Northminster to a special session meeting on Saturday, June 16th to tell them of our plans to enter the overseas service of the church. The message from Ted Romig, head of Ecumenical Personnel, was that I was to be assigned to the United Church of Christ in the Philippines in the field of industrial evangelism. On Sunday, June 17th the sermon title I had chosen before I had heard from Ted Romig was "God's Sign to Us." I told the congregation of our plans. I said to them: "For the past month I have been in correspondence with Ted Romig, head of Ecumenical Personnel, for an appointment in the Asian field. I had been considering this decision for some time. This past Friday, after a month of filing applications and interviews, I received a call notifying us of our appointment to the United Church of Christ in the Philippines...This has been a hard decision for us to make. Let me say that it is with a great deal of sadness that we leave this congregation. In the past four years our family has made many friends, and this alone makes parting from you very difficult. Ours has been a rich experience....we have built a church together for God. As I have mentioned many times before, as beautiful as our church is, it is only a church as you become united together as a fellowship of Christians. As members of this fellowship, Eunice and I are representing you in another part of the world. "

In that same worship service Lois Richardson told the congregation that she was "stepping down" from her position as organist and choir director. John

Richardson had been assigned to a Union Carbide subsidiary in Indianapolis for a year. A special congregational meeting was called for June 24th to organize a Nominating Committee to begin the process of a pastoral search. On the Nominating Committee were Stewart Watson and Wallace Marsh from the Session; Eleanor Gover and Rodney Berg from the Deacons; and Inez Knapp and Jack Shepp from the Trustees. Dr. Robert Steen, the new General Presbyter, would meet with the Nominating Committee on Monday, June 25th to explain the procedure for the pastoral search.

We left Buffalo the last week of June heading south toward Allegheny College in Meadville, Pennsylvania. Here we were to engage in a five week Study Fellowship program in Mission set up by the National Council of Churches for prospective missionaries and fraternal workers. We returned to the Town of Tonawanda and Northminster Church on the first of August where I preached the four Sundays in August. On August 31st we completed our ministry of four years at Northminster Presbyterian Church.