

CHANGES AND CHALLENGES, I: REFOCUSING

by Tom Cox

The end of World War II brought a period of unprecedented growth and prosperity for the nation and for Pocatello's First Presbyterian Church. But it was not a period without problems. Rapid growth brought fresh challenges, demographic and social changes brought others, and issues of war and peace soon emerged to divide Americans sharply. Keeping abreast of all this sorely tested the church, leaders and members alike.

Nationally the Presbyterian church went through a period that was to try its ability to meet and adjust to new circumstances. At first glance, it appears that the denomination must have been doing well, for membership grew apace during the period. During the twenties and thirties, the Presbyterian and other mainline Protestant churches had struggled to maintain their numbers; the forties, dominated by the distractions of war, saw only mild improvement; but over the next two decades this changed dramatically. Fueled by the growth of suburbs and accompanying resurgence of older values, church membership boomed in the United States. The Presbyterian church, one authority has noted, was "almost overwhelmed" as resulting needs regularly outstripped available funds.

The problems facing the church nationally were brought home to long-time elder S. E. Brady at the General Assembly of 1946, which he attended as a commissioner, the fourth representative from the First Presbyterian Church to be thus honored; as he discovered, the pattern in Pocatello reflected that seen nationally. From 1922 to 1950 growth in the membership of the First Presbyterian Church was at a rate consistently below that of the city itself. Even during the 1940s, when church membership finally regained pre-depression levels, the city's dynamic growth far outstripped that of the church: forty-three percent to twenty-five. This pattern changed dramatically during the 1950s. From 1950 to 1957 Pocatello had only grown four percent, but the church saw its membership increase twenty percent. During the same period, the average church school attendance rose from 160 to 224 per week. And the numbers continued to rise: in 1959 the church had 500 members with a church school enrollment of 325, by 1962 the church was reporting 620 active members. Some remember those years as the golden age of the church, and in many ways it was, but it was an age of challenges as well.

Buoyed by surging growth and undaunted by the tasks this brought, Presbyterians throughout the nation increased financial support of their church, but there were many accumulated, genuinely pressing demands that congregations often were sorely tested to meet. In Pocatello, as elsewhere, building needs — even routine maintenance — had been postponed, first by the financial exigencies of the depression and then by a shortage of building materials and by more pressing demands during World War II. With the war over, circumstances at last offered a chance to take care of some of these accumulated needs. But where should one start?

The case of Camp Sawtooth, Idaho's Presbyterian summer camp for youth, offers a case in point. Camp Sawtooth first appears in session minutes in August 1945, which reported that eleven young people from First Presbyterian attended that year, enthusiasm was high, and leaders hoped to have an even larger contingent from the church go the following year. Two years later, ten of

the church's youth attended, and the Rev. J. Willis Hamblin — E. T. Ferry's successor as minister at First Presbyterian — was on the faculty. But attendees found Camp Sawtooth badly rundown. In response, in 1948 camp officials requested that First Presbyterian Church (and presumably to other churches) provide funds to help repair and improve facilities. Session's response was lukewarm, for the depression-era attitude that authorities should guard the church's financial coffers carefully still reigned. It replied that it had no money budgeted for Camp Sawtooth and could not give anything at that time; moreover, it suggested that the costs of repairs and improvements ought to be pro-rated among the churches sending youth to the camp. When budget-making time next rolled around, First Presbyterian earmarked a mere twenty-five dollars for Camp Sawtooth.

But if the session was cautious, one might say niggardly, in its approach to Camp Sawtooth, the same could not be said of the church's membership at large. For many years First Presbyterian's Merritt Greeling served on Camp Sawtooth's board of trustees. Indeed, he and his wife, Lillie May ("Jimmie") Greeling, were so active in support of the camp — both before and after they transferred their membership from Twin Falls in 1958 — that a major building at the camp was named Greeling Hall in their honor. This was unwonted acclaim for the Greelings; as the Rev. J. Austin Lininger later noted, while they did a lot for the church, they were so modest and quiet that their contributions often went unnoticed — but not always, Merritt Greeling was elected moderator of Kendall Presbytery in 1963 (oddly, presbytery records list him as still being from Twin Falls), a position he was to hold until his premature death the next year.

Improved physical facilities — whether at Seventh and Lewis or at Camp Sawtooth — were not the only pressing need. The war and the struggle to rebuild during the years following broadened the perspectives of many Presbyterians, making them more aware of the need for outreach. Secular developments played a major role. The Marshall Plan helped get Western Europe back on its feet, President Truman's Point Four Program extended aid to third world countries, many military personnel on occupation duty in Japan had their ideas of culture and race modified and softened, while erection of the United Nations' headquarters in New York brought the world to the doorstep of Americans as never before. Lesser developments, such as publication of the much-lauded and widely-sold coffee table book *The Family of Man*, had their effects too. In spite of anti-Soviet xenophobia that ran just beneath the surface of much of this — and sometimes surfaced virulently, as at the hands of Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin — this was a period in which Americans became much less parochial. The United States, growing numbers of citizens now realized, was intimately tied to developments far beyond its borders. And with a mood of confidence born out of victory in World War II, it seemed the world could indeed be made a better, more just and peaceful place. When President John F. Kennedy created the Peace Corps in the 1960s, so many young people volunteered for it that some pundits likened it to a new Children's Crusade.

Churches reflected the new attitudes. As Harry Emerson Fosdick argued in *The Living of These Days* (1956), "multitudes" of ministers and churchgoers "would not have been Christians at all unless we could escape the bonds of the then-reigning orthodoxy." They did escape, and benevolence aimed at both domestic and foreign needs increased dramatically. Presbyterians were in the forefront. In 1950 the so-called Northern Presbyterians — the largest branch of the church until reunion with the Southern denomination in 1983 — gave about 100 million dollars a

year for local, national, and international mission needs. The figure had jumped to 220 million dollars a year by 1957, and the following year church leaders inaugurated a program aimed at doubling that figure yet again by 1962. This was no small undertaking. Already Presbyterian per capita giving for missions was \$72.03 per year, one of the highest among major Protestant bodies in the United States. By contrast, Episcopalians averaged \$52.79, Methodists \$43.82, and Southern Baptists \$48.17.

To encourage increased support, the national church adopted an “open end budget.” Each year it adopted a “basic program,” designed to maintain the status quo, but at the same time laid before members a group of “advance programs” toward which to aspire. In effect, the denomination’s members were told: “Here are some things we ought to do, and which we will do if we get the money.” Projects on the list aimed at increasing mission work overseas, building new churches in mushrooming U.S. suburbs, expanding and strengthening the denomination’s forty-one church-related colleges, and training thousands of church school teachers and other lay leaders. The approach disabused members of the idea that supporting the basic budget was all they needed to do. As the Rev. Dr. John Thompson Peters, the church’s secretary of stewardship and promotion, put it: “The church is not a club to which we pay fixed dues. Giving is part of our discipleship, an act of worship, an expression of gratitude to God.” According to Peters, giving was a way for Christians to obey Christ’s command to proclaim the Gospel to every living creature and was the only basis for “true Christian stewardship.”

In 1965-1967, a major fund-raising drive — the Fifty-Million-Dollar Campaign, chaired by President Dwight D. Eisenhower — sought money to upgrade mission and institutional facilities after the deterioration and neglect of the depression and war years. The First Presbyterian Church, although by then engaged in fund-raising for a badly needed addition to its existing building, pledged over \$10,000. A decade later the national church launched a Major Mission Fund drive, and again First Presbyterian responded generously, pledging \$17,468, well above its goal of \$15,000. Across the land, other Presbyterian churches responded in like manner.

But there were problems accompanying the dramatic increase in giving. Sometimes the emphasis on raising money for missions and other distant projects seemed to overshadow needs closer to home. This author knew one Presbyterian, a long-time treasurer of his church, who grumbled that “The Presbyterians are always asking for money!” Yet his minister, busy with fund-raising, did not seem to have the time to call on people like the man’s wife, who for years had always been a willing hand in service to the church. Disgusted, the man left the denomination for the less-demanding — and, in his case, perhaps more nurturing — Unitarian Church. Such attitudes may have been present in Pocatello’s First Presbyterian Church too, but there is no way of knowing, for such things are rarely revealed in materials available to the historian. What does appear locally is a remarkable fundraising success story and an equally impressive record of personal gifts to the church.