

FOUNDING FATHERS — AND MOTHERS, IV: ANNETTE WHITE

by Tom Cox

From the beginning, women have been central in the life of Pocatello's First Presbyterian Church. Eight of the eleven charter members were women, but none played a larger role than Mrs. Earle C. White. She was there even before there was a church, for it was she who was largely responsible for bringing S. E. Wishard and his Gospel Tent to Pocatello in the first place. Over the years she was involved in nearly every major development; and in 1954, when the church held special services celebrating its fiftieth anniversary, she was the guest of honor as the last surviving charter member.

Women had not come to leadership roles in the Presbyterian church easily. Paul's injunctions against women speaking in church, John Knox's diatribes against women in authority (aimed primarily at Scotland's catholic Queen Mary), and the general sexism of American society long combined to keep women in the background. The Presbyterian's Puritan fellow-Calvinists shared the view. In colonial Massachusetts, Anne Hutchinson was called to task by authorities for daring to lead Bible study sessions in her home.

There had been some softening of attitudes by the time First Presbyterian was founded. In 1877 the church had begun commissioning women missionaries for service in the West, Presbyterians had been active in the women's rights movement that began at Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848, women were allowed to speak at church events — although not from the pulpit — and a presbytery of the Cumberland Presbyterian church (at the time the fastest growing branch of Presbyterianism and, as a result, short on ministers) even dared to ordain Louisa L. Woosley in 1889 — to the chagrin of the denomination's Kentucky Synod and General Assembly. But in 1904, when Presbyterians established their church in Pocatello, women were still referred to as "helpmates;" they were not expected to be leaders. Following accepted usage of the times, as long as her husband lived Mrs. White was always Mrs. E. C. White, even on the church membership roles — never Annette White — as if her identity came only through association with her husband. Not until the obituary announcing her death in 1960 at the age of 91 does one find her given name used in public notice. In the early years of First Presbyterian, much of the work of women was channeled through the Ladies Aid Society, a body whose very name implies that the real leadership came from men. There are those who would say that these were just the accepted social norms of the period and had no larger meaning. But practices paralleled the usage, the one reinforcing the other. A photograph of the attendees at the synod meeting in Pocatello in 1905 demonstrates the situation. It shows a large, overwhelmingly male group — only in the back row are two women barely visible (Amelia Frost and Mrs. White, perhaps?).

Things changed at a glacial rate, as is made clear by Lois A. Boyd and R. Douglas Brackenridge in their pathbreaking study *Presbyterian Women in America: Two Centuries of a Search for Status*. In the secular domain, women long had limited property rights; they were not allowed to vote in national elections — and, in most places, local elections — until the 1920s. In the Presbyterian church, women were not permitted to be elders until the 1930s (in 1931 the first five women commissioners to General Assembly included B. J. Silliman of Utah); with the lone exception of Woosley, no woman served as a minister in any branch of the Presbyterian church

until the ordination of Margaret Towner in 1956; even ordination did not bring equality, Towner and other early women ministers were pushed toward Christian education or administrative positions, rather than the pulpit; for many years even women ordained by other denominations were not allowed in Presbyterian pulpits; the Ladies Aid Society did not become the more-accurately-titled United Presbyterian Women until 1958; Kendall Presbytery did not have its first woman moderator until 1969, when Laura Holman of Twin Falls was installed in ceremonies held in Pocatello's First Presbyterian Church (interestingly, she was also the first lay person to hold that position); and the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. did not have its first female moderator until 1971. But, for all this, women strong in faith and long on talent were not easily discouraged from assuming a larger place than society in general — or the church — was inclined to assign to them. Mrs. White was one.

Annette White moved to Pocatello with her husband in 1893. Following the founding of First Presbyterian on July 17, 1904, she filled post after post in the church. For many years she served as Superintendent of the Sunday School; she helped organize Christian Endeavor in Pocatello; she was president of Ladies Aid; she held offices in the Women's Missionary Society (which, according to the *Pocatello Tribune*, spent December 16, 1908, "packing Christmas boxes for the Fort Hall mission); she aided in the church's music program; she was elected a deacon in 1924 (she and Mary Norby being the congregation's first women to hold that position); she served on the planning committee whose work led to the building of the present church building at the corner of Seventh and Lewis; on numerous occasions she opened her home on South Seventh for social gatherings of church people; the list goes on and on. When the General Assembly amended the church constitution in 1930 to allow for women elders, First Presbyterian was quick to respond, electing Mrs. White to that position on June 22, 1932 — although, as one observer put it, "She had been one in effect, all along." Her influence showed up in little things as well as big. Her daughter Louise later recalled that when she was a nine-year-old piano student her mother had required that she "learn the hymns for the next Sunday's service as a regular part of her piano practice."

As a capstone to her long career of service to the church, Mrs. White served as a commissioner (delegate) to General Assembly held in Denver in 1933, to which she traveled by car with the Rev. Joseph Cook, the Nez Perce minister at Fort Hall (who was Kendall Presbytery's other commissioner), and his wife. During the trip, Mrs. White repeatedly sought out restaurants and lodgings that would serve her traveling companions in spite of the widespread discrimination against American Indians at that time.

Leedice Kissane, speaking for the United Presbyterian Women in 1981, summed Mrs. White's work in the church: "She seems to me to exemplify women members of the early church when there was no distinction between men and women members, but all were Christians together making the life of the church their sole concern. She was truly a power in all reaches of the organization." Leigh Gittens was more succinct, describing her as a "fine Christian lady who worked all her life for the welfare of this church." Tom Norris agreed: to many who had been around at the time it sometimes seemed in retrospect that she "had built the church single-handed. . . ." Mrs. White's husband shared in her work and did much of his own, causing James Hedges, the church's first minister, to write in the 1940s, "they have been the mainstay of the church for more than thirty years." But their roles were hardly equal, and while some criticized

E. C. White's sharp business practices, no one ever questioned Annette White's probity. Indeed, much of what Earle White did should probably be credited to his wife; as one early member noted, he was never regular in his attendance, but his wife "could get him to do anything for the church." Moreover, leadership was expected of men; it was Annette White who helped pioneer new roles for women. In sum, Annette White's life exemplified a development noted by a leading church historian when he wrote that gradually day to day operation of Protestant churches in the American West became "largely a woman's prerogative."

Annette White was a founding mother, to be sure, but she was much more. Like a good mother, she continued to nurture the church in a multitude of ways over the next many years after its birth. Her work as long-time Superintendent of the Sunday School was especially important. But perhaps her greatest contributions came through her work in the Ladies Aid Society. Among other things, the society worked for some months in 1910 to finance the purchase of a bell for the church tower, the 1,100 pound Blymeyer bell that is still in use. On November 14, at the end of the drive, a Bell Banquet was held to celebrate. The men of the church were guests. As Leigh Gittens wrote: "It's hard to understand. The ladies did all the work raising the money, preparing the food and serving the banquet, and apparently all the men had to do was enjoy the banquet!" Nor was that the end of it. The Ladies Aid continued strong, raising money to meet need after need and supplying support in many another way as well. The acid test came in the 1930s, during which, Leigh Gittens wrote, "Ladies Aid worked extremely hard. . . . Many of us believe that without their efforts, the Presbyterian Church here in Pocatello could have collapsed." And, with all due respect for the reverends S. E. Wishard, Hugh Rankin, and James Hedges, it seems likely that without Annette White neither the church *nor* Ladies Aid would ever have come into being.

With such a history behind us, it seems somehow especially appropriate that today our pulpit is filled by the Rev. Pamela Mayes and six of the fourteen current session members are women. Annette White, one suspects, would be pleased.