

Chapter V

THESE LATER DAYS

Albert G. Cornwell was a graduate of the University of London with work in theology at McGill University. He brought to The Park Church pulpit an authentic scholarship and a wide knowledge of history and literature that enriched his sermons. He was a preacher for thoughtful people with a gift for giving his hearers new insights into oft repeated truths.

He was keenly interested in public affairs and made significant contributions to the life of the community in this field. He came to Elmira at the beginning of a period of rapid expansion of community social agencies, and at a time of struggle for better and more efficient local government. Through work on committees, through sermons before his own people and innumerable talks before other groups, he effectively carried on The Park Church tradition of interest in public affairs that began with the founding of the church around the slavery question.

Nor was Mr. Cornwell the only one. During this period many lay members of the church, both men and women, were active in community enterprises. It has remained the same to this day. The Boy Scouts, the Girl Scouts, the Y.W.C.A., the Community Chest, the other community agencies and committees have seemed at times to have almost a disproportionate number of Park Church people in their management.

Mr. Cornwell founded the "Lenten Forum" while still working as Mr. Eastman's assistant. For thirty-five years this forum has brought leading authorities in the field of national and international affairs to Elmira on Sunday evenings during Lent. Organ recitals by eminent organists have also been a part of this Lenten program.

Non-secretarian and non-partisan, belonging to the entire community, the forum's motto is from Voltaire, "I may not agree with a word you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it."

Through two world wars and a long, severe depression, the Lenten Forum has continued without a break, and for the most part, has paid for itself through voluntary collections taken at meetings.

During Mr. Cornwell's ministry, the Eastman memorial windows, designed and executed by James Powell and Sons of London, were installed. There are three of these fine stained glass windows on the west side of the church underneath the gallery. The large center window, "St. Paul Preaching on Mars Hill" is a memorial to the joint ministry of the Eastmans. The smaller windows, one on each side, are memorials to them as individuals. "Conversion of Paul" is dedicated to the memory of Mr. Eastman; "Peter Baptizing Cornelius" to the memory of Mrs. Eastman.

These memorials were sponsored by the Annis Ford Eastman Bible Class.

It was during this same period that the other beautiful memorial windows in The Park Church were installed. "A Home Scene in the Life of the Master," opposite the Eastman window on the east side of the auditorium, a memorial to Mrs. J. Monroe Shoemaker, was the gift of her sons, Guy W., Floyd M., and J. Raymond. This window is in two panels, Jesus in Joseph's carpenter shop being the theme of one, Jesus being instructed by His mother the theme of the other.

On the north side of the Shoemaker window is a window dedicated to the memory of Elizabeth Fenner Hevener and Carlton Kellogg Hevener. This is a picture of "Jesus the Teacher."

On the south side of the Shoemaker window is a beautiful window showing the boy Jesus in the Temple, a memorial to Catherine Perine Miller, mother of Charles Perine Miller of whom more presently.

In 1924 the Copeland chimes were given to the community by Mrs. I. Seymour Copeland and her son, Dr. Woodford J. Copeland, in memory of their husband and father. The tower of The Park Church was thought the most appropriate place for the chimes because Mr. Copeland had been a devoted member of the church, had served on its board of deacons, and been a warm friend of four of its ministers. He was founder of the Elmira Star and the first president of the Elmira Star-Gazette.

It was during the nineteen-twenties that The Park Church became affiliated with other Congregational Churches in the voluntary district, state and national organizations of Congregational Churches. This step had been considered and reconsidered since the early days of the church. It was finally felt that affiliation would give the church a larger influence in any movement for church unity, or other matters of concern to all Protestant churches. Affiliation also gave the church a national organization through which to contribute to home and foreign missions.

At the same meeting at which this important step was taken, the church voted unanimously that pews in The Park Church should no longer be rented, but that all should be free and unassigned. This matter had also been discussed for years before final action was taken.

In 1924 Caroline Sanbourne Adkins (Mrs. Leslie Adkins) was ordained as a minister of the gospel in The Park Church, Mr. Cornwell preaching the ordination sermon. Shortly afterward Mrs. Adkins and her husband sailed for Turkey as missionaries supported by The Park Church.

The following year Mrs. Lillian Herrick Chapman (Mrs. William H. Chapman) was ordained in The Park Church. The denomination in which Mrs. Chapman had grown up, and in which she had actually served several years as Pastor, had refused her ordination, solely because she was a woman.

After her ordination, Mrs. Chapman served several years as Mr. Cornwell's assistant, giving special attention to the Sunday School and to work with young people, and becoming a beloved figure in church and community life.

In 1929 The Park Church began to share with the First Congregational Church of Peoria, Illinois, the support of Mr. and Mrs. James A. Hunter, missionaries in China. Mrs. Hunter taught English in Jefferson Academy, Tunghsien, North China, and Mr. Hunter agriculture in the same school. Mr. Hunter helped train agricultural leaders, and did extension work among the people themselves. He was interested especially in improving both the quality and quantity of chickens, hogs and goats raised in China, and became a pioneer in setting up agricultural fairs and short courses for farmers. During the Sino-Japanese War, Mr. Hunter helped in the work of the mobile universities in China, and Mrs. Hunter returned to America. Mr. Hunter also was active in relief and rehabilitation.

It was during Mr. Cornwell's pastorate that the benefactions of Louis Perine Miller came back to the church from bread cast upon the waters by Mr. and Mrs. Beecher many years before. The Beechers befriended Mr. Miller as a boy. He lived with them for some time while going to school, and it was through Mr. Beecher's influence that Mr. Miller got his first job, a place with the Fall Brook Railroad in Corning. He was industrious and frugal, and apparently wise in making investments, because when the New York Central absorbed the Fall Brook Railroad, Mr. Miller found himself with a fortune.

He went to France for a vacation, fell in love with France, and with a French woman, and stayed. But he never forgot The Park Church. He sent checks from time to time, sometimes for as much as \$1,000, and he gave generously to the organ fund. At one time he turned over to the church a block of securities which though of little market value at the time, were later sold for a considerable sum. Mr. Miller asked that part of his benefaction be considered a memorial to his boyhood friend Edward B. Gleason and himself.

After Mr. Miller's death his wife sent money to be used in creating a memorial. The four stained glass windows on the west side of the building representing the prophets Jeremiah, Isaiah, Ezekiel and Hosea, are this memorial.

In the last few years of his ministry, Mr. Cornwell was assisted by Mrs. Sara Eberhardt (Mrs. William Eberhardt) as a young people's worker. She took charge of the Sunday Evening Club, a club of teen age young people, and helped organize the Thomas K. Beecher Club for young people just beyond high school age, and the Mr. and Mrs. Club for young married couples.

During the war years the Mr. and Mrs. Club sent subscriptions to "The Reader's Digest" to all Park Church men and women in the armed services and provided leadership for many church activities.

In 1943 Mr. Cornwell resigned after certain irreconcilable differences of opinion concerning the best interests of the church had arisen.

With Mr. Cornwell's resignation there came to an end a period of eighty-nine years in which there had been but three ministries - the Beecher, the Eastman and the Cornwell. Not only that-there was an overlapping in these ministries that made them a more continuous service than appears at first glance, Dr. and Mrs. Eastman came six years before the death of Mr. Beecher, and Mr. Cornwell came to help Dr. Eastman five years before the latter's retirement..

In the entire eighty-nine years, no minister left The Park Church for a bigger church or a larger salary, although such opportunities were available to all of them.

Certain activities were a part of the work of the church during all three ministries. Among these were the New Year's Reception; "Bag Sunday" just before Christmas when food stuffs for distribution to the needy were brought to the Sunday School; the sending of gifts to those in the County Home at Breesport.

After Mr. Cornwell's resignation the Rev. W. Hamilton Benham served as interim pastor for thirteen months. Mr. Benham was the Pastor Emeritus of the First Presbyterian Church. He was well known to The Park Church people, and gave them a wise and helpful ministry during the time when they were making diligent search for a man to carry on in the traditional spirit of The Park Church. Dr. Rockwell Harmon Potter of Hartford, Connecticut, also helped during this period, acting as supply while Mr. Benham was in Florida.

The Rev. John Frye Stearns was unanimously called to the ministry of The Park Church on October 1, 1944. The Rev. Mr. Stearns is a graduate of Harvard, class of 1922, and of the Chicago Theological Seminary with a Master of Arts Degree from the University of Chicago. He taught in Bulgaria for four years immediately following his graduation from Harvard. He was assistant minister of the First Congregational Church of Los Angeles, California; minister of the First Congregational Church of Pontiac, Michigan; minister of the High Street Congregational Church of Auburn, Maine, before coming to Elmira. In a little more than a year's residence in Elmira, Mr. and Mrs. Stearns and their son, Edward, have become beloved members of The Park Church "family," as Mr. Beecher would have said.

On October 15, 1945, Miss Betty L. Johnson of West Haven, Connecticut, accepted the position of Director of Religious Education in The Park Church. Miss Johnson studied for two years at the New Haven State Teachers' College and for two years at the Hartford School of Religious Education where she received her degree, Bachelor of Religious Education.

We feel that it is a good omen that we are beginning our second century with these two New Englanders in places of leadership. As an independent Congregational Church in America, our history is much longer than the one hundred years about which we have written - it really began with the landing of the Pilgrims at Plymouth.