TO THE GLORY OF GOD, I:
BUILDING A HOUSE FOR THE LORD

by Tom Cox

The founders of the First Presbyterian Church of Pocatello faced an immediate and very real problem: where to worship. S. E. Wishard, Hugh Rankin, and their Gospel Tent were departing to continue their work in other communities. Temporary quarters might be found — and were — but a church building was needed, a structure whose very existence would proclaim Christ's presence on the east-side. Recognizing this, the organizers of First Presbyterian began a fund-raising drive even before the formal organization of the church had been completed. By July 17, 1904, when the Gospel Tent meetings came to a close, one thousand dollars had already been pledged. Earle White, Norman Belcher, and others continued diligently searching for funds in the days that followed, and near the end of the year, thanks to a one thousand dollar loan from local sources, and another from the national Board of Church Erection, the church was in a position to call for bids. Difficulties over alleged collusion between the church's first (and at the time only) elder and a builder resulted in the Rev. Hedges insisting upon re-bidding — the church needed to establish a reputation for "square-dealing," he argued. This delayed matters for a time, but on January 4, 1905, new bids in hand, the church awarded a construction contract to F. W. Myers, a local builder.

The new building, located at the corner of Fifth and Lewis streets rose quickly. Winter blizzards slowed work, so it was not complete within the ninety days called for in the contract, but — though not quite finished — it was sufficiently so for Easter services to be held there on April 23. Members must have celebrated the Resurrection with special fervor that Sunday as they gladly abandoned the drab old quarters of Wedekind Hall, located four blocks away at the corner of Third and Center. Revealing the confidence of the founders, the church was set back on its twin lots, near the alley, so that there would be ample room in front to erect a new and larger church at a later date.

A few photographs remain of what came to be known as "the little white church in the vale." It was a simple, frame structure, painted white; it measured thirty by ninety feet and had a steeple-topped bell tower in the left front (but until 1910 without a bell). A large, arched, stained glass window dominated the front of the church to the right of the entry. It appears that the window was made up of intricate, non-pictorial designs — a residue of old Calvinist opposition to Catholic iconography was perhaps still present. All in all, it was a Protestant chapel such as might have been found in thousands of other communities scattered across rural and small-town America at the time (inexpensive stained glass was available from wholesalers and already in use in many small churches in the West, including the Presbyterian church in Soda Springs).

One can only guess at the interior — but with some confidence. Tom Norris, who moved to the Pocatello area in 1911, recalled it as "nothing ornate," with a "plain" interior (church leaders had, he thought, cut corners in erecting the building). In other words, it was a relatively simple affair, as were most small Presbyterian churches of the period. At the front, an empty cross, signifying that Christ had risen and reigns, would have been the focal point. On a table beneath it, in all probability, there would have been an open Bible, signifying the centrality of the Word. The pulpit would have been offset to one side, indicating that no one stood between the worshippers and the cross and that the minister was a teacher and leader, not an intermediary between humankind and God (however, the pulpit may have been located in the center, as it was in some Presbyterian churches, again indicating the centrality of the Word). In keeping with the basic concepts of Reformed churches, worshipers would have prayed directly to God through Jesus, not intervening saints. The cross was probably a plain Latin cross and, like many others, may have stood on a base of three steps, signifying faith, hope, and charity--or love, as the NRSV has it (1 Corinthians 13: 13). But it may well have been a Celtic cross, the Cross of Iona, with its slightly flared arms and a circle around the middle signifying eternity; for with the Presbyterian church's ties to Scotland and the Celtic church's long opposition to control from Rome even before the Reformation, these were — and remain — popular among Presbyterians. On those occasions when communion was served, a simple table would have been set at floor level, and the minister would have stood behind it to officiate, again indicating that the faithful could come directly to God without an intermediary. For all its simplicity — and for all of John Knox's and John Calvin's dislike for the ornate symbolism of Catholic churches — the church at Fifth and Lewis would have been rich in a simple symbolism of its own.

The founders of the church had been correct. By the time debt incurred in building the church was paid — the note for the local loan was happily burned on October 4, 1913 — the structure at Fifth and Lewis was bulging at the seams. During the winter of 1914-1915 a gallery seating some fifty people was added at the rear of the sanctuary to ease crowding, but this was only a temporary solution. With membership growing, it was apparent that a new building would soon be needed — there were nearly 250 members, and Sunday Church School attendance was well over 150; one class met in the loft, another at one end of the main sanctuary, and a third at the other end (with folding screens separating the two). "We liked that little church and hated to see it go," Grace Tarr Bistline recalled, but a new church was clearly needed.

On May 3, 1916, the Rev. Marcus Lindsay, pastor from 1915 to 1918, reported on a proposal for new facilities; a year later J. T. Young argued that a different location was needed, one nearer Idaho Technical Institute (as the Academy of Idaho was now called) and further from the east-side's growing business district. Such a location, some argued, would help in getting support from the national Board of Church Erection, which was interested in encouraging a Presbyterian presence in centers of higher education.

The church proceeded with planning through a committee chaired by Earle White. After investigating options and needs, the committee recommended construction of a building to cost roughly $50,000. At a congregational meeting in November of 1919, Mrs. E. C. White moved that a building fund be started. The motion carried, and at a subsequent meeting in July of 1920 the congregation voted to proceed to erect a new church and spend about $75,000 on it — not $50,000 as earlier agreed on. Recognizing that this goal would not be easy to meet, the committee sought an expert on fund-raising to lend guidance. In due course, the Rev. George G. Dowey of the National Board of Missions arrived to provide aid and experience.

Planning moved ahead in spite of pastoral changes. After the United States entered the First World War in 1918, Rev. Lindsay left to help the Young Men's Christian Association in its work with the army. His successor, the Rev. R. J. Phipps, supported the idea of a new building, but left in 1923. During the tenures of these two, planning proceeded at a deliberate pace. It seemed that before the congregation could forge ahead it first had to come to terms with the reality of its needs and what a successful fund-raising campaign would demand of it.

The Rev. G. William Barnum, who arrived from Boise's Second Presbyterian Church in December 1923, took hold of the matter. As Leigh Gittens wrote, Barnum "had a magnetic personality, a driving Christian faith, and a cheerful disposition," and the church soon "seemed to be revitalized." Planning quickly turned to action. Ladies Aid, following a vigorous fund-raising campaign, purchased two lots at the corner of Seventh and Lewis; E. C. White, who thought more land was needed, traded two lots he owned elsewhere for the two adjacent to those acquired by Ladies Aid and donated them to the church. At this point, Kendall Presbytery lent its endorsement to the project. It noted the proposed building's "strategic location . . . in one of the most critically important points of the Mormon Area," the fact that it stood in the midst of a large industrial community and foreign settlement "almost untouched with evangelical work," and that the First Presbyterian Church was "the only evangelical organization in the quarter of the City where the Institute is located." Substantial support from the national board was in order, Presbytery argued.

As matters proceeded, a committee composed of S. E. Brady, J. R. Woodruff, and Mrs. E. C. White provided planning and direction; a second committee — Alex Campbell, F. C. McGowan, and J. T. Young — focused on raising funds. J. B. Bistline — a former mayor of Pocatello, owner of an east-side lumber and hardware business, and active in many a capacity in the church over the years — served as fund treasurer. For a time, the committee's goal was raised to $100,000 — a huge sum at the time, especially for a church that had overdue notes on the manse it had constructed in the previous decade — but it was subsequently scaled back to a more realistic figure.

The details of what followed are unclear. Session minutes say little about the fund raising drive, and neither Leigh Gittens nor subsequent researchers have been able to find much information to flesh out the story. What is clear is that by May 1926 there were pledges in hand for $32,023 and a loan of $10,000 had been obtained from the Board of Church Erection. In October 1926, plans were obtained from Charles W. Bolton and Son of Philadelphia, well-known church architects, and soon after bids were opened and a construction contract signed with Charles A. Baldwin for $40,153. Groundbreaking took place on May 3, 1927; all present turned a shovel full of earth, beginning with Mrs. E. C. White, the only charter member still on the membership rolls. On July 23, the cornerstone (complete with a copper time capsule) was laid with full ceremony — including a prayer in Shoshoni by Hubert Tetoby, an elder of the First Presbyterian Church of Fort Hall who had formerly worked with Amelia Frost and served as her aide-in-translation.

Progress soon slowed. The old church building was sold to another church (and was subsequently moved and eventually torn down); First Presbyterian's last services were conducted there on November 4, 1928, but the new church was not yet ready. In addition to the contract to build the Presbyterian church, Baldwin also had one for remodeling the Congregational church. Both found that money came in slowly, and Baldwin played one church off against the other, using whatever funds he had at hand to work on the church that was at the moment most demanding. Tom Norris later recalled the church framing standing without a roof through an entire winter while Baldwin worked across town on the Congregational church. It was, Norris said with masterful understatement, “an uncomfortable situation.” While awaiting completion of its new building, the Presbyterians met in temporary quarters, first in the White Building at Second and Center and then at Franklin Junior High School. Somehow, in the midst of all this Barnum found time to serve as a commissioner to the General Assembly of 1928 and treasurer for the Synod of Idaho. The first services at the new church — in the basement, because the rest was not yet complete — were on July 28, 1929. It had taken over a decade of planning, fund raising, and hard work, and there were still some finishing touches needed, but First Presbyterian had its new building!

All this came at a cost, for the demands of the campaign wore on everyone. Membership fell from 265 in 1926 to 228 in 1927 (the church would not regain its 1926 level of membership until 1945); Sunday School attendance dropped; and the treasurer was reporting a deficiency of funds to meet obligations. Even those who stayed must have felt pangs of disappointment, for they had started with grandiose hopes of raising $100,000 and in the end had realized but $32,023 (plus the loan from the Board of Church Erection). Tom Norris, already a major figure in the church, reflected the mood. With the Rev. Barnum clearly in mind, he later grumbled that ministers come to a congregation, get them to construct a new building, and with this feather in their caps, move on to another congregation, leaving behind a church burdened with debt and facing the challenge of finding ways to pay it off.

But perhaps the most seriously affected was the Rev. Barnum himself. In 1929, when the congregation refused to accept the budget for benevolences proposed by the session and directed that it be cut more than fifty percent, Barnum had a statement of protest read into the minutes of the annual meeting. The congregation’s actions, he said, reflected “a most unfortunate attitude toward the church’s missionary responsibility. . . .” Although he said he had spent “the best years of his ministry” in Pocatello, in May of 1930 Barnum resigned as pastor. He stayed on long enough to preside at the dedication of the new building on June 22, at which the Rev. Dr. William J. Boone, founder and president of the College of Idaho, gave the dedicatory sermon; Barnum then left to accept a call from Kalispell, Montana. Percy Havenor, clerk of session, later wrote of Barnum: “We never had a harder worker in the pastorate nor do I think it would be possible for one to be more zealous . . . in pulpit and in the field.” However, Havenor explained,

> *Ours is a Railroad town and the residence [sic] are very transient. Church responsibility . . . sets [sic] rather easily on our people and it required constant effort on Mr. Barnum’s part to keep things going. . . . Reverend Barnum is personally one of the finest men I ever knew and one who lives his convictions as well as preaching them. His weakness, if you call it this, [is] that he expects his church members to do likewise.*

In short, Barnum left because he felt he was not “getting the cooperation that he should have from the church.” But, Havenor realized, “This is not an infrequent occurrence after a building program, especially when it ends in a time of depression.”

One can recognize what Havenor was referring to: today we would call it “burn-out.” Surely, many members of the congregation were equally exhausted, even discouraged, by the difficulties of bringing the long, trying building campaign to a conclusion. Fortunately for the First

Presbyterian Church, key members stayed on, working diligently to meet the challenges brought by the Great Depression — and the new building too remained. And fortunately for the larger church, Barnum soon regained his energy, continuing to preach until his death in the 1960s at the age of seventy-seven.