

CHANGES AND CHALLENGES, II: "THIS SCHOLARLY GENTLEMAN"

by Tom Cox

The pastorate of the Rev. Dr. J. Willis Hamblin, who succeeded E. T. Ferry in late 1944 and served as minister of First Presbyterian until 1956, presents problems for the historian. Considering how long he served, there is remarkably little about Hamblin in the history Leigh Gittins prepared for the church's 75th anniversary. Gittins described Hamblin as "this scholarly gentleman" and commented that he and his wife were especially interested in youth work, beyond that he is silent. When one consults the records, the reasons for Gittins' truncated coverage quickly become clear. Available sources tell us little about Hamblin. Yet it is evident that there is more to be said, for his pastorate was both long and demonstrably productive.

The basic chronology is clear enough. Hamblin was born in Martintown, Ontario, in 1886 and moved with his family to Duluth, Minnesota, when he was a child. He graduated from McAllister College in 1910, from McCormick Theological Seminary in 1913, and received his doctorate from Hastings College, Nebraska, in 1940. He ministered in Cass City, Michigan; Santa Fe, New Mexico; and Cañon City, Colorado. In Cañon City he also served from 1921 to 1929 as chaplain of the state penitentiary there. Immediately prior to receiving a call from Pocatello, Hamblin held a pastorate in Sheridan, Wyoming. Session records reveal that Hamblin was not the first choice to fill First Presbyterian's vacant pulpit after the Rev. Ferry left. In October 1944, a call went out to the Rev. Paul Baird of St. Anthony, but he declined, explaining that "due to the short time he had been laboring in St. Anthony," he did not feel it would be right for him to leave so soon. A call was then extended to Hamblin, who accepted, staying on in Pocatello until retiring at age seventy in 1956, at which time he moved to Greybull, Wyoming, where he lived near his daughter's ranch and fill pulpits in the area from time to time. He was a Shriner, a Mason, and an active member of Rotary. But what was the man like? What was the nature of his ministry in Pocatello?

Statistics provide a starting point in a search for answers. At the beginning of Hamblin's pastorate, membership in First Presbyterian stood at 263, Sunday school enrollment at 165, and annual expenditures at \$5,291. By the time Hamblin retired twelve years later, membership was 363, Sunday school enrollment 224, and the annual budget \$15,360. Pocatello's growth, coupled with the national surge in membership of mainline Protestant churches during the period can explain some of these increases, but there was more to it than that. Hamblin clearly did much to energize others and, it would seem, having done so, would step out of the way and let them get credit for what was accomplished. Thus, the church's progress during the period was probably better shown by the actions of its members than by its increases in membership and in money spent. Moreover, like Leigh Gittins, Mary Dahlquist remembered Hamblin as a scholarly minister and noted that, as a result, the church's membership in university circles grew dramatically during his tenure. Yet, she hastened to add, in spite of his generally intellectual demeanor, he could light up the pulpit in anger when occasion demanded.

But there is a broader context for Hamblin's ministry. Like many another, he seems to have worked the theological ideas of the period into his own thinking — and, as a result, into his ministry. World War I, the Great Depression, and World War II had tested the faith of many a

Christian and sent them looking for fresh answers as to how to cope with the problems of totalitarianism, intolerance, and social injustice. The German church's struggle with Nazism was especially traumatic and came into sharp focus when Adolf Hitler ordered that *Mein Kampf* replace the Bible in the nation's churches. Historian Fritz Stern, a Holocaust survivor, recalls the period vividly. "Some people recognized the moral perils of mixing religion and politics," he writes, "but many more were seduced by it." Hitler's order contributed mightily to the upswelling of protest that was codified in the famous *Theological Declaration of Barmen*, which was later incorporated into the *Book of Confessions* of the Presbyterian Church (USA). "Jesus alone is Lord," German theologians argued. Simple on its surface, this statement was a stunning rebuke of totalitarianism and the cult of a national father-god leader, whether instituted by Hitler or by anyone else.

Out of all this a theological movement often referred to as Neo-Orthodoxy emerged. Karl Barth was among the leaders and had an influence that reached far beyond his native Germany. Indeed, he and two Americans of the Reformed tradition, H. Richard Niebuhr and Reinhold Niebuhr, played central roles in developing an intellectual argument that would help make Christianity relevant to the problems of the age. Reinhold Niebuhr restated John Witherspoon's old argument (which James Madison had helped entrench in the American political system): "Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible; man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary," while Richard Niebuhr focused on the call to Christians, in light of grace, to work for the transformation of culture — the need for which the Holocaust and the dropping of the first atomic bombs dramatically highlighted. Their theology reflected a realism about human society, stressing the evil not only in human beings but also in their institutions, and stressed the Christian potential for transforming the world by dependence on God's grace.

Neo-Orthodoxy generated heated debate. Some saw it as an intellectual cover for fundamentalism; others thought it liberalism in disguise, but no one could deny that it was a bold confrontation with a national leader who sought to bend everything, churches included, to his will. Nor, was there any denying, regardless of one's position on the movement, but that Barth, the Niebuhrs, and the like were first-class Biblical scholars who gave an intellectual depth and sophistication to debates over the proper place of the church in the world. The Rev. Hamblin — "this scholarly gentleman" — clearly seems to have brought their arguments into the First Presbyterian Church, and people from Pocatello's academic community, where the issue of how to create a just and lasting peace was surely debated just as it was elsewhere in academia — and in American society — at the time, seems to have responded. An increase in church membership from those in the college community was a natural result.

But if Hamblin's intellectual approach found a welcoming audience in academic circles, one must look elsewhere to find an explanation of his success with youth. Indeed, while still a teenager, Ray Hunter heard the Rev. Hamblin preach and thought him rather boring, his voice something of a monotone. Actions, not sermons would seem to have undergirded Hamblin's success with young people, for his genuine concern for youth was manifest early on. Soon after his arrival, Hamblin learned that many of the church's youth were socially handicapped because they did not know how to dance, unlike LDS youth who learned dancing at that church's youth functions; concerned, Hamblin proposed that instruction in dancing be a part of the youth program. This was a daring departure. Be-bop was popular and seemed scandalous to some of

the church faithful, adding strength to long-standing suspicions among many Presbyterians that dancing was sinful (in 1951, when this author first visited Presbyterian-affiliated Whitworth College in Spokane, not only was dancing prohibited on campus but co-eds were forbidden to wear lipstick). But after considerable discussion, Hamblin prevailed, and Friday youth gatherings, featuring dancing, potato chips, and Coke soon proved popular. As Tom Norris noted, this could never have happened under the Rev. Barnum and unnamed others among Hamblin's predecessors.

Hamblin's interest in youth was shown in other ways as well. As noted earlier, in 1945 the church sent several youth to Camp Sawtooth. Apparently this was the first group from First Presbyterian to attend the summer camp, and it surely went with Hamblin's encouragement, for two years later he was a member of the camp staff himself. Other contingents followed on a regular basis.

Then in 1950, a new Presbyterian-sponsored Boy Scout troop was formed, Troop 13, replacing Troop 1 which had fallen dormant some years before. Ardell Smiley was Scoutmaster and Henry Dahlquist chairman of the troop committee. Alongside the scout troop, there was Cub Pack 13, which served younger boys. Knox Boring served as Cubmaster, while Dr. Mel Graves was chairman of the pack committee. Both troop and pack were open not just to Presbyterian youth, but to boys from throughout Pocatello. Again, Hamblin appears to have been working behind the scenes, encouraging the Men's Club to sponsor the new groups, which it did. Indeed, the Men's Club went beyond mere sponsorship, underwriting the cost of attendance by some of the troop's members at the National and World Scout Jamborees, held soon thereafter at Priest Lake in Idaho's panhandle. Hamblin's interest in Scouting was deep-rooted. After he left Pocatello, he served for ten years on the organization's Wyoming state executive committee.

Similarly, in the 1950s Charlotte Cleland persuaded Northern Star to support Melba Mack, one of her former students, as a mission worker in Puerto Rico; and in 1955 (and perhaps other years as well) the church's Missionary Society, active ever since the church's founding, also lent support to Miss Mack. There is no evidence that Hamblin played a direct role in these actions, but he had helped create an environment where such things were done.

Internal changes accompanied these externally oriented activities. In the early fifties, Mariners Clubs were spreading rapidly in the country's Presbyterian churches. Made up of married couples, these groups were designed to provide service to their churches and to promote sociability among members. In 1955 with the encouragement of elder Elwood Becker of Jerome, then a national officer of Mariners, a group formed in the First Presbyterian Church and elected Knox and Ila Boring as its first skippers. The Flagship Mariners, as the group was known, soon took up the task of helping the choir, which once again had fallen on hard times. The Mariners provided post-rehearsal refreshments and recruited couples for the choir; soon, as Leigh Gittins put it, the choir was once again "alive and enthused." Wednesday evening practices averaged twenty-plus attendees for the next several years. Nor did the work of Mariners stop there. Over time the group launched a number of projects and social programs, including, near the end of Hamblin's ministry, redecorating the pastor's study and installing new stair runners. So successful was Flagship Mariners that it grew to the point where a second Mariners group, Buoys and Belles, was spun off from it. Many members believed that in addition to their service and

social functions, these bodies attracted many new people to the church. They may well be right, for membership was certainly growing apace during the period.

Individual gifts to the church also bespoke fresh dedication. New memorial stained glass windows were added to the sanctuary — not without some controversy — and in 1952 the S. E. Bradys gave funds for a pastor's study and renovation of the kitchen and restroom facilities. That same year new hearing aids were installed in the sanctuary, apparently also a gift from a dedicated member; Grace McDougall presented the church with an altar cross; and Evelyn Turner four solid brass offering plates, a three-tray silver-plated communion set with glasses, and fifty-two folding chairs gave in memory of her late husband. Not long after, with the Organ-tron organ in failing condition, Evelyn Turner again stepped forward and, with some help from others, purchased a Hammond Electric Organ for the church. Dedicated on May 20, 1956, near the end of the Rev. Hamblin's pastorate, the organ was to serve the church for over two decades until replaced by today's pipe organ; sold to the Southern Baptist Church, the Hammond organ remained in service there for many years. Keith Forrest came to First Presbyterian the next year, following his mentor James Drake; Forrest was to continue as church organist for the next thirty years.

During his pastorate, Ladies Aid had formed a Pew Committee to raise funds to purchase new pews for the church, the ones then in use having been around since 1905 when they had been installed in First Presbyterian's original church. Now, folding chairs complemented the old, dark-walnut, time-worn pews in order to provide adequate seating to accommodate the burgeoning congregation. There was an additional reason for replacing the old pews; as Tom Norris recalled, they were most uncomfortable. Ladies Aid worked hard to obtain donors who would sponsor all or part of a new oak pew and to raise money from those who wished to support the project but remain anonymous.

Major projects, desirable though they may be, seldom proceed without a certain amount of friction. The campaign to acquire new pews was no exception. Margaret Ifft, a member since 1924, was a key figure in the drive to obtain the new pews, but she was out of town for an extended period when the campaign neared its end. Others went ahead and ordered the pews. When Mrs. Ifft returned, she was shocked to learn that the pews were to have a light oak finish. She protested mightily. To her light oak seemed insufficiently dignified for a church; it reminded her of the cheap, light alderwood furniture then common in the marketplace. But her protests came too late, and in February 1957 the light oak pews were duly installed.

There was a bit of irony in this. The old pews were donated to the Congregational Church in Challis, which had fallen on hard times but needed new seating badly. The old pews were hauled to Challis, and a dedicated member of that congregation set to work stripping, sanding, and repairing them. When a member of First Presbyterian was in Challis some time later, he discovered that the old, dark-walnut seating from Pocatello was now handsome, blond pews remarkably similar to what had been installed in First Presbyterian over Mrs. Ifft's protests.

One of the highlights of Hamblin's ministry in Pocatello was the church's fiftieth anniversary celebration. On Sunday, July 18, 1954, the Rev. Joseph I. Gulick of Idaho Falls preached to a large gathering. This was followed the next evening with a History and Reminiscence Service,

honoring older members of the church. Mrs. E. C. White, by then 85 years old, was the guest of honor as the sole charter member able to attend. Dr. Hamblin gave a short history of the church (unfortunately no copy seems to remain), and Mrs. Alex Campbell, Jean Campbell, Olive Sprester, and C. A. Smiley — all early members — participated in the program.

When the Rev. Dr. Hamblin retired from First Presbyterian at the end of June of 1956, he left the church larger and stronger than it had been when he came. He had encouraged people to get involved, had helped them to develop a proprietary sense about the church that made them active rather than passive Christians. The Ferrys had been a hard act to follow, but he had clearly met the challenge. And so had his wife. Looking back to the Hamblin years, Mary Dahlquist recalled how socially active Mrs. Hamblin had been, having people over for tea and other gatherings whenever the occasion demanded — and on numerous occasions when it did not. While some details of the Rev. Hamblin's years in Pocatello remain obscure, one thing is clear, he and his wife had been a most successful team.