

**“All We Are Saying“**  
**“Century Service: 1950-2000”**  
**II Corinthians 5:16-21**  
**August 30, 2009**

The second fifty years of the last century are still so close that their significance is in the process of being discerned and understood. Yet the events from this period in our collective history continue to make their way into our awareness in many ways. The recent remembrance of the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Woodstock stirred memories for so-called Baby Boomers, now no longer babies. The death of Senator Ted Kennedy has supplied opportunity to recollect this period of time. On television, the program “Mad Men” presents a look back at the mores, fashions, and social changes of the era.

By 1950, after two decades of depression and war, our country was entering what would be termed “an age of affluence.” Industries established during the Second World War led in the industrial expansion of the times. Along with massive improvements in the highway system and the availability of newer, faster automobiles, the population moved into metropolitan areas. A new housing phenomenon sprang up around the edges of cities; they were called “suburbs.” Television sets began to appear in more and more homes, connecting people to information and entertainment.

Historian Martin Marty observes that Protestantism profited from a return to religion during the post-World War Two years. A special issue of *Life* magazine from December 26, 1955 focuses on Christianity. It includes articles on the history of Christianity and on faith in the United States, noting “an unprecedented wave of religious observance.” There are also pages of religious art, and notes about “special challenges for Catholics.” Inside the cover is a two-page spread on President Dwight Eisenhower’s views on faith.

In 1957, 98% of the population asserted membership in a specific church. (Ahlstrom) Normal Vincent Peale’s “The Power of Positive Thinking” became a best-seller, encouraging peace of mind and confident living. Church buildings were built. Others expanded to accommodate a sudden rise in the birth-rate which fed into the Sunday school program. During the three year pastorate of Elmer Charles Smith, the annex of First Church was completed for \$100,000, adding to much needed floor space for education and church activities.

In 1953, the congregation called the Rev. Russell M. Weer to serve as pastor. Along with his wife Florence, Russ Weer had two children, Ruth and Russ, Jr. who grew up in this congregation through their father’s 23 year pastorate. Although I never met Russ Weer, we both had a connection with Thompson Memorial Church near New Hope, Pa. His first call was to that congregation where, many years later in 1970-71, I would serve as a seminary student intern. Our service in the church would later connect us here, and I would meet his adult children. I am grateful Russ for sharing stories with me about his father’s calling at First.

In the early years of his pastorate, Rev. Weer oversaw the formal observance of the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the beginning of the building of this sanctuary. The Haskell organ, used since 1892, was replaced with an Austin organ, requiring a rearrangement of the choir seating, alterations to the west wall, and the placement of the pulpit. He was here when, in 1958, the Presbyterian Church USA and the United Presbyterian Church united to form the United Presbyterian Church USA.

Many other changes were about to occur. In a recent book review in the *New York Times*, Frank Rich reflects on Fred Kaplan's book, *1959: The Year Everything Changed*. "It was in 1959 that Berry Gordy founded Motown, that G.D.Searle applied to the F.D.A. for the approval of the birth-control pill, and that Texas Instruments announced the advent of the microchip. The year began with a Soviet technological triumph, the launching of the spacecraft Lunik I, and ended with an embarrassing capitalist fiasco when Ford Motor Company yanked the ignominious Edsel. Along the way the first two American soldiers were killed in South Vietnam.. All the elements were in place for upheavals to follow." The upheavals brought with them their own consequences, both negative and positive.

1960 brought the election of a Roman Catholic president. One historian notes this as the end of 500 years of a Protestant vision that started at the death of Mary Tudor. Whatever the case, a "New Frontier" had been crossed in many ways. In October of 1962, a group of shaggy haired musicians sang "Love Me Do," initiating a wave of new music and the "dawning of the age of Aquarius." Eyes turned toward space exploration. Human beings walked on the moon. But great social changes also drew attention. Pairs of words served as shorthand for some points of tension: men - women; hawk-dove; black-white; straight-gay; hippie-square; violence - peace. Tragedies abounded. Assassinations shocked. War, both hot and cold, erupted. "All We are saying, is give peace a chance." We Shall Overcome." "All you need is love."

The space race yielded benefits for more than space with the invention of Teflon, computers, and Tang, to name a few. The advance of polio was stopped with the risky but widely applied use of vaccinations. Ecological awareness and wise use of resources were becoming topics of discussion. In the midst of it all, came the announcement that "God Is Dead," which was, no doubt, a big surprise to the Almighty, and served as a spur to deeper thinking and wider conversation about God and faith.

In this church, as in so many, people were seeking to understand the circumstances of their times, while drawing on the strengths of their tradition and finding new sources for confidence. The importance of a caring community remained high in the church. Rev. Weer encouraged and led a ministry of concern to the elderly and served on the board of the Presbyterian Homes in central PA. He was also eager to support young people in the life of the church and took leadership in Camp Michaux, which was located not far from Carlisle and which provided a place of Christian nurture and service for generations of young people and leaders in this congregation.

In the mid-60's, Second Presbyterian Church, then located a block south, was considering

a move. Conversations were held, exploring the option of both congregations combining as one in this building, as had been done in the late 1700's. Such a merger was not realized. Second built on Garland Drive. First recommitted to its long-term presence on the Square and its ministry in the center of the community. Women, who had already served in leadership as deacons, now became elders with Pat Grabey, elected in 1971. Rev. Weer guided the congregation through many changes as long-time members died and newer members were incorporated into church leadership. Mission to people in need extended to Rapid City SD and locally, to those affected by Hurricane Agnes in 1972. Out of the congregation, Dean Young and Bill Hammann responded to a call to serve as pastors. The celebration of the nation's bicentennial in 1976 strengthened the congregation in a variety of ways, but it was also the year of Rev. Weers retirement after serving this congregation with strength, guidance, and loving care through 23 years of change and challenge and opportunity.

Interim Spencer Smith served rather briefly because the Rev. Jacques Kelewae was called before the end of the year. One of our history books labels him "the young minister," youngest at age 29 since Ellis Newlin in 1844 at 23 years of age. Rev. Kelewae (who was a classmate of mine at Princeton Seminary) was instrumental in guiding reorganization of the session committees, encouraging fellowship in the congregation with a "ritual of friendship" which continues, including children in worship with children's sermons and inclusion in Communion. Elizabeth Gardner became a part-time Director of Christian Education for two years. Worship time was tinkered with, but finally remained at 10:45 AM. The Major Mission Fund, chaired by Bob Barcus exceeded its goal. Storm windows were placed on all the sanctuary windows. When Rev. Kelewae accepted a call to Illinois in 1981, once more Rev. Spencer Smith served as interim. "Keep on keeping on," he encouraged the congregation.

In June, 1982, the congregation connected with its Celtic heritage and called the Rev. Jim Skimins from Scotland. His ready wit and lively sense of humor were couched in a Scottish brogue, according to one observation. Fellowship in the church was extended with the institution of the post-worship coffee time and the beginning of the Mariner's Group for (then) young adults. The use of space was under consideration through a long-range planning committee which eventually led to a major addition and interior changes to the church facility. The roof was raised to make room for a second floor. Everything else got moved around. Under Rev. Skimin's guidance, First Church gained the kind of space befitting a congregation growing into the future.

Along with other programs and changes in the congregation's membership, Rev. Skimin's served the church during another denominational reunion. In 1983, the "Civil War" ended for Presbyterians. In Atlanta, the former Southern and Northern branches reunited to form The Presbyterian Church (USA). Then in 1984, First Church celebrated its 250 years of service with special events. The highlight was an historic service in this sanctuary, welcoming President George Washington as the honored guest.

Rev. Skimins guided the congregation in those years of honoring the past while planning

for the future. Not long after the anniversary celebration, he accepted a call to serve as pastor of Plymouth Presbyterian Church. With thanks and appreciation for his ministry, Jim and his family were off to Michigan, where he continues to serve.

During the ensuing interim, the congregation was first served by Rev. John Hutchison. When John was called to serve his home church at Paxton in Harrisburg as interim, a son of this church, Rev. Bob Jacoby became interim here. Bob ably and pastorally led the church until March of 1996, when the congregation at First installed their next pastor, who found a congregation ably led and ready to be surprised at what God would do with them on the way into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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*Rev. Jon A. Black  
First Presbyterian Church  
On the Square  
Carlisle PA*

*275<sup>th</sup> Anniversary "Century Service" sermon series*