

TOIL AND TROUBLE, III: TOM NORRIS, EXEMPLAR OF COMMITMENT

by Tom Cox

The Great Depression and World War II tested the First Presbyterian Church in a variety of ways, but through it all there was a loyal coterie of people who, through thick and thin, saw the congregation through. No one typifies these steady pillars of support better than Thomas H. Norris.

Tom Norris was born in England in 1899, came to the United States with his family in 1904, and moved to Pocatello from Ogden, Utah, with them in 1911. From that point on he was a resident of the Gate City area, attending Bonneville School, Pocatello High, and the Academy of Idaho before going to work for the Union Pacific Railroad in 1916. He remained with the railroad until his retirement in 1966 as chief clerk to the General Yardmaster.

Initially, Norris was not active in the church in Pocatello. At first he lived with an aunt and uncle some distance out in the country, and after he moved to town and went to work for the railroad he worked seven days a week, so could not attend often. With such long hours, he had little time for Christian Endeavor and the youth activities of the church. Gradually, however, things changed. In Ogden, he had attended a Baptist church; in Pocatello, he married a Methodist from the west-side whose father was active in that church. Living on Pocatello's east-side, the young couple "compromised" by attending the First Presbyterian Church, which, in any case, was the closest to hand. They became members and regular attendees. In 1929 Norris was elected to the church's session, a body on which he was destined to serve many times in the years that followed.

In time Norris also became remarkably active in the community. He was on the Board of Directors of the Bannock County Red Cross, the Bannock County Hospital and Nursing Board (fifteen years as its chairman), the Bannock Memorial Hospital Board (six years as its chairman), and the Mountain States Health Corp. He was appointed to a Governor's Select Committee to initiate health care services in the state's rural areas and was president of the Board of Governors of Home Health Care of southeastern Idaho and vice-chairman of the Regional Medical Program for the Western states. The Idaho State Hospital Association awarded Norris its Star Garnet Award for his many years of service. Nor was his work restricted to the field of health care. He was a charter member of the Pocatello chapter of the Brotherhood of Railway Clerks, which he subsequently served as its representative to the Idaho legislature, in Washington, D.C., and at national meetings of its Grand Lodge. He was president of the Union Pacific Oldtimers Club and an active mason.

Norris's list of activities in the church grew to be as impressive as that in the community at large. He not only served on the church's session numerous times, but also was its clerk for many years and served terms on the church's Board of Trustees before that body was merged with the session. Norris taught Sunday School regularly, and was devoted to youth work — he was always the elder who assisted in the baptism of babies. With the Rev. Ferry, he founded the Men's Club whose monthly steak fries were long a regular feature of its activities. As Leigh Gittins put it, Norris "was Chairman of practically every committee on which he served — and

there were many in his fifty or more years of total commitment.” Norris agreed: he had been, he said, every church officer except president of Ladies Aid and minister. Indeed, when ministers left, Norris seems to have been the one whom the congregation nearly always picked to chair its Pastor Nominating Committee — and in the meantime had him fill the pulpit. The congregation had many teachers in its ranks who could have preached too, but looking back, Norris could not recall a time when any of them had offered to do so. “Let Tom do it,” seemed to be the order of the day. There was a reason. As Leigh Gittins put it, Norris “has filled every position with honor and dignity, seeking only to do his duty as a Christian and a devoted Presbyterian,” and as the Rev. Jo Lininger recalls, “Anything that Tom Norris did was the ‘final word’ . . .” In light of all this, it comes as no surprise that Norris was selected as a delegate to and moderator of Kendall Presbytery and, in 1964, as a commissioner (delegate) to the General Assembly held in Oklahoma City. Fifteen years later, Gittins noted that although Norris was by then confined to a nursing home, “His advice is sought even now. . . .” That same year, acknowledging his many services, the session passed a resolution calling Norris “a trusted Christian leader whose devotion to his church inspired us all” and giving him the title “Mr. Presbyterian.”

Tom Norris was interviewed on the occasion of the church’s seventy-fifth anniversary. Asked what advice he had for members of the church who would be hearing his comments on cassette tape fifty years later, Norris replied firmly: be loyal to the church regardless of who is the minister. Attend even if you don’t care for the person in the pulpit. Moreover, there is danger in cliques and divisions; do not get drawn into these. One’s support should always be for the church itself, not for the minister or a group within the congregation. Interestingly, Grace Tarr Bistline gave very similar advice. People should not criticize the pastors, she said, for many problems were probably “our own fault not the pastor’s.” If good Christians, people would overlook things for the good of the church. Such advice from two long-time leaders in the church surely grew out of experience. For his part, Tom Norris had seen many a minister in his fifty years of active service in the church, and though he is known to have grumbled only about one — the Rev. Barnum — there surely had been others with whom members of the church, and perhaps Norris himself, had differences. Under some, attendance and membership had declined, a fact on which both the Revs. Richmond and Spencer had commented, and the enthusiasm with which the Ferrys were embraced suggests a contrast with some of E. T. Ferry’s predecessors — and perhaps an unhappiness with some of them. So too do Emma Kelly’s comment that some among the church’s early ministers were “pretty straight-laced” and the remarkably short tenures of some of those who were called to serve the Pocatello church.

Tom Norris not only gave sound advice, he followed his own prescriptions. Through depression, war, and post-war adjustments and the many new problems that accompanied rapid growth, year in and year out, regardless of who the minister of the moment was, Tom Norris was there working, leading, and advising in an effort to make the church at Seventh and Lewis a stronger institution, a better instrument for advancing God’s plan for the world. It survived and grew because of him — and people like him — as much as because of any of those called to fill its pulpit. Memorial gifts given in Norris’s name after his death in 1979 went to purchase new choir robes (replacing ones that the Young Matrons had purchased around 1940); they are with us still, an appropriate reflection of his own long service to the church.