

WORKING OUR WAY THROUGH, IV: TRYING TIMES

by Tom Cox

In 1986 the Rev. R. Coke McClure came to First Presbyterian from Rigby to succeed Jack Wells. He arrived in the midst of times that would have been difficult for the church even under the best of circumstances. But there were positive signs too. Victor Joe had taken over as director of Christian Education; in the annual report for 1986, he was able to report good progress in increasing youth involvement in the life of the church, providing Sunday School teachers with a sense of community and appreciation, and presenting a program that was better integrated with the overall ministry of the church than it had been earlier. In 1987 donations to the God's Fund increased almost 100 percent over the previous year, and the Deacon's Pantry was a source for distribution of eighty bags of groceries to the needy. That same year, the church initiated a Camp Sawtooth Project, which came to fruition when seventy-two members showed up at the camp over Memorial Day weekend to build a new cabin. Allan Priddy served as general foreman, Jim Stitt was master carpenter, and Mary Echo ran the kitchen for the group. Not only did the project add badly needed capacity at Camp Sawtooth and provide those involved with experience and a sense of togetherness, it paved the way for the church's later involvement in the Habitat for Humanity program in Pocatello. Membership and giving were soon climbing. As Phyllis Rubel recalls, services were jammed; you had to get to church early to find a place to sit.

The turnaround was partially the result of concerted effort by members, but also of the fact that the Rev. McClure was a good "fit" for the church. He had grown up in California, where his father had been a geologist of some note, and had attended Dartmouth on a football scholarship and then Princeton Theological Seminary. Such a background might seem strange for a minister first called to Rigby (where he served six years) and then to Pocatello, but both his wife Trudy and his mother had Idaho roots, and he had often come to eastern Idaho on fishing trips with his father. The thirty-one year old Rev. McClure thus had better understanding of the area than his educational background might have led one to expect. Still, the intellectual interests he had developed in Berkeley and at Ivy League schools made him feel somewhat isolated in Rigby, and he welcomed the call to Pocatello, with its university and larger population. He came to Pocatello with an enthusiasm that helped get his ministry at First Presbyterian off to a good start.

But difficulties soon arose. In August 1989 the McClures informed session of pending divorce proceedings. The Rev. McClure stated that he wished to continue as the church's pastor; the session voted to retain him and added a positive statement regarding his ministry, action which was confirmed by secret ballot at a congregational meeting a month later. There were a number of positive developments over the next few months — Jean Joe was elected Moderator of the Synod of the Pacific, Jack Wells was made Pastor Emeritus (and plans were made to accord Jo Lininger the same honor at his scheduled retirement in 1991), a College and Career Fellowship was started, and the church purchased a complete set of the new Presbyterian Hymnals, the selection being made by a committee chaired by Harald Wyndham. Still, there were repercussions from the McClures' situation. A few members left for other churches, and the proposed budget for 1990 had to be scaled back when pledges failed to meet expectations.

Still, 1990 and 1991 were marked by important developments. Joy Doctor began a drama-in-worship group, which introduced a program of liturgical dramas during Lent. Kerry Robison (later Williamson) joined the staff as Co-Director of Christian Education in 1990 and became sole Director later in the year when her co-director, Jenny Neurath, stepped down. According to informed observers, Robison did an excellent job; among other things, she was instrumental in forming a Girl Scout Troop, and later a Brownie troop, under FPC sponsorship (unfortunately for First Presbyterian, she would resign in 2001 to become Coordinator of the Early Learning Center at ISU). The Peacemaking Committee sponsored a class taught by Jean Joe on her family's experience at a relocation camp during World War II and on subsequent efforts of Japanese-Americans to gain redress; in 1991, she was selected as a commissioner to General Assembly. At Thanksgiving, the Deacons reestablished their collaboration with the Salvation Army by assisting with their Thanksgiving Dinner for the unfortunate; this was followed in subsequent years by an on-going program of preparing and serving Saturday lunches approximately once a month (people served at Salvation Army reported that the lunches provided by First Presbyterian were the best ones served there). Being Presbyterian, the church had a plenitude of committees, new and old — including one to tackle the thorny, if hardly earth-shaking question, of when the congregation should sing “Amen” at the end of a hymn and when not. Far more important in a physical sense was the tuck pointing of the church's mortar, which had deteriorated badly. As the annual report put it, the Building and Grounds Committee's “theme for 1990 was . . . living stone and sick mortar. Fortunately, the sick mortar was cured by the laying on of hands and trowels, elbow grease and . . . capital.” The project cost in excess of \$34,000, but the repaired mortar was expected to last seventy years, and since giving had recovered significantly, the project did not generate lasting financial problems.

But the McClures' divorce was not proceeding smoothly, and members of the church were divided by developments. In the spring of 1991 the session met with a representative of Kendall Presbytery's Committee on Ministry regarding the “difficulties surrounding the separation and divorce of Coke and Trudy McClure.” No resolution to differences emerged, and in May session sent a letter to all members of the congregation regarding the ministerial situation and general health of the church.

Still, divisions did not halt progress on a variety of fronts. Several members of the church — including Gracia Bare, Leona Skaggs, and Jane Wyndham — were deeply interested in the Stephens Ministry program of one-on-one caring. A number of members attended an informational meeting in Ketchum in October 1991. Five months later, after reviewing the situation, the session decided that the existing professional staff was inadequate for meeting all the spiritual, emotional, and social needs of the congregation; it concluded that a Stephens Ministry group would be a better means than an Associate Pastor for ministering to families suffering crises. In May, when session presented a proposal to establish such a program to the membership, over ninety percent voted to do so. Not long thereafter, Victor Joe, Sandy Drew (later Loyer), and the Rev. McClure attended leadership training for Stephens Ministers at the University of California, Berkeley; in 1993, Joe and Loyer began preparing members of the congregation to serve in the program. Their efforts culminated in May with the commissioning of ten Stephens Ministers to serve in the program.

There were other noteworthy developments too. In May 1992 a work party built another cabin at Camp Sawtooth — what a far cry from 1983 when Building and Grounds had called the camp “a very low priority”! Finances continued to be in good shape, and the God’s Fund distributed a record \$3,465.30 locally to needy recipients. Thirteen new members joined the church over the course of the year, but this had to be balanced against the “retirement” of Clerk of Session Clarence Green after 22½ years of service.

Yet in spite of positive developments, a crisis was brewing. In December Kendall Presbytery informed First Presbyterian’s session that on the recommendation of its Committee on Ministry it was appointing an Administrative Commission to inquire into and settle difficulties at FPC. The commission would have the power to dissolve the pastoral relationship with the Rev. McClure and/or set aside the session. What followed would make 1993 a long and difficult year. There were those who were offended by what they considered outside interference, believing that First Presbyterian was capable of handling its own problems, but under the Presbyterian system of shared governance no congregation is totally free to do as it wishes, and the Administrative Commission was soon at work. In February, four members of the session resigned. In March the session accepted the recommendation of the commission that the church retain a conflict management consultant, George D. Parsons of the Alban Institute. Some members of the church objected and protested the “secrecy” of the session’s deliberations, but session was not at liberty to discuss a number of confidential issues. At the beginning of April, Parsons reported to the session and the Administrative Commission recommending that a negotiating team of an equal number of supporters and critics of the Rev. McClure be appointed. In the meantime, another member of session resigned. In May the session rescinded its acceptance of the resignations of the five who had resigned, but two persisted in doing so. The negotiating team set to work, but was unable to come to an agreement: a majority proposed that the pastoral relationship be dissolved, a minority countered that a pastoral and congregational change process be pursued for a year, with the pastor working with an oversight team to resolve difficulties that had been identified. Several other parties made recommendations to the session, either in person or by letter, and in the end session voted to accept the minority proposal. An Oversight Committee was formed in June, and over the summer the session tried to grapple with a budget shortfall and the loss of thirty members of the congregation. In August, an attempt was made to reconsider the process of pastor and congregational change, but the motion failed to pass. By September, however, the Administrative Commission had concluded that the situation could not be salvaged and dissolved the pastoral relationship between First Presbyterian and the Rev. McClure effective at month’s end.

Presbytery had a recommendation waiting in the wings, and before September ended session members had heard the Rev. Don Wright preach. He was invited to serve as Stated Supply Pastor commencing October 1. The Rev. Wright had a long career in the Presbyterian church and considerable experience working with congregations in crisis — for some years, he had worked out of the headquarters of the Synod of Southern California and Hawaii, where such work had been his specialty. This was the third time he had been called to a congregation that had suffered the loss of a pastor, experience that proved invaluable as he set to work at First Presbyterian, where he made reconciliation his top priority. Long experience had given the Rev. Wright a thorough knowledge of the intricacies of the *Book of Order* and faith in it as a valuable guide not just for managing church affairs, but for healing as well. Friendly, outgoing, and

confident, he was quickly popular; there was a crusty conservatism about him that grounded his sermons in basics with which all sides in the recent controversies could identify, helping to draw them back together. Thanks in part to the Rev. Wright's firm administrative hand, membership stabilized at around 350, no small feat in a church with so many older members and thus fairly frequent deaths. Still, the effects of recent events continued to be felt: average attendance fell from 144 to 118 and church school enrollment from 190 to 114 during his tenure. Giving was more problematic, but finances stabilized too, thanks in large part to special summer stewardship and challenge giving campaigns (contributions per attendee actually climbed from \$800 to almost \$1,000 per person).

These were busy years for the church. In 1993 Catherine Mailliard took over as church secretary, Maryanne Beery as choir director, and Gerald Hughes as organist (in 1996 Hughes would succeed Mailliard as church secretary while continuing as organist, positions he still holds). Reflecting the enthusiasm of members for making a new start, some 150 people showed up for a Christmas open house at the home of the Rev. and Dorothy Wright. In 1994 FPC hosted a visit by General Assembly Moderator David Dobler, Leona Skaggs was appointed to the board of Camp Sawtooth, Don Wright and Harald Wyndham sponsored a monthly ecumenical youth fellowship, and over the summer Wyndham led an eight-week prayer workshop. Session also approved sponsorship of another Girl Scout troop under Kerry Williamson (but decided to eliminate the positions of Youth Elder and Youth Deacon), and approved church support of the Portneuf River Greenway campaign. Perhaps the highlight of the year came in September with the addition of eight new ranks of pipes to the organ, making it the largest in the city. Organist Gerald Hughes presented an inaugural recital on the enlarged instrument and followed this up the following month by leading an organ seminar at FPC under the sponsorship of the American Guild of Organists.

Momentum carried over into and beyond 1995. In February, Clive Swansbourne of ISU's Music Department offered to house his nine-foot concert grand piano in First Presbyterian's sanctuary, explaining that the church had the finest acoustics in the area. The church gladly accepted the offer and a month later approved monthly recitals at the church by Swansbourne and other musicians from the university, something FPC was to continue to enjoy for the next four years. In March, the Stephens Ministry team reported that it was ready to begin recruiting a second group of participants, and in June session, ready for fresh challenges, began consideration of new mission possibilities, including a Food Bank, a Habitat for Humanity chapter, and a Day Care Center. By the following year, Habitat for Humanity had become a major focus of the church's mission activity. Under the leadership of Allan Priddy and Pete Oslund, the church committed itself to funding and raising the roof on Gateway Habitat's first house — a commitment that was to continue with subsequent houses erected by the group as it sought to provide a low-cost house to people who otherwise could not afford a private dwelling of their own. In 1996, restroom facilities for the handicapped were installed on the main floor of the church, while in April 1997 a handicapped entrance was added to the home of FPC member Florence Malmberg. In June, a Christian Day Care Center became reality. Housed in the church basement after the installation of new carpet and tile and fresh paint, the center opened in September with a staff of four and an enrollment of nineteen. Plans were also begun for a LOGOS youth ministry, plans that came to fruition the following year. The year 1998 also saw the installation of a new roof on the sanctuary, a project that got off to a bad start when Pete Oslund, who was in charge, fell from the

roof and was badly injured. The Buildings and Grounds Committee took over, completed the project, and at the same time provided practical support for the Oslund family during Pete's convalescence — including the installation of a handicapped entrance for their home.

Except for a brief respite following a heart attack in March 1996, the Rev. Wright was to serve First Presbyterian until the end of 1997, at which time the congregation selected a Pastor Nominating Committee to begin the searching for a permanent minister. While the work of the PNC proceeded, the Rev. Wright continued to serve until August 1998, at which time he resigned to become Stated Supply at the Idaho Falls church. Although there had been some muted grumbling that the Rev. Wright had not moved the Pocatello church toward a permanent call as quickly as he could have, the deliberate speed at which he had moved probably was wise. Divisions had been deep and healing a slow process, a process helped along, no doubt, by the many activities into which the church had entered during his tenure as Stated Supply and then Interim Pastor.

For a decade and more the First Presbyterian Church had been sorely tested. Yet in spite of differences and divisions, activity — indeed, progress — continued. The church's major accomplishments during the period are a sure indicator of the same resiliency that had seen it through the trials of the depression of the 1930s and then of World War II.