

CHANGES AND CHALLENGES, V: ALBERTA PHILLIPS AND THE CHURCH'S SOCIAL CONSCIENCE

by Tom Cox

Like other denominations — and American society as a whole — the Presbyterian church had been deeply divided by the social and political ferment of the 1960s and 1970s. Although the heated rhetoric that had marked the period of the Viet Nam War subsided once that conflict was over, differences continued. Within the church these differences sprang, as much as anything, from contrasting views of the proper role of the church in the world. Pocatello's First Presbyterian Church was not immune to these developments.

During the late 1970s a spirit of malaise had crept into First Presbyterian. Some blamed the Rev. Jack Wells, some pointed their fingers in other directions, but whatever the cause it was clear that all was not right with the church.

Slowly the church pulled its way out of its slump, and new initiatives appeared that bespoke a fresh spirit. In 1979 the Men's Club was reactivated under the leadership of Art Carlson. It soon took up the sponsorship of work parties at the church (held monthly from 1985, the work parties were to continue even after the Men's Club died from attrition). There was a vibrant active youth program under Jack and Shirley Wells. Fifteen youth attended Camp Sawtooth in the summer of 1981, and in 1982 the Men's Club began renovation of a Junior High room for the youth. In March 1984, the session decided that more lay leadership was needed in worship; by the following January forty lay members had participated in the Sunday morning worship services. In 1982 Leigh and Virginia Gittins donated funds to purchase three octaves of bells, and a bell choir, the Celebration Ringers, commenced with Jean Coapman as its first director. In 1984, the bell choir was in danger of dying when its next director resigned, but Betta Sharp, one of the ringers, knew that she "wouldn't be able to stand that," so she agreed to take over. Betta has been the bell choir's director ever since. In October 1983, session voted to allow an AI Anon group to hold its meetings in the church, which it continues to do to this day; later that year the God's Fund was created to be administered by the Deacons as a means of providing emergency aid to the poor and indigent in the community. Other steps were also taken to help the community's less fortunate. In 1985 the Deacons worked with representatives of seven other churches in Pocatello to bring pressure on United Way to address the problem of inadequate heating in many homes in the city; the response was positive, and by the end of the year the homes of some fifty families had been provided with heating. That same year the Deacons also began what was to be a long-term relationship with Salvation Army, working as holiday bell ringers to raise funds and, later, serving lunches once a month at the Salvation Army center. The following year regular donations — and other help — was extended to Aid for Friends, an organization raising funds for a homeless shelter in Pocatello. That relationship too continues today.

There is statistical evidence for the shift that was under way. In 1982 mission giving by First Presbyterian had been \$9.64 per capita, compared with \$25.15 in Kendall Presbytery as a whole, but it was improving. In 1983, the church's benevolence budget was \$6,950; the following year it rose to \$7,143, a respectable 8.5 percent of the budget — and the total, if not the percent, continued to grow in the years that followed.

Nationally, Presbyterians were displaying deep concern for the welfare of the nation and the world. The Rev. John M. Fife of the Southside Presbyterian Church in Tucson, Arizona, led the “sanctuary movement” which provided safe havens and a sort of present-day “underground railroad” for Central Americans fleeing the revolutionary turmoil then raging in their native countries. The Rev. Fife and his associates justified their actions as “cases of conscience,” but they were on a collision course with the United States government, which charged them with harboring illegal aliens. In 1980, the General Assembly of PC (USA) adopted a statement entitled “Peacemaking: The Believer’s Calling,” which dedicated the church to work for peace with justice in all human relations, from families to nations. Peacemaking offerings became an annual event that helped fund the various initiatives undertaken through this program.

One of First Presbyterian’s newer members, Alberta Phillips was instrumental in First Presbyterian establishing a Peacemaking Committee of its own in May 1985. According to an obituary in the *Idaho State Journal* in 1997, Phillips was the first female graduate of the University of Idaho and the first female attorney in the state. She was neither. In fact, the first woman had been admitted to the Idaho bar in 1895; Phillips, the fourteenth, was not admitted until 1942. Still, she was among the state’s first fifty women attorneys, a group honored by the Idaho Bar Association for its pioneering work in winning women a respected place in the state’s legal fraternity. First Presbyterian’s Peacemaking Committee was to be extremely active over the next several years in working for peace and justice in the home, community, nation, and world. Supported by Mary Echo (sometime president of Presbyterian Women), Scotty Whaley, and others, Phillips pushed the church to be active in Crop Walk, which addressed world hunger, and the Snake River Alliance — an Idaho-based citizen’s group working for peace and justice, an end to nuclear weapons production, and responsible solutions to the problems of nuclear waste and contamination. She also served for ten years on the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries, through which she pushed for programs of healing and outreach.

Prior to establishment of the Peacemaking Committee, benevolence seems to have been a low priority for First Presbyterian. When faced with budgetary shortfalls in 1978 and again in 1980, the session responded by directing that expenditures for benevolence be halted for the remainder of the year. Revealingly, until 1985 the session had no standing Outreach Committee; giving was the concern of Worship and Mission — and it appears to have been a very secondary part of that body’s work. With the creation of both a Peacemaking and an Outreach Committee in 1985, there was a dramatic shift of emphasis. Alberta Phillips, Mary Echo, and their allies (both on and outside of the two new committees) set to work with an enthusiasm that generated a fresh interest in helping others, an interest that carried forward for years, even after there ceased to be a separate Peacemaking Committee, its work having been assumed by Outreach. At a memorial service following Phillips’s death in 1997, Randall Kline summed up her contributions: “Her community involvement was based upon the love of people and protection of our earth for future generations, a passion for peace, and a love for all creatures. . . . I celebrate her life as she positively changed the lives of so many others” — or, more succinctly, “of all the people I have ever met, Alberta [alone] should be sainted.”

Phillips’s death left a leadership hole that was hard to fill, all the more so since Mary Echo, her great ally in peacemaking work, died that same year. Moreover, fresh problems emerged inside

the church that distracted attention for a time, but gradually others appeared to take up the mantle of social conscience of the church. Today First Presbyterian continues active in programs of social outreach and healing. Alberta Phillips and Mary Echo would surely be pleased.