

## CHAPTER IX

### 1946-1981

I have been asked to update this history of The Park Church which was prepared in 1946 as a part of the celebration of the one hundredth anniversary. In a short history one can do no more than hit a few high spots. What is worse, one can mention only a few of the many individuals whose devoted service has kept the church alive. Readers who wish fuller accounts can find them in the records on file in the church.

Perhaps a good way to begin this new chapter is to tell of the other happenings of the centennial year. A "Centennial Album," prepared by the Rev. Stearns and Mr. Welles Crandall was published. This was a collection of photographs, old and new, with historical notes. In the album is a good account of the centennial year celebration which deserves reprinting:

Observance of The Park Church One Hundredth Anniversary began on Sunday, May 12, when at the morning service Mr. Stearns gave a sermon entitled "The Park Church Completes Its First 100 Years."

On Wednesday evening, May 15, a Park Church exhibit arranged by Miss Carolyn Hall, Mr. and Mrs. Fred West, Miss Adelaide Dexter, Miss Olive Sheely, Miss Agnes Betts, Miss Marian Tobey and Miss May Elmore was on display. Following a supper a meeting was held in the auditorium.

Dr. Arthur W. Booth gave a paper on "Mr. Beecher as a Teacher." Max Eastman spoke appreciatively and charmingly about his recollections of his father and mother as co-pastors. Jervis Langdon carried the story of the church down to the present time, suggesting the possibility that by the end of the next century The Park Church would be reunited with the mother church.

On Sunday, May 19, Dr. Rockwell Harmon Potter of Hartford, Connecticut, who had served about two months as interim minister in 1944, gave the sermon. In the afternoon the choir presented four choruses from Brahms's Requiem as an In Memoriam to the members of The Park Church who had finished their course in faith and rested from their labors."

The album tells of the New York Congregational Christian Conference that was held in The Park Church in 1946. Among the resolutions adopted was:

Whereas the addresses by Rev. Roswell P. Barnes, D.D., and Rev. L. Wendell Fifield, D.D., (keynotes to the conference), indicate that leaders in many walks of life are turning to the church for the only answer to the distressing political, social, industrial and moral world problems,

Be it Resolved that this conference commit its delegates to the determination to accept this challenge and dedicate themselves anew to practice the teaching of Jesus personally and in all our activities; and that the delegates take back to their churches the message that in this time of crisis leaders in world affairs are looking to them to lead in the task of building here the City of God.

It is hard to imagine any group today showing such confidence in what "leaders in world affairs" are doing. It somehow seems suggestive of the changes that have come about in the short span of twenty-five years. Another story from the album:

The disastrous flood which Elmira suffered on May 28, 1946, necessitated the moving of large numbers of Red Cross workers. Needing headquarters, they accepted the offer of The Park Church lecture room and parlors for this purpose. Over a period of two and a half month these rooms were scenes of the busiest activity as scores of flood victims came for interviews. The flood was termed by the Red Cross workers a major disaster.

This centennial year was, therefore, made increasingly memorable by this substantial contribution of The Park Church in a community crisis. The founding fathers and mothers and the leaders and members who planned and built the present church building would have been gratified to realize how useful this organization and its home could be at such a time.

### **THE STEARNS MINISTRY**

The Rev. John F. Stearns was minister from 1944 until 1965. Thus his ministry covers nearly twenty-one years of this report. During this time much work was done on the church building, some of which was necessary repairs. Masonry was repointed, there was a new furnace and a new roof, and other essential work was done.

The interior of the church proper was redesigned. There was considerable feeling within the membership that a more churchly sanctuary was desirable. There were others who loved the old church for its own sake. Mr. Stearns was in favor of a change and his enthusiasm was influential in the final decision. He gave much time to conferring with committees, architects, and workers, giving every detail close attention.

The organ and choir were moved from the front of the church to the balcony. There were repairs on the organ including a new console. Against the south wall where the organ pipes were is a scarlet dossal curtain. Hanging over this is a beautiful cross carved of walnut wood from the old stairs by the late Mr. Arthur W. Rumsey, a member of the church. All of this under a rose window provides a center of interest as one enters.

With the exception of a small kitchenette added to the parlors, Beecher Hall, the parlors and the Minister's study were not changed. Nothing was done to the apartment on the third floor

in which the Eastman's had lived which thereafter served now and then as the sexton's apartment. All other space south of Beecher Hall was redone to the end that the Sunday school now has larger and more convenient quarters.

Before this renovation was undertaken a careful study was made of an alternative - the building of a somewhat smaller, more architecturally modern church on a more westerly site. At the 1956 Annual Meeting Mr. Alexander G. Long reported for this study committee. The work of the committee had been so thorough that we were shown sketches of a possible new building. It was estimated that it would cost \$365,000. The congregation voted for the renovation of the old building.

By 1958 the work was on its way under a building committee of which Mr. Leslie D. Clute was chairman. Other members were Mr. Charles A. Austin II, Mr. John Brand II, and Mr. Clarence E. Killinger. The architects were Fudge and Underhill of Elmira in consultation with J. and R. Lamb, ecclesiastical architects of Tenafly, New Jersey. Streeter Associates of Elmira were the general contractors.

The total cost was \$282,759, of which \$179,244 was raised from pledges. The remainder came from appreciation of endowment funds, and bank loans. The final repayment of the loans was made in 1970.

Soon after the renovation two memorial windows were added: one in memory of Ruth Buck Mandeville, given by her son David; one in memory of Alexander G. Long, given by his wife.

Another important study and decision was made during the Stearns ministry. This concerned the possibility of The Park Church becoming a part of the United Church of Christ. A study committee began work on this in November 1960. Mr. Ray Simmons was chairman. Serving with him were Mrs. Joseph W. Buck, Dr. Mary Edith Runyan and Mrs. Elmer E. Thompson representing the Board of Deaconesses; Mr. John Lamb, Mr. Lacey Woodward and Mr. Charles H. Miller representing the Board of Deacons; Dr. William T. Boland and Dr. Glenn M. Kendall representing the Board of Trustees. Mr. Simmons was also a Trustee.

This committee met monthly until April 1961. It studied the Constitution of the United Church of Christ and the implications of merger for The Park Church. The committee made several progress reports to the congregation. The final meeting was in April 1961 and was a congregational meeting. The committee presented two speakers. Dr. Nathanael Guptil of the United Church of Christ gave the reasons for becoming a part of that church; the Rev. Arthur K. Rouser of the Cadman Memorial Congregational Church of Brooklyn gave reasons for remaining an Independent Congregational Church. A relatively small congregation chose the latter course.

During the Stearns ministry we had a number of directors of religious education who came and went in rapid succession. They were able young people who were well liked by our youth groups but with three exceptions, did not stay long enough to make much of an impact. The three exceptions were Miss Lillian Dilts who served from 1948-1951: Mr. Thomas W.

Wright, 1955-1958; and the Rev. Oliver B. Francisco, 1959-1964. Miss Dilts and Mr. Francisco were somewhat older than the others.

Miss Dilts achieved a city-wide reputation for the beautiful Christmas pageants and other programs which she arranged for The Park Church. She was a hard worker and was successful in attracting people to work with her. Mme. Halina, ballet mistress, gave Park Church angels instruction in how to walk across a stage, how to hold arms and hands, and other principles of movement. Ernest Friedman and others from the Elmira Little Theatre helped with makeup. A woman who knew Miss Dilts well says that people were willing to work with her because they knew that whatever she undertook would turn out beautifully. In an annual report during Miss Dilts' time here, Mr. Stearns expressed admiration for the Christmas pageant saying that she had filled the auditorium, the first time he had seen it that way.

Reports written by the young people themselves suggest that the Sunday Evening Club flourished when Miss Dilts was their advisor.

There is no doubt that the Club flourished during the time Mr. Tom Wright was here. It became the largest Christian young people's group in the city and the largest among the Congregational Churches of New York State. Mr. Wright left to finish his theological studies at the Colgate-Rochester Divinity School. The esteem and affection that The Park Church people had for him is shown by the fact that they gave him a purse with which to pay his tuition.

Mr. Francisco stayed longer than any of the others. He was Organist and Choir Director. With the help of his wife he was also responsible for religious education.

In 1952 the Rev. Roger Nicholson came directly from Yale Seminary to be Assistant Minister. He gave much attention to the youth work of the church and is said to have been particularly successful in counseling young people. He encouraged a number of Boy Scouts to work for the God and Country Award, a reward not often earned. Several people have told me that they thought it was a great spiritual loss to the church when he left.

An important event during this time was the organization of The Park Church Council. This is presently composed of the Minister and the Presidents and Chairman of the following bodies: Board of Trustees, Board of Deacons, Board of Deaconesses, Board of Christian Education, Stewardship Committee, Women's Fellowship, Music Committee, Social Concerns Committee, plus three members at large elected at the Annual Meeting of the church. The Council acts as a kind of clearing house for matters of concern to the whole congregation. Part of its duty is to counsel the Minister and "Advise and consent" whenever serious problems arise. It also serves some of the purposes of what in business is called the personnel department. The Minister serves as chairman.

May 13, 1956 was a happy day for the people of The Park Church. Hobart A. Burch, Jr. son of Dr. and Mrs. Hobart A. Burch, devoted members, was ordained in The Park Church. There had been other ordinations there but in its long history no other son of the church had entered the ministry. The Rev. Hobart A. Burch, Jr. had graduated from Princeton and from

Union Theological Seminary. He now has charge of the social service work of the United Church of Christ.