

CHANGES AND CHALLENGES, VI: J. AUSTIN LININGER AND THE LARGER CHURCH

by Tom Cox

One has to read between the lines of a sparse body of evidence to reconstruct J. Willis Hamblin's contributions to the First Presbyterian Church, but such is not the case with the Rev. Dr. J. Austin Lininger, who succeeded him in 1956. Lininger had a well developed historical sense that led him to save a wealth of material chronicling the church's story during his years in Pocatello and inspired him to pursue the extended correspondence that resulted in the photo exhibit of former ministers of the church displayed in the memorial chapel. Indeed, among the items found when the church's cornerstone was opened for the centennial was a cassette tape of one of his sermons — one of the few surviving sermons, whether on cassette or in print, by any of the church's ministers during its first seventy-five years.

The Rev. Lininger served in Pocatello at a time of sweeping changes in the Presbyterian world. Some of these had origins in the on-going quest for church unity; others in the divisive effects of the war in Viet Nam, felt even in conservative Pocatello. Lininger was intimately involved in a number of issues of the day, and nearly all had their impact on the First Presbyterian Church.

Unification of Presbyterians into one major denomination had proceeded by fits and starts ever since the Civil War. In 1870 New School and Old School Presbyterians reunited, in 1907 a majority of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church merged with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and in 1958 the United Presbyterian Church of North America — which had roots running back to Scottish Covenanters who immigrated to North America in the colonial period, unlike the Presbyterian mainstream whose origins stemmed largely from Ulster — joined with the PCUSA to create the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. The new body had 3.1 million members and more than 9,000 congregations.

Nor did unification stop there. In 1960 the Rev. Dr. Eugene Carson Blake, Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the UPCUSA, preached an historic sermon at Grace Episcopal Cathedral in San Francisco in which he decried Christian divisions and called upon Protestant denominations to work for broad-gauged unification in a church that was “truly Catholic, truly Reformed, and truly Evangelical.” Dr. Blake's sermon was front-page news and led two years later to the Consultation on Church Union (COCU), which began the process of making his dream a reality. Initially, the United Presbyterians and three other denominations — the United Methodist Church, Protestant Episcopal Church, and United Church of Christ (Congregational) — were involved; gradually others joined. In the end, no merger took place. Blake's United Presbyterian Church dealt the death-blow to the effort in 1972 when, frustrated by the intractability of issues of theology and practice, its General Assembly voted 411 to 310 to withdraw from COCU's attempt to create a blueprint “Plan of Union.” A year later, the United Presbyterians rejoined after COCU shifted emphasis from formulating a formal plan of union to formulating models for cooperation. Any chance of COCU's member churches uniting in one body was over.

Nearly every merger — or attempted merger — was occasioned by debate, and repeated defections by those unhappy with the direction of change occurred. In 1907 a minority of the

Cumberland Presbyterian Church refused to join the merger with the PCUSA and stayed on as the separate Presbyterian body that continues to this day under the Cumberland name. The PCUSA divided too; in 1936 a group unhappy with what they considered the too liberal direction of the main church — including the ordination of women as elders — left to form the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. And in 1973, a decade before the United Presbyterian Church and the Southern Presbyterians finally reunited, a considerable number of the latter's congregations (half of those in Mississippi) — angered by the movement toward racial integration, the ordination of women, and the church's participation in the "liberal" Federal Council of Churches — left the Southern body to form the National Presbyterian Church (later known as the Presbyterian Church in America). A few years later, other congregations left the Southern body to form the fundamentalist Evangelical Presbyterian Church. These departures, as James Smylie wrote, were "the price . . . paid for national reunion."

Even when major mergers did not take place, debate boiled in Presbyterian circles. The Cold War is often dated as beginning with Winston Churchill's "Iron Curtain" speech at Presbyterian-affiliated Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri, but as anti-communist xenophobia increased under the leadership of Wisconsin's Senator Joseph McCarthy, some Presbyterian leaders became concerned with its corrosive effects. In 1953 John A. McKay, Moderator of the PCUSA, wrote "A Letter to Presbyterians" warning of the dangers of McCarthyism and calling for a calm, sensible approach to the anxieties of the period. With its approval by the General Assembly, McKay's letter officially placed the church in the camp of those who favored freedom of speech and conscience. Not everyone in the denomination agreed. Sometimes opposition to McKay's approach was open, as when he was accused of being soft on communism, and sometimes subtle, as when the Rev. George Dougherty launched a movement to have the words "under God" added to the Pledge of Allegiance in an effort to make clearer the differences between the United States and godless communism.

The Viet Nam War followed, deeply dividing Americans. Their differences were reflected in the church. When Angela Davis, a Black self-avowed communist who opposed the war, went to court over her firing from a position at the University of California, the Presbyterian church provided funds to help pay her legal expenses. The outcry was immediate and strong. Nationally, Presbyterian giving dropped sharply, and many left the church in protest. Eventually, black church leaders repaid out of their own pockets the money that the church had given Davis, but the damage had already been done; to this day, this author hears bitter complaints about the Angela Davis affair nearly every time he revisits his former church in California; it was, these critics charge, indicative of the way church leaders had aligned themselves with ultra-liberal causes. For First Presbyterian, the war had an even more direct impact: the Lininger's son, Jack, fled to Canada to avoid being drafted to fight in what he thought an unjustified war.

There were theological as well as socio-political divisions. Tension between fundamentalists and modernists was ever-present. Adoption by the Northern church of the *Confession of 1967* — and the Southern church's adoption of a new *Declaration of Faith* and *Book of Confessions* a few years later — brought religious differences of this sort into sharp focus. Also divisive was the growing rift between those who emphasized private faith, individual morality, and personal evangelism and those concerned with the impact of religion in the public sphere and the

responsibility of Christians to address social problems. Douglas M. Strong sought to demonstrate in his book *They Walked in the Spirit* that one could work to transform society while still nurturing a deep personal piety, but as the majority aligned more and more with the modernists and social activists, publications like the *Presbyterian Layman* and *reNew* emerged to give voice to conservative Presbyterian perspectives on faith and life.

As the charismatic movement gained strength in the 1960s, including in Presbyterian circles, it too engendered debate. Generally, Reformed church members were suspicious of experiences of glossolalia, most believing that genuine speaking in tongues had been confined to the early church; in contrast, those within the charismatic movement tended to view people who did not speak in tongues as not having been reached by the Holy Spirit. Intolerance existed on the two sides, and the Presbyterian church sought to find a way of accommodating both — something it eventually did by acknowledging the charismatic approach as a valid route to faith, but not the only one, not the chief spiritual gift, and not meant for all; it urged Presbyterians to avoid divisiveness over the issue, and directed that both those speaking in tongues and those who did not be accepted as valued parts of the larger church. Whether anyone was truly happy with this straddling of the issue is uncertain. In any case, the church had demonstrated once again what Presbyterian preacher-professor-poet Henry Van Dyke — author of many hymns still in use today — had observed in the 1920s: Presbyterians have a “propensity to quarrel among themselves and divide their forces on minor issues.” The truth is, however, that few involved in the various debates would have considered their differences “minor.” As divisions continued, Clifton Kirkpatrick, Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the PCUSA, eventually felt compelled to write *What Unites Presbyterians?* to remind the faithful of the many things they held in common.

These developments impacted the First Presbyterian Church in various ways. Some had relatively little effect; divisions over others continue to be felt. The merger of the old PCUSA with the United Presbyterians in 1958 generated little friction — either here or elsewhere — for the two were remarkably alike. Locally the biggest impact seems to have been in the realm of names. First Presbyterian became the First United Presbyterian Church, and Ladies Aid became United Presbyterian Women to reflect the denomination’s new title. Additional women’s groups were also melded into the UPW, bringing to an end the Ladies Missionary Society, which had been around since the church’s founding, and Northern Star. Other groups got new names too, and bookkeeping was adjusted to reflect the changes, but none of this seems to have significantly affected the forward momentum of the church.

Merger with the Southern Presbyterians in 1983 brought further changes in nomenclature — United was now dropped from First Presbyterian’s name (and from that of the denomination) — but, except within the Southern church, the merger seems to have generated only limited debate. Some Northern Presbyterians (including some in First Presbyterian, no doubt) were troubled by this union with the more fundamentalist, evangelical, and anti-intellectual Southern Church, but such concerns had little effect on the course of events. Presbyteries of the UPCUSA approved the union by a vote of 151-0.

The Angela Davis case also seems to have had only a brief impact on First Presbyterian. Looking back years later, the Rev. Lininger thought Pocatello too isolated from the scene of

most Black activism and violent anti-war protest for the Davis affair to continue as an issue for any length of time. Similarly, there is little evidence that the Viet Nam War divided the Pocatello church as deeply as it did some, although it did impact the ecumenical campus ministry which the church supported — and from which it withdrew support for a time as controversy swirled around it and the Rev. Willis Ludlow, its head.

But if it was something of a bystander on some of issues of the period, the First Presbyterian Church was intimately involved in others. For this, the Rev. Lininger was largely responsible, for he supplied strong leadership. As one former ruling elder recalls, the session “didn’t exactly become a rubber stamp” during Lininger’s ministry, for there were people on it with talent and convictions of their own, but Lininger knew what he wanted and was persuasive in his arguments. He would come into session meetings, lay out his plans, and the group would normally go along with his wishes. On the fundamentalist-modernist split that had long troubled the Presbyterian denomination there is no question as to where he stood. When this author told Lininger that he was disturbed by the tone of hard-core conservative writings in *Presbyterian Layman* and that, in frustration, had given up reading it, Lininger’s reply was succinct and to the point: he still read it, he said, because he “wanted to know what the enemy was doing.”

Under the Rev. Lininger’s leadership a steady stream of visiting Presbyterian dignitaries filled the First Presbyterian’s pulpit: the Rev. Drs. Harrison Ray Anderson, Ganse Little, John Coventry Smith, and William R. Laws, each of whom served as Moderator of the General Assembly; the Rev. Daniel G. Little, coordinator of planning in the UPC’s Board of National Missions; the Rev. Wesley G. Baker, consultant on ecumenical relations for the UPC; the Rev. William Hopper, Synod Executive for the Synod of Idaho; the Rev. Stanton E. McClenny of Post Falls and the Rev. Ralph O. Marshall from the College of Idaho, each while Moderator of the Synod of Idaho; the Rev. George H. Pike, Moderator of the Synod of the Pacific (successor to the Synod of Idaho); and no doubt others. Not all the visitors preached. The Rev. George E. Sweazy, another Moderator of the General Assembly, delivered spoke to a dinner served in the Whitman Room by the United Presbyterian Women. Collectively, these visitors both broadened the horizons of the First Presbyterian Church and gave members a sense of connectedness to something larger, a sense that both strengthened and motivated them.

The Rev. Lininger’s efforts were not all directed toward his own denomination. Reflecting the times, his approach was broadly ecumenical — and so was that of many of the visitors he brought in. When Methodist Arthur S. Fleming, immediate past president of the National Council of Churches (and former U.S. Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare), preached at First Presbyterian he did so to a joint gathering of six of Pocatello’s Protestant churches. Evangelism, Fleming proclaimed, should be the top priority of the church, but too much time was spent arguing over how to accomplish it and too little actually doing it. “No single congregation, no individual denomination can carry through adequate evangelism,” he argued; all needed to be involved. Ecumenism was central to the message of various visiting Presbyterians as well. When John Coventry Smith preached (again to an inter-denominational group), his message was broadly ecumenical — as were those of both the Revs. Daniel Little and Wesley G. Baker, who preached on inter-denominational World Communion Sunday. Their messages were heard; today, one member still recalls this as “an exciting time” in the church.

Ecumenical efforts were not limited to sermons; practice was affected too. In 1969 First Presbyterian Church joined in joint services with the First Baptist Church while the Rev. Lininger was in Miami, Florida, for a meeting of the National Association of School Trustees. So successful was this effort that it was expanded the following year. First Presbyterian joined with the First Baptist Church and the First Congregational Church for joint summer worship services rotated monthly from church to church. Those preaching came not only from the three churches, but from other denominations as well; for example, the summer program was launched with a sermon by the Rev. Burton R. Brown, president of the Idaho Council of Churches and himself a member of the Church of Christ; and in July one of the sermons was delivered by local Episcopalian Father John Tulk. Nor was cooperation limited to worship services. The three participating congregations also joined in a junior high day camp, a summer church school, and Wednesday evening family nights (this last held not at any of the three cooperating churches, but at Holy Trinity Episcopal Church). At the national level, COCU may have been having trouble finding a blueprint for denominational union, but in Pocatello cooperation among Protestant churches was proceeding apace. The Rev. Lininger's wife, Virginia, added her bit to the ecumenical movement, addressing an inter-faith gathering at Pocatello High School during Brotherhood Week.

As one visitor after another was heralded in the local press, and as the First Presbyterian Church engaged in fresh approaches to worship and inter-denominational cooperation, it earned a higher profile in the community and a reputation as a place to which important visitors came and where major things were happening. A tremendous growth in the church during Dr. Lininger's tenure was one result, with membership rising from some 360 to roughly 600. At the same time, the network of contacts that made the steady stream of visitors to the church possible gave the Rev. Lininger wide exposure and in 1972 led to talk of his running for Moderator when the General Assembly met in Denver that year. In the end, his name was not one of the four put in nomination; instead, in the arcane system Presbyterians used at that time for selecting moderators, Lininger, attending as one of Kendall Presbytery's two commissioners (he had also been a commissioner in 1962 and 1967), served as "convenor" of one of the twenty-six "electing sections." Two years later he departed Pocatello to take an administrative position with the national Board of Pensions, but the larger-than-ever membership and firm intellectual and ecumenical commitments that he had helped to build remained.