

CHURCH AND COMMUNITY, III: MARY NORBY'S LIFE OF QUIET SERVICE

by Tom Cox

In 1979, as the First Presbyterian Church was celebrating its seventy-fifth anniversary, the Rev. J. Austin Lininger, then pastor, noted how much of the celebration centered around the building of the new church and the additions and improvements to it. These were noteworthy events, he said, but “a church is not a building; a church is *people*. . . .” Sharing that view, this author has tried to make individuals the focus of his history. There are pitfalls to such an approach. Those who leave records, those who appear time and again in session and congregational meeting minutes, and those who serve as officers in the various organizations of the church represent only a small portion of the total membership; in spite of what it may sometimes seem, theirs is not the whole story.

Some years back, historian Tamara Hareven noted the same phenomena in American history as a whole. Much of the history of the United States, she wrote, is the story of forgotten people, or as she put it in the title of a book she wrote in an attempt to tell their side of the story, of *Anonymous Americans*. Mary Norby was such a figure in the First Presbyterian Church. She never held major office or headed a major committee, her name appears infrequently in church records, but she played a vital role nonetheless. When early members described the First Presbyterian Church as the “Church of the Open Door,” they may well have had in mind people like immigrant Mary Norby.

Mary Norby and her husband Gabriel had been born in Gotland, Sweden. They lived for a time on a farm in Nebraska, but Gabriel disliked farming so around 1907 or 1908 they moved to Pocatello, where he became a policeman. Over the next many years, Mrs. Norby was a regular attendee at the First Presbyterian Church, although it was probably some time before she drew much notice. Self-conscious about her heavy Swedish accent and limited English, she seldom spoke in meetings. From the first, the family had little money and was unable to make major contributions to the church's coffers. Mary's circumstances grew worse after Gabriel and one of the Norby children died during the influenza epidemic of 1918. To make ends meet, she rented rooms in the family's house at 810 South Eighth Street to students from the Academy — students who often had sufficient money only for the first month's rent, but, when their funds ran out, were allowed to stay on because, although Mary was far from affluent, she had taken on the role of mother-in-residence and could not bring herself to turn them out. At one point she provided rooms for practically the entire football team and “was lucky to get one month [of rent] out of them.” Many students left school still owing considerable sums for back rent — but they remembered her fondly, and her daughter, Emma Kelly, recalled that when Mary died in the 1950s, it was amazing how many overdue payments poured in. As many a student had recognized, Mary Norby was poor in material things, but not in spirit, and they wished to reciprocate at last for what she had done for them.

In the 1920s Mary Norby's daughter returned to the family fold from a failed marriage, child in tow. What followed was no life of leisure for Emma. Protests notwithstanding, on Sundays Mary would roust her out of bed and march her off to Sunday school, just as she had done when Emma was a child. She was not charged any rent, Emma recalled, but paid dearly, for her

mother was a firm taskmaster; perhaps it would have been easier to have been charged, she mused, for then so much could not have been asked of her. At first, Emma may have gone to Sunday school under duress, but the church soon grew to be an important part of her life, and she became active in Christian Endeavor and served as secretary-treasurer for the Sunday school. In 1941, when Mrs. E. C. White finally resigned as superintendent after decades of service, Emma Kelly replaced her (or, according to one source, became assistant superintendent under Edna Matson). Later Emma became church treasurer. Her mother had groomed her well for service, yet, Emma insisted, "I did very little compared to her."

Mary Norby and Mrs. E. C. White were elected deacons in 1924, the first women to hold that position in the church. But Mary's greatest contributions to the church came in the 1930s. She had been a member of the planning committee for the new church constructed at the end of the 1920s and was "so proud when they got it going," but difficulties soon followed. With the church short on money and large mortgage payments hanging over it, fund-raisers assumed increasing importance. Ladies Aid, of which Mary was a member, played a key role in the attempts to cope, promising to take over responsibility for making payments on the building loan and helping on other expenses as well. Dinners and luncheons became major sources of funds. Prepared by members of Ladies Aid, who charged 75 cents or one dollar a plate, the meals were served to a variety of groups at the church and in the community. The foodstuff that went into these meals was all donated, and Mary Norby became the key figure in obtaining the necessary items. The local People's Market was a favorite target. Although he was a Methodist, over the years Mary persuaded its manager to donate huge quantities of meat to Ladies Aid; indeed, Emma recalled, "she could talk them out of just about anything." She also had a list of members of the church whom she approached regularly for donations. As Leigh Gittens recalled, his mother was on Mrs. Norby's list, and on one occasion simply greeted her when she came to call with: "What do you want now, Norby?" It was easier than resisting, which probably would have been fruitless in any case, for it was hard to say "no" to Mary Norby.

Mary not only obtained numerous donations, but also spent many an hour cooking, cleaning, serving, and doing other chores in connection with the meals. Yet she worked so quietly, so unassumingly, that she got little credit. To her daughter's disgust, when post-event accolades were handed out, others frequently got the credit for what Mary Norby had done: her mother had gotten the meat and other donations, had done much of the work of preparation, and had helped to serve, Emma recalled, and those "who had only donated a half a pound of butter" stood up and took the bows. Her daughter may have grumbled, but there is no sign that Mary ever did.

Leigh Gittens recognized Mary Norby's contributions, even if many others did not. On the occasion of the church's seventy-fifth anniversary he recalled that First Presbyterian's "successful beginning was largely due to two devoted families, the E. C. Whites and the Gabriel Norbys." And when Gittens spoke of the Gabriel Norbys, he meant primarily Mary, for her husband had died in 1918 and even before that she was the one who was the more intimately involved in the church. Churches need their Annette Whites and Percy Havenors, leaders who stand out and provide public leadership, but they need their Mary Norbys too, for they are an important, if generally anonymous, parts of any church's story.