

Reflections on My Fifteen Years as Pastor at First Presbyterian Church, Bloomington, IN
May 16, 1985 - May 15, 2000

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July 2015

Prelude

On Thursday, March 14, 1985, I was officially approved by the Presbytery of Ohio Valley as the called Pastor to the First Presbyterian Church of Bloomington. I cannot remember any happier day in my life, except perhaps when I was married to Hayden Megar and when our children were born.

The call process had been somewhat more demanding than is typical, even for Presbyterians, because I was transferring from another denomination, the American Baptist Churches U.S.A. Moreover, I had been without any employed position since the first of the year, and had been without any pastoral responsibilities since the previous summer. The short story is that I had negotiated myself out of a job, having been party to a church merger that needed to happen, but which left me without a permanent position. I had also turned down the opportunity to become the candidate of another Presbyterian Church in another Presbytery some months previous because I sensed that FPC Bloomington was the right place for me, although the FPC Pastor Nominating Committee had not yet come to that conclusion.

It was such a joyous occasion for me because it seemed so right, and was so long sought, and because I had no other live options for employment for the foreseeable future.

My previous pastorates had been, first, in a mid-sized working class congregation in southern West Virginia, where I could count on the fingers of two hands, and maybe one, the number of college graduates, and then a rather small upper-middle class congregation in Kalamazoo, Michigan, where half the men had their Ph.D.s, mostly in religion or a field of science. Three of them comprised the religion faculty at Kalamazoo College, one was a professor of music, and the others were research scientists for Upjohn Pharmaceuticals. Over the six plus years of my tenure there were also two or three other ordained ministers in the congregation in addition to the members of the religion faculty, as well as the president of one of the largest banks in town and the head of an industrial manufacturing company.

My decision to go prospecting among the Presbyterians was not a repudiation of my American Baptist roots, but a recognition that few ABC congregations existed where I was likely to be a happy fit. My conviction that I was called to serve FPC Bloomington arose, in part, from the fact that I had served in Appalachia, so I knew something of the local culture that had spread to southern Indiana, and I had served in a congregation with close ties to an institution of higher education, albeit one not nearly so large as Indiana University.

My affinity for the Presbyterian Church had its roots in previous experiences. I don't think the fact that my Boy Scout troop was sponsored by, and held its meetings in, the First Presbyterian Church of Rapid City, South Dakota, was determinative. But for two of the four years that I attended Vanderbilt Divinity School in Nashville, Tennessee, both of them after marriage, Hayden and I attended two different local Presbyterian congregations. Also, Hayden was born and raised in the First Presbyterian Church of Florence, Alabama, and that is where we were married in 1971. While at Vanderbilt from 1969-1973 I considered becoming a Presbyterian, but attending Nashville's Second Presbyterian Church one Sunday when elders were being ordained convinced me that was not an option. It was a congregation of the Presbyterian Church U.S. (the "Southern" church), where – I discovered – subscription to the Westminster Confession was still mandated. I would later be denied ordination in my home ABC congregation due to the theological scruples of the then-current pastor, who found my statement of faith heretical. I knew already that I could not subscribe to key tenets of the Westminster Confession, so that ruled out PCUS membership. I had no ties to any United Presbyterian Church congregations, where I might have been compatible. The later re-union of the UPC and the PCUS in 1983, and in particular the adoption of the new Book of Confessions, which both implicitly and explicitly made it clear that no single confession was doctrinally normative, was a crucial development so far as opening the door for me to find a theological home among the Presbyterians. Sadly, later developments reflecting mostly Southern church sensibilities made that home less and less accommodating as time went on.

Anyway, in March 1985 I was thrilled to be called to the FPC Bloomington, and have always considered it providential that I was able to spend fifteen years of my life as its pastor.

A word about the call process seems in order. I was able to circulate my Personal Information Form within the PCUSA only after receiving approval from the Committee on Ministry of the Presbytery of Lake Michigan. Fortunately, I knew the Presbyterian ministers in Kalamazoo, and one or two of them greatly facilitated this process. However, I doubt I would have ever received serious consideration from the PNC of FPC Bloomington had it not been for a "Face-to-Face" interview event held at the Presbyterian church in Maumee, Ohio, on October 27, 1984, at which some seven or eight members of the PNC were in attendance. I was fortunate to have an interview with those Bloomingtonians, which confirmed my suspicions of compatibility. That interview became a decisive experience giving me the credibility I needed to overcome the prejudices associated with the fact that I was, after all, a Baptist. Subsequently I became one of six invited to Bloomington for an on-site interview, after which I became one of two favored candidates.

Getting a consensus from the PNC was going to be a major challenge, if only because the PNC consisted of thirteen members, of whom I believe two had been nominated from the floor at the congregational meeting at the time the slate was presented for election. Judy Schroeder was the PNC chair, and she did not want a divided PNC. After a neutral pulpit engagement at the Presbyterian church in Greencastle on one of the coldest days in memory, January 20, 1985, when the thermometer dipped to -20 degrees, I later learned that I had become the choice of all but two

or three of the PNC members. Judy Schroeder, in her wisdom, arranged for a second neutral pulpit exposure, this one on February 17 at the First Presbyterian Church in Martinsville. Finally, the PNC was able to agree on me as their consensus candidate.

During the call process I had become aware that there were some issues unique to FPC that I would eventually have to face, not least of which was that the church facilities were in considerable state of neglect. At the time, however, there were so many positive indications that I was a good fit for the congregation that nothing else really fazed me or gave me pause. But the fact that the PNC included members nominated and elected from the floor by the congregation was one of the indicators that there were some dynamics in the church's life that would probably present a challenge.

Somewhere along the way I also discovered that the previous pastorate with Jim Steele had not been a very happy one. Unfortunately, Jim died several years ago, so he cannot provide his own perspective on his ministry in Bloomington. What I know is that fairly early on in his six or seven years with FPC he was strongly encouraged by the Personnel Committee to begin a search for another pastorate. Eventually, Jim did receive a call to a congregation in New Jersey, where he finished out his ministry before retiring, but his departure from Bloomington did not come soon enough for some of the members. My guess is that, irrespective of any shortcomings he may have had (as we all do), his personality was not the best fit for the congregation. I am sure that, among other things, he suffered by way of comparison to his predecessor Paul Miller, and probably also his associate, Jim McDonald. Since I followed someone who had been less than successful in all three of my primary pastorates, I was fortunate to have benefitted by comparison. I'm glad I did not have to follow any of the three pastors who preceded my immediate predecessors in these congregations, as I heard wonderful things about them all!

In any event, I came to FPC without any particular agenda but to strengthen the congregation and help it thrive as it was, not as I thought it ought to be. I was already happy with the composition of the congregation, and did not see any need to implement major changes. Within the first year, however, I began to realize that something was going to have to be done about the facilities, and I gradually came to understand that their neglect was probably a consequence of dysfunctions that had set in during the Steele pastorate. In particular, I saw that attracting new and younger families would be a real challenge without improvements to the educational wing called Walker Hall, named after the pastor emeritus, Joe Walker, who happened to have returned to Bloomington in his retirement with his wife, Audie, and was active in the congregation.

By the way, although Joe was not very vigorous by this time, and Audie was seriously afflicted with Alzheimer's disease, Joe was very supportive of my ministry and never posed any threat or created any interference. On one occasion, he took me with him to meet one of the local citizens whom he no doubt knew from years past, and I was delighted to learn that a \$10,000 bequest from her was coming our way. We used it to upgrade the sound system in the sanctuary, a project that needed to be done. Joe died in 1990.

Rebuilding Foundations

Lots of other improvements to the facilities were also needed, but the ethos of the congregation, which I supported, was not to lavish money on facilities unnecessarily. The congregation, so far as I could tell, did not have an edifice complex, and I couldn't have been more grateful. This being the case, it took some doing to persuade a majority of the members that there was anything significant lacking in the facilities as they were. Late in 1986 a Long Range Planning Committee was established by the Session, with Judy Schroeder and Warren Roberts as co-chairs.. Later Judy became the sole chair, but Warren, who was a historic preservationist, remained a key member, and several other people would give yeoman service during the course of what became a \$1.5 million new building and renovation project. Astronomer Martin Burkhead gave untold hours in oversight of the building process, Doreen Rice, who worked in facilities management at IU, helped enormously with the lock-and-key setup, and several families were generous contributors when it came time to pledge the funds to finance an undertaking that exceeded the normal limits of what can be expected based on formulae developed by church consultants for capital campaigns.

There were several crucial developments along the way that might give one the impression this project was meant to happen. One was the death in 1987 of Charles Ziegler, the last remaining heir to what we called the Ziegler property, a large Victorian house occupied by IU students, which sat on the north-south alley facing Seventh Street, just to the north of the church. Full control of this property devolved to the church, affording us the opportunity to utilize the entire half-block on which the church building sat. After Warren Roberts had satisfied himself that the house was so badly chopped up inside that it was beyond reasonable restoration for our use, we were free to enter into negotiations taken at the initiative of Bloomington Restorations to bequeath the house to another party. Or we could have torn the house down, but that was never very seriously considered, and it would have yielded a public outcry, especially from parties in the neighborhood.

Lo and behold, along came CFC with an offer to take the house off our hands for the grand sum of \$1, move it a block-and-a-half down the street, and restore it, turning it into a B&B that is now the Grant Street Inn. And it did not cost the church anything other than the time spent in completing the negotiations. This occurred in early 1990.

There was another problem, however, that we had already been contending with for some time. A city alley and major public utilities ran east and west between the church building and the northeast quarter of the block that we wanted to develop as part of the new building program. A lot of protracted negotiations took place in which I was personally involved before we finally got City approval to vacate the alley and have the utilities removed, or relocated. The husband of one of the younger couples who had joined the church since my arrival worked for one of the utility companies and was very helpful in some of these negotiations. I also remember a personal meeting with Mayor Tomilea Allison, in which I secured her support for our project.

Well before all this was completed, we had engaged an architect to provide some preliminary sketches and proposals for what we might do to expand our facilities. This work had convinced us that we needed to expand to the north and, if at all possible, to have the alley vacated. Eventually, however, we also concluded that we needed a different architect with a more creative vision and a more persuasive presence to carry our planning forward. I knew Larry Burke as a fellow Rotarian and as one whose work around Bloomington was impressive, so I recommended that we engage his services. We could hardly have done better. Larry took on the project with extraordinary commitment to make the most of our desires for an architecturally attractive, serviceable and affordable addition and renovation. Aided by the extraordinarily detailed and precise blueprints of the existing structure created by church member, surveyor, and engineer Kevin Potter, Larry designed an addition that fit in beautifully with the existing structure and that met our new space requirements as well.

It had taken several years and lots of meetings, but when the time finally came to present the project to the congregation for its final acceptance and support in June 1989, we were well prepared. Judy Schroeder's superb leadership of the committee and Larry Burke's architectural genius were essential to the successful outcome. With the adoption of the project, it was time for the fun to begin.

I'll not try to recount much of the building process, but there is one memory I must relate. At some point during the winter we had to take the church's main boiler off-line, and were left with only a small boiler to heat the entire facility. I remember one December Sunday in 1989 when it was barely 40 degrees in the sanctuary during morning worship. It was one of the most delightful Sundays in memory. We knew we were all bundled up and huddled together for good cause. Spirits were high even if temps were low. The building project imposed a lot of costs and significant inconvenience, but the scale and importance of what was happening easily compensated. I'm reminded, also, that prior to this time the church had no air conditioning. In the summer I did not wear a robe and often took off my suit jacket as well during worship, to cope with the heat. Nobody seemed to mind.

Simultaneous with the building and renovation project, we were engaged in re-building the church's program, ministry, and mission. The *raison d'être* for the project, after all, was so that we could be more effectively engaged in Christian witness and service to the community. This included a commitment to make the church facilities available to various groups in the community for meeting space, a commitment that continues to be fulfilled.

Bounty

Some 8-9 years into my ministry with FPC I compiled a list of twenty-plus new programs and activities that had been started during my pastorate for the session to review at its annual planning retreat. The list ranged from Circle Mary and the Evening Study Circle to the Handbell Choir, Vacation Bible School to a men's softball team, Hanging of the Greens to Christmas pageants to the Heifer Market and Global Gifts, Children's Choir to the Posoltega Sister Church relationship.

The latter has since grown as numerous groups of young people and adults have taken mission work trips, beginning in 1995, to visit and nurture ties with the people of Posoltega, Nicaragua. The Heifer Market and Global Gifts event, which received its initial impetus from member Gil Weldy, is a major fund-raiser every fall to support the Heifer Project International.

Gil also had a hand in initiating another significant event, the church's funding of a Habitat for Humanity house near Unionville. All the funds came from the church, beginning with a \$15,000 gift from Eugene Wyllie, whose health was starting to fail. The church raised another \$18,000, so there was enough to pay for the house plus pay to build a house in Nicaragua, where the rest of the funds were sent. Church members also did a lot of work on the house during several weekend building blitzes.

In addition to the above, the church remained a strong supporter of Monroe County United Ministries throughout this time, and to this day is consistently the single biggest contributor to MCUM each year among local congregations. One of the worship highlights each year is the Thanksgiving Offering of foodstuffs for MCUM on the Sunday before Thanksgiving, when a cornstake Sukkah is set up in the front of the sanctuary and worshipers bring their bags of food forward in processional as part of the morning's offering.

I would be remiss not to mention Mary Lou Miller, who was a force of nature in almost all of the congregation's local mission and outreach efforts, as well as the Posoltega relationship. Mary Lou was a founder of the pre-school at what is now MCUM, and she was a champion of all the special offerings taken by the congregation for mission purposes, most especially the Thanksgiving offering. Some of the fund-raising she promoted supported the school children in Posoltega as well. She also regularly maintained the Outreach bulletin board that featured various local mission and outreach activities of the congregation. I owe her a special debt because she conceived and successfully promoted the idea of sending me on a National Council of Churches Travel Seminar to the Soviet Union in 1988 in conjunction with the millennial celebration of Prince Vladimir's introduction of Orthodox Christianity to Kievan Rus, effectively establishing what became the Russian Orthodox Church. We visited Moscow, Zagorsk, Kiev, Odessa, and Leningrad (now St. Petersburg), and stopped over in Helsinki on the way home. It was one of the most wonderful experiences during my time with FPC.

The Work of Ministry

Being a parish minister involves all sorts of activities and all sorts of relationships. As someone who has never been narrowly focused in my interests and enjoys having a great variety of things to do, I always felt that parish ministry was a happy fit. However, if there was any one thing I regarded as central to my calling, it was preaching and worship leadership. Early in my ministry I had encountered Harry Emerson Foskick's dictum, one hour in the study for every minute in the pulpit, and in my experience that was just about right. If one really wants to prepare sermons that merit the attention of a whole congregation of active, alert, engaged church members, one had better not skimp on the scholarship, general reading, and careful crafting of the sermon. The rest

of the worship service also merits close attention, but does not usually take nearly so much time to prepare, although I sometimes spent hours selecting appropriate hymns and composing portions of the liturgy to augment the sermon and other worship service components.

When I came to Bloomington I was already attuned to the importance of using gender-inclusive or gender-neutral language in reference to people in order to remove the male gender bias in our language and culture. Avoiding such bias in my sermons was not difficult. However, as time went on, the challenge of crafting worship services that were not infused with such bias due to the language of traditional liturgy and hymns became increasingly burdensome. Amending the language of the printed prayers and other liturgical elements was relatively easy most of the time, though sometimes I had to abandon a favorite text because there was no elegant way to clean up the language. But when my Associate, Cynthia Cochran, and I began printing hymn texts in the order of service that either were not in the hymnal, or were edited revisions of what was in the hymnal, not everyone was happy. Many conversations and debates followed. When the Presbyterian Church published a new hymnal with more inclusive language texts in 1990, I was eager to have it adopted by the congregation. Some members of the Worship Committee were of a different mind. A compromise of sorts was eventually worked out, one that involved creating a hymnal supplement of “old favorites” from the Pilgrim Hymnal that had long been in use. Of course, some of these old favorites were very problematic in their language, either due to their theology or their gender bias, or both. At one point the Session voted to require me to make use of the supplement at least once a month, which I had been doing most but not all of the time. Most of the hymns in the supplement were no longer serviceable, in my view, so I never selected them. Many of the hymns in the new hymnal were also problematic for one reason or another, however – unfamiliar, too hard to sing, objectionable theology, and so on. I routinely kept close track of all the hymns I selected so as to “mix it up” as much as possible, given the finite number of hymns that I was willing to ask people to sing in worshipping God.

All this became even more challenging as I came to realize that it was not just gendered language about people but also gendered language about God that required attention. Hymns declaring God to be Lord or King or Father are clearly patriarchal, and I have no doubt they help reinforce the values and ethos of a patriarchal society. To this day, the Christian churches as a whole have failed to find alternative language for worship that truly transcends our patriarchal heritage.

When I wasn't preparing sermons or worship services, chances are I was engaged in church administration, pastoral care, or some denominational or community service. I quickly learned after becoming Presbyterian that there are more i-s to dot and more t-s to cross, that is to say, more reports to make and more procedures to follow, than I had been accustomed to as an American Baptist. Doing things decently and in order sounds good, and for the most part I was glad not to be subject to some of the strange winds of fortune that can afflict less structured denominations, but sometimes decency and orderliness can become obsessive and excessive. Also, FPC was a significantly larger congregation than any I had served since seminary. That in itself was probably the largest factor making my administrative work more intensive and extensive. There were lots and lots of meetings, many at night, to staff or at least attend. There

were lots of records to keep, or be sure someone else was keeping. There were other staff members with whom to relate, and to support, and to supervise.

I'm not going to say much about the staff relationships I had during my 15 years with FPC, but I want to note three things: 1) although relationships with most of the staff were amiable most of the time, there were some significant exceptions that I greatly regret; 2) I arrived with little experience in staff recruitment and selection, and this resulted in some outcomes that were less than optimal; 3) there was a lot of luck involved in these relationships, some of it very good, some of it not good at all.

When I arrived, Charlene Williams (nee Mitchell) was the Associate Pastor, having been called during Jim Steele's pastorate. She resigned in 1987 to go to graduate school. She was succeeded by Cynthia Cochran, who stayed some five years, then Kristen Berndt, who stayed three-plus years, then Wendy VanderZee, who served as Interim for well over a year, then Mary Jensen, who arrived in 1999 and remained after my departure in 2000. Each of these five Associates was quite different from the others. I felt I had good working relationships with at least three of them.

The luck factor appeared most prominently in connection with the church secretaries. Long-time church secretary and member Mildred Thornburg chose to retire upon my arrival, so the selection of her replacement was one of the first decisions the Personnel Committee and I had to make. Our first hire was a young woman named Susan who, as best I recall, was the partner of an I.U. graduate student. She moved on the next year, and for the following four years, Louise Taylor was the church secretary. Louise was a gem of a person, loyal, courteous, and very hard-working. But she was also of retirement age, and without much experience in some of the tasks expected of her. She had been widowed and left without adequate resources, which is why she sought the job. In retrospect I believe I was most fortunate that she held the position, because she was extraordinarily congenial and supportive.

The selections of Susan and Louise highlighted what turned out to be a perennial problem, however. There was a dearth of interested candidates every time we had to fill the secretary position, which was five times altogether, and never did we have a candidate with the experience one would hope for someone in such a sensitive and demanding position. Only once did we have a candidate who otherwise appeared to be fully qualified. Of all the things I might have done differently during my ministry with FPC, one of the top two or three would be to have gone to greater lengths to secure the kind of person needed to fill the church secretary position.

Apart from my own ineptitude, which certainly was a factor, there is a lot more that could be identified as problematic in the way personnel issues were handled during my tenure at FPC. Some of the problems that arose probably had their roots in the dysfunctions of the previous pastorate. Some of the problems were related to the desire to overcome our society's legacy of gender stereotypes, leading to skewed perceptions by some church members regarding what constituted unhealthy and inappropriate behaviors in staff relationships. I want to emphasize that while I found most of my relationships with other FPC staff congenial most of the time, there

were numerous ways short of termination in which I attempted to resolve less than satisfactory staffing relationships and performance with respect to some of the persons who came on staff during my tenure at FPC.

Before moving on I want to say one more thing about being the Pastor/Head of Staff at FPC. It meant that I had an Associate with whom I could share many of the tasks of ministry. I was very grateful for this on several counts. Typically, my Associates staffed the Outreach and Christian Education Committees, and sometimes others as well. They worked with the youth. They shared in pastoral visitation and care. They each had on average one Sunday per month to prepare the service, lead worship, and preach, and they usually covered my vacation and study leave absences. And, despite differences in age, gender, and formal position, in most cases I felt we were able to be genuine colleagues in ministry. This is not something to be taken for granted, as it does not always come easy, either for the Pastor or the Associate Pastor, but it serves each of them well, and enhances the entire ministry to and of the congregation when it happens. In any event, there was always more work to be done at FPC than I could do myself, and it was usually a great relief to have one week each month when I could catch up on other things because I did not have to prepare a worship service or sermon.

I wish to say something about pastoral care and counseling, since it is such a major part of the work of a parish minister. Included here would be weddings and funerals, both of which I had with less frequency than one might expect. At one point there were so few deaths in the congregation that I thought, "We must be doing something right!" The members were not dying off as frequently as would be anticipated. This is not to say that I felt in any way deprived of opportunity for this form of ministry. It was always difficult and challenging to provide the pastoral care and memorial or funeral service appropriate to the family and circumstances.

There were also not as many weddings as one might expect in a university community, although it was not uncommon to be asked to preside for a young couple who had no church home, no active religious affiliation, and in some cases no clear religious identity or convictions. The sanctuary of FPC makes for a lovely wedding setting, which was sometimes the reason my services were sought. Other times it was because I was perceived to be fairly open-minded about conducting a service that, while rather traditional in form and certainly not without religious overtones, was responsive to the particular religious sensibilities of the couple in question. Even though weddings are typically joyous occasions, they can involve a lot of work, so I never really wished to have more than came my way.

I suppose I should also mention baptisms in this context. As a Baptist I had only engaged in believer's baptism by immersion, though I had always felt it important to recognize the validity of other forms of Christian baptism. One of the main considerations for me was that baptism should symbolically express its theological meaning. To this day I do not think there is any Christian denomination or tradition that has gotten either baptism or the Lord's Supper altogether right in terms of who, what, when, and how. However, this reflection on my ministry with FPC is not the place to lay out my theology of the Church and its sacraments. Suffice it to say that I wanted the

infant baptisms I performed to be as meaningful, memorable, and non-perfunctory as possible. Consequently, when I conducted my first baptism at FPC I proceeded to scoop up a large handful of water and visibly splash it over the baby's head. There were gasps throughout the congregation. Then, taking a cue from a Presbyterian minister friend from my days in West Virginia, I proceeded to carry the child throughout the congregation so that everyone could have a good look and feel more engaged in the ceremony. Thankfully, this proved to be a delight to the people in the pews, and henceforth I felt affirmed and empowered to continue this practice.

The main component of pastoral care, however, is visitation of those facing acute or chronic illness, which I did on a regular basis. I have no idea how many times I've walked the halls of Bloomington Hospital, but I came to feel more or less at home there, and seldom left after visiting an ailing church member, or conversing with family and friends around a bedside, in a mood of discouragement or hopelessness. Even in dire circumstances there is something heartening about sharing the burdens and uncertainties of human existence with others in a community of caring. Of all the visits I made to FPC patients, one I never forgot indelibly etched into my mind a phrase from Shakespeare, uttered by the man I had come to visit. In response to my query regarding his disposition, he responded, "On fortune's cap I am not the button." One of the benefits of ministry in a university community is to have parishioners who are able to express themselves so simply yet eloquently.

One other activity in my ministry that bears mention is teaching. Over the years at FPC I taught all kinds of courses, including biblical studies, ethics, social issues classes, commissioning (now confirmation) classes, and orientation classes for new church leaders. But the one that was most engaging and rewarding, at least for me, was the theology class I led in the mid-late 1990s. Much of the time we had a text that I asked everyone to read. Authors I recall included Marcus Borg, Jack Miles, John Barton, John Cobb, Douglas Ottati, and Raymond Brown. When we met I would provide a summary or overview and then we plunged into discussion. Sometimes we dealt with issues current in the life of the church, such as human sexuality or war or euthanasia, sometimes I shared the leadership, almost always the class afforded opportunity to explore theological, ethical, and social issues more deeply than ever possible in a sermon. I was not always able to teach the class, due to the constraints of the Sunday morning schedule or other factors. But I tried to do so as frequently as possible, as it provided all of us who participated with an outlet to raise questions, pursue answers, and reflect on theological perspectives that allowed for personal and interpersonal spiritual and intellectual growth.

Beyond the Congregation

If there is anything other than preaching that I think was distinctively characteristic of my ministry with FPC, it was my involvement in the community and in the work of the church beyond the congregation. I've never felt that I was called only to minister to church members, or only to those on the rolls of my own congregation. I've always regarded the ministry as in some sense a public vocation, with the world (at least the proximate world) as one's parish. I believe such an approach may also serve the congregation well, insofar as one is a positive representative of the

local church to those who might otherwise have no contact or exposure to what the congregation is all about. When I was working on my Doctor of Ministry degree at Vanderbilt in 1973, my focus was on “Church and Society,” and I’ve never felt I could effectively serve one without serving the other.

In Bloomington I became a Rotarian in the summer of 1985. In 1986 I was invited onto the Board of the Monroe County Red Cross, where I served in particular as a member of the Personnel Committee. In 1986 I also became a member of the Board of the Center for University Ministry, serving on the Personnel Committee until 1990, after which I became a member of the Synod’s Higher Education Committee until 1994. During this period I also served on the Indiana Commission for United Ministries in Higher Education (ICUMHE), including chairmanships of the Finance and the Consultation and Review Committees and three years as Board Chair. In 1987 I became a member of the Bloomington Hospice Advisory Committee, and later was a board member as the transition was made to establish a formal and permanent hospice affiliated with the hospital. I also began to hold positions in the Presbytery of Ohio Valley in 1987. Over the years I served on the Committee on Ministry (including the Clergy Compensation Task Force), moderated the Personnel Committee, sat on the Coordinating Council, moderated the Budget and Validation Committee, chaired the Human Sexuality Task Force, and served on the Social Justice and the Mission and Stewardship Committees. In 1989 I became a board member of the Monroe County United Way for seven years, including service as Board Secretary and a year as Board President. In 1995 I was invited by Haines Turner and others to join Citizens for Community Justice, now known as the Community Justice and Medication Center (CJAM). In 1997 the chair of the Bloomington Human Rights Commission invited me to apply for a vacancy on that commission (created by the resignation of then-FPC member Jack Hopkins), which I did, and I continue to serve on this commission to this day.

Throughout the entire time that I have been in Bloomington, I have also participated in whatever ministerial and/or ecumenical and/or interfaith associations have existed. Today the group is called Monroe County Religious Leaders, it is interfaith, and it includes lay as well and clergy members. I came of age as a parish minister at a time when the mainline denominations, at least, had a much more expansive and comprehensive vision of the mission and ministry of the “Church Catholic” than exists today. I also attended an ecumenical university-based divinity school that had no denominational affiliation. It is hard for me to fathom being without the company, collegiality, and companionship of other Christian leaders who belong to different pension plans and pursue their calling under different logos and banners, even though I might never want to trade places with them. My perspectives and understanding regarding parish ministry have doubtless been shaped by these relationships, which have helped sustain me in ways that might not be possible within the boundaries of one’s own congregation or denomination.

Ties that Bind and Binds that Tie

One of the reasons I stayed in Bloomington after concluding my service with FPC was that I had other ways to continue to contribute to the life of the community. The list of organizations to

which I belong is somewhat different today from the years 1985-2000, but I am most grateful that I was able to combine the work of parish ministry with all these other forms of service to the larger society and the larger church, and thereby carve out a semi-permanent niche in the community.

Another reason I stayed in Bloomington is that I never succeeded in securing any satisfactory alternatives. When I first started exploring the possibility of pursuing a call to another congregation, back around 1995, I never would have thought it would prove so fruitless. In my previous experience, securing a new call had been no problem. I divulge this information for the sake of the historical record. I was never eager to leave FPC, but I realized by the mid-90s, as I was approaching age 50, that staying till retirement was probably not going to be the best thing either for me or the congregation, and I realized that after a certain age my prospects would begin to diminish rather than expand. To be sure, there were a couple of times when I could have gone elsewhere, but it would not have been right to do so. It just never happened that I was nominated for a position that I felt in good conscience I could accept.

In the late summer of 1995 I also had a conversation with Jim Ackerman in which he raised the possibility that I might want to consider working on a Ph.D. in religious studies at I.U., and that I could begin to explore this possibility without actually being admitted into the Ph.D. program of the department. Given that I.U.'s fall classes were about to begin, I took little time thinking this over and proceeded to enroll as a continuing studies student in the class that was required of all incoming graduate students in the department. I had long thought about the prospect of pursuing a Ph.D., as it was the road not taken when I entered parish ministry. When we came to Bloomington, there was no Ph.D. program in religious studies at I.U., but by 1995 one had been solidly established. My first exposure to graduate studies in the department proved to be very exciting, so I proceeded to apply for admittance to the degree program, and was happily accepted.

In terms of my work at FPC, I approached my graduate studies as a commitment of time that would otherwise have been my day off. Since I enrolled in one course each fall and spring semester for the next ten semesters, I had very little free time for the next five years other than during the summer break and when on vacation. During those five years, and given that I had been able to count a number of classes taken at Vanderbilt toward the degree requirements, I was able to complete all coursework shy of language requirements and a practicum before the summer of 2000. It took another four years to pass the language requirements, take my preliminary exams, and write and successfully defend my dissertation, a process I could not have completed while working full-time. At no time while at FPC, however, did I have my heart set on finishing the degree. I was finding the intellectual stimulation and sense of accomplishment taking courses reward enough. So I think I would have been content not to proceed further, but the reality was that by then the time had come to take my leave of FPC. And, as it turned out, by default the path of "choice" was to finish the degree since my continuing job searches within the PCUSA, the ABCUSA, and later academia as well never led to another alternative.

Interlude

Unlike some clergy, I'm not a great story-teller. That is not to say that I did not have my share of story-worthy experiences during my years with FPC. One that immediately comes to mind, and may have been the most hilarious of my tenure, occurred one Sunday when I had just come back from attending the General Assembly meetings in Charlotte, NC. In my sermon I recounted the election of the new moderator, who won out over another candidate whose last name was Mead. I reported that after he won the election, the new moderator chose Mead as his vice-moderator. Jim Ackerman, whom I count as a dear friend and compatriot, commented to me later, remarking favorably about my selection to be vice-moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church – a rather preposterous idea given my relative obscurity within the denomination at large. I had to explain that it was not “me” but “Mead” who had been chosen for this high office. Later Hayden and I had a riotous time recalling this exchange.

People being what they are, I suspect there are too few such moments in the lives of most pastors. But there are many times that prove very gratifying, and that help make the ordinary and the less-than-sublime seem worthwhile.

Church attendance in most places ebbs and flows with the seasons, and it also ebbs and flows (one hopes) over the years. Over the course of my fifteen years at FPC there was very little net change in the number of persons on the membership rolls. But, especially during the early years, there was significant growth in attendance. Along with this came even greater growth in the level of activity, and in the capacity of the congregation to engage in mission and service. In fact, even though FPC was only the third or fourth largest congregation in the Presbytery in terms of membership, we maintained the highest level of attendance throughout most if not all of the time between 1985 and 2000. After several years of noticeable growth, the session decided that we should hold two services on Sunday mornings. We did, and for a time all went well, but attendance at the early service was never robust and it gradually waned and did not seem sustainable, so that we eventually went back to a single service.

Other than on Easter Sunday mornings, when the sanctuary was packed to overflowing for at least one of the services, the highest level of attendance I can recall occurred during several Sundays that coincided with the first Gulf War, January-February 1991, when George H. W. Bush was President. I found this especially gratifying, because it indicated that people were seeking some spiritual or religious context, and quite possibly some theological or biblical or prophetic word, to help them deal with the anxiety and trauma of the war. Some of the people who came during that time belonged to other congregations and gave me reason to believe they were not satisfied with whatever was or was not being said and addressed in the worship services and sermons of their home churches. As for myself, I was made aware that there were several young men related to our congregation who were involved in the war, and I was also persuaded that the war was unjust and should be critiqued and resisted. Somehow I found a way to reflect on the conflict, and raise questions about it, that apparently was not offensive to those who might have viewed the war differently, and was also responsive to those who surely felt the need for some kind of critique. For several Sundays attendance remained high. Nobody I know left angry. The war was relatively short-lived, so I did not have to continue trying to find ways to address it, but I

was truly grateful that there were many willing to be stirred and challenged in their thinking about their country's military operations. In retrospect, however, I have concluded that that was probably a singular time in terms of both the disposition of the congregation regarding the sort of event in question and also my relationship with the congregation.

Breaking Away

I would be remiss, and the historical record would be deficient, if I did not say something here about the fact that my departure from First Presbyterian Church, Bloomington, in May 2000 came under duress. There were a number of members who, for some time, had been covertly working together to force my departure. There were probably still others who were simply hoping to force me to change my ways, thinking that if only I could accommodate myself to their wishes, things would go well. However, many if not most members remained oblivious, or willfully ignorant, of the fact that my ministry with them was in jeopardy. Some seeds of conflict had been sown years before over issues like the use of inclusive language in worship. Deeper rifts were created and exposed during the tenure of my Associate, Kristin Berndt, and after a misunderstanding between the church secretary and me that the secretary never got over. There were also some encounters with particular church members whom I will not mention. Some might regard my account as self-implicating, others would fault me for speaking ill of the dead, and in this case, also of the living.

Tensions were exacerbated in 1997 after five members of the congregation came to me with a request to find some way to move the Session to go on record in support of what was called Amendment A, a proposal to amend the Presbyterian Book of Order by removing a newly adopted change called Amendment B, the so-called "Fidelity and Chastity Amendment," which prohibited the ordination of elders or ministers whose lives did not conform to fidelity in heterosexual marriage or chastity in singleness. We agreed upon the strategy of having these individuals circulate a petition among members of the congregation, one that urged the Session to endorse Amendment A. In September Shirley Hart and Jim Ackerman presented the petition to the Session for its consideration. The meeting proved highly contentious, with objectors claiming among other things that the petitioners had gone behind their backs. The dilemma faced by the petitioners was that, had they first asked for the permission of the Session to circulate the petition, or had they simply gone straight to the Session with their request, in all probability they would have been turned down. Most church members, had they been present at that Session meeting, probably would have been greatly distressed if not also shocked at the level of conflict that resulted. A couple of meetings later a slight majority of the Session did ultimately vote to affirm support for Amendment A and to convey that support to the moderators and stated clerks of the Presbytery and the General Assembly. But it was a costly victory, and one that did not culminate in any change in the Book of Order at that time.

The ironic fact is that as time went on during my pastorate, the theological center of the congregation was shifting to the right and I was not. If anything, I was becoming less orthodox and more liberal in certain sorts of ways. This was also happening at a time when the PCUSA was moving to the right, theologically, a movement that has not been reversed (despite the shift

that has occurred regarding ordination of gay and lesbian persons). The language of the liturgies being published by the denomination as resources for worship tended to be more traditional and conservative, and use of these liturgical resources became more widely expected. At some point it was mandated in the Directory for Worship that the Apostles' Creed be recited at every baptism. I once checked back through several years of church bulletins, going back all the way to Charles Swartz, Joe Walker's predecessor, to see if I had mis-judged the theological character of FPC. What I found was occasional use of the Apostles' Creed with some pastors, little or none with others. Once, after I had just preached a sermon on the Trinity, Sam Westfall, who was a most regular and attentive member, remarked to me on the way out of the sanctuary that he could not remember when a sermon on the Trinity had last been preached at FPC. Today one would be hard put to find a Presbyterian candidate for ordination who does not affirm and write about the Triune God. At one point in the 1990s the General Assembly even passed a statement that, read carefully, expressed an exclusive theology, one claiming that there is no salvation outside Jesus Christ. I consider myself a life-long Christian but I could never preach that!

I never considered it my calling to force my theology upon others, but I always considered it my calling, and the Christian thing to do, not to force on others theology that I did not share, or theology that might prove a stumbling block to their own acceptance and affirmation of the Christian faith. Wittingly, or more likely unwittingly, there were those in the FPC congregation who wanted me to do precisely that. Reflective of these sentiments, in September 1996 the Session had instituted a policy that use of one of the creeds or confessions in the Book of Confessions, and/or a biblical affirmation of faith, be used in worship no less than once a month.

There were other factors, I'm sure, that fueled the opposition to my ministry – interpersonal and organizational dynamics, power struggles, personality conflicts – along with some indiscreet and disloyal behavior by key staff members. I really cannot be objective, nor am I sufficiently informed, to judge how significant these other factors might have been. I just know they existed. Nonetheless, it was not until perhaps the last two years of my tenure that there was much evidence of the conflict to those not directly involved.

Almost invariably, when conflicts within congregations arise that come to focus on the person of the Pastor, church leaders and administrators decide it is the Pastor and not the dissidents in the congregation who must find their way elsewhere. I often wished it were otherwise, as I continued to hope until the last few months of my tenure that some way could be found for me to remain. I'm confident that many if not most in the congregation would have been content with my staying, though they might not have been willing to countenance the loss of other members. Some would have been thrilled for me to stay regardless.

In the end, with the assistance of Presbytery staff and leadership and the counsel of a couple members of the Personnel Committee, I negotiated a severance package that provided me and my family up to almost a full year of income to make the transition to other employment. Since I never secured another call, I received the full package. Some members were surprised, and many were distressed, when I announced my resignation. But friends and supporters within the

congregation provided me with a wonderful send-off in the form of a gathering with speeches and a gift of money to be used for a trip to Israel and Palestine, a trip that I regret I never found adequate opportunity to take.

Postlude

Some fifteen months after I concluded my ministry with FPC, I was invited to preach at the Bloomfield Presbyterian Church. As it happened, on the Tuesday before the Sunday when I preached, the events we call 9/11 occurred. The sermon I preached in Bloomfield probably would have met with general acceptance in Bloomington, but that was hardly the case in Bloomfield. More to the point, the sermons I would have subsequently felt called to preach, including sermons openly objecting to the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, for reasons that have since become obvious to most people, would probably have gotten me into a good bit of trouble with a number of FPC members. A lot that transpired in our national political life during the fifteen years of my ministry with FPC was unsavory, and there were times when my preaching touched upon political matters in critical ways. But the years immediately following my departure reached new lows in the political life of our nation in all kinds of ways. Had I been preaching during that time, I could not have held my peace, and would have occasioned all kinds of grief for myself, my family, and all but a very few congregations I might have served.

All this is by way of saying that, as fortune would have it, or by the grace and providence of God, leaving First Presbyterian Church after fifteen years of mostly exciting and fruitful and rewarding ministry was a blessing much greater than I could have realized at the time. I was not able to accomplish all that I had hoped, I still had aspirations for the congregation that were not and have not been fulfilled, but I am unreservedly grateful that I had the time I had with all those who shared their lives with me and allowed me to be in ministry together with them as their pastor, leader, preacher, teacher, and friend.

Afterword

If anyone wants to know more about what I have been up to since 2000, some idea can be gained by visiting my website, www.bcbangert.com. There are links there to my CV as well as the scores of columns I have written for the *Bloomington Herald-Times*, plus links to articles I have written, sermons I have preached, and information about the book that came from my Ph.D. dissertation. It is titled *Consenting to God and Nature: Toward a Theocentric, Naturalistic, Theological Ethics*. It's a challenging read, but one relatively free of technical jargon. I highly recommend it!

When Hayden and I see friends from FPC around town, we are often asked, "How are the boys?" We're often not quite sure how to answer to that question. They have both grown up and are out of the house, and tend to be reserved in what they share about their daily lives..

Older son Andrew is married to Christie Peterson, a fellow Masters degree graduate in

Information Science (formerly Library Science) from the University of Michigan. They have a daughter, Dagmar, as cute as can be, who was born on November 6, 2013. Andrew works in web-page development (we think) at the Enoch Pratt Free Public Library of Maryland in downtown Baltimore, and Christie is an archivist at the Johns Hopkins University Library. They rent a condominium just across the street from the university. We see them a couple of times a year and wish they lived a bit closer.

Nathan resides just north of town on Bethel Lane, on a property we purchased some years back of which he is the caretaker. He has continued to draw and paint off and on, but as of this writing his energies are being largely consumed by caring for Haley, his Alaskan Malamute of fifteen-plus years, who is on her last legs. Haley could not have had a better master, and Nate could not have had a better companion, these many years. We see them a couple of times each week.

Errata:

In reading the reflections of former ministers Paul Miller and Robert White, I noted two errors: 1) in listing persons from FPC who entered the ministry during his tenure, Paul mentions Michael Riggins. Michael was actually ordained in FPC early in my tenure, and for several years served the First Presbyterian Church of Seymour, IN, before moving to a congregation in Michigan; several other FPC members were also ordained during my tenure: Deborah Grohman, William Meyer, and Wendy VanderZee come to mind; 2) Robert places the opening of the “cherub windows” during the 1990s sanctuary renovation. It was not until after my departure in 2000 that the sanctuary renovations took place and these windows were uncovered.