

## **WORKING OUR WAY THROUGH, II: CHILTON PHOENIX**

by Tom Cox

Since the mid-1970s, the First Presbyterian Church has had to work its way through a variety of problems and challenges. Some have been the result of changes in American society that have impacted churches everywhere. Others have resulted from factors internal to the congregation. But from wherever they sprang, the ways in which these problems have been handled and the solutions that have been found have combined to shape the church of today.

As we have seen, music has been a defining element in the First Presbyterian Church from its earliest years, and central to this has been the choir. But the choir has frequently struggled to survive. Repeated changes of directors, periods of limited participation, and the absence of male voices during World War II all took their toll at one time or another. The last decades of the twentieth century could have been another period of trial for the choir, for it was one in which other problems in the church might easily have sapped the enthusiasm essential for it to continue playing a vital role. A good part of why it did not can be laid at the feet of Chilton Phoenix, yet oddly he was never a member of the church; he would repeat the Apostle's Creed, but never took communion.

In the early days of the Reformed faith, membership in the church was something much cherished, but hard to come by. During the first years of Puritan New England, one had to wait for a conversion experience, go before the members of the session to convince them that it was real, and then stand before the entire congregation to repeat the process. The grilling was intense, and the psychological trauma often deep-felt. Not the least of the concerns of those involved was the nagging question: "Is this experience real, or is it the work of the Devil?"

Even in the nineteenth century, church membership was not something to be taken lightly. Many churches issued communion tokens to the faithful, tokens that had to be shown before one was allowed to participate in the sacrament. Somehow it seemed essential that non-members be excluded from the celebration.

The church was considered to be the body of the "visible saints," selected for salvation through grace by the omnipotent Calvinist God. But there was a problem with all this. An all-knowing God hardly needed an earthly body to determine who was a member of His church or who was qualified to partake of communion. Thus, the church gradually came to accept the idea that there were also "invisible saints," those selected for salvation but whom God had chosen, for whatever reason, to keep secret; they were every bit as much a part of the Church Universal as those who had been added to the membership rolls of earthly congregations even though their status remained unknown to their fellow humans.

Membership in the church has become easier to acquire. Most churches today hold to the idea that God knows His own, so it is hardly necessary for church leaders or members to add highly demanding tests of their own to those seeking to become part of the church family. Questioning by session members tends to be much less intense than in colonial times, and the appearance

before the congregation as a whole has become a mere formality. Communion tokens have become curiosities valued only by a handful of collectors and antiquarians.

Yet there are echoes of the past in our present situation. The church family of First Presbyterian has long included people who are regular participants, but who are not carried on its rolls. Some fall into that category because they have chosen, for reasons of their own, to leave their membership with another church or another denomination, but have regularly contributed time, talent, and money to the work of the church — one is reminded of Amelia Frost, who left her membership with the Fort Hall church when she returned to New York for the last many years of her life, years during which she was an active participant in the Presbyterian church in Rochester, New York, where she had taken up residence with relatives. On the other hand, there have been others who have been fixtures in the church without, insofar as we know, ever being admitted into membership anywhere.

Perhaps no one looms larger in the list of non-members who have been key parts of First Presbyterian's church family than Chilton Phoenix. Repeatedly, old-timers in the congregation have told this author that in writing a history of the church he had to be sure to cover Phoenix. Indeed, it has been suggested, one cannot really tell the story of the choir — which has been a central part of this congregation's history — without discussing him at some length.

All that said, one must note that Phoenix's role in the church extended beyond the choir. He was an attorney by training — long employed by the Union Pacific Railroad — and an historian by avocation. He worked with Leigh Gittins and Leedice Kissane in the campaign that resulted in the building of the Fort Hall replica in Ross Park, in planning the centennial celebrations for the city of Pocatello, and on those for the seventy-fifth anniversary of the First Presbyterian Church; he served on the committee that selected the pipe organ which has been such an important part of the church's music program over the last twenty-five years; with Paul Link, he co-authored a local history entitled *Rocks, Rails, and Trails*; and, more recently, he was an instructor for Elderhostel classes dealing with the history of the Pocatello area.

As befitted an attorney, Phoenix was a formidable defender of his opinions. Paul Link, to whom he was something of a father figure; recalls Phoenix as “stubborn, grumpy, yet very wise . . .” and one who “did not like to be told what to do.” This last characteristic could lead to trouble. Tribal rules make unauthorized travel in the back country of the Fort Hall Reservation illegal, but Phoenix would have none of it. On one occasion, he blithely took a busload of Elderhostel students onto the reservation to visit the site of the original trading post without bothering to get permission — and nearly got the entire group arrested by tribal police as a result. Some found these characteristics off-putting. A leading figure at the Idaho State Historical Society commented sourly to this author that “Chilton was pretty full of himself.” Others were more charitable. Bob Shaw, a fellow member of the choir for years and clearly fond of Phoenix, has referred to him with some amusement as the choir's “dictator.” Evelyn Falk, choir director from 1965 to 1972 (and a member well before that), was more explicit: “Chilton Phoenix, as music librarian, helped keep us organized.”

Being “music librarian” gave Phoenix ample opportunity to influence what was sung. He came to practices early and then stayed late to make sure all was in order. He purchased and paid for

much of the music used by the choir — and his preferences shaped what he bought. Paul Link recalls that he “disliked any Church Choir music written after his birth in 1921.” Maintaining the church’s files of sheet music gave Phoenix a special power: when music showed up that he did not like, it seemed to disappear, never to be seen again.

But “dictator” Phoenix’s influence went far beyond this. He sang in the choir — often off key — for over forty years. He joined with fellow choir members for post-practice sessions at Buddy’s, where camaraderie and good humor were honed and Phoenix’s sharp sense of humor reigned. Not surprisingly, it was he who frequently picked up the tab for the group. And on Easter, when there were two services, Phoenix and his wife Ruth regularly had the choir over for a sumptuous, substantial breakfast between services. As Roger Wheeler recalls, “It was always hard [for the choir] to get geared up for a second service of singing when our tummies were so full.”

In discussing the qualifications for a director of First Presbyterian’s chancel choir, Melissa Norton recently observed that in her experience it seemed the greatest requirement was that a director “be someone whom the choir can stand — and who can stand the choir.” Chilton Phoenix was one of those with whom choir directors had to learn to work — but somehow director after director did just that. And thanks in large part to his presence and influence, the choir prospered during many a period when a plenitude of difficulties faced the church, providing elements of continuity and stability that were badly needed. Phoenix’s death in 2002 left a hole that Paul Link admits to feeling still. Many in the choir could no doubt say the same.