

Chapter III

THE NEW CHURCH AND LATER BEECHER MINISTRY

The Church meeting on January 3, 1871, marked the 25th Anniversary of the Society and according to the minutes "it was fittingly attended to with appropriate remarks by John Selover, one of the founders of the Church and Society."

At that time the Church was outgrowing the old meeting house and a movement was started to build a "more adequate Church home." This was furthered by Mr. Beecher in his typically unconventional manner. He said to his people:

I can preach in the park in warm weather and in a hall in winter; or I can do as the Lord himself did – preach from house to house. What I am here for is the life of religion in your souls, and preaching is but a minor question. Still there are advantages in a suitable building...no one shall be asked or urged to give; but all are invited to take stock in this enterprise, just as they would subscribe to any other stock company, expecting dividends. The dividends we look for are not indeed cash. But there are values which cannot be expressed in dollars.

The Park Church has often been called "the first institutional church in America." Mr. Beecher himself never used that term, but spoke always of a "church home." He believed that members of the "Christian Family" should work and play together during the week as well as worship together on Sundays. His philosophy on this point is here presented from his sermons –

Sworn enemies can go to church, and set in pews to hear song and prayer and preaching, and even take part in the same; yet they are not assembled. Going to church proves nothing one way or the other, as to the love one bears toward his brother.

Let us see whether the rich man can love the poor, and not feel them a burden; whether the so-called refined and the unrefined can find some common bond; whether the aversions of race and caste are somewhat mitigated in us...Let us see whether we can make our children happy in fellowships and sports that are without taint of sin.

Plans for a new building developed rapidly. Barely a week after a new church was decided upon, a special committee made up of L.C. Foster, J.H. Barney, C. J. Langdon, J. R. Robinson, Mrs. C. B. Stuart, and Mrs. Theodore Crane recommended the then rather revolutionary plan of providing for parlors, playroom and library. Such a plan was adopted; and on June 28, 1871, it was determined that the "auditorium have accommodations for 800 adult sittings on the main floor, and 200 to 300 sittings in a gallery or galleries." Half of the subscriptions were called and

the Trustees were instructed "to proceed at once to get elevations, plans and specifications, and push forward the work as rapidly as practicable." The trustees at this time were H.S. Gilbert, T.W. Crane, G.A. Gridley, C. Preswick, J.M. Robinson, and William Ogden.

Several architects submitted plans and that of W. N. White of Syracuse was adopted. In early 1872 bids were invited, these being submitted at the meeting of May 7, 1872. The low bid was \$58,218.00 which was accepted. There were some doubts as to financial responsibility of the low bidder and Mr. Beecher was appointed to make an investigation. On May 29, 1872 he made an unfavorable report and thereupon the Trustees rejected the bid and then awarded the contract for the carpenter work for enclosing the building to E. Kingsbury for \$24,000.00 and awarded the excavation and mason work to Gerrity & French on what we now would call a cost plus basis, cost plus "fifty cents profit upon each mason mechanic employee and twenty-five cents each laborer employee per day, provided either said Gerrity or French will engage to give their entire daily personal superintendence for no further remuneration." At the same meeting, "Mr. Beecher was appointed superintendent for the construction of Church buildings and was authorized by the Trustees to draw upon their treasury for all sums of money required."

It was first estimated that the buildings could be constructed for approximately \$71,500.00. However, as the work progressed, it was found that the cost was running much above the estimate. In June, 1874 even though the building was not completed, Kingsbury and Gerrity & French were relieved from further performance.

On September 28, 1874, at a meeting of the Church it appeared that to that date \$82,000.00 had been expended, of which there had been paid by subscriptions and loans \$61,000.00, leaving a \$25,000.00 indebtedness. At that meeting and at one held shortly thereafter, subscriptions were received which cleared the debt. Thereafter the record indicates that \$30,500.00 was borrowed.

New contractors, Stone and Bassett, were secured to complete the building. The lecture room was finished first and used in the fall of 1874. The auditorium was opened for worship October 10, 1875, and the rear part, parlors, offices, etc. was completed in 1876.

J. M. Robinson seems to have carried heavy responsibilities in forwarding the erection of the Church. On the death of Mr. Robinson, the Trustees at their meeting of January 5, 1886 adopted a resolution stating in part that "during the trying times when the present church edifice was being builded, his zeal, his quiet and never-flagging energy in looking after that important work, which owes its successful completion more perhaps to him than to any individual of our number, can never be forgotten. Indeed it is more than probable that years hence, when we who knew and loved him, shall have departed the massive building known as 'The Park Church' shall be pointed out to the passerby as in part at least a monument to him who 'builded better than he knew'."

The construction of such a building was a tremendous task and it necessarily enlisted the support of the entire membership. The erection of such a church today would require close to \$1,000,000.00. It remains today a monument to the exceptional ministry of Mr. Beecher and to the men and women of the church who, by their foresight, faith, loyalty and sacrifice provided for themselves and succeeding generations such an adequate "Church Home."

The 25th anniversary of the Church also marked the changed of name. At the same meeting which considered the erection of the new Church, several names were proposed, such as The Seventh Church of Elmira; the Home Church of Elmira; Church of All Saints; Congregational Church of Elmira; and The Park Church of Elmira. The name "The Park Church in Elmira" was finally adopted, after the meeting turned down a proposition that the word "Congregational" should appear in the name.

Mr. Jervis Langdon, grandson of the Jervis Langdon who was a charter member of the church, was the first child baptized in the church. The record says-

"The first child baptised in the new church is known on earth by the loved name-Jervis Langdon-the son of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Langdon. Presented for baptism Sunday, October 31, 1875."

Mr. Langdon was President of the Board of Trustees for many years and has served the church in innumerable ways.

An early account of the first wedding is also worth reading -

The first wedding in the new church took place Nov. 4, 1875. Edward P. Bement and Julia Robinson were then and there united in marriage by the pastor. One the son of the preceding pastor, the other daughter of one who ever since the church was organized has served the church with all the gifts and graces God gave him. Because all honored their fathers, and all the present members love and honor this brother and sister, it seemed fitting to gather at their wedding, the first in the new home of the church.

With the opening of the new church the room now used as the minister's study was a library open to the public. It was in charge of Miss Ella Wolcott and remained the town's only public library until the opening of the Steele Memorial Library some twenty years later.

Miss Wolcott, who was another of those unusual personalities in which the history of The Park Church abounds, taught literary classes and sponsored literary clubs in the church. The Shakespeare Club was her particular pride and joy. It sponsored such elaborate affairs as costume parties in which guests came costumed as Shakespearian characters. This club even gave Shakespearian plays on the romp room stage.

Miss Wolcott had been an entertainer in government hospitals in Washington during the Civil War, and came to Elmira because of her great admiration for Mr. Beecher and the kind of church life he was developing here.

The various activities of the church are partially known by the following calendar which was followed for many years.

CALENDAR

- PUBLIC SERVICE, morning and evening, every Sunday.
SUNDAY SCHOOL and BIBLE CLASSES, every SUNDAY at 12:30 p.m., from
September 1st to July 1st.
CHILDREN'S SUNDAY and INFANT BAPTISM, the morning service of the first
SUNDAY of each month.
SACRAMENTAL SUNDAY and BAPTISM OF ADULTS the second SUNDAY of
Feb., April, June, Aug., Oct., and Dec.
THE COVENANT MEETING of the church, on WEDNESDAY evening before
Sacramental Sunday.
PRAYER MEETING in the lecture room every WEDNESDAY evening except the:
GENERAL SOCIAL ASSEMBLY, to make and perfect acquaintance, the third
WEDNESDAY of each month.
SEWING SOCIETY AND SUPPER, all WEDNESDAY afternoons from September
1st to July 1st.
TEACHERS' MEETING and PASTOR'S LECTURE every FRIDAY evening from
September 1st to July 1st.

The Sunday School continued to flourish. Mr. Burr M. Hulbert wrote some years ago in the Elmira Star Gazette:

"The writer of this article attended the Park Church Sunday School beginning about 1880. The school was booming at that period and had between 600 and 700 registered pupils, and a large attendance each Sabbath. The first Sunday of each month was Children's Sunday, when all the pupils except the Primary Grade, were in attendance at the morning service and such a crowd as each Children's Sunday called out was amazing, and every available inch of space, stairs and all, was filled.

The service was very informal, more like a jolly social gathering. Prof. Whelpton and Prof. Cramer, organists played the Sunday School songs, which were given with spirit and a dash. The church quartet, which then included, Mrs. Maria Gibson, soprano; Miss Nellie Perry, alto; Robert N. Parmenter, tenor and William Perry, bass, gave familiar selections and "Father" Beecher talked. It was not a sermon, but generally a homely talk on one of his familiar walks through the woods, describing the trees and their uses, or some other very interesting nature talk, all interesting and educational.

The SOCIAL side of the school also was a decided feature and the city, then only having seven wards, was divided into three equal parts, proportioned according to the location of the pupils' residence. Each month a social gathering was held for one of the three city divisions, a dinner was enjoyed and all adjourned to the romp room on the second floor, where a regular time was enjoyed."

This seems a good place in which to reprint another Star Gazette article - this from Matthew D. Richardson:

Fred Wright, Superintendent of Elmira's public parks, has called my attention to an old clipping from the New York Daily Graphic dated Aug. 7, 1873...It describes a time when the late Thomas K. Beecher held religious services in Eldridge Park... I had heard of Mr. Beecher preaching from the Lyceum Theater stage, while the Park Church was in course of erection, but this was the first time I'd ever heard of his holding out-of-door religious worship in the Elmira park ... In the newspaper appeared an old wood cut, showing the familiar figure of Father Tom, addressing a throng of admirers from a raised platform, an orchestra seated in the foreground - a reminder of the old camp meeting days.

The records of this period show that the church was greatly concerned with the care of the needy, especially widows, orphans and the aged. Each case was carefully considered, with Mr. Beecher constantly reminding his committees that "these things must be handled with discretion." The professional terminology is lacking, but otherwise these records sound very much like the records of the modern case work agency.

The Park Church had an employment service that antedated free public employment agencies. At a meeting of the church, ways of helping people find "honorable employment" were considered. It was voted to raise a fund for the purpose. We read "Mr. Beecher said it was far better to give our prayers and money to objects of this kind than to give alms..."

Those who say that all our public welfare work is simply an extension of what the church had done for years can find plenty of evidence to support their thesis in the history of The Park Church.

Mr. Beecher sent New Year's letters to absent members of the church, and to former members of the congregation living in other places. These letters followed a definite pattern year after year-statistics, notices of deaths, chatty items about the Sunday School, the Sewing Society, and the community. He told of new public buildings, new pavements, the general state of community prosperity, and gave items of interest about prominent citizens.

Under date of January 1894, Mr. Beecher says, "The revenues of the church barely meet current expenses, with little or no margin for necessary repairs, but all debts are paid monthly, and the church continues as hitherto-honest."

And again, "R. O. Stone says of last Sunday's children's sermon that it was the best he ever heard. That if we could have a picture of the pulpit last Sunday with the ferns and flowers and the bible and Mr. Beecher and the choir singing, we would like to send it to our absent members." The R.O. Stone mentioned here was the sexton for many years and greatly beloved by the members of the church.

As a sample of community news, Mr. Beecher says under date of January 1897, "The city now has two new bridges across the river, one at Walnut street on the west side and one at

Madison Avenue on the east side. These new bridges have no street car tracks, much to the delight of the Humane Society and the comfort of the horses."

From the letter of January 1894 - "The library and literary classes of the church attract and hold many attendants not otherwise related to us-all under the general care and leadership of our well-known Miss Wolcott."

In 1898, Mr. Beecher startled his congregation by calling himself "a back number." Mrs. Gleason, of Gleason Sanitarium fame, who was away, wrote home when she heard of it, "So Brother Tom considers himself a back number. Well he is handsomely bound and highly respected and stands in his place ready for reference."

But the years did take their toll and on March 14, 1900, he whom everyone called "Elmira's first citizen" died, after a few days' illness. He had not only won the love of the community through his personal goodness, he had served it well in a civic sense. He was county superintendent of schools for a year and bridge commissioner for two years. He had been chaplain of the Baldwin Post, GAR since its founding.

The whole city went into mourning. A community memorial service was held. A few of the tributes spoken at that time are here reprinted.

Thank God, I saw Mr. Beecher bringing to completion the rites of a Jewish confirmation, giving his blessing to the children of my congregation, and reprimanding them to keep the law as though he had been an orthodox rabbi for twenty-five years.

Perhaps it was the first time in the history of the world that a Jewish congregation shed tears in its own synagogue, last Friday evening, in honor of the memory of a noble Christian preacher. We feel that we have lost a champion of our cause and the crown of our community. Our children never experienced any unpleasantness from the pupils of your Sunday-school, because the teachers in charge of Mr. Beecher knew how to impart the crucifixion without harming the Jews. Our people have always felt perfectly at home in Mr. Beecher's church.

The Rev. Jacob Marcus, Jewish Rabbi.

"His sermon was a plain, simple gospel sermon,-an exaltation of Christ. There was no effort to be grand or eloquent, no rhetorical flourishes, no straining after effects, nothing high-flown or sensational about it. But it produced a great impression. I was charmed with it, and drawn irresistibly to the speaker.

As a theologian, Mr. Beecher was a free lance. He followed no school, did not claim to hold any systematic divinity or to believe in any church or ecclesiastical organization; but, as an independent thinker, he built up his theology upon the Scriptures, without regard to precedents or

authorities. In his social intercourse, he was most entertaining, brimful of wit and humor, and fertile in his resource of anecdote and illustration."

The Rev. George H. McKnight, Rector of Trinity Church

"Our friend and father, Thomas K. Beecher, the greatly beloved man, so wise in counsel, so tender in sympathy, so eloquent in speech."

The Rev. William T. Henry, Minister, First Baptist Church

The Rev. J.J. Bloomer, Pastor of St. Patrick's Church and Mr. Beecher were good friends. In an interview published in the Elmira Daily Advertiser a few days after Mr. Beecher's death, Father Bloomer said in part:

"Beecher and benevolence are synonymous. It is not easy to exaggerate when speaking of his charity...Honest sincerity forced him to express convictions which right and the absence of a turbid and contentious spirit commanded for him the good will and esteem of all, even of those who disagreed with him. In every sphere of life, he is worthy of kindest memory."

The whole community wished to honor him by a memorial of some kind, and so the money for the Beecher statue which stands in Wisner Park was given by citizens of the whole community, not solely by members of The Park Church.

The statue is by Jonathan Scott Hartley, the most prominent sculptor of the time who is known for his keen analysis of character and technical excellence.

The same sculptor designed a memorial to Mrs. Beecher - the drinking fountain at the corner of the Federation Building. The fact that this is the only public memorial to a woman in Elmira is testimony to the unique place she also held in the community. The center of interest in the design of the fountain is a bas relief portrait of Mrs. Beecher. It shows a strong, kind face, and bobbed hair-a sensible style in which Mrs. Beecher antedated Irene Castle.

And finally a few more words from Beecher himself:

"God and all things proceeding from Him – in a word truth - does not change. But a man's apprehension of truth and his declaration of truth change, unless, indeed, a man has stupefied himself-or been overtaken by spiritual atrophy and death."

"He has reason to doubt that he is really growing up into God who finds no changes taking place in his theology."

"Each generation should read and think for itself, just as each generation eats and assimilates food for itself and makes growth."

"The time will come when our churches will be called no longer by sect names."

A PRAYER BY MR. BEECHER

"Our Father in heaven, wilt thou note the record of our hearts and the words of our lips, that the one and the other in perfect agreement may be an offering of truth to thee, a new consecration.

Wilt thou enable us to meet the experiences of each day as they unfold themselves, with composure, peacefulness and contentment-with industry where there is strength, with patience where there is weakness. O Lord our God, accept this day. So may thy Kingdom come and thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil; for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen."