CHURCH AND COMMUNITY, II:
H. ADDISON MULLEN AND THE QUEST FOR A BETTER SOCIETY

by Tom Cox

The idea of separation of church and state would have made no sense in eighteen or nineteenth century Scotland. In 1603, Scotland's King James VI succeeded to the throne of England and promptly decamped with his court for London from where he reigned over both nations. There was still a Scottish parliament, but in 1707, in spite of the opposition of the majority of Scots, that body accepted the Act of Union, dissolving the Scottish parliament and uniting the two kingdoms to form Great Britain, ruled from London. So long as Scots paid their taxes and did not engage in rebellion, authorities in London paid the northern realm little attention. There was a Secretary for Scotland, but beyond enjoying the perquisites of office and a limited patronage, most holders of the position did little. In effect, Scotland was without a government, however much one might have been needed.

The Church of Scotland filled the vacuum, taking care of poor relief, deciding who should be employed on public works, overseeing education, and determining when individuals had violated community standards and on the appropriate punishment for their actions. All this grew in importance as social problems mounted as the potato famine that devastated Ireland spread to Scotland and as the Highland clearances, during which various lords forced peasants from their lands to make room for sheep for income and deer parks as hunting preserves for the wealthy, proceeded. Wrapped up in all this, the right of a congregation — through its elected representatives, the session — to "call" the minister of its own choice had deep political overtones. Moreover, it was the session that oversaw the management of the various public responsibilities that had devolved upon the church in the absence of a functioning government. There was no separation of church and state, in many ways the Church of Scotland was the state — not a theocracy like Calvin's Geneva, but a government of the people that looked out for the community and sought to protect it from undue exactions by authorities in London or by Highland lords.

Scots brought the idea that the church should be deeply involved in community affairs with them to America where, as Presbyterians, they found similar views in New England's Puritan communities. Puritan society was heavily regulated — who could live in a community, what resources one could draw upon, what prices one could charge for goods, and to whom he could sell were all controlled by authorities. Even walking for leisure through Boston Common on a Sunday was banned as inappropriate behavior for the Sabbath. Intent upon creating a godly community, Puritans regulated numerous aspects of life that later generations would consider beyond the church's proper purview. Roger Williams objected that an almighty God did not need the help of man-made laws to advance His plan for the world, but to no avail; in the end he left Massachusetts to become the founder of Rhode Island. Like Williams, others who objected to Puritan controls also had to suffer the consequences.

Patterns established in the colonial period continued long after. During the nineteenth century Presbyterians were active in campaign after campaign to create a better society: abolition, women's rights, Indian rights, temperance, humane treatment of the mentally ill — the list goes on and on. Nor was such activity only in America; in addition to campaigning for education and

the rights of the poor, the Church of Scotland provided leadership in the early nineteenth century drive to outlaw the slave trade, that blight of the Western world.

Christians of other persuasions — Catholics and Lutherans in particular — tended to be baffled by all this. Catholic immigrants saw the temperance movement as an attack on the saloons that were the social centers, hiring halls, and the sole safe gathering place for the urban poor. Movements that attacked urban machine politics were seen as targeting an institution that provided a voice to immigrant masses. Movements for women's rights seemed to undermine the established family structure of traditional society, a structure that lent stability and cohesion to the community. The church, people with such views argued, should provide solace and protection for its adherents, but had no call to try to change society — God had ordained the existing social order, and if it were to be changed that was in God's hands. From this viewpoint, Presbyterians and their meddling ilk seemed to be self-righteous busy-bodies. Recent studies of voting patterns have shown how deeply these divisions ran. On reform after reform, nineteenth-century voters divided sharply along denominational lines.

By the time the First Presbyterian Church of Pocatello was founded, these divisions were becoming less clear. The Social Gospel movement had opened the eyes and mellowed the views of many Protestants regarding immigrants and the urban poor, while the creeping secularization of American society moved much of the leadership on social issues out of the religious sphere. Still, Presbyterians continued to be engaged in social issues — and were to continue to be so over the years. Indeed, President Woodrow Wilson, that devout son of a Presbyterian minister, not only supported reform at home, but also sought to extend it to the international arena.

The Rev. H. Addison Mullen, who arrived from Colorado Springs in October 1907 to succeed James Hedges as pastor of the First Presbyterian Church, illustrates the point. He was a popular speaker at the Academy of Idaho and elsewhere in the community, was active in presbytery (which he served as moderator), and in 1912 he organized Men of the Hour, a local adjunct of the American National Forum, a non-secular organization that aimed to improve the educational, moral, and citizenship level of young men who had missed a college education.

Mullen was not afraid of taking on the most formidable foes when the occasion seemed to demand it. On September 26, 1909, President William Howard Taft arrived in Pocatello by train. Taft was in town less than half an hour, but it was a Sunday evening. The next day Mullen tied into the President in the press, castigating "the surreptitious manner in which he intruded upon the hallowed evening hour and afforded a latent temptation to . . . disturb the sacred custom of a city in its worship."

This was the period during which Pocatellans were seeking to cleanse their city of the rawness that had long pervaded it. The red light district near the Oregon Short Line's freight depot was eliminated and the city's numerous saloons (32 by one count) were sharply reduced in number. The records do not reveal activity by Mullen or the leaders of the First Presbyterian Church in these campaigns, but one can assume with some confidence where they stood — and that they were active.

When Mullen announced his retirement in 1911, the *Pocatello Tribune* was full of praise for this "beloved pastor . . . [this] sterling good minister and man." As the anonymous reporter put it:

> *Aside from being one of the most popular pastors in the Gate City, Rev. Mullen is rated by uncountable friends in and out of the church as a first class man in every particular. . . . Genial, jolly, always obliging, an excellent "mixer," an enthusiastic lover of good, clean, athletic sport, clean of heart and mind, an eloquent preacher of the gospel, a tireless worker for the upbuilding of the church; earnest and honest in a desire to better moral conditions in every possible way and to purify the social and political body, Rev. Mullen during his five year residence here has been a power for good. His retirement will create a vacancy hard to fill.*

One finds it hard to imagine more fulsome praise, although First Presbyterian's Grace Tarr Bistline was to put it more succinctly. He was, she said, looking back some seventy years later, a "good all around man." Indeed, she recalled, church members thought him "just about perfect."

People outside of Pocatello seem to have shared the reporter's high opinion of the Rev. Mullen, for in 1912, before he departed from the Gate City, he was one of 125 of "the strongest men in the church" who attended a conference in Kansas City to study the problems of home missions and how that work could best be prosecuted throughout the country. Not surprisingly, his "retirement" did not last long. Early in 1913, he accepted a call to the Central Presbyterian Church in Butte, Montana.

Efforts to improve Pocatello did not end when Mullen departed from the Gate City. A few years later, the session authorized his successor, the Rev. Marcus E. Lindsay, to protest to the city council against a proposal that would allow theaters to show motion pictures on Sundays. Neither Presidents nor movies should be allowed to infringe on the Sabbath.

Time would modify some of the positions of the church and its leaders, but the long-standing Presbyterian tradition of deep commitment to improving the community continued. Leaders, clergy and lay alike, continued active in efforts to create a better city — J. B. Bistline as mayor of Pocatello, Tom Norris through his work in behalf of Bannock County Hospital and Bannock County Red Cross, the Rev. Jo Lininger with his long involvement on the local school board, Allan Priddy via his work with Habitat for Humanity, Paul Link through his efforts in behalf of the Portneuf River Greenway, the deacons in feeding the poor through the Salvation Army, the list goes on and on. As the Rev. Jim Cramer was told by a community leader soon after he arrived in Pocatello in 1999, the Presbyterian church provided leadership and had an influence in the Gate City far beyond what the size of its membership would suggest. It did indeed, for the sense of community responsibility that stretched back through American history to the church's Scottish roots — and to which the Rev. H. Addison Mullen had contributed so effectively — was alive and well in the First Presbyterian Church.