

## **HERE WE STAND, II: A SNAPSHOT OF STATISTICS AND PEOPLE**

by Tom Cox

During 2002-2003, as part of its preparation for calling a new pastor, First Presbyterian engaged in a lengthy self-evaluation. Statistics in the *Mission Study*, a central part of this effort, provide a snapshot of the membership of First Presbyterian, if not of the theological positions represented therein. Some of the statistics gathered have been referred to in earlier essays in *News & Views*, but collecting them in one spot can give a more coherent picture than having them scattered in a number of issues.

At the time of the *Mission Study* there were 292 members carried on the congregational roll. This figure was somewhat misleading, for the roll had not been systematically reviewed for some years to determine who on it was in fact no longer a member — whether by death, transfer, or inactivity. Of the members listed, 36 percent were male and 64 percent female. The average age was 55, with 40 percent 60 or older. There were 35 non-member children and youth attending, all but five of whom were 12 years of age or younger; on the other hand, nearly a third of respondents were retired. In other words, it was, as it had been for some time, a relatively old congregation. Reflecting this, in 2003 ruling elders ranged in age from 35 to 78 and averaged 55.2; deacons then serving ranged from 42 to 82 and averaged 65.1 years of age. As might be expected in such a group, only 37 of the members on whom data were available listed themselves as single, while over 200 were married, widowed, or divorced. The relatively small numbers of single and of young members (only 36 were under age 30) demonstrate, among other things, the limited success that the church has had in attracting students from Idaho State University.

The congregation continued to be well educated, as it had been for years. Of the respondents, there were none who had not at least completed senior high school; 113 had undergraduate degrees, and 72 had done post-graduate study. More respondents classified their employment as “professional” than all other types of employment combined.

From 2000 through 2003, average weekly attendance at worship services hovered around 100, reaching its nadir in 2002 with an average of 95.5 attendees per week. From 1995 through 1999, average weekly attendance was always considerably higher, the lowest year being 1995 when an average of 116.4 attended each week. Data was not readily available to demonstrate the level of involvement in the church beyond attendance at worship, but from 1993 to 2002 denominational records show that annual giving per attendee rose from \$800 to \$1,500, an increase that shows a positive response to the financial exigencies in which the church found itself at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

When members were asked to rate the various aspects of worship services, the music programs stood at the top of the list, while the children’s Sunday School program was rated least satisfactory. In rating non-worship activities of the church, fellowship and local giving programs ranked highest, youth programs lowest. Responses to a question regarding reasons for attendance at the First Presbyterian Church reinforced these findings. Of 65 respondents, 51 listed music as their reason for attending, 43 fellowship, 36 a place for family worship, and 35

denominational loyalty. Only 7 listed youth programs, 7 the teachers in the Church School program, and 4 the church's evangelism efforts. The weak showing of Christian Education is hardly surprising. Annual reports to denominational headquarters showed that from 1993 to 2003 enrollment in CE declined by over seventy-five percent.

In sum, the *Mission Study* and annual reports to PC (USA) headquarters in Louisville showed an older, well-educated congregation with strong music and fellowship programs, but weak in serving children and youth and ineffective in evangelism, especially in reaching into the university community. However true all this may be, it tends to obscure the wide ranging patterns of faith and the diverse personalities that the church encompasses. To appreciate those, one needs to go beyond mere statistics to look at individuals.

First and foremost, it must be acknowledged in determining where First Presbyterian stands after a century of service to God and community that there is tremendous diversity within it. Trials and tribulations may have strengthened First Presbyterian's leaders and other members as they worked in the church's behalf, but they have failed to homogenize them. There were — and there remain — sharply divergent patterns of faith within the congregation. This is a source of strength, for the differing gifts, the differing approaches of members complement one another. Surely, diversity has always been present, but in comparing developments during earlier times with those of the past few years, one gets the impression that it may now be greater than ever.

Harald Wyndham has argued that it is too early to do the sort of biographical sketches for current members of the church that have been accorded various earlier leaders in the preceding pages of this study, for their work is on-going, their legacies still being shaped. His point is well taken, yet a few observations can be made about present leaders. First and foremost, there is great variety among them, as is shown in the *Mission Study*. Ruling elders range cover an age range of over 40 years, in years of membership in First Presbyterian from 3 to 45, and in years of service on session from one to 19 (in light of rules laid down in the *Book of Order*, this last figure obviously not all consecutive). Some have also served as ruling elders elsewhere. There are men and women, retired and employed, quiet and outgoing. They include lifelong Presbyterians and those who have come to the church from other denominations. Indeed, it might be said that no two are alike. Only in their ethnicity does uniformity appear. All are Caucasian, reflecting the overwhelming makeup of the congregation as a whole.

But leadership comes not just from the ranks of ruling elders. Allan Priddy is a key leader and has been a member of the church for many years — indeed, he and his wife Kathy were married in First Presbyterian — yet he is not a member of session. His colorful announcements have highlighted many a Sunday service. Under Priddy's direction, work parties were long held the first Saturday of each month, providing thousands of dollars of maintenance to church facilities every year. Once the responsibility of the Men's Club, work parties now fall under the purview of session's Building and Grounds Committee, chaired by Art Carlson, but Priddy continues to play a central role. "Breakfast at eight, work at nine, coffee break at ten-thirty, finished by noon" is their mantra — and the formula is adhered to faithfully. Moreover, Priddy and Carlson make sure that no one works alone; at least two volunteers are assigned to each job so that people get to know one another by working, as well as breakfasting, together. Priddy has been equally adept as the driving force behind First Presbyterian's work with Gateway Habitat for

Humanity; in 2005 work parties from the church raised the roof on their sixth Habitat house in Pocatello, while First Presbyterian has contributed an additional \$1,000 a year to construction costs. Moreover, in 2004 when First Presbyterian opted to include a float honoring its centennial in the annual LDS Pioneer Day parade in Pocatello, it was Priddy who was in charge of building the entry — which won second prize among all those entered. His knack for energizing others for participation in such programs is unparalleled, yet when asked to be a member of the church's Outreach Committee, under which the Gateway Habitat project falls, he demurred, just as he did when asked to be a member of the board of Gateway Habitat: "I am a builder, not a politician or administrator," he explained — he can work endlessly and is a master at energizing others, but finds committee work frustrating. "Let me do what I do best," he asked — and what he does best is very good, indeed.

Chuck Thompson, another member not currently serving on the session, is of another stripe altogether. A sort of senior statesman, seventy-eight year old Thompson listens quietly as others debate, and then calmly and gently adds a bit of wisdom that defuses things when the discussion starts taking on sharp edges. Although he has been a member of First Presbyterian for only a dozen years, he was active in the Methodist church he attended in California before moving to the Gate City. His wife Peggy had grown up in the Presbyterian church, and on arriving in Idaho, they gravitated naturally to First Presbyterian and were soon participating actively. Among other things, they donated the magnificent Bible that graces the sanctuary lectern. So involved did they become that Presbyterian Women voted Peggy an honorary life accomplishment award. Some time after, when told that the cancer with which she was afflicted was probably terminal, she said with pride that she had been born a Presbyterian and was going to die a Presbyterian.

Chuck Thompson's experiences, combined with his basic personality, give him a certain equanimity in looking at recent events. His ability to remain calm in the midst of tempests and the universal respect he accords others have won him a wide circle of admirers and lay behind his selection first as Clerk of Session at the time of the Rev. Cramer's departure and then as Kendall Presbytery's lay commissioner to the 2004 General Assembly, an experience he describes as among the most moving of his life. The emphasis at the GA on the importance of mission has made him an enthusiastic supporter of new outreach programs for FPC. He wrestles too with the challenges of low membership — empty pews trouble him, and he repeatedly asks what we can do to reach out in ways that will fill them.

Perhaps nothing reflects Thompson's approach better than an event on the eve of his departure for General Assembly. At least one member of session, knowing that there would be votes on questions involving the place of homosexuals in the church, lobbied him to vote a particular way. He listened politely, did not argue, but also did not commit to a position: he would, he said, study the materials provided and pray for guidance on the issue. To this day the petitioner does not know how in the end Thompson voted, but she went away from their meeting knowing that her views had been heard and would be prayerfully considered. An issue that in other hands might have generated sparks and created confrontation had been dealt with in a constructive manner. Every church needs people who deal with others and with divisive issues so well.

Janne Goldbeck represents yet another aspect of the life of the church. Churches are not only places where the Word is proclaimed and fellowship of the faithful enjoyed, but also places where new generations of church leaders are prepared. Although infrequently discussed, a major responsibility of any congregation is identifying and encouraging those who will become ministers of the Word and Sacraments. Over the years, First Presbyterian has not been overly successful in this regard — in part because, as an older congregation, most of its members have been beyond the age of career choice. Still, it has not been wholly unproductive. In June 1969, Charles E. (“Gene”) Hemenway, who had been active with youth groups at First Presbyterian, graduated from Idaho State University with a degree in music and promptly departed to enter Louisville Theological Seminary. Ordained at First Presbyterian, his “home church,” in 1972, Hemenway then commenced his work in the ministry as Associate Pastor of the Boone Memorial Church in Caldwell. Then, in April 1983, Joe Coulter, an attorney serving on First Presbyterian’s session, gave up his law practice and followed in Hemenway’s footsteps. He too completed his studies at Louisville and became a pastor, although after serving several churches he eventually left the ministry.

Janne Goldbeck has followed a different path. A professor of English at Idaho State whose graduate training was received at the University of Oklahoma, she has specialized in medieval literature and has been especially attracted to the work of the period’s mystics. She arrived in Pocatello in 1976 and, having grown up a Presbyterian in Texas, promptly joined First Presbyterian. In 1980 she was married in the church to John Lowry, whom she had gotten to know at the university even though he too was a member of First Presbyterian in which he had grown up. Over the years, Goldbeck has served on the church session and as a deacon, taught in the church school program (at one time or another, everything from third and fourth graders to adults), and chaired the Christian Education committee.

Sometime around 2001, Goldbeck was called to preach at the Federated Church in Star Valley, just across the state line in Wyoming. From time to time, ordained elders are called upon to provide sermons, but this soon turned into something more than occasional preaching. The church lacked a regular minister, so Kendall presbytery authorized her to offer communion there, something that elders normally do not do. Since she was still a full-time faculty member at ISU, the needs of the Star Valley church were more than she could handle alone, so Melissa Norton soon joined in her work there. About the time she began preaching in Star Valley, Goldbeck learned of the denomination’s Commissioned Lay Pastor (CLP) program through which lay people complete systematic study and activity to prepare them for the sort of service she was providing to Star Valley. CLPs help to ease the denomination’s shortage of ministers and aid in meeting the needs of smaller churches not in a position to call a full-time ordained minister. Knowing that she would be retiring from the university in the spring of 2006, she approached the Rev. Don Wright about the CLP program in 2002, and, although he was no fan of non-seminary training — those going into CLP programs, he once told this author, “are just trying to become ministers on the cheap” — he encouraged her to enter it. She did just that, beginning study first under the mentorship of the Rev. Jim Cramer, then under Dennis Felasco of Idaho Falls, and finally under the Rev. Pamela Mayes. Unlike ordained ministers, CLPs are commissioned to serve a specific church or churches. Different presbyteries treat them differently, but in Boise Presbytery CLPs serve on presbytery committees and in other ways are treated essentially as equals by the ordained clergy; that may well prove to be the case in Kendall presbytery too,

although at this writing there are no CLPs serving in it. Regardless, Goldbeck might be seen as the third member of First Presbyterian to enter the ministry — broadly defined — and thus one who is helping to fulfill the church's responsibility to provide future leaders for the denomination.

These three — Priddy, Thompson, and Goldbeck — are an unscientific sample of the leaders of First Presbyterian. Together they show the reality of a church whose congregation has a great degree of variation within its ranks far better than do the statistics presented in the *Mission Study*. This diversity makes serving the congregation challenging, for what speaks to one member does not necessarily speak to another. Yet these varying patterns of faith are also a source of strength, giving the congregation a variety of resources to draw upon in meeting its needs and a range of sensitivities that help it to recognize differing opportunities and challenges within the congregation, in the community, and in the wider world. May it always be so!