

CHANGES AND CHALLENGES, III: A GRAYING CONGREGATION

by Tom Cox

In 1974, after the Rev. Lininger announced that he was departing to take an administrative position in St. Louis, one member asked him why he was leaving. “I’m burying too many of my friends,” he replied. Lininger had touched on a central reality in the church, one increasingly evident over the years that followed: the congregation was growing old.

This was not just a development in the First Presbyterian Church of Pocatello. As James Smylie demonstrates in *A Brief History of the Presbyterians*, it was denomination wide. From 1955 to 1988, the United Presbyterian Church and the Presbyterian Church in the United States — merged in 1983 to form the Presbyterian Church (USA) — lost over 1.3 million members, 30.8 percent of their total. Some conservative spokesmen blamed the decline on a neglect of the “spiritual nurture of congregants, placing too much emphasis on social reform,” but age was probably a far more important cause. By 1988-1990 one-fourth of Presbyterians were 65 or older, causing “a considerable loss through death” each year. With such an old membership, Presbyterian birthrates fell sharply.

Statistics from First Presbyterian’s mission study, completed in 2003-2004 as a part of the preparation for calling a new pastor, illustrate the situation at the local level. The average age of members of the congregation was 55; those aged 60 and above made up 40.7 percent of the congregation; there were only 7 members under 20 and 36 under age 30 (only 10.2 percent of the membership); and of non-member participants — including children and youth — only 35 were 18 or younger.

But the story of Dorcas Circle illustrates what had taken place in ways that mere statistics cannot. Circles have been key components of Presbyterian Women (and its forerunner, United Presbyterian Women) for years. They first appear in Pocatello in the aftermath of the merger which created the United Presbyterian Church in 1958, although in some Presbyterian churches they seem to go back further. In any case, at the time of the merger, the various women’s organizations of First Presbyterian were combined into United Presbyterian Women; and that body in turn was divided into working groups called circles that met for study, prayer, social interchange, and service. In 1959 Ann Smiley reported that there were eight circles active in the church, but a year later the number had dropped to seven. Not all of those were destined to survive. In 1972 Ann Kunkel reported that there were but five circles “with about 100 members participating,” each has its own “study program and fellowship.” One was Miriam-Ruth Circle, formed from the merger of two originally separate groups (and still active at the time of this writing). The annual report for 1978 also lists five; in terms of finances, at least, Miriam was the largest, with receipts of \$254.65, while Dorcas was the smallest with \$140.25. In 1979 May Myers reported that there were six circles, that they met once a month in members’ homes, and that UPW as a whole also met once a month. As can be seen below, although these figures come from annual reports, they must be taken as only approximate. Since the circles are sometimes referred to in the records by their names and sometimes by numbers, and there is no key for cross-referencing them, a precise record of their birth and passing, to say nothing of their activities, is impossible.

There were predecessors. The Women's Missionary Society had been around since the beginning of the First Presbyterian Church; chapters had existed elsewhere even longer. In the 1880s, with Presbyterian foreign mission work languishing, women of the church instituted an annual Thank Offering, the proceeds of which were channeled to mission support. The impact was immense. It has been said that women's giving saved the denomination's worldwide missionary movement at that time — a matter in which Presbyterian women took great pride, after all at that time they were still excluded from positions of leadership in the denomination.. Under the circumstances, it is hardly surprising that when the system of circles was introduced, many members of First Presbyterian's Women's Missionary Society opted to stay together as a group. Toward that end, they formed themselves into Circle 1, which adopted the name Dorcas Circle. With roots that went back many years, it is not surprising that Dorcas Circle's membership was the oldest among the various circles. It was not always a high profile organization. In an appendix to Leigh Gittins's history, UPW president Dorothy Graves listed the six circles in the church: Ada [sic], Deborah, Naomi, Miriam, Ruth, and Eve — but no Dorcas. Apparently no records of its first years remain, but there *are* minutes spanning the years 1972 to 1985; although Graves failed to include it in her list, Dorcas Circle obviously existed when she wrote.

One part of every circle's program involved the Least Coin Offering. Following the example in Mark 12:42-44, the women theoretically donated the smallest coin of the realm — in practice any small coins — as a token of their prayers for world peace. Begun in 1956 by Shanti Solomon of India, the offering was designed to make women everywhere feel themselves a part of the worldwide family of faith as they prayed for peace and reconciliation in families, communities, nations, and the world. Combined these little gifts funded evangelism, service, and relief programs around the world, especially ones aimed at empowering women. The approach was popular among members, in part because it did not represent an entirely new concept. "Pennies for Palmer" had been a program of the Women's Missionary Society designed to raise funds to rebuild the Sheldon Jackson Hospital in Palmer, Alaska, after it had been destroyed by fire. The hospital, a major center of health care for the territory's Native Americans, was of more than passing interest to members of First Presbyterian: Percy Havenor's daughter Grace was a nurse there. Members of Dorcas Circle, at least, were well aware of the precedent provided by "Pennies for Palmer"; at the circle meeting on October 27, 1972, the connection between "Pennies for Palmer" and the Least Coin offering was discussed as a part of the program.

Links between United Presbyterian Women, Dorcas Circle, and mission activity persisted for a number of years. On August 10, 1964, the *Idaho State Journal* reported that Annie Westrom was honored on the occasion of her ninetieth birthday at the UPW's annual "medical mission meeting" and was presented with a gift from Dorcas Circle "of which she has been a member for many years." Magda Stocker made the presentation, with some forty women of the church attending. Zelma Hilliard, also a member of Dorcas Circle, presented the program on medical missions. Normally, the article went on, Annie would have been working that day as an election precinct constable, but she decided not to do it this year so as to be able to attend the birthday celebration. Nor was that her only community service. On her ninety-seventh birthday, in 1971, she was honored again, this time by the Royal Neighbors of America, who presented her with a

50-year membership pin. In reporting the occasion, the newspaper stated that she “is active in several clubs and attends the Presbyterian Church faithfully. Until recently, she also made regular visits to her friends at the rest homes.”

The early years of Dorcas Circle’s existing minutes reveal an active, viable, if rather aged group. With some fifteen members, roughly a dozen attended most meetings (at a meeting at the church on Feb. 22, 1974, “The entire membership was present”). On September 29, 1972, following “a delicious luncheon,” Evelyn Turner reported that the Least Coin offering was working to better the lives of people in nine countries. Zelma Hilliard did a program entitled “A Woman’s Conversations with God” in which she discussed “asking God’s help in being kind and generous even when it would be easier not to be so.” Devotionals and a closing prayer rounded out the meeting. In other words, the programs were much like those of other circles at that time and since.

Patterns are discernible in the group’s programs. One theme that repeatedly popped up was the role of women in the church. In April 1975, the lesson was on “Jesus’ attitude toward women”; in May, Dorothy Allen gave the lesson on women in the Bible with “emphasis on the equality of men and women in Bible times.” On another occasion, a “general discussion” followed a symposium at the church under the heading “Lets Get Along with Mormons.” There was further discussion the following month. The minutes of subsequent gatherings show similar activities, a host of social events, support for the ill and injured (including rest home visits), several donations to church fund-raising activities (including a collection for the World Hunger program in April 1975 and in Oct. 1976, a donation of \$22 to the World Hunger program “in lieu of [a] bigger lunch”), and participation in various mission activities. On March 30, 1973, Magda Stocker “gave her idea of the disposition of old church records.” The secretary reported: “An interesting discussion of the value of such records followed. Magda had some information on church records.” How this historian wishes he could have been privy to that discussion!

Bit by bit numbers dwindled through deaths and people moving away. In 1971, on the occasion of Annie Westrom’s ninety-seventh birthday, the *Idaho State Journal* reported “she enjoys spending many hours on her front porch [at 355 South Fifth] watching the traffic and the people. Although her eyesight has failed considerably in recent years, she still likes to play the game of ‘500.’” Born in Thatcher in 1874, the oldest of ten children, Annie Westrom had outlived all but two of her sisters and one of her five children. But even she could not live forever. Her deteriorating health was discussed at the meeting of Dorcas Circle on March 30, 1973; she died soon after. Others were lost to the group too. The minutes for September 1973, for example, read “Bertha Anderson, a faithful member for many years, has gone to Portland to make her home near a daughter.” In January 1974, Margaret Miller moved to Woodburn, Oregon; in March, Rae Tschudy moved to The Dalles, Oregon (a report of her death appears two years later). Effie Hardy and Mina Downard died 1975. Summer meetings were canceled because too many were out of town at that time. By May 1976 membership was down to nine (all of whom were present at the meeting that month!). Although some new members joined, by the early 1980s membership was but six. Meetings rotated from home to home among the members, but age was making hosting them increasingly difficult. In December 1975 Dorcas Circle was invited to Doris Brydon’s home to meet with Deborah Circle. Meetings began to be held more often at the church, at the Pancake House, or — once a year — at the home of Mary Dahlquist,

even though she was not a member of the group. By October of 1983, minutes were getting short and sketchy, and the handwriting of secretary Mildred Baldwin increasingly shaky.

The last two entries sound the death knell. In feeble hand, the minutes for October 1985 include: “We talked about joining Debaraw [sic] Circle.” In November 1985, the last minutes in the book (actually on a separate sheet inserted between pages) include the sentence: “We talked about ending.” They did, but it is not clear exactly when. The Presbyterian Women Coordinating Team yearbook for 2004-2005 says Dorcas/Deborah is currently “without members.” Jeanne Davis apparently was the last member of the merged group, but she had come to it from Deborah Circle, not Dorcas. When Dorcas/Deborah ceased to meet, she requested that she be placed in the inactive membership of Adah Circle. Rather than coming to a clean, firm end, the circle had just shriveled away. Apparently Arcile Green was its last treasurer; she first shows up in Dorcas minutes on January 17, 1975, as “a guest [who] told of a money making project for UPW.” Just when she joined is not clear, but when she died early in the new century her children found among her things records showing that at the time of her death she still held Dorcas Circle’s small treasury — hoping, perhaps, that someday it might be revived. Her children turned the \$30 over to the church, providing the last transaction in church records for a group that had already been dead for several years.

Circles, however, were not dead. They continue, diminished but alive, providing a role and network for older women. Today Naomi and Adah survive on their own — although the latter is largely inactive, being made up, like Dorcas before it, of elderly members — while Miriam and Ruth have combined into one; it is currently the largest circle with sixteen active members.

How long First Presbyterian’s circles will continue to survive is an open question. At a recent stewardship gathering, one person — herself an active circle member — wondered aloud if they had outlived their usefulness. At least one circle member disagreed. While service and mission projects can clearly be carried forward by other means, and fellowship among women is furthered by such things as the annual potato bake and Presbyterian Women’s tea, they do not seem to provide the sort of quiet, supportive, but undemanding network that helped sustain Annie Westrom, making her feel at home in the church to the very end. Nor are circles valuable only to their members; the church benefits too. In reviewing the record, it seems the congregation’s commitment to mission has declined as the circles have declined; others continue to focus on this need, of course, but they apparently cannot do the job alone. If these are in fact the case, what better reason for maintaining and strengthening the circles than that, while they provide support and nurture to their members, they also help the church to stay true to its charge of outreach to the world?