

## FOUNDING FATHERS — AND MOTHERS, I: SAMUEL E. WISHARD

by Tom Cox

To the careful observer, Samuel E. Wishard — or S. E. Wishard as he was generally known — must seem something of an anomaly. His photograph hangs in Pocatello's First Presbyterian Church, placed first among the ministers who have served there. But, as any careful student of the church's history knows, Wishard was in fact never pastor of the church. His place in that photographic display was secured by the fact that he was the organizing pastor in charge of the Gospel Tent meetings in 1904 that brought First Presbyterian into being.

Wishard followed in the tradition of the denomination's missionary pioneers. Like Jackson and Kendall, he was driven by an intense anti-Mormonism. He helped found what became Westminster College in Salt Lake City in order to provide a solid Calvinist education in the heart of the Mormon Zion; he was to serve on its board of directors until his retirement in 1905. He also wrote various tracts aimed against the Latter-day Saints, such as *Present Problems in Reference to Mormonism*, published by the Presbyterian Board of Home Missions in 1900, and he preached countless sermons aimed at providing Biblical refutation of the claims of Mormonism.

As we have seen, in 1887 Henry Kendall persuaded Wishard to give up his position as pastor of Chicago's Fifth Presbyterian Church to take charge of home mission activity in the Synod of Kentucky. Wishard was hugely successful. Recognizing his talent, Kendall "borrowed" Wishard from the Synod of Kentucky and dispatched him for three months to assist in Utah and Idaho. Afterward, Wishard went back to pastoral work in the Midwest even though authorities in Utah wanted him to remain. In 1890 Kendall persuaded Wishard to go west once more, this time to serve as mission executive for the Synod of Utah. He stayed for the rest of his career. Over the next fifteen years he was to be a major contributor in making Presbyterianism a vital force throughout Utah and Idaho.

In his work for the Utah synod (of which most of Idaho was then a part) and through it for the Presbyterian Board of Home Missions, Wishard sought to counter the work of the Latter-day Saints by establishing mission schools and churches wherever possible. But thanks to his predecessors, there were already a number of Presbyterian entities in place. The Presbyterian Church in Malad was one, and its story is revealing. In 1880 Malad was one of the leading settlements in Idaho, while Pocatello was just a wide spot beside the new railroad to Montana (it did not even appear in that year's census). To gentiles, Malad seemed a thoroughly Mormon community, but being on the northern edge of the Mormon Zion it may have seemed a more likely target than most communities in Utah proper. To the LDS faithful, on the other hand, Malad was a wild, gentile place with a disturbing admixture of heretical Mormon fringe groups — and thus sorely in need of redemption. The truth probably lay between the two extremes. Through the efforts of Wishard's Presbyterian predecessors in the area, a mission school was established in Malad in 1878, a chapel built in 1882, and a church organized two years later. The church took a firm anti-Mormon stand, adopting the motto (still featured on the bulletins for its services): "A Light Shining in the Darkness." To the church's founders and to subsequent generations, there was no doubt but that it was a *Mormon* darkness.

Malad was not alone. Through Wishard's efforts, a Presbyterian church was established in 1894 in Soda Springs, like Malad a town where Mormons, heretical LDS fringe groups, and gentiles existed in a volatile mixture. Other communities in southeastern Idaho also had Presbyterian churches, mission schools, or both before the founding of Pocatello's First Presbyterian Church: Preston, Rigby, St. Anthony, Montpelier, Franklin, Paris, even now-largely-forgotten Lago and Oxford, the latter nestled just south of Red Rock Pass and then a railroad town of some importance, all had churches before Pocatello; it is not clear how many of these were the product of Wishard's activities, although Montpelier, Paris, and Oxford — as well as Malad — clearly pre-dated him.

Wishard's approach was not what one might have expected considering the strength of his views toward the Latter-day Saints. He was no Mormon basher, confronting the lion in its den. Wishard believed that Christian truths, carefully presented, would permit Mormons to see the errors in their own doctrines. Most Mormons, he found, did not know the Bible well; therefore, he made most of his sermons expository, explaining what the Bible had to say about marriage, the priesthood, baptism, and other issues where the Mormons had departed from orthodox Christianity. Wishard refused to be drawn into confrontation and debate with LDS spokesmen. On one occasion in St. George, Utah, a Mormon bishop had been holding forth on the subject of damnation, arguing it was temporary. At his gospel meeting that evening, Wishard had a colleague read the definition from Webster's dictionary: "damnation: eternal punishment." Wishard suggested that in light of the definition, the bishop might want to reconsider his position. Afterward, the latter said to him, "You have a good sense of humor, sir." Wishard replied simply, "We do not throw stones."

Although not flashy, Wishard's approach — for which long experience in the pulpit had equipped him well — was effective with both Mormon and non-Mormon audiences. He found the people of Utah and southern Idaho eager for knowledge and, an associate recalled, "Mormons always had a wholesome respect for Dr. Wishard because of his kindness, fairness and rare ability to open up the Scriptures and present truth in a vivid clear way that left no doubt in their minds as to exactly what he meant."

In his preaching, Wishard was moving in the same direction as were those in charge of mission schools, and he supported them enthusiastically. The costs of building a new society left Mormon leaders with little money for schools; education languished. By increasing the knowledge of young students, Wishard and other Presbyterian authorities believed that they would not only prepare young people to be better, more productive citizens, but also more perceptive on religious matters and thus better equipped to detect Mormon fallacies and understand the alternative truths that he had to offer. This emphasis on education was of long standing in the Presbyterian church, stretching all the way back to Scotland — and here, as there, it helped to lay the groundwork for universal public education.

On his retirement, Wishard went to California, but before he left he had one last thing to do. Late one night Josiah McClain, his successor, was passing the old First Presbyterian Church in Salt Lake City which by then was abandoned, replaced by a new, larger structure. McClain thought he heard talking. He slipped around to the back of the church to investigate and found

Wishard on his knees in the dark pleading with God for Utah and the rest of the region that had been under his supervision. Humbled, yet inspired, McClain quietly slipped away.

On his death, a colleague summed up Wishard's work in Utah and southern Idaho:

*Coming at once into sympathetic relations as supervising counselor with the many struggling churches and missions, most of them planted in hostile surroundings, he went everywhere, traveling night and day, preaching, comforting, cheering, directing; helping all to [en]vision more clearly the greatness of this gospel work; helping the East to see and feel the needs of the West, and the West to understand the East, the Christian Church, its Boards, and their work for the whole church. Trusted by a large constituency, he joined East to the then distant West by frequent long trips, holding conferences, making addresses, stimulating and encouraging all. . . . [He wrote extensively] and his vigorous views and experiences went throughout the land. . . . He preached incessantly; audiences large and small equally had his best. . . .*

But, another colleague observed, “he was too restive, and may I say aggressive, for long pastorates,” a characteristic that peculiarly prepared him for his work as missionary executive for the Synod of Utah.

Such was the man who brought the Gospel Tent to Pocatello. He must have welcomed the opportunity, for the community, especially the area east of the railroad tracks, was becoming increasingly dominated by Mormons. Although there is no record of the content of the sermons Wishard offered his Pocatello listeners, it seems certain that he used his standard expository approach and preached familiar Presbyterian fare—the Bible and its calls on individuals to accept the wonder of God's grace and pursue lives of Christian love and service. It was a message that members of the First Presbyterian Church were to hear time and again over the years that followed.

Finally, it should be noted that Wishard had a marvelous singing voice; accompanied by the pump organ he brought with him to Gospel Tent meetings, Wishard rendered hymns in the most moving fashion. An associate wrote, “how he **sang** the gospel! Who that ever heard him sing ‘I Was Once Far Away from the Savior’ will ever forget his Savior?” Wishard had set the tone and pointed the way — in music as well as theology — it is well that he continues to be honored as a founding father of the First Presbyterian Church of Pocatello.