

TOIL AND TROUBLE, II: ISABEL FERRY AND THE TRIALS OF WAR

by Tom Cox

Although the Great Depression had been a time of trial for the First Presbyterian Church, its lifting failed to bring relief from problems. World War II came hard on the heels of the depression, testing Americans in different, but no less traumatic ways. Husbands and sons were called into military service; women went to work in defense plants; scrap drives, price controls, rationing, and shortages became the order of the day; after over a decade in the doldrums, the railroads ran at nearly full capacity; and military facilities and production plants came even to remote Pocatello. Neither the Spanish-American nor World War I had touched America — or the church — as intimately as this war did; indeed, not since the Civil War had there been a conflict that intruded into the lives of the nation's citizens as completely as did the Second World War.

With employment high and little available on which to spend one's income, church receipts rose from a low of \$2,059 in 1937 to \$6,389 in 1945. With the end of the depression, a period of inflation had commenced. In spite of wartime price controls, from 1940 to 1950 the cost of living rose some 70 percent, but even when adjusted for this, the church's real income had grown significantly. Paying current expenses as they came due, to say nothing of accumulated debt, became less traumatic. There was now no doubt the church would have the financial wherewithal to keep the doors open. It even was able to come up with \$2,500 to settle its debt to the national Board of Church Erection. In exchange for this token payment, the board issued a grant mortgage that freed First Presbyterian from the legal obligation to make further payments, but left it morally obligated to do so when able. But if finances were no longer threatening, other challenges facing the church were another matter altogether.

Membership had languished during the depression and continued to do so during the war. First Presbyterian was not alone. Nationwide, Presbyterian church membership was down. In Denver Presbytery membership fell 6,510 to 3,561 between 1940 and 1960. Pocatello's church did slightly better than national averages, but growth of the Gate City provided a buffer against decline that masked the reality of the problems associated with maintaining the level of membership. From 1922 to 1930, Pocatello grew by 9 percent, First Presbyterian Church only 2.5 percent; from 1930 to 1940, Pocatello gained 10 percent, the church only 5 percent. When John Spencer became minister in 1935, he launched a drive that netted 34-40 new members (available sources disagree on the exact figure), but the gain was ephemeral. By 1938, membership had fallen to 202, the lowest figure in two decades. This was followed by another temporary spurt in growth under the popular leadership of the Rev. Ebenezer T. Ferry, membership reaching 241 in 1940, but as young men left for war and families suffered disruptions and relocations, it soon fell back. Not until 1945 did the number of members finally exceed that of eight years earlier.

The church thus hardly entered the war years under the best of circumstances. With the number of members down, with many men gone, with those that remained often heavily involved in war-related service projects, and with the church itself called upon to meet new needs generated by the conflict, the leaders of the First Presbyterian Church had to find fresh ways of getting things

done. As we have seen, women had from the first been key participants in the church's work; now their roles became more important than ever. No one's activities illustrate this situation better than those of Isabel Ferry.

Traditionally, little was expected of minister's spouses except that they should live, like Caesar's wife, so as to be above suspicion or reproach. In the terms of the day, they were to be "helpmates," serving as hostesses for church-related functions and calmly managing the domestic affairs of the family. In *Minister's Wives*, Presbyterian William G. Douglas spelled out the expectations revealed in the literature of the period. Although she might be educated for and capable of leadership, Douglas notes, a minister's wife was expected to concentrate on training others for leadership, rather than being a leader herself, and she should participate in few non-church activities "so she does not neglect her basic duties in home and church." She should be "always wise and humble . . . [she should follow] the protecting mother model . . . keeping her beloved from all danger and exertion." As another observer of the time put it, the minister's wife appeared to be "playing a character in which the script for the role has been written by tradition. . . ." Even as late as the 1950s, Douglas found, "the cultural image" of a minister's wife tended "to remain that of a 'poor thing' with little zip, sparkle, or attractiveness. . . ." But the role of women in the church had slowly been changing, just as it had been in larger American life, and that of ministers' wives gradually followed along. World War II speeded the process — and brought Isabel Ferry to center stage in the First Presbyterian Church.

A native of Morristown, Minnesota, Mrs. Ferry attended Carleton College and the University of Texas, graduating from the latter with majors in Latin and music. A lyric soprano, she spent much of her life singing and producing musicals. She taught Latin, English, and music in the Worland, Wyoming, high school, where she produced several elaborate musicals similar to the Ziegfeld Follies. The record of the couple's pre-Pocatello years is sketchy, but it was apparently while in Worland that she met and married E. T. Ferry, although they may have met and married earlier, and whether Ferry was Superintendent of Schools in Greybull, as one source says, or was a minister there is uncertain. Just when and where he received his theological training is also unclear. In any case, the couple moved to Pocatello late in 1937 after the Rev. Ferry received a call from the First Presbyterian Church. Although Mrs. Ferry gave up teaching at this point, her interest in music remained, and she quickly joined the church choir and ere long became its director.

With more and more of the church's men off to war or too heavily involved in defense work to have time for the choir, finding the voices to keep it going was difficult. Mrs. Ferry responded by taking the unprecedented step of organizing an all-female choir, reputedly the first such in the United States. Although there were those who were dubious about this departure, the choir soon proved itself far more than a stop-gap. In addition to serving as chancel choir during church services, the group was publicized widely and gave numerous public performances to a war-weary and entertainment-hungry community. In their own way, Isabel Ferry and the members of her choir struck a blow for greater participation by women in American society — not so great a blow as that struck by "Rosie the Riveter," but a blow nonetheless; and, in the process, they helped keep alive the long-standing tradition of music as a central part of the ministry in the First Presbyterian Church. At the annual congregational meeting in 1944, Mrs. Ferry received "a rising vote of thanks for her work in providing us with such a splendid choir."

In addition to her work with the choir, Mrs. Ferry directed and wrote music for the annual Scotch concert fund-raisers held on the birthday poet Robert Burns. Although these were listed as a presentations of the Men's Club, women in fact did much of the work: For example, in 1944 Louise Budge assisted Mrs. Ferry in directing; Mrs. Otto Stocker read a number of Burns' poems; Helen Cleare, Carolyn Wells and Margaret McPhie were dancers; Marjorie Stocker, Louise Gathe, Beverly Ashton and Helen Cleare (again) were soloists; other women made the kilts and Scottish bonnets worn by participants.

Coupled with these activities, Isabel Ferry also played what William Douglas, in *Minister's Wives*, calls the expected, standard roles of a minister's wife — hosting Ladies Aid and other groups in her home, meeting with Young Matrons and various circles, helping with Sunday school, and dutifully participating in fund raising activities — but what stands out is the number and variety of new, war-related activities she took on as well.

Nor was Isabel Ferry the only church woman heavily affected by the new demands of the day. For example, the Ladies Aid Society (of which Mrs. Ferry was an active member) assumed a host of fresh responsibilities. Page after page of the society's minutes give evidence of the situation, but perhaps none more graphically than the entries for June 1943. The USO operated a "Soldiers Hut" in Pocatello, and those in charge asked Ladies Aid to serve refreshments there on June 22-24. On the twenty-second, members gathered at the church and baked ninety-four dozen cookies; additional dozens were made at the homes of members, bringing the total donated to 250 dozen. Just how they managed this at a time when sugar and shortening were tightly rationed remains unclear, but with or without rationing the output would have been most impressive.

Ladies Aid did not stop there. Members served at the USO hut on other occasions too, prepared a picnic lunch for a squadron stationed at the local air base (they served forty airmen), donated writing desks for rooms at the air base hospital, furnished the sailor's room at the local Naval Ordnance Plant (the largest military facility in Idaho, the plant opened in 1943; it employed some 1,000 civilians who made heavy weaponry for the Pacific Fleet and coastal defense, but naval and marine units were attached for security, liaison, and other purposes), sewed buttons on soldier's kits for the Red Cross (in November they had an all-day sewing day), and sponsored teas to support war loan drives. All this was in addition to the group's regular activities within the church — helping to meet financial crises, organizing a drive to raise funds for new pews for the church, and taking care of simpler needs, such as arranging for floral decorations at Sunday services (paid for by Ladies Aid, the flowers were the special domain of Mrs. G. Nicholas Ifft, "who," the society noted in expressing its appreciation, "is so busy with Red Cross and war activities"). To help finance all this, Ladies Aid had one fund-raiser after another; time and again the group prepared and served meals to groups from the University of Idaho, Southern Branch (as the Academy of Idaho was now called) and elsewhere in the community — faculty women, panhellenic, sororities, even the Men's Club from the church. As if this were not enough, in the midst of all this activity, Isabel Ferry advised members to "take time for more friendliness in this time of stress and strain of everyday life."

Going through the society's minutes for the war years is a humbling experience. The list of activities goes on and on, yet the records make clear that it was really a small group that accomplished it all. Nearly every meeting of Ladies Aid was attended by fewer than twenty members, and the same names appear repeatedly when things needed to be done. A faithful few were seeing the church through — and under the leadership of the Ferry's, whom Leigh Gittins characterized as "this kindly, gentle couple" — making it stronger under the most trying of circumstances.

In October 1944, the Rev. Ferry resigned for reasons of health to move to Cupertino, California; both he and Isabel had been hospitalized for periods during the last months of his ministry in Pocatello. The couple left with a sadness that was widely shared in the congregation. Rev. Ferry told the session, "Our relations have been so beautifully friendly in every way that I would be an ingrate not to plainly acknowledge the Ferry family's deep indebtedness to this congregation for the wonderful companionship of the past years. It is the pride of our pastoral years." The congregation reciprocated. In 1979 Leigh Gittins judged that they were "the most loved leaders in our 75 years existence." For those who were not present at the time, such statements are hard to evaluate, but there is nothing in the records that gives any reason to question his judgment.

What was the secret of their success? The Ferry's had come at a time of national trauma and, after the pastorate of the Rev. Spencer, at a time when the church itself needed reinvigorating, but there must have been more to it than this, things about which the record only furnishes hints. Grace Tarr Bistline, who had been in the church under every minister since 1910, recalled that some of them "were pretty straight-laced . . . [and] did not think you should hardly smile in church." She mentioned the Rev. Barnum as an example. Emma Kelly recalled that when one church pianist played her father's favorite hymn, "Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus," with "a little swing," she was sharply criticized, promptly quit the church, and never returned.

The Ferry's stood in sharp contrast, and in April of 1938, just six months into his pastorate, the session extended a vote of thanks to the Ferrys "for progress made the past six months." The causes of this progress seem to have been largely the result of an open friendliness and a fresh approach to issues. Tom Norris, recalling the monthly steak fries of the Men's Brotherhood, noted that the Rev. Ferry always came by early to put the "spuds" in the oven and then stayed on to work with Norris in the little, poorly ventilated old kitchen, cooking onions to garnish the steaks. They went home smelling "pretty sweet," Norris remembered. Out of such little things, a closeness developed, what in October 1944 as his pastorate was drawing to a close, the Rev. Ferry called a "fine spirit of cooperation."

Cooperation grew partly as a result of the sort of leadership the Ferrys provided, but partly from the church's slowly bettering financial position — a betterment speeded along when the session directed that the manse, which had served the church since 1915, be sold. But, whatever the cause, it seems clear that the Ferrys left the church stronger than they found it, and one gets the impression that their greatest impact was personal. Their warmth, their commitment, their imaginative leadership had made a difference — and to that, it should be noted, Isabel Ferry made contributions every bit as great as her husband's and in the process, like Rosie the Riveter, struck a blow for women's liberation.

