

## **TOIL AND TROUBLE, I: THE GREAT DEPRESSION AND THE CHURCH**

by Tom Cox

By their very nature, churches go through times of trouble. All one needs to do is read the Epistles of Paul to realize that this is nothing new. War, depression, internal division, and external assaults all test the will of the faithful and the strength of a congregation. For the First Presbyterian Church of Pocatello no trials were greater than those faced during the 1930s.

The Great Depression was a traumatic, life-altering experience for Pocatello and for the nation. Years later, Tom Powers, a railroad engineer and east-side resident, recalled: “I will never forget that gray December day in 1929 when I was cut off from the railroad. It is as vivid in my memory as that windy walk I had to take over the Center street overpass to get my pay. It was the last steady work I had until 1939 when [at last] I worked the year round.” Former students of the east-side’s Bonneville School looking back to the period, found that for all their ethnic and religious diversity they had a bond forged in the struggle to survive during the depression; the endless search of they and their families for ways to “make do,” to stretch limited resources, and to find fulfillment in little things had drawn them together.

Those were hard years for the First Presbyterian Church too. What had started as a Wall Street panic, turned into a prolonged, grinding depression, an economic collapse such as the nation had never seen before — and has not seen since. Railroads were especially hard hit, and with them Pocatello. The church’s debts accumulated. In 1932 First Presbyterian still owed the architects of their new building \$1,200, Idaho Glass and Paint \$400 (for the rose window), back salary for the new minister (the Rev. Claude Richmond, who came to First Presbyterian from St. Anthony), and various other bills. The manse needed repair and the furnace new grates, but there was no money.

The Rev. Richmond tried to put a good face on the situation, telling the session in 1933: “although the church is in bad financial shape, we really are in no worse shape nor as bad as some and . . . if we have faith in the Church we will pull through.” Such encouraging words may have helped, but over time the strain of circumstances took its toll on everyone and brought friction to the fore, sometimes over what from a distance seem like minor issues. When some members planted a new lawn for the church, others criticized: how could you plant a lawn when basic maintenance had been postponed, they asked? G. Nicholas Ifft, managing editor of the local newspaper, played a leading role in attempts to meet the exigencies of the time, virtually begging for money to keep the church going. His son, Nicholas Ifft, III, observing all this, vowed it would never happen again, and in subsequent years became a champion of frugal fiscal management and a tiger in defense of church memorial funds.

Proud though members of First Presbyterian were of their new church building, a burden of debt came with it, and as wage earners lost their jobs and families were forced to tighten their belts, pledges did not always materialize. On top of this there were the regular costs of operation, and even they were difficult to meet, for giving fell off. Church leaders struggled to adjust. Extra congregational meetings were called in an effort to bring expenditures into line with the new financial realities. Current expenditures were shaved from \$5,020 in 1929 to a mere \$2,076 in

1934. At one point Northern Star, the organization of the church's business and professional women, helped with bills current, and Ladies Aid paid part of the minister's salary when the church itself lacked funds for the purpose. Similarly, Ladies Aid took on the responsibility of paying the interest on the church loan and, through the efforts of Mary Norby and others, launched a series of fund-raisers in an attempt to raise the money to do so. But Ladies Aid was only partly successful, and in the end the church failed to make required payments on both interest and principal. When the Rev. Richmond offered to reduce by \$200 the church's debt to him for back salary in exchange for four Sunday's off, the session eagerly accepted. To further reduce expenses and provide some badly needed cash, the church sold its manse. For all intents and purposes the church was bankrupt. Nicholas Ifft and Alex Campbell journeyed to Philadelphia to get church authorities to extend the mortgage, and the national board decided not push for payments on its overdue loan and accumulated interest. This allowed the church to survive, but just barely. Meanwhile, the fund-raising efforts of Ladies Aid and other women's groups may well have made the difference between keeping the doors open and closing shop. Leigh Gittens put it plainly: "Many of us believe that without their [the women's] efforts, the Presbyterian Church here in Pocatello could have collapsed. . . ." Tom Norris agreed. Ladies Aid, he said, was "the backbone of the church."

Rev. Richmond studied the matter and came to the conclusion that the trouble was a spirit of indifference to church attendance — the same sort of indifference that had contributed to Rev. Barnum's departure. Leigh Gittens judged that Richmond was "probably correct," but there was more to the story than that. As people left Pocatello in search of employment, membership dropped — from 254 in 1930 to 233 in 1933 — but even many of those who stayed had little money for the church and, embarrassed, may have opted not to attend rather than fail to give when the offering plate came their way. Church treasurer Emma Kelly noted that there were "very, very few pledges" at that time; Tom Norris thought some who had pledged previously left to get off "a sinking ship." Under the circumstances, even though relief needs had risen sharply, church benevolence was cut from \$1,134 (22.5 percent of expenditures) in 1929 to \$296 (14.2 percent of expenditures and barely over \$1 per member) in 1934. By 1936-1937 there was no money at all being budgeted for benevolence.

Further complicating matters, on June 23, 1935, Richmond resigned to accept a call from the church in Watsonville, California. Believing that his salary, "current and deferred," ought to take precedence over other bills, the session voted to hold the pulpit vacant "until current expenses and back salary had been cleaned up." Slowly things improved, and the church found the wherewithal to launch a ministerial search, and in due course issued a call to the Rev. John E. Spencer of Lake City, Iowa. The terms were hardly munificent. Spencer's salary was a mere \$1,200 per year (with two weeks vacation), plus use of the manse (until it was sold) and contributions to the Presbyterian pension fund. There may well be a story behind all this, although available documents fail to disclose it; one suspects that the church in Lake City had fallen on hard times too — had it been forced to close its doors? Whatever the case, the new minister set to work with gusto, launching a membership drive that brought in some 40 new members. Losses for various reasons cut the net gain to 29, but the increase, coupled with a slight brightening of the national economic picture, generated a small increase in giving, an increase that unfortunately was more than absorbed by accumulated debts. In 1936, current expenditures topped \$3,000 for the first time since 1930, and the treasurer reported church

finances to be “very healthy,” an exaggeration but not an unreasonable statement considering what had gone before. However, it would be five more years before the church — or the country — would be completely free from the clutches of the depression.

The costs of all this were not just in the loss of members and a reduction in giving. The depression wore on the spirit of church members, undermining enthusiasm and eroding commitment until at the annual congregational meeting in 1936, its minutes reveal, the Rev. Spencer “expressed regret that members were not taking proper interest in the work of the church and stated that while he felt there was opportunity for great work in Pocatello unless he received more support he could not continue as pastor of this church.” As he put it to the session a day later: “the membership must co-operate to make the church grow and function properly.” However correct he may have been, the handwriting was on the wall. Within a year, Spencer had left to accept a call to Buhl. Adding to difficulties, after Spencer’s resignation in 1937, the church went for a time without a minister. A brightening of conditions eventually came, but only by fits and starts.