

Memoirs
Of the Ministry of James R. Steele
First Presbyterian Church, Bloomington, Indiana
1977 – 1984

By Marcy Steele

It is a privilege to reflect with you on our time in Indiana. I am grateful to Lou Moir for reaching out to me to add to the memoirs that you have accumulated from those pastors who have served First Presbyterian Church in Bloomington. I am sorry that Jim, who died in July, 2004, is not able to share his own observations. I cannot reflect on his ministry at the same level of detail as others who have written about their time with you. So what follows, is a patchwork of images that represent that time in our lives.

The Beginning

There was much excitement in our home in Shrewsbury, NJ, when we set out in October of 1977 for Bloomington. Arriving just in time for Halloween, our two small children wondered if anyone would come trick or treating to our house. And, of course, they did. We were the new family in our Sycamore Knolls neighborhood, which became a delightful place to raise our family for the next 7 years.

Our children, Kimberly and Ian, settled easily into the school, took advantage of all of the wonderful activities available to Bloomington youth, developing friendships which continue to this day. Kim and her family had an opportunity to visit with Bloomington friends during the summer of 2014 when they traveled with my two granddaughters to see Virginia Baude and her family, as well as friends from Bloomington High School South.

The first year or so was a challenge for Jim. I remember the tension with Jim MacDonald, whom Jim liked and respected. My recollection is that Jim and Dean had won the hearts of many members and those folks were distressed at the tension between the two. The ultimate decision to encourage Jim and Dean to seek another call was painful for many and left scars that seemed not to heal.

In those early years, I remember Jim reflecting that he was not sure that the congregation knew what it wanted in a pastor. Perhaps, he said, it would have been better to have an interim pastor work with the congregation following Paul Miller's long pastorate to ask the important questions about mission and vision. In my work with the Committee on Ministry of Palisades Presbytery, I have seen on many occasions where the work of an interim can bring to the surface historical issues that are better addressed before calling a new pastor.

The Middle Years

The denomination was going through a period of significant change during our time in Bloomington. Some of the issues that festered during the early 80's fostered significant conversation within the congregation.

In 1982, a six-pound baby boy was born in Bloomington. He lived six days, but became a focal point for a national rethinking of infanticide and parental power. The question that was raised circled around the common law to exercise jurisdiction over the care of children, and the crucial issue of whether quality of life standards are more significant and fundamental than the principles of the sanctity of life. The local and national press reported that "Baby Doe" was born with Down syndrome and had a malformed esophagus that prevented food from reaching his stomach. Rather than authorize corrective surgery, the parents chose to withhold food and medical treatment, except pain killers, from their son. The Monroe County prosecutor learned of the parents' decision to stop feeding the infant, and brought suit to remove Baby Doe from the parents' custody. Since the parents' decision was based on the medical opinions of advising physicians, however, the Monroe County Circuit Court determined that no probable cause existed for finding that Baby Doe had been neglected. On appeal, the Indiana Supreme Court prevented interference with the parental decision by affirming the circuit court orders. Before an emergency appeal could be made to the United States Supreme Court, Baby Doe died.

But the death of Baby Doe left Bloomington with divided opinions, openly voiced. The congregation reflected the town and members sought to express their frustration, anger and support.

In the midst of this conversation, the 195th General Assembly convened in Atlanta in May, 1983. The adoption of two policy documents, "*Covenant of Life*" and "*Covenant and Creation*" added more discussion items. These documents focused on theological reflections on contraception and abortion and addressed the question of how the church might integrate the significant biomedical developments with the role of the community and faith and the theological and ethical issues that abortion, in particular, raised. The documents, in discussion throughout the denomination, raised concerns from the political right, such that a disclaimer added by the 197th General Assembly was included in the reports distributed after that Assembly.

Adding to the challenges was the merger of the "northern" and "southern" Presbyterian denominations at the 195th General Assembly. The "northern" branch, comprised of the UPCUSA, dating from 1706 and the UPCNA, formed in 1858, merged with the PCUS, the "southern" branch, to form the PCUSA. This meant a move of the national headquarters from New York City to Louisville, KY. While there was general excitement over the reunion of the church and the potential to heal the breach following the Civil War, the merger raised concern for some on the theological center of the PCUSA and its implications for the denomination in the years to come.

Jim felt a strong connection to the denomination. His annual trip to General Assembly was something he looked forward to each year. He attended partly to touch base with his colleagues from all over the nation, but also to experience firsthand the phenomenal influence that the denomination has

throughout the world. His pattern was to provide his observations upon return as part of the Sunday worship – as a way of encouraging participation in the connectional church.

And so...

Despite the challenges, our family enjoyed our time in Bloomington. Ian continues to be an avid IU basketball fan. A particular highlight was the year that the team won the NCAA championship. I'm sure the joyous screams from our family room were heard throughout the neighborhood. And there was the family cameo in *Breaking Away* – which is still a favorite movie.

Jim and I loved the music - opera – concerts, etc., and watched with pleasure as some of the stars we saw on the IU stages moved to grace the prominent stages in New York City. Kim, in particular, follows the career of Joshua Bell, the talented violinist, who was in her class in high school.

The members of the congregation were generous in their support and love for our family. We valued the small group experience we had with the Flemings and Alice Duncan and others, and the many wonderful meals with so many members over the years. Jim treasured the stoles made by Florence Donnell that were a gift to Jim and now are used regularly at services in Englewood. We are grateful for the ongoing support from Jean Holzinger who managed the rental of our Bloomington home for us until 1992.

If there is one particular memory that lingers, it was when the congregation brought a Vietnamese family to Bloomington. The congregation enveloped the family with warmth and love, finding a home, tutoring in English, and watching as they built a raised garden, Vietnamese style, to grow their own vegetables.

In the spring of 1984, Jim received a call to the First Presbyterian Church in Englewood, NJ. I remember him saying that he was prepared to resign his Bloomington pastorate if he had not found a call by June. It was not good for the church for him to continue, he said.

Jim had grown up in Salt Lake City - a “gentile among the saints”. He was no stranger to the desert and the pain that comes from being a minority. He always believed that God had a reason for us to be in Bloomington. We came to see our time with you as a measure of our willingness to witness to God's love regardless of the challenges we are given. We left for New Jersey carrying with us a love for Bloomington and an abiding affection for the congregation.

Jim served the First Presbyterian Church in Englewood, NJ, from April 1984 to June 2003. It was a happy time for him and for the family. I continued my work in student services administration – at Columbia, then NYU and finally as a regional manager for SunGard Data systems. I retired in 2009 and have enjoyed a rich volunteer life with Habitat for Humanity, the Presbytery of the Palisades and my condominium community. Kim and her husband Paul Sanner live in West Orange with their two daughters, Brynn and Kyla. Kim works at City University of New York (CUNY) and Paul serves as music teacher and Minister of Music at Second Presbyterian Church in New York City. Ian works as a regional

manager for Anderson Merchandisers, Inc. and is a regular participant in BBQ contests throughout the northeast. ..And yes, there are wonderful leftovers.

As your congregation approaches another significant anniversary, know that you are in our prayers. It is my hope that the future will be filled with the challenges and love that cause a family grow into a vehicle of God's presence in the midst of a shared life.