

7. A Time of Testing

We didn't quite know what to expect as we drove down to the Meadville Conference for Outgoing Missionaries. It seemed that five weeks of training was a long time, especially since we would also be undergoing at least three month's preparation in the Fall. Our time at Meadville would mean we would not be getting to the Lake in Wisconsin for our vacation. If we were finally accepted we would not get back to the Lake for five years.

We looked forward to our time at the Lake every summer. It was such a place of relaxation from the hectic schedule we kept during the year. Time at the Lake took my mind off the church for the moment. Most of the year my attention had been on the church and making sure that we were moving forward. Actually I discovered the peace of the Lake environment stimulated my thoughts about sermon themes for the coming year. Besides the church and her part in it, Eunice's attention was on Scott and Kerry and their needs. She was now in the fifth month of her pregnancy with our third child.

We arrived in the town of Meadville and searched out Allegheny College. We found the registration desk for the Study Fellowship for outgoing missionaries. It was a program sponsored by the National Council of Churches to provide a climate of interdenominational cooperation in overseas mission. As Presbyterians we were one group among many others who would be engaged in the discussions about contemporary mission. We found our lodgings in one of the dormitories. We were among those who needed extra space since we had a family. Fortunately, we would not have to worry about meals since those would all be provided. That was a plus in our situation.

The Study Fellowship program was divided into several areas of concentration. There was a Biblical and theological theme. The Dutch lay theologian Hendrik Kraemer and an Anglican theologian Joseph Fison were there for these themes. There were also lectures on the changes going on in world mission. A special emphasis was on ecumenical relations. Emphasis was also placed upon language study. One of the priorities was to learn the language of the country to

which people were going. Here we had an excellent introduction to the link between language and culture by Eugene Nida. Nida's particular approach was expanded upon through lectures by Bill Smalley whose laid back presentations added life to the learning of culture through language.

There were also area studies which gathered people together in the regions to which they were being assigned. Two areas determinative of who we would get to know at Meadville was first, those who were going to the Philippines and second, the Presbyterians attending the conference. There was one other Presbyterian couple bound for the Philippines, Jim and Louise Palm. We immediately hit it off. From our first meeting we knew that we would have good friends in Jim and Louise Palm. Both Jim and Louise were open and warm people. Louise was a graceful spirit which went with her Tennessee upbringing. Her father was the president of Maryville College. She was raised in Maryville and had completed her college there. Jim was a Wisconsinian and drew deeply from the liberal spirit which his Swedish heritage had bestowed on him. He was originally a Swedish Baptist but found his way to Union Theological Seminary where he became a Presbyterian. His U.T.S. credentials was enough to make for a tight relationship. Louise, who was a musician, had taken her training at the School of Sacred Music at Union.

Along with the Palms we discovered a great contingent of other Presbyterians at Meadville. The interdenominational mix opened us up to people from other churches. We made friends with Pat and Paul Fenske, a Reformed Church couple. As we got deeper into the conference we discovered that the challenges of the mission experience had the effect of uniting us with those in our own church to whom we might be related for a long time. We were in conversation with Jim and Marge Williams who were bound for Hong Kong and Taylor and Betty Jo Potter who were headed for India but landed in Thailand.

The memory which lasted the longest from the Meadville experience was the presentations by the Anglican Joe Fison on "The Holy Spirit." His style of teaching and his indomitable spirit opened up a whole new of understanding of the presence of the Holy Spirit in the midst of the world. I took notes assiduously during his presentation. I thought that even if I didn't make it to the Philippines, I had enough encouragement from his lectures to begin a whole new

search. I did begin my own Biblical analysis after this encounter with Fison, carefully going through the books of the Old and New Testament in a search on how the Spirit engages the world. I kept a notebook for many years with my own findings. Later I came across a book he had written on "The Holy Spirit" and added it to my library.

Hendrik Kraemer was another addition to my list of inspiring church folks. Besides his work on the laity, he had also written extensively on the relation of the Christian faith to non-Western cultures. He was an anthropologist who viewed non-Western cultures from a Christian perspective and vice versa. He had written a book "The Communication of the Christian Faith" which raised the difficulty of communicating the Christian Faith in cultures alien to Western concepts. Human language is inadequate in this communication of the Christian Faith, said Kraemer. This would not be my last time to meet Kraemer. He would be with us at our Presbyterian Study Fellowship in the New Jersey. When our family finally got to Asia he was also at a meeting I attended on industrial mission in Japan in the late 1950's. He had been invited to Japan to engage in discussion of his latest book on "A Theology of the Laity."

The five weeks at Meadville sped by and we were back again in Buffalo to finish our packing and to complete our work at Northminster Church. The five weeks at Meadville had provided me much material for preaching during August. Since August was a vacation month I provided the congregation with a synopsis of the issues we were facing in the global church and the world. Our packing consumed the rest of our time. We had to make decisions on those things we would leave behind in storage, those things we would have sent to the Philippines, those things we would give away or sell, and what things we needed to take with us. The toughest thing to part with was our new blue Chevy station wagon which we had bought for our enlarged family. Jack and Mary Lois Shepp who also had a growing family of three children offered to buy the car from us. We agreed that they could have it after we had finished our Study Fellowship and were ready to leave for the Philippines.

We soon discovered how important our blue Chevy station wagon was to be. We were expected in New York City to begin the preliminaries of our Study Fellowship before we finally settled at Mount Freedom, New Jersey for three

months. We were to begin with a two week field trip to the coal fields of West Virginia. Families would be housed on 122nd St. and Claremont Avenue near to the offices of the Presbyterian Church at the 475 Riverside Drive. I should say wives with children were to be housed in apartments on Claremont Avenue while husbands, couples without children and single folk would make the field trip to West Virginia. Eunice and I knew the area quite well since it was close to Union Theological Seminary.

In late August we bid our last farewells to our friends at Northminster and packed up the Chevy station wagon. Every corner was filled. We had just enough space for a car seat for three year old Scott and a basket for one and a half year old Kerry in the area behind us. We loaded the rest of our belongings on the top of the car tying them down on a rack. We resembled a modern style wagon train as we headed toward the turnpike. But we were heading East toward home and not West toward the frontier. Actually I began to realize New York City was the frontier. Conditions in the area where the family was to be housed had gotten even more dangerous since we left four years ago.

Before we had left Union Theological Seminary in late May 1952 and headed for Dayton to be married, we had one of our more exciting New York experiences. We had been given a Chevy coupe by Juliet Blanchard to make the trip from New York to Ohio. It was our wedding present before the fact. We had packed the Chevy with all my belongings which I emptied from my Hastings dorm room. Eunice was to drive the car to the South Bronx after she finished her last class at Teacher's College. We would be staying with my Dad and my sister Erna for our last night in New York before we headed to Dayton for the wedding. I went home earlier since I was finished with my good-byes at Union. Before I left Eunice and I hunted the neighborhood for a parking space near the seminary. There was nothing nearby so we finally settled for a space on Riverside Drive just beside Grant's Tomb. This is not good I thought to myself, but what else can you do. I cautioned Eunice to be especially careful when she came back to get the car.

I waited at home for Eunice's arrival. I worried when she did not arrive. I thought about the car near Grant's Tomb. My instinctive New Yorker fears began churning. The phone rang. It was Eunice's tense voice on the other end of the line. "What's happened?" I asked half-knowingly. "I'm at the police

station." she said with an even more intense voice. "Why are you at the police station? What's happened to you?" my voice becoming even more upset.

"Our car was broken into and all of your clothes and everything was taken."

"Oh my gosh!" I said in agony. "I knew this would happen. I knew that was a bad place to park the car. What police station are you at? Where is it." I asked.

"I had a hard time finding it, but it's under the viaduct - under Riverside Drive. The police have been very helpful." Eunice said with a little more confidence.

"How did you get there?" I asked, again worrying that she might not find her way back to the South Bronx.

"When I got to the car, I saw that it was broken into and all your stuff was gone. There was a note on the visor which told me to come to the police precinct. I finally found it by wandering around on the West Side. The precinct is tucked away under the viaduct. They have all of your stuff here."

"What do you mean they have all of my stuff? What happened?"

"An off-duty policeman caught two guys breaking into the car and unloading it into another car. We were lucky. But they have to keep some piece of clothing for evidence. What shall I do?"

I thought for a moment. "Leave them my winter coat. I need a new one. And thank them for doing their job."

"These guys will be coming up to trial. They are both drug addicts. I think they're sending them to someplace in Kentucky. You may have to show up for a court case." Eunice said.

"Wherever that will be...probably in the city. We'll have to wait to hear. In the meantime, find out the easiest way for you to get here and be careful. We don't want anymore accidents. We were lucky this time. "

Four years had passed and this incident was still with me. I was apprehensive as I thought about leaving seven months pregnant Eunice with two small children in a New York City apartment. Beyond that I hoped that the heat of a New York August would be moderated by the more temperate weather of September. It suddenly occurred to me that all this preparation for an overseas assignment was really a way of testing us. Could we take all this movement and change? How would we bear up under all these temporary arrangements? How would we get along with all these different people?

We rolled across the George Washington Bridge and into New York. We had been away from the city for over four years and we were coming back in what I considered the best time of the year - the Fall. We got off the Henry Hudson Parkway at 125th Street and as we swung around and headed for La Salle Street, out of nowhere came another car. I hit the breaks. Eunice and Scott let out big screams. Eunice was holding Scott in her lap and put out her hand to keep from hitting the dash-board. Kerry was sleeping in a basket just behind the front seat. The baggage and other items in the back of the wagon suddenly lunged forward toward the basket. Fortunately the basket was high enough that the luggage slid over the top of the basket and onto the top of the front seat. The baggage we had tied onto the roof of our station wagon broke loose and slipped down onto the hood, off the hood and on to the street in a big jumble. Eunice was in shock. She quickly set down Scott and we both began pulling the luggage off Kerry's basket. Our one and a half year old was startled but in good spirits. It was like she expected all this to happen.

I got out of the car, looked to see if any damage was done to the car hood and gazed in frustration at the assemblage of our belongings in the middle of 125th Street. A little crowd gathered around staring at us curiously....No one offered to help. I quickly reassembled the luggage on the street. Some we piled up in the place of Kerry's basket and some on the front seat. The other luggage I tied down on the rack. Kerry sat in Eunice's lap for the remaining five blocks of the journey, Scott squeezed in between us on the front seat. By the time we finally got everything back in order, I knew we were back in New York with all its wild happenings. It was like we had never left the city. I thought: "What a way to begin the Study Fellowship."

What was even more unnerving was the thought that in less than an hour I was supposed to be on board a bus heading for the mining towns of West Virginia. I had originally looked forward to this trip to West Virginia. I looked forward to getting a close up view of what the Presbyterian Church was doing among the coal miners of Appalachia. With this last event, and the state of shock we were all in, I was in a tense mood. We pulled up in front of the Claremont Apartments where the families were to stay until they headed for Mount Freedom.

The bus for the West Virginia trip was already in front of the building and we were leaving in about an hour. Eunice and I still had to get our car unloaded and all our luggage up to the apartment assigned to us. Then we had to get Scott and Kerry settled in, not to say Eunice. We opened the door to the apartment and my heart sank. First, it was a back apartment with little light. Second, it had the dank and dusty smell of a closed in quarters. Third, it was dirty - it had not had a deep cleaning since before World War II. We went about our business of getting our luggage sorted out and put in all the right places, not saying much to each other but thinking - this is a test, this is a test. Only one more step on the road.

I tried to make my leaving as easy as possible, looking forlornly at Eunice, and secretly thanking my stars that she was who she was. We kissed tenderly and hugged tightly. She good-naturedly told me to have a good trip and to write. There was no telephone in the apartment, another minus. I was the last one on the bus, all those waiting appreciating my predicament. We headed out on our journey, making our way for the Lincoln Tunnel and our long trip through New Jersey, Pennsylvania and finally West Virginia. The gang on the bus were a lively and considerate crew. That took some of the edge off my leaving. Marge and Jim Williams, whom we had met at Meadville, were newly married so had no children. Betty Jo and Taylor Potter, also Meadville friends, were also childless and were both making the trip. Abe Hsu, a Chinese American was also on the trip, as well as Luningning Asuncion, a Filipina who was to become a good friend and support as we prepared for the Philippines. Byron Haines, Bob Hermanson and his wife Louise, Dr. Ron Seaton, a Wooster grad were also traveling companions. All in all there must have been over twenty-four people on the observation trip.

While our destination was West Virginia, we stopped off along the way to visit other ministries of the Presbyterian Church in inner city Pittsburgh. The final target of our journey was the Mountaineer Mining Ministry in West Virginia. Presbyterian work in the Appalachian coal fields had a long and well known history. Years after we had made our journey to the coal fields of West Virginia, I came across the work of Jack Weller whose book "Yesterday's People" (University of Kentucky Press, 1965) provided a deep insight into the culture of the people of the coal region. Weller, a Presbyterian minister had served the people of the Big Coal River Valley in the West Virginia Mountain Project for many years. Our troupe was brought there to see the church and the mines and listen to some of the young pastors who were serving in the Mining Ministry.

It was here I met Bill Grace for the first time. We would renew acquaintances when our family returned on furlough to the U.S. through San Francisco in the mid 1960s. At that time Grace was in urban church work in San Francisco. I would meet him again in the 1970's when he was a community organizer in the Twin Cities. Bill Grace became a major figure in P.C.U.M. - a coalition of Protestants doing urban community organizing. Here he had the support of Monsignor Jack Eagan who was a central figure in the Roman Catholic efforts in community organizing. Ed Towne was another person serving on the Mountaineer Mining Ministry staff. I had known Ed at the College of Wooster.

The observation trip opened us all up - fraternal workers and missionaries-to-be - to the Presbyterian Church's ministry to working people. Our visit to the mines and the churches would provide good background for the discussions we would be having at Mount Freedom about "the revolution of rising expectations" - the explosion happening in all the countries to which we were going. I came away from this observation trip feeling my own sense of ministry was being confirmed. All that we had seen was on the cutting edge of the Presbyterian Church's engagement in the urban and industrial scene in the United States.

We arrived at Mount Freedom in mid-September. Don Smith, who was in charge of the Study Fellowship, had made arrangements that all of the folks in the Claremont apartments would spend only one week in New York and then settle in at the Sain's Hotel in Mount Freedom. For Eunice this was a great relief. The apartment had been confining for the children and it was super-dirty. She was

continually washing Kerry's carry-around blanket because of the grime which pervaded all corners of the apartment. I arrived at Sain's Hotel, along with the rest of the travelers, to a welcoming Eunice. She had already settled in and had stories to tell about the terrain at Sain's Hotel. We were ready to engage the work of the next three months, and to await the final determination of whether we had survived the time of testing.