

## **FOUNDING FATHERS — AND MOTHERS, III: JAMES A. HEDGES**

by Tom Cox

Ministers are not sent to Presbyterian churches by bishops or other authorities, they are “called” by local congregations. For Scottish Presbyterians this had been a hard-won right, for archbishops and local lairds had long insisted they should select local ministers or, at the very least, have the right to veto the choices of individual congregations — they wanted to prevent the churches from becoming instruments used against their positions of status and privilege. American Presbyterians, as the inheritors of this tradition, were among the most ardent supporters of the War for Independence (in 1774 a Pennsylvania Loyalist informed Parliament that the Crown’s chief opponents in America were “Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and Smugglers”), and reflecting the concept that power should reside with elected representatives of the people, they jealously guarded their right to call their own ministers.

Thus, though S. E. Wishard had been the organizing pastor for Pocatello’s First Presbyterian Church, he was never officially its minister; no one could claim that title until there was a church to issue a “call.” And, in any case, Wishard had other responsibilities — but he filled the pulpit for the first months of the new church’s existence, traveling regularly from Salt Lake City to do so while it sought a worthy candidate for the position. At length, with Wishard’s help, the founders of First Presbyterian located a person they believed to be right. They promptly extended a call to the Rev. James A. Hedges, who accepted. He and his family arrived in Pocatello on December 3, 1904, and on December 11, Hedges preached his first sermon as minister of First Presbyterian Church. One week later the session authorized architect H. R. Brown to prepare plans for a permanent chapel. It was an important time: the church was now fully functioning and looking ahead; chances that it would die aborning rapidly diminished.

Previously, Hedges had ministered to churches at White Sulphur Springs, Montana, and Nez Perce and Kendrick (in northern Idaho but a part of Walla Walla Presbytery). Hedges was somewhat appalled by what he found in Pocatello. It was a far cry from the rosy situation that Rankin was to paint when he reported to the Synod of Utah in 1905 — that was a sort of cheerleading effort — and equally removed from the picture painted by Leigh Gittens, who drew upon Rankin’s report and reflected its view. Hedges’ reminiscences, published in the *Journal of the Presbyterian Historical Society*, give a more unvarnished view:

“to come as utter strangers among a handfull [sic] of people who received us cordially it is true but so few in number and worshipping in an old store building with an upturned apple box for a piano stool; with only a handfull of Sunday School scholars and a superintendent waiting to resign and a baker’s dozen at church, the outlook was anything but cheering. Besides I and my family were late that [first] morning due to our clock being out of the way [unpacked]. The Sunday School superintendent [Norman Belcher] who was also the ruling elder said surlily [sic] as we came in ‘You are not making a very good beginning, Sir.’”

Belcher was to be a continuing problem. Belcher’s wife, a devout charter member, had apparently dragooned him into serving as Sunday School superintendent and as the lone elder. He looked forward to being shed of the superintendency and perhaps of the position of ruling

elder as well. Unhappy with his situation, Belcher seems to have taken out his frustrations on Hedges.

Nor did problems end there. A portion of Hedges' salary came from mission funds, the rest was raised locally — and was often slow in materializing. As he put it, "It was very trying and discouraging. To the home missionary it was often not a question of living but of mere existence." The mission board should have provided more support than it did, Hedges believed, for although it was not officially classified as such First Presbyterian was in fact a mission church to the Mormons. Financial records for the period do not seem to have survived, but the budget must have been Spartan, for although the church had grown by then, the expenses for the 1914-1915 fiscal year was a mere \$976.95, with the minister's salary of \$474.95 making up some 48 percent of the total and various domestic and foreign benevolences making up about 11 percent. The minister's salary may still have been supplemented by national mission funds, but this support seems to have soon ended, for in 1916-1917 (with weekly church attendance now averaging 78) the minister's salary was \$1,200, a round figure suggesting that it was the total of his monetary compensation. Regardless, the figures for 1914-1915 give strong support to Hedges' statement that his was a life of "mere survival."

Pocatello was not alone in its financial difficulties; in 1905, of the 52 churches in the Synod of Utah only five were self supporting. Moreover, Hedges explained, most of the longtime Presbyterians in Pocatello were members of the west-side Congregational church; nearly all on the east-side where his church was located were LDS, and "Their influence and numbers made me feel as though I was dwelling among a foreign people. . . ."

Yet progress came. At first the church met in old Wedekind Hall whose "discomforts, its dreary walls, and its large dimensions . . . made our little congregation [seem] smaller than it was." Wedekind Hall served over the next several months until a new chapel was erected at Fifth and Lewis streets. Indeed, a fund drive to finance the chapel was already under way when Hedges arrived in town; with financial aid from the Presbyterian Board of Church Election, it was completed by April 23, 1905. Meanwhile, working with Professor Herbert D. Cheney, one of the four original faculty members of the nearby Academy of Idaho — forerunner of Idaho State University — Hedges started an east-side Young People's Society of Christian Endeavor. Attendance at both the church and Sunday school was growing.

With the new chapel in place, Hedges pushed to have the synod meet in Pocatello in 1905. Norman Belcher, still the only elder, protested, first at the idea and then at the plans Hedges made for the gathering. Hedges had uncovered collusion by Belcher and a builder to get the contract for the new chapel; he had insisted on rebidding, so "that the church might get a reputation for square dealing." Thereafter, Belcher became unrelenting in his opposition to Hedges and, in any case, apparently thought that as elder he should have had a larger say in planning the meeting of synod — and the Presbyterian system in which elders rule while ministers take care of matters dealing with the Word and Sacraments would suggest that his argument may well have been valid. But the synod meeting came off successfully, Belcher later admitted begrudgingly that the gathering had been well planned and executed, and Hedges came to see that the friction had been partly his own doing: "I am sure," he later wrote, "that if I had

consulted with him more and asked his advice that his attitude would have been different. . . . What misunderstandings could be cleared up if we were led always by the Spirit of Christ.”

Available sources give no hint of the thrust of Hedges’ sermons, but his actions speak loudly. Segregation lines were still rigid, but he ignored them, preaching on occasion at the black church on North Fifth and welcoming Indians who came from the Fort Hall Reservation with Amelia Frost and east-side Chinese. This last may seem an anomaly, but Presbyterians had worked closely with the Chinese community in California, San Francisco in particular, fighting to protect them against the prejudice that often seeped into that state’s laws and politics. Now, Hong Bing and Hong Kee joined Frost’s charges in being among the first to donate toward the building of the Presbyterian chapel. Nor was class a barrier for Hedges. He later recalled receiving into membership a poor family over the objections of new elder W. P. Havenor, who had been asked to assist. “Why do you receive such people into the church,” Havenor asked. “They are of no advantage to us.” Nonetheless, Hedges proceeded; clearly, he was laying the foundation for what would come to be known as “The Church of the Open Door.”

Like many later pastors, Hedges was deeply involved in the community. On May 2, 1907, veterans of the Spanish-American War and members of the Grand Army of the Republic (Union veterans from the Civil War) gathered at Fourth and Center and marched to the Presbyterian Church, where Rev. Hedges delivered a message and special music was presented. That same year, Hedges was selected to serve in the Republican state caucus to select the party’s nominee for the United States Senate. The general sentiment was to name William E. Borah, who had gained fame as prosecutor in the just-completed case against the trio accused of killing ex-governor Frank Steunenberg. Hedges had listened to Borah’s performance before the caucus and supported Borah, but he warned Congressman Burton L. French, “Burton, you’ll never be able to pin Borah down to any thing. He will always be a free lance.” In spite of the warning, the caucus nominated Borah, who won easily. But Hedges was proven correct, although Borah went on to become one of Idaho’s great public servants, he was always “a free lance.”

In the fall of 1907 Hedges announced that he would be moving to Sunnyvale in the newly irrigated Yakima Valley. Hedges was not the last minister whose service in Pocatello was to be relatively brief, but mobility was common across the West. Populations shifted constantly, and church members and their ministers joined in the movement — one authority has called them “turnstile communities” with “floating congregations and brief pastorates.” In its first seven and a half years, the Denver Presbyterian church had five ministers and was without a pastor forty percent of the time. The Laramie church was worse. Organized in 1869, it spent its first four months without a pastor and then from 1869 to 1895 had eleven ministers. The old New England practice in which ministers gave retrospective sermons after fifty years in the pulpit of the same church never made an appearance in the West.

A good start had been made during Hedges’ brief tenure. But he “was far from being satisfied. I left behind a little church not yet fully organized and a thousand dollar debt on the building. . . . I was not sure that it would live or die and I was very anxious concerning it. Others, however, that came after me pushed the little church forward until it has become one of the strong churches of Idaho. ‘Paul may plant and Apollos may water but God giveth the increase.’” Hedges was being too modest. The little church he had come to serve now numbered 44

members, four times what it had been when he arrived. However brief his stay, he had made a considerable impact and fully deserves being remembered as a founding father of Pocatello's First Presbyterian Church. At the same time, his story makes clear that for the church to continue for long it would have to depend on a relatively small core of people who would stay put and provide the continuity of leadership and outlook that an organization needs to survive.