

WORKING OUR WAY THROUGH, III: JACK WELLS AND THE SEARCH FOR BALANCE

by Tom Cox

The Rev. J. Austin Lininger's departure left an immense hole in the First Presbyterian Church. "Obviously," Leigh Gittins wrote, "it would not be easy to find someone to fill the shoes of our dynamic Rev. Jo," for he enjoyed "great ability and popularity." But as the Rev. Lininger prepared to leave, a Pastor Nominating Committee was formed and set to work under chairman John Jackson. It pushed ahead diligently and was soon ready to announce its choice: the Rev. John F. ("Jack") Wells, who was to be minister of First Presbyterian for the next twelve years. They were to be busy — and sometimes controversial — years.

The Rev. Wells had impressive credentials. He had been educated at the University of Minnesota, Oberlin College, and the Yale University Divinity School, served in the Army Air Corps during World War II, was minister of a church in Maryland, and then served as organizing pastor of one in Wilmington, Delaware. For the next five years, he was associate pastor of a large church in Billings, Montana, and then in 1965 went to the First United Presbyterian Church in Kearney, Nebraska, where he served until called to Pocatello. Outgoing and friendly, the Rev. Wells looked very ministerial — someone commented, "he must have been sent out by central casting." A solid, genial Midwesterner, Wells seemed to reflect tradition more than the fresh winds blowing through the church. With a dry sense of humor and a sometimes brusque approach, he brought a personality and style to the pulpit of First Presbyterian markedly different from those of the Rev. Lininger.

The Rev. Wells's ministry seems to have started smoothly enough. The divisive Viet Nam War had subsided as an issue, and attention turned to things nearer to hand. Since the Wellses preferred to invest in a home of their own, the church sold its manse, netting a profit of over \$7,000. On June 6, 1976, the church mortgage, finally paid off, was burned with appropriate ceremony; with finances now in good shape, a major renovation of the basement took place; and in 1977 the stained glass windows — worth at the time an estimated \$25,000 to \$28,000 — were repaired and provided with protective outside plastic covers after some had been damaged by vandalism. But perhaps the greatest accomplishment of the period was the acquisition of a pipe organ. Its dedication was a major milestone for the church. Many former choir members returned for the ceremony, which featured former church organist James Drake in a dedicatory recital. As the Rev. Wells put it, "1978 will be remembered as a banner year . . . the year of the pipe organ!"

There was progress on other fronts too. The festivities in 1979 in commemoration of the church's seventy-fifth anniversary thus came not only as a celebration of past accomplishments, but also of apparent present-day health. The congregation entered into them with gusto. The cornerstone of the church was removed, the brass box containing an assortment of items placed in it when the building had been erected in 1927 opened, and the contents placed on display. Additions were made — including cassette tapes of reminiscences by long-time members and a copy of a history of the church prepared by Leigh Gittins and published using money from the Memorial Fund. The cornerstone was then returned to its place. For reasons that are not clear, everyone seems to have assumed it would not be reopened for fifty years, that is until 2029, but

fortunately that was not to be the case, for its contents have proven invaluable in the preparation of this history.

But there were clouds on the horizon. Almost from the beginning, some members were troubled by the sale of the manse; the Rev. Wells, they argued, should be devoting his efforts to building the church instead of a house for himself. There were other issues too. By the late seventies various long-running national controversies were coming to the fore in First Presbyterian. Nick Ifft III and others protested the use of denominational funds to support union boycotts and other “liberal” causes. Abortion became an issue. Homosexuality was the subject of a workshop and debated at both the local and presbytery levels, but ministers were urged not to take a firm position until General Assembly had determined the denomination’s stance. The Rev. Wells seems to have followed that recommendation, although he urged members to attend the workshop; in spite of calls for calm, homosexuality was an issue on which members had strong opinions, and debate swirled. And, as we saw in an earlier essay, Mormonism — an issue in First Presbyterian from its founding, although not always openly — came to the forefront once more.

But all this did not halt progress on other fronts. Church giving for benevolence climbed steadily, increasing some fifty percent from 1974 to 1978, and in response to the denomination’s Major Mission Fund drive, announced in December 1978, First Presbyterian over-pledged its quota of \$15,000 by more than \$2,000.

Even as the seventy-fifth anniversary celebrations proceeded, grumbling about the Rev. Wells’s leadership was becoming more open. The cassette-taped interviews of Tom Norris and Grace Tarr Bistline, conducted by Leigh Gittins and Marvin McCall and placed in the church cornerstone, provide some of the first evidence. When asked what advice he would give future church members, Norris urged them to be loyal to the church regardless of who the minister was; moreover, he added, there was danger in cliques. Bistline said much the same thing: people should not criticize the minister and should overlook some things, for perhaps the perceived problems were “our own fault and not the pastor’s.” The complaints about Wells — and Hamblin before him — clearly were behind their pointed advice.

By October 1981 a “lengthy discussion” by session of the problems facing the church at its monthly meeting and the calling of a special meeting two weeks later to discuss the “assets and problems concerning the minister and the church,” a meeting at which the Rev. Wells confessed to being “poor as an administrator” and a motion was passed that the session was “aware we are in a spiritual crisis.”

Grumbling continued, although available records do not make it entirely clear what the problems were. New session member Harald Wyndham seems to have come as close as anyone to putting his finger on the sources of discontent, when he suggested that peace would come if attention were focused on the larger, more basic mission of the church, rather than on differences over authority and style. Open discussion rather than decision-making by cliques would create a healthier church.

More than discussions in session meetings seemed to be needed, and in August 1983 Kendall Presbytery's Ministerial Relations Committee suggested that First Presbyterian commence, as session minutes put it, an organized discussion of "the leadership role of Session and Pastor in our church." An hour and a half was spent at the next session meeting addressing the challenges facing the church, but delineating problems seems to have been easier than finding solutions. A session retreat focused on the church's problems of communication followed, but outside experts who attended seem to have dealt in vague generalities and have been little help. Still, there was recognition of the need to resolve conflicts in order for the church to move forward.

The Rev. Wells agreed. Toward that end, in November 1983 he announced that he planned to retire in July 1986, when he would reach 62 years of age. He hoped, he said, that this would bring a new spirit to the church — and it seems to have done just that. For the remainder of his ministry, controversy seems to have declined — or to have been channeled to such lesser questions as whether to purchase land east of the church for a parking lot, how to cope with high energy costs, what to do about replacing the church boiler, which, after a checkered career, finally failed in 1985 when the custodian — who was fired for his negligence — let it run out of water, and whether or not the Pocatello area needed a second Presbyterian church. But while now muted, controversy was never completely absent. Establishing a second Presbyterian church in Pocatello was viewed by some as a sign of denominational strength, but others saw in the idea an implied criticism of First Presbyterian and recognized that such action would draw people and resources from it. The Rev Wells later remembered he and others "fighting off the efforts" of those who wanted a second church.

New leaders begin to appear in church records with some regularity in the 1980s. Alberta Phillips, Mary Echo, Harald Wyndham, and Ron McCune among others, all elected to the session, and McCune, who had originally been tapped for Finance Committee chair by an informal group of old-line leaders, agreed to serve as Finance Chairman for a second term when no one else was willing to take the job. In the meantime, some of the long-time leaders receded from prominence. In 1980, for example, Nick Ifft III lost a contested election for ruling elder and was never again on the session. New leadership bespoke a fresh outlook in the church as surely as did fresh initiatives. But what was behind all this? What had caused the turnaround from the mood of discontent present as the decade began?

A search for answers to these questions is complicated by a lack of clarity as to the sources of discontent in the first place. Not until the Rev. Wells's remarks to his final congregational meeting does something appear in the records that provides a satisfactory explanation. He had spent nearly a third of his pastoral career with First Presbyterian and, in spite of problems, had "warm feelings about all of it." His goal, he explained, had been to get committees to do as much as possible "for THEIR church," but no one appreciates this style, he observed; people want "a strong leader." Still, change was essential. The church had to make the very necessary transition from the days of allowing a few to run things." There had been a time when the church had been kept alive by the strong leadership of a handful of devoted members — people such as Mrs. E. C. White, Percy Havenor, Tom Norris, and the Nick Iffts — but those times were past; for the church to continue to flourish, to keep those it attracted into membership, it was going to need to incorporate more people, newcomers and oldtimers alike, in decision-making and to undertake fresh programs. As a step in that direction, one observer recalls, Wells had

edged John Jackson out of the position as chairman of the nominating committee, which he had dominated since 1970. Jackson's wife, Dolores, soon resigned as church secretary, a position she too had long held — whether she did so under pressure is not clear. The Jacksons and others of the old guard might grumble about a lack of strong leadership, but the Rev. Wells was giving firmer direction to the church than they guessed — however unaccustomed they might be to the style of leadership he provided.

During the cornerstone opening ceremonies in 1979, the Rev. Wells had hinted at what was to come. A church, he had said, is not a building, “a church is people . . . people who know that old things pass away, but . . . God calls new things into being.” It is useful to “look back to capture the flavor of life that was . . . but we [must] look forward to new challenges in the years to come. The Apostle Paul, Wells pointed out, used the language of building often “keeping himself *humble*, to be reminded that he himself was but a building stone. . . .” God “is glad for the contribution that each can make,” Wells added, “. . . and, I think our church history shows already that we have needed each person who has passed through these doors to live among us for a time.” The implications of this message may have been missed at the time, but they were an accurate forecast of the inclusive approach that the Rev. Wells was to pursue in the years that followed — an approach that sought a balance between new and old, between ministerial and lay leadership, between the authority of the few and of the many. In short, he forced the church to move closer to the Presbyterian ideal of shared governance and power delegated to elected representatives.

This search for balance may have been traumatic, but out of it good things came. New leaders and new strength emerged. Through his prophet Ezekiel, God had promised the Israelites “A new heart I will give you, a new spirit I will put within you” (Ezekiel 36: 26). Through the Rev. Wells, He seems to have done just that for the First Presbyterian Church.