

A Brief Telling of a Long and Poignant Story

Precisely 50 years ago tomorrow, on Sunday, October 10, 1971, at 11:28 a.m., a low-pressure steam boiler exploded in the First Baptist Church of Marietta, Ohio, while church school classes were meeting throughout the building. The boiler room, on the second floor of the three-story educational wing, was directly above a classroom of 11 ninth and tenth graders and their 30-year-old teacher, husband of the church organist.

The blast blew out walls and buckled the boiler room floor, bringing concrete, steel, and scalding steam and water down on the classroom below, killing four of the students and their teacher. Two others required lengthy hospitalizations, one in critical care. The rest escaped with minor injuries.

The event made national news, including coverage in the New York Times. It also spurred passage of legislation by the state of Ohio to strengthen its boiler inspection requirements.

That Sunday was the first since spring that heat had been turned on in the building. It came just two days after the church's pastor, 59-year old Donald Duncan, had died suddenly of a heart attack in his front yard upon returning home from visiting parishioners in the local hospital.

Pastor Duncan had been convalescing the entire summer, recovering from double pneumonia after an acute ulcer attack in May. The previous Sunday, October 3, had been his first time back in the pulpit. In his absence, the congregation had relied on lay leadership, guest preachers, and an intern pastor who had begun his work in July, not knowing until his arrival that the Pastor was incapacitated. The October 10 worship service, which preceded the church school hour, had fittingly observed its church calendar designation as "Lay Ministry Sunday."

Why tell this story? Because, as intern pastor of that congregation from July 1971 through May 1972, I was present that day in October. When the explosion occurred, I was in another part of the building, leading a young adult class. Upon learning what had happened, I rushed to the education wing and began removing concrete blocks from one of the classrooms, frantically searching for children possibly buried by debris. Fortunately, I found none. The children who might have been there had been in another part of the building. By this time fire, police, and medical personnel were on the scene, engaged in what rescue work was possible. It was a terribly long wait to learn about the five who had died and those who had been severely injured .

I cannot begin to relate how eventful and significant that year in Marietta proved for me and my new bride (married on June 26, 1971).

It is not uncommon for people to be born or thrust into circumstances they would never have chosen, but which they consider extraordinarily meaningful or valuable in learning about life. What a peculiar fact of existence that some things we would never choose to have happen -- to ourselves or others -- often prove most significant to who we are, how we perceive the world, or what we consider most important! It's also true that there seems to be no other way to learn certain lessons about life, and about ourselves, than to live through circumstances we would hate

to experience again.

I cannot say I'm glad I was the intern pastor of the First Baptist Church of Marietta, Ohio, in 1971-72. The explosion, its circumstances, and its aftermath were a grievously tragic set of events, especially for the families directly involved, but also profoundly for the entire congregation. But I do not have survivor's guilt. And in some strange way, I am grateful that I was there.

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