

CHANGES AND CHALLENGES, IV: LEEDICE KISSANE AND THE UNIVERSITY CONNECTION

by Tom Cox

By the time the First Presbyterian built its new church at Seventh and Lewis, the east-side had changed considerably. North of Center Street it was still a working class area full of immigrants and modest dwellings. South of Center was a different matter altogether. Community leaders — business and professional people — were gathering there in increasing numbers. Fine homes were appearing in what would in time become the University Neighborhood Historic District. The dwellings of George Gittins and Earle White had once stood in relatively undeveloped isolation — as one early member of the church recalled, during the century's early years the area from the Presbyterian Church to the Academy of Idaho was largely empty sagebrush flats — but by the 1930s numerous fine dwellings had arisen. It was now one of Pocatello's "in" neighborhoods.

Growth of the Academy of Idaho speeded this development. Faculty members and staff, desiring to live close to the school, built residences that contrasted sharply with the host of small, inexpensive houses springing up north of Center (and building was imperative, for as is so often the case in growing new neighborhoods, there was a shortage of rentals; Magda Stocker later recalled that her family's home became a sort of dormitory for teachers because of the shortage). Living in close proximity to the Presbyterian Church, Academy personnel were drawn inexorably to it. Those who had believed that building at the corner of Seventh and Lewis would increase the Presbyterian presence on campus were being proven correct; from the 1930s, faculty members were much in evidence in the church, and time after time First Presbyterian drew upon the school for talent to lead its choir, play its organ, or direct its musical programs.

Leedice Kissane was among those faculty members who came to the First Presbyterian Church in the 1940s, and her activities in the church illustrate the growing role of those from the University of Idaho, Southern Branch (or Idaho State College, as it was called after 1947). As a student at Cornell College, Iowa, in the 1920s, she had studied journalism and expected to make it her career, but marriage and a family changed her plans. In 1928 her husband Donald accepted a position at the Southern Branch, whose faculty then numbered around 50; as she later recalled, "It was an adventure — the beginning of my married life and the university was at a kind of beginning stage too. . . . I was a faculty wife all through the 30s — at home with the children and getting my feet under me as a mother." To help make ends meet during those difficult depression years, with its low faculty salaries, she worked as a substitute and part-time teacher in the Pocatello public schools. For three summers, she and her husband "piled the children into the car" and journeyed to Moscow, where she completed a master's degree at the University of Idaho and Donald worked in that school's music program. Her first association with the Southern Branch was as a part-time instructor of English in 1938. Her husband was by then professor of violin and director of the college orchestra. In 1941 she was appointed to a full-time position as instructor of English and journalism, a role in which she was both effective and popular — Roger Wheeler, who in time would become a successful educator and a leader in First Presbyterian, was one of her students and because of her influence added an English minor to his major in Education. In the same year that Leedice became a full-time instructor at Idaho State she transferred by letter from Pocatello's Methodist Episcopal Church to First Presbyterian.

Gradually she became more and more involved in her new church. In December 1945, for example, she presented “a most delightful reading from ‘I Remember Mama’” to Ladies Aid; another program followed three months later.

In the late forties, Leedice was promoted to assistant professor and assigned to teach classes in American literature. The assignment changed her academic career. American Studies, an interdisciplinary approach to the study of American society, was just developing as an academic discipline, and Leedice’s work in American literature made her see the value of this approach that broke out of the narrow confines of traditional disciplines. With her family now old enough that she could focus more time on her professional career, Leedice began to look for a school where she could pursue a doctorate in American Studies. The University of Minnesota had such a program, and she spent three summers and a sabbatical year there, obtaining her Ph.D. in 1965. The following year she got American Studies accepted as a part of the curriculum at Idaho State and was named the program’s director, a position she was to hold until her retirement in 1970 — by which time the little school her husband had joined in 1928, and she a decade later, had grown to have a faculty of 433. Yet Leedice did not leave the classroom in 1970. In that year she was awarded a prestigious Fulbright lectureship at the University of Reykjavik in Iceland, where she taught American Studies, pioneering the field there just as she had at Idaho State. Only on her return to Pocatello could it truly be said that she had retired.

The story of Leedice Kissane’s career in Pocatello is more than just one of degrees, promotions, and classes. Combining her early journalistic interests with the broad cultural focus of American Studies, she wrote a semi-regular column for the *Idaho State Journal* called “That Reminds Me,” a column focused on vignettes — human interest stories — describing the community’s people and history. Eventually these were published in two volumes by the Idaho State University Press under the title *Pocatello Memories*. In 1982, with help from Leigh Gittins and Chilton Phoenix, she instigated and shaped Pocatello’s centennial celebrations. Although she never claimed to be a historian and was not trained as one — she was, after all, a professor of English and American Studies — Leedice had come to be viewed as such by many members of the congregation and community. And not without justification. Merle Wells, the long-time state historian and for eight years head of the Idaho State Historical Society — himself a good Presbyterian — had high regard for both Leedice and her work. Moreover, she was, a former editor of the state’s historical journal recalls, “something I seldom call anyone, a genuinely sweet and gentle person.”

In 1939 Leedice helped organize the Presbyterian Young Matrons Club “to promote sociability among the younger women in the church.” Following her retirement, Leedice became more active than ever in the church, although she was so modest and unassuming that much of what she did went unacknowledged. Her husband Donald was director of the church choir for extended periods, and thus much noticed, but those who were active in the congregation at the time recall without hesitation that it was she who was the more active in the church.

Although there is no record of much of what she did, one thing is clear: Leedice’s historical interests were turned to the use of Pocatello’s First Presbyterian Church. She was chair of the 75th anniversary celebration and in connection therewith organized the program for an anniversary banquet, held in the Idaho State University Student Union dining room on

September 9, 1979. Two years later she prepared a brief history of Presbyterian Women, an organization in which she was active. In the meantime she began work on a larger history, a study of the First Presbyterian Church that, in light of the combination of her own and her husband's long association with the congregation and her interdisciplinary training in American Studies, promised, both in terms of the period covered and in depth and sophistication, to go beyond the history prepared by Leigh Gittins for the church's 75th anniversary.

But the latter project came to naught. The Rev. Jo Lininger, possessing a strong historical sense, had kept files of all the programs for services during his long pastorate at First Presbyterian; also, in acquiring photographs of the church's many ministers for the 75th anniversary, he had received a large number of letters from the pastors' family members and friends, letters full of grist for the historian's mill. Unfortunately, Lininger's successor, the Rev. Jack Wells, failed to appreciate the value of these materials and discarded them. Like this author's mother, he seems to have looked upon such material simply as "old junk," clutter if you will, and in the process of cleaning house disposed of it even though he should have known better — after all, before coming to Pocatello, the Rev. Wells had prepared a history of the First Presbyterian Church of Kearney, Nebraska, for *its* centennial. Disheartened by this turn of events, and by the implied lack of appreciation for what she was doing, Leedice abandoned her work on a congregational history. Not long after, she left Pocatello for Grinnell, Iowa, to live near relatives in her native Midwest. In both cases, First Presbyterian was the poorer for it.

Leedice Kissane exemplified the university presence in the First Presbyterian Church of Pocatello. As with many others who came, both during her own years in the church and later, her training allowed her to bring talents to bear that would otherwise have been in short supply and to enrich the church thereby. As time passed and their numbers grew, so did the role in the church of such members. In recent years, no one could grumble, as Tom Norris once had, that although there were a number of teachers in the congregation, none of them ever offered to preach when the need arose — and they have come to fill almost every other need too, taking on job after job. The music ministry in particular has benefited from leadership of personnel attached to the university, including Donald Kissane, Keith Forrest, Wesley Harris, Rudolph Goranson, and David Gonzol. Today the roster of faculty and staff members from Idaho State who are active in the church is long: Ron and Joan McCune, Ray and Ann Hunter, Paul and Katie Link, Gene Stuffle, Victor Joe, Janne Goldbeck, Melissa Norton, Loren Weaver, and others. Unfortunately, no complete roster of university members who have been active in the church over the years is possible, for records are not set up so as to provide such information.

But perhaps statistics tell the story of recent years better than any list of names could. In 2004, when the church was preparing a self-study as a prelude to calling a new pastor, it found that over sixty percent of the membership had college degrees and roughly two-thirds of those had post-graduate degrees. There was not a member with less than a high school education. Employment patterns showed a high level of education too, with well over half of those employed holding professional positions; the number of retired members, which included many who had previously held professional positions, was equally high. Although the survey did not reveal how many of these were employed by Idaho State University — or in education as a whole — it provides a clear picture of a well-educated congregation. Indeed, the combined total

of professionals and retired professionals is in excess of sixty percent and exceeds the number of all members currently employed by a large margin.

The First Presbyterian Church had moved to its location at Seventh and Lewis in part in order to better serve the academic community that was to become Idaho State University. Outreach to students there proved a challenge fraught with difficulties — especially during the 1960s — and at times it has simply languished; moreover, while the university brought a number of dedicated Presbyterians to it from outside the Pocatello area, few people from the university seem to have affiliated with the church as a result of its local evangelical efforts. Throughout its history the church and the university in all its permutations have existed in a close symbiotic relationship, but, as the career of Leedice Kissane well illustrates, in balance the university seems to have done far more for the First Presbyterian Church than the church has been able to do for the university community.