

Remembering First Presbyterian Church of Bloomington, Indiana, 1980-1987

I was called to First Presbyterian Church as Assistant Pastor in November 1980. My ordination and installation took place at the church on Epiphany Sunday 1981. After a couple of years, my title was changed to Associate Pastor. During my tenure I served with three heads of staff: Rev. James Steele, Rev. Dick Ruach, and Rev. Byron Bangert. In 1987 I left First to pursue a degree in education from the Presbyterian School of Christian Education in Richmond, Va. From there I went on to serve churches in Florida, Missouri, and Louisiana. I happily share with you some memories of my seven years at First Pres.

My first acquaintance with First Pres actually took place prior to my seminary studies. In 1976, during a personally difficult time, I lived in Bloomington for a few months. First Pres became a place of refuge for me. Mildred Thornburg, the church secretary, was the first person I met. Rev. Paul Miller listened to me and offered me guidance in the room which would later become my office. After meeting with Dr. Miller, I sat alone in the beautiful empty sanctuary, picked up a Pilgrim Hymnal, and lit on a song whose beauty still moves me, "Come Down, O Love Divine." For a few months, I attended the service of worship and sang in the choir under the direction of the organist Lidetta Matthen. Then my 3 year old son and I moved to my parents' home in Carmel, IN, to discern next steps.

Four years later I completed my studies at Louisville Presbyterian Seminary and began interviewing for a job. In my search I encountered several search committees who saw my status as single mother problematic. Not the search committee of First Pres! To them I was a person with gifts and skills for ministry. What an ironic and sweet turn of events that the church which had anchored me in a time of personal crisis now called me to be one of its pastors.

One of my first assignments was to find cornstalks for the annual building of the Sukkah, a shelter built in the chancel for the bringing of Thanksgiving food items for the hungry. A city girl, I knew little of farms. I ventured into the November countryside, found fields of cornstalks but had no idea how to find the owners of the fields. I gave up looking for owners to seek permission. I must have provided a humorous sight wrestling with bedraggled corn stalks in the snow. The only tool I had brought for the job? Scissors.

The emphasis of my work was to be in the area of Christian education. Providentially, I had a wonderful education committee to work with - I remember the wonderful support of Mary McClellan, Judy Weisstein, Ron Jensen, Lou Moir, Dotti and Pat Riggins, and many others. Their guidance and love greatly sustained me while I broadened my understanding of Christian education.

In adult education, I was delighted to find that First Pres saw itself as a place “where we can agree to disagree.” People of faith could and did draw different conclusions about current events and issues. How important for me to learn that a church could be a place of civil conversation, with members disagreeing strongly at times and still respecting each other.

As to youth ministry, highlights of youth group times were putting on a musical or two; going on a field trip to an ophthalmologist’s office, courtesy of Kathryn Miller; traveling to Camp Pyoca, Eastern Kentucky, and Montreat; and exploring the Larry Crowe Retreat. I fondly remember Rey Carlson taking us for walks in the Larry Crowe woods and talking with wonder about the process of photosynthesis. He praised the mysterious workings of chlorophyll. “Notice” he said “the way leaves of plants turn to expose themselves to the greatest amount of sunlight.” Rey also led us in a project of planting Christmas tree seedlings.

I remember camping out in tents at the Larry Crowe Retreat with the youth group one Saturday night before Easter. We woke up, felt cold, looked up and stared at odd blobs on the roofs of our tents. Unexpected snow had fallen softly during the night, and we held our Easter sunrise service in an wonderland of white.

Koinonea’s Christmas Store was a very special part of the First Pres advent season. The little gifts, crafted by church members, were lovely and affordable and all the children so happy to be able to purchase treasures to bestow on their family members. I still treasure a special ornament Josh picked out for me at the store: a square of clear glass hand painted with a wintery scene.

I remain grateful to Joann Dodd for sharing her patterns for a crewel embroidery nativity scene. I made and used the lovely figures with my family and with the children in the churches I went on to serve in Missouri, Florida and Louisiana. There are years now when I no longer put up a

Christmas tree, but my advent figures always make an appearance, a few at a time, week by week as Christmas approaches.

At First Pres my son and I felt ourselves to be part of a larger family. We learned to write Bread For the World letters and walked in CROP walks. The Namy family, as well as other individuals and families in the church, took us under their wing and offered such gracious hospitality and friendship. I remember with thanksgiving the wonderful graduate students who were an important part of the life of the Bloomington congregation during my tenure - Kelly Zeiher, Robin Ripley, Robert Dunning, and Laurie Ramsey - brought their artistic creativity to bear in the life of the congregation. I remain grateful for the honor and privilege of working with organist and choir director Lidetta Matthen. Lidetta chose music of such fine quality to be an integral and fitting part of each service of worship. I feel that my association with her helped me to collaborate with other musicians in my future ministry. I remember with delight the time I was in line at a grocery store and heard young Tony Weisstein proclaim to the cashier: "A whale is NOT a fish. A whale is a mammal." Space does not permit me to name all the folks who brought me joy and enriched my life and faith.

Inspiring to me was story and the artistry of church member Florence Donnell. Frances related that as a young woman she had wanted to study art but did not have the opportunity. After she married and raised a family, the desire to create something beautiful re-emerged in her life. During my tenure, Frances designed bulletin covers which the church used for a time— simple, lovely, black and white line drawings. Then she began designing and embroidering beautiful liturgical stoles for the pastoral staff. When I was about to leave First to pursue further study, Frances gave me a complete set of stoles. Bill Spangler then built a lovely cabinet to house them. I wore Frances's extraordinary stoles throughout the 33 years of my ministry.

This Christmas when I visited my son Josh and his family in Simpsonville, S.C. I took along my tattered green folder of Bloomington memorabilia. Here are a few of the items we perused:

- Two letters written by church member Halley Loomis Crater in 1981. To Joshua she wrote: "You are one of the little boys who will be here long after I am gone, and I love you! Did you know I am 92 years old?" Josh and I recalled the delightful tea party she gave us one afternoon. At her table beautifully laid with china, Josh was spellbound by a sugar bowl laden

with sugar cubes. She gave him some cubes to take home. And during the tea, we heard a terrific buzzing. She called us to the window to see the large bumble bee who was making all the racket. She exclaimed, "What a handsome fellow!"

- Josh and I read a table grace which Hallie printed out by hand and which has stayed with me over the years:

*Give us a good digestion, Lord,
and also something to digest.
Give us a healthy body, Lord,
with sense enough to keep it at its best,
Give us a healthy mind, good Lord,
which seeing sin is not appalled,
but finds a way to set it right.
Give us the grace to see a joke,
To get some happiness out of life,
and pass it on to other folk.*

— 12th century blessing from Chester Cathedral in dear old England

- Also in my file is a kind letter from Rev. Bob Sackman, wishing me well in a new position several years after I left Bloomington. Bob always offered me support and encouragement in my ministry at First Pres. When I was at First, he would call me every so often and simply ask, "How are things going?" It was also Bob's habit to gather a carload to ride together to Presbytery meetings. He stressed the importance of three meetings: the meeting in the car before the meeting, the meeting itself, and the debriefing on the way home. He well communicated the importance and richness of being involved in the life of Presbytery and the wider church. One year he invited me to work on a small church commission with Rev. Bill Laws. I am grateful for the times I travelled with Bill to Oak Grove Presbyterian Church, a tiny church struggling with deciding whether to remain open or close its doors. It impressed me that Bill, a former Moderator of the General Assembly, was so attentive, kind, gentle, and loving to those few members of the Oak Grove Church seeking to make a faithful decision.

Thank you for this opportunity to look back and reflect on my experience as a Pastor at First Presbyterian from 1980-1987. I am thankful for all the grace that came to me and my family in

the earliest years of my ministry. From this distance, I can see more of what First Presbyterian Church taught me about being the church. I can see themes that have shaped my character and understanding of how to be a pastor. Congratulations on your upcoming 200th anniversary! May the church continue to be a place of refuge, welcome, friendship, guidance, artistry, civil discourse, music, mutual concern, and creativity, all underpinned by the love of God we know in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.

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Presbytery of South Louisiana

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