

The First Twelve Years

By

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Although the Myers Park Presbyterian Church is only thirty-two years old, it ranks high among the first in the entire Southern Assembly. In view of its amazing record and having been the first pastor, I am making an attempt to write a brief sketch of the first twelve years. It is in no sense a history of this period but a very personal, running account of the happenings in those happy and interesting days. It was the nearest thing to a religious romance that I know. I do so with the hope that those of "the old guard" might enjoy it and those who came later possibly be interested.

Two things I regret. One is the generous use of the first personal pronoun which is unavoidable; the other the impossibility of mentioning the name of every member. Suffice it to say that they all composed a group of highly unusual men and women.

It was during my pastorate of the First Presbyterian Church of Selma, Alabama that I received a telegram from the Myers Park Presbyterian Church of Charlotte, North Carolina. The committee wanted to know if I would be in my pulpit on a designated Sunday. Never having heard of a Myers Park Church, I was puzzled. However, I wired that I would be speaking at that time.

When the day came it was not too difficult to spot the four visitors though each one selected a different section to behold the proceedings. That they were somewhat self-conscious and new at the game was evident,—at least they were interested. At the close of the service they made themselves known and a conference was arranged to be held at the manse. At the time agreed on, the committee arrived. It was composed of Hamilton W. McKay, George E. Wilson, Jr., Tom McP. Glasgow and Tom Henderson. They were an attractive looking group, not the least unsure of themselves and in high good humor. There was not the faintest ecclesiastical suggestion about them, but rather a committee to select a football coach.

Following the usual pleasantries, they stated the object of their visit. It was to find a man who would become the first pastor of the Myers Park Presbyterian Church. I could only tell them of my complete ignorance of the existence of any such organization. With genuine amusement they proceeded to enlighten me, which they did very effectively. At the moment the church they represented had 256 members, no building, no lot, no funds for either. Dr. Melton Clark was their acting pastor and the chapel in Queens College rented for their services.

They laid particular stress on the young and new congregation. It was their united conviction that it was of an unusually high type, able and willing to go through with their plan and eager to get on with it. They were prompted in the adventure by a desire to do something about their spiritual lives. The membership of many of them in the churches to which they belonged had become little more than nominal. They had no feeling of personal responsibility, no active interests and spiritually were at a low ebb. Because a number of them were the sons and daughters of ministers, church officers and Christian parents, they knew something ought to be done. As one of them said, "We are dying spiritually and we don't want that to happen."

The shock of the visit came when they said they were not just a committee to look over a possible

prospect but officially empowered to extend a call provided they saw fit to do so. That also I had never heard of. They saw fit. I did my best to express the appreciation I so deeply felt and my pleasure in meeting them. In my desire to do all I could, I told them that since they had extended such a surprising courtesy I would be glad to visit Charlotte between Sundays and, if they so desired, conducted the midweek service. That, they said, was all they could ask. On this pleasant note we said goodbye.

The Church in Selma was one of the oldest, strongest, and most active in the Synod. It possessed a noble and enviable record. The congregation was marked by birth, education, culture and attractiveness. Our nearly four years there had been a rewarding experience. I had no thought of leaving.

The visit to Charlotte was made on February 11, 1927. It was my first and I was not prepared for the activity and size of the city or the beauty of Myers Park. The committee and other members of the congregation extended a warm and gracious welcome and spared no effort in enabling me to see the situation.

Naturally, the mid-week service was of special interest as it afforded the opportunity to see the membership. In spite of the fact that each was looking over the other, the occasion was a very pleasing one. I talked briefly on "The Rich Young Ruler," who having so much yet lacked so much that when he saw Christ he ran, knelt before Him and in desperation asked, "What lack I yet?" In no small measure the young ruler and the young congregation were alike. Each had experienced that "a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of things which he possesseth." Both were conscious of a definite want.

Following the service I met a delightful group of men and women, the gayest ever, if a little unfamiliar with prayer meetings. They were very gracious.

The final conference was held in the Chamber of Commerce with some fifteen men present. Knowing this would be the show-down, I asked before the meeting if I should speak plainly or continue on in the happy vein in which the conversations had been held. The reply was, "Take off your coat and go to the mat," which being interpreted meant, "Lay it on the line." I did.

Their proposal was to raise \$125,000, purchase a lot, build some Sunday School quarters, and when the movement justified it, erect the Church. Today the word 'billion' is about as common as million was then; so the amount suggested does not sound impressive. However, the dollar was quite a different matter in 1927, and one hundred and twenty-five thousand of them had little or no connection with hay—as I understood it. On today's market it meant something like two hundred and fifty thousand or more.

I tried to thank them for the call, what they were willing to do and their kindness. I felt it only fair, in the light of what they hoped to have, to tell them what the Church in Selma already had. Regarding what they proposed, I agreed thoroughly on the opportunity. I even dared suggest a doubt as to whether their sights were high enough to take advantage of it. For I had the feeling that what they really had in mind was a church for their own use; not with any idea of exclusiveness but to take no risk in losing the personal responsibility they were seeking. Certainly they had not the slightest desire for size. As commendable as their attitude was, I told them a church could not limit its membership and that they would have to build in terms of the future rather than a certain number of years.

Next I made the effort to make them see that starting with Sunday School space first and the Church second would be a perfect illustration of the cart before the horse. This, of course, would involve a larger financial outlay which they neither expected nor wanted. As a result, a number of eyes turned toward the ceiling. Assuring them that I would give the proposal sincere consideration, I hastened back to my work.

The people in Selma were wonderfully kind and gave the assurance of their desire for us to remain. When I told one of the elders, a warm personal friend, of the Charlotte offer, he said, "Are you crazy? Don't you know that crowd in Charlotte have no idea of building any church? Then where will you be? Ruined, that's all. The nerve of it." While this delightfully straight talk did not decide the issue, for several other reasons it seemed best to decline the call.

The reaction in Charlotte took the form of telegrams, telephone calls and letters. They had not expected a refusal. However, having done what I thought best, I tried to buckle down to the task in hand.

It so happened that some time before I ever heard from Myers Park I had accepted an invitation to conduct the services of Religious Emphasis Week at Davidson College. In order to fulfill the engagement it was necessary to spend the night in Charlotte. While there my hostess, a member of the Episcopal Church, suggested calling up some of my Charlotte friends. I told her I didn't think they would be interested as the matter between us was a closed chapter.

On the last day in Davidson George Wilson called me and asked if I would like to see "some of the boys on a purely social call." I said I would be delighted but would be unable to see them until after the evening service. Later when we had come to be devoted friends he assured me that the "purely social" stuff was the only "lie" he ever told me,—laughing as only he could.

About a dozen men came in the afternoon and we held the meeting after the close of the last service. It was quite obvious they had something other than social on their minds. There was a seriousness that I had never seen in them before. So without any playing around or sparring, we got down to business. They wanted to renew the call to Charlotte. Sharp and able men, they declared their willingness to raise \$250,000, build the Church first, a Sunday School Unit and as soon as possible complete the plant. I didn't say anything other than my pleasure in seeing them and that I would consider their second offer. But there really wasn't any use in using the word 'consider' for in that moment I had decided. I felt that if they were that much in earnest and believed I could help them, win, lose or draw I was willing to try. I did feel that I should talk with the people in Selma before making the decision public. This I did with the greatest sadness for they had shown us a kindness for which we were truly grateful.

We arrived in Charlotte on June 1, 1927—an eventful day. The original committee and a number of men and women were at the train. No sooner had I touched the ground when this question rang out, "What do you have in that brief case you are handling so carefully?" My gleeful reply was, "just the telegrams, letters and promises you made before deciding to come."

The warm and gracious welcome over, we were driven to the attractive house which had been selected for us until the new manse could be constructed. The location was ideal. There followed a round of gaiety and entertainment that we completely enjoyed and filled us with encouragement.

As fresh and delightful as it all was, this stubborn fact looked us in the face. No lot, no church, no nothing in the material line—just a dream. As alluring as this dream was, the realization of it had to be of the earth, earthy.

The Chapel in Queens College was ample for our needs and splendidly situated. Unquestionably, the time spent there was one of the happiest in the first twelve years. The services were not only an occasion for worship but also for companionship where many and lasting friendships were rapidly formed. The congregation grew steadily and the spirit was more suggestive of a college campus than anything else. I don't believe any people ever had more fun in a religious adventure.

Having secured a pastor, steps were immediately taken to get the program under way. The lot committee consisted of Tom Henderson, Chairman, Harvey W. Moore and W. C. Rankin; the building committee of Dave Ovens, Chairman, Mrs. Charlie Lambeth, Mrs. Rush Lee, Hunter Marshall, Norman Pease, Charlie Ross and Victor Shaw; the finance committee of Eddie Jones, Chairman, Chase Brenizer, John Bass Brown, Torrence Hemby, Irving Henderson, Ed Keesler, Walter Lambeth, Charlie Moody and Lloyd Summerville. As long as there is a Myers Park Presbyterian Church it will be an emblem of the ability, loyalty and devotion of these splendid committees.

On December 15, 1927, the following persons composed the official force. Elders T. M. Glasgow, Hunter Marshall, Clerk, Hamilton W. McKay, James T. Wardlaw, George E. Wilson. Deacons: John A. Tate, Chairman, Yates Faison, Tom Henderson, Eddie Jones, Caldwell McDonald, Norman Pease, J. W. Thomson. Sabbath School: J. W. Thomson, Superintendent, Willard Dixon, Secretary. Men's Club: Caldwell McDonald, President; Henry Sloan, Vice-President. Woman's Auxiliary: Mrs. Charles P. Moody, President; Mrs. Alonzo Myers, Vice-President.

While this group of men and women, the official force of the newly organized church, afforded the leadership, there were many others who worked side by side with them, without whose devoted efforts the splendid progress could never have occurred. Later they were to fill offices both old and new.

From the very beginning of our negotiations assurance was given that I was not expected to "build any church." They said, "All we want you to do is to look after us as our pastor and we will do the rest." This they literally did. I was invited to meet with committees and occasionally asked how I liked what was going on; that was all. I might as well have been a guest.

Never will I forget the day Tom Henderson asked me to go with him to look at the site about to be selected. We went out Queen's road and turned into a short dead-end street which overlooked as fine a broom-straw crop as one could imagine—over three acres of it. "Here," he said, "is the center of Myers Park and the best place for the Church." I managed to keep on my feet but the ropes helped: it was a body blow, right around the belt.

For once I kept my mouth shut and my face straight, I think. Anyway, I made it home, sought a chair and sank down weakly, muttering to myself, "What in the world? How can anybody expect a person to do anything on any such place as that?" The Church I had come from was on the main corner of the city, the very center of about all that was going on. I just hadn't figured on going to a field, rabbits to the contrary notwithstanding.

Needless to say, the location proved to be perfect—a place beautiful for situation. Charlotte is now not far from three times the size it was then yet the site leaves nothing to be desired.

Under the able, experienced leadership of Dave Ovens and his hard working committee, the construction of the Church and one unit of the Sunday School was soon on its way. It was a great stimulus to the whole enterprise. Many were the times when the members came by to watch the progress of the work.

On April 7, 1929, two years and three months after conducting the first service in the Chapel at Queens, the new Church was entered. The beauty of the day, a capacity congregation of members and friends, the lovely music under the excellent direction of Mrs. Charles A. Moseley, Jr., the beautiful flowers and the handsome edifice—all contributed to make the occasion one of great joy and deep gratitude. The ensuing day Julian Miller, the gifted editor of the Charlotte News, wrote the following editorial which is quoted in part. Little did he realize how truly prophetic it was.

A Church With a Radiant Prospect

No congregation has ever started off in its earlier beginnings toward a career of great usefulness in Kingdom-promotion than that of the Myers Park Presbyterian Church which is today entering its new house of worship, a thing of exceeding beauty and a joy to the hearts of the members of this band as it ought to be a source of great pride to the community at large. The church was a strong church from its infant days. It started off that way, being made up of many of the influential members of other Presbyterian Churches in the City. In numbers it is already in the midst of a swell that is prophetic of tremendous development along this line in the days ahead.

It has now one of the finest temples of worship in the Southland, an expensive creation of beauty and of convenience. It was spared the chagrin that the new congregation usually suffers in being forced to worship for a few years in some sort of a shack, often for many years in that sort. It goes early into its activities through the medium of a large and costly place of worship. That will be an impetus to its future growth. . . . All in all, therefore, we come back to the beginnings to repeat that here is a new influence in the Christian life of this community whose outreach is going to be distant and whose labors amazingly effective for the furtherance of popular interest in the great religion of the Man of Galilee.

After approximately three years the new manse was ready. It was in perfect keeping with its attractive surroundings. We entered it with gratitude, pride and genuine joy—our home for nine years.

In sketching the first twelve years of the Church I have so far written almost entirely of the material side of the adventure. The matter of chief importance, of course, was the congregation, the individual men and women who composed it. I want to mention now some of the traits which—so clearly marked them.

They were young. All that is meant by youth was theirs—life, enthusiasm, drive, confidence. It seemed strange indeed to be only forty three years old and, with the fewest exceptions, the oldest person in the congregation. The average was not far from thirty years. They were going somewhere—but fast and I wasn't exactly ready to be carried off in all directions at once. Vibrant with power, the question was, could it be directed in the proper channels?

Regarding their youth I used to say to friends, "There are virtually no weddings or funerals but you ought to see me baptize the babies." I really became expert in that happy function, and it was soon evident that as far as numbers were concerned the future held no problems.

They were attractive in appearance. They looked just what they were—aristocratic, cultured, successful—not exactly ecclesiastical. When their friends first heard of the plan to build a Church, this question was asked, "What are you really going to do, build another country club?" The Press spoke of them as "the rich and fashionable."

Nor was their attractiveness limited to their looks. It was equally true of their personality, both individually and collectively. Whatever personality actually means, they had it. Certainly it is a social grace but it is also a power in every phase of life, especially religion. For want of it many Christians are limited in their influence and because of it many are highly effective. Surely Christ was as radiant in His person as He was in His wisdom. Contrary to the opinion of multitudes, Christianity does not rule out win-someness. Beyond question the warm personality of the Church was one of the major causes for its amazing growth.

They were talented. If they did not possess five, very few had one, and no napkins were needed. Proof

of this was in the places they occupied in the civic, political and financial affairs of the city. Many were leaders.

What contributed so much to the success of the adventure was the willingness to use their various gifts in the entire program. As an illustration, I used to sit lost in admiration at the way the financial side of the Church was conducted. In spite of a venture involving what would amount to approximately \$650,000.00 today and a sharp depression, the program never faltered in its plans or progress. Only financial talent of the highest kind could have handled a problem so well.

Upon one occasion a very gifted young woman was elected to the Presidency of the Women of the Church. She refused; so I was asked to see her. I found that the reason for her declining was not any unwillingness to serve but a stern sense of unworthiness. At the conclusion of our conversation, she said, "Do you think I ought to accept?" To which I replied, "I certainly do." That was all. She undertook the work and gave to it the same time, thought and care that she had when president of the Junior League. Needless to say, her administration was a highly successful one.

There was the mark of unity. They were of a mind and determined to avoid anything that looked like friction because of the type of people they were, strong and different opinions were inevitable. They had them and expressed them with great vigor. However, when decisions were reached, all pulled together and in the best of spirit. Once on Tryon Street I was approached by a man who had long been a staunch member of another denomination. Due to sharp personality clashes he had virtually been asked to resign. For some six months he and his wife had attended our Church and he expressed the desire to unite with it. Kindly but firmly I told him of the unity we valued so highly and our determination to preserve it. He assured me he would "cause no trouble;" so I invited him and his wife to meet with the session. They did, were received and became loyal, devoted and generous members until the end of their lives.

In another way this bond of union was beautifully shown. Mr. Sam Alexander, our oldest elder by far, suddenly passed. The gentleness and tenderness with which he was borne to his last resting place by the hands of his young, strong, stalwart fellow-elders was to me a moving sight indeed. It was easy to see that they were caring for one of their own.

I will mention one other trait—the lack of religious experience. Of this mark no one was more conscious than they. Indeed, it was their knowledge of it that drove many of them to unite in so strong an effort. Perhaps it was for this very reason that they possessed such genuine humility, in matters religious.

When they first started the movement some of them went to a friend who, while young, was a deeply consecrated woman. They asked for her help. She replied, "No, I don't believe there is enough religion in all of you put together to do any such thing." There was no argument, no resentment, no dismay. They simply took it and kept moving. The fact that the young woman and her husband did later unite with them and become devoted and valued members was not without a bit of delicious humor.

They never did learn to "talk religion." Pious phrases were not for them. They were completely without artificiality of any kind. They were intensely human—a great consolation to me.

They did talk "Church"—anywhere, with anybody and as naturally and enthusiastically as on any other subject in which they were especially interested. It was the kind of conversation anyone could feel free to enter whether in the marts of trade or the clubs of pleasure. Quite unbeknownst to them the very thing they had hoped and planned for was taking place—what the Scripture calls "growth in grace."

The increase in the Church and Sunday School, especially the latter was nothing short of astounding.

In the main, youth was calling youth. Certainly if there had ever been any thought of exclusiveness it had vanished. When visitors attended the services they were met out front by the officers and men of the Church. The method used on the men was more that of blocking and tackling than any other. The women stood by to brush them off!

The Church was the nearest thing to a men's organization of which I have any knowledge. From the very beginning they showed an interest that was arresting. When women take the lead, furnish the inspiration and do most of the work in a church no one is surprised. They always have. But when young men pitch their hardest in a religious enterprise, that is something else again. Not a few wives were stunned. However, they eventually realized they were not seeing things and cheered them on.

As I have indicated, the Women of the Church played their part. Indeed they did, with great effectiveness. Because of their youth it was only natural for them to be keen on the civic, social and literary life of the city. They definitely were, and though Church work was a new field for very many of them, they willingly made a place for it in their busy schedules.

From what I have tried to write of the first twelve years of the congregation it would be easy to form the conclusion that those who composed it were near perfect, sitting on top of the world, enjoying life with little knowledge of its problems and sorrows. They were not even near perfect, they did ride high and they did enjoy themselves. However, neither problems nor sorrows are respecters of persons. They had theirs.

I found this out mainly in pastoral work and close personal relationships. While there is no substitute for preaching one's level best, neither is there a substitute for unceasing pastoral care. I never felt that I could preach Sunday after Sunday to people whom I did not know and love.

If, on the surface, a congregation ever appeared to have no need or desire for a pastor, the Myers Park Presbyterian Church qualified. A minister, yes; a pastor, no. I can only say that no other people I ever tried to serve were more gracious and warm in their response than they. Visiting them was not a mere duty but a genuine pleasure. I can never express what these visits meant to me both personally and officially. Thinking to help me as the congregation increased, I was asked, "Why don't you limit your visits to the sick and troubled?" My reply was, "The sick and troubled are not my only concern, what I'm after is that hard running crowd who are neither." I tried never to let up on them, though how many visiting cards I left will never be known. They were not exactly home bodies; but when I did run them down it was worth all the times they beat me to it.

So for twelve years we lived and labored and laughed and suffered together. For such an experience there are no words to measure the gratitude the family felt and feels for the kindness and affection so constantly and beautifully shown and the unfailing aid of the Savior of us all. We saw a dream come true.