

Religion Becoming Public Service

A Chapter in the Life of First Christian Church, Portland, Oregon

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For nearly half a century, national church bodies that long had been ascendant in American life have been diminishing in membership, market share, and public influence. Once called mainline, Presbyterian, Methodist, Episcopal, Disciples of Christ, and other Protestant churches often are referred to now as old-line, implying that they are remnants of an era now past. In contrast to the national trends, however, a growing number of these old-line congregations are showing new strength.

Historian Diana Butler Bass has been studying some of these congregations to discern the sources of their new vitality. She is discovering that when congregations identify the ideas and beliefs that formed their identity in the past, and reshape these traditions for our time, they build the foundation for developing life-giving Christian practice among members and vitality in congregational life and mission. As a careful historian, Bass states that tradition has four aspects: the classic Christian faith that all churches share, the denominational tradition that particularizes the great tradition, the impact of

national identity upon the way a church understands itself, and the unique autobiography of each congregation.

With Bass's thesis as our framework, I intend to describe a thirty-year period in the life of one congregation. My purpose is to describe certain aspects of this congregation's history that characterized it during its period of greatest strength and could serve as part of the foundation for a new period of vital witness to the gospel.

On the Sunday after Christmas in 1878, a small group of pioneer Christians began a series of meetings that led to the formation of First Christian Church in Portland, Oregon. Eighteen months later, this new congregation purchased a building site on the corner of Columbia Street and Park Avenue on the western edge of the city and a year later occupied its first building.ⁱ Now in its third building, First Christian Church continues in the same location. Designated as Portland's cultural center, the congregation's neighborhood is home to the Portland Art Museum, the Oregon Historical Society, Portland State University, Oregon's leading newspaper, and some of Portland's prestigious residential addresses. Currently, the congregation is engaged in a dramatic redevelopment of the city block that it has owned for many years and looks forward to a significantly transformed place in Portland's downtown landscape.

The challenge facing a congregation like First Christian in Portland is to determine what kind of a church it really is and how it should interact with the vibrant city, which it has served for one hundred thirty years. The answer can be found in the stories that it tells, for as Bass makes clear, it is by their stories that congregations define who they are, transmit their life to others, and interact with the world around them. These stories, she proposes, hold "the keys to vision, health, and vitality."ⁱⁱ

The Concept of Service to the Community

During the summer of 1939, two men and their families moved to Portland, Oregon, and immediately became active participants in the life and work of First Christian Church. Together, as pastor and leading lay leader, they propelled their congregation into the forefront of their city's public life, a role it continued for a generation.

Thompson L. Shannon, a native of Oklahoma (with a little native American blood), had graduated from Phillips University and Yale Divinity School and then studied abroad. After living briefly in Germany during Hitler's rise to power, the Shannons moved to Edinburgh where Tom completed residency for his Ph.D. degree. Scottish theologian D. M. Baillie influenced his studies and James Steward, one of the great preachers of the era, was his spiritual mentor. During the Shannons' years in Scotland, they suffered under terrible German air raids.

In Portland, Shannon took up his pastoral labors with great energy, revising worship and congregational life, inspiring youth and young adults, and developing significant shared programs with other downtown churches. One of his major successes was creating a Wednesday evening school of Christian living that regularly attracted as many as 500 participants.

This young pastor's sense of the nation's mood was indicated in a statement that he wrote and printed every week as the front cover of the Sunday worship folder, beginning in 1943 and continuing throughout the rest of his ministry. "Whoever you are that worship here, in whatever household of faith you were born, whatever creed you now profess," the statement began, "if you come to this sanctuary to seek the God in Whom you may believe or to rededicate yourself to the God in Whom you do believe, you are welcome here." Recognizing the pain that the war was inflicting, the statement continued, "Leave not this church without a prayer for yourself, your friends, and all who worship here; for our nation in these days of sacrificial burdens and difficult

decisions; for all hapless victims of the world's catastrophe, and for the coming of God's world-wide Kingdom of justice and peace; for the fellowship of the Christian Church universal among all nations and races; for men and women of every faith who sincerely desire one human family under the Fatherhood of God."

With only a modest revision of language, this statement could be used today by churches that are aware of the world's turmoil, the vast extent of human suffering, the widening interfaith character of American life, and the long-time vocation for Christian unity that characterizes First Christian Church's ecclesial tradition.

In a sermon at the 1944 International Convention of the Disciples of Christ, Shannon offered a theological rationale for this kind of ministry. For the Christian faith to provide a foundation for the new world toward which humanity was trying to find its way, Shannon affirmed, the church would have to "restate and reinterpret our basic doctrines" and develop a new sense of community that binds people together around values rooted in their religious heritage.ⁱⁱⁱ

This theological conviction, led Shannon into serious engagement with public affairs in his adopted city. Despite the pressing obligations at his church, he quickly immersed himself in service-oriented organizations in Portland and across Oregon. During 1945, his last full year in Portland, the list of agencies included the advisory committee of the Oregon Liquor Control Commission, the Oregon Mental Health Association, the Portland council of social agencies, the Portland Public Forum, and the World War II Russian relief committee. Shannon's zeal, skill, and preeminence were recognized by the Portland Junior Chamber of Commerce when it chose him as Portland's first junior citizen of the year. Editors of the Portland newspaper, *The Oregonian*, "wrote that he had

translated his religion into the broadest concept of service to his community” in a record that “spreads over nearly every phase of civic work.”^{iv}

The second man to join First Christian Church in the summer of 1939, was Paul J. Raver, a prominent Disciples layman from Chicago, professor of electrical engineering at Northwestern University, and former chair of the Illinois Public Utilities Commission. He came to Portland, hand-picked by Harold Ickes, secretary of the interior in Franklin D. Roosevelt’s cabinet, to be the first fulltime administrator of Bonneville Power Administration. His commitment to making public power available to the public at low cost threatened the Portland business establishment. Members of the influential City Club were convinced that the recently created Tennessee Valley Authority was the forerunner of socialism in the United States and they feared that Roosevelt had a similar goal for power generated by dams on the Columbia River.

World War II, however, postponed this debate because the nation at war needed the power that Raver’s dam produced. Because of Bonneville, Henry Kaiser came to Portland and nearby Vancouver, Washington, and built the vast number of liberty ships that helped the United States win the war. Because Bonneville power made possible the development of aluminum refining and processing along the Columbia, little Boeing Aircraft in Seattle became another reason why the United States increasingly dominated the world. An economic historian of Portland notes that during World War II, Bonneville Power Administration was the economic engine that drove the United States. It can be said that Paul Raver, elder at First Christian Church, was the man who more than any other made that possible.^v

In sermons delivered on Layman’s Sunday in 1951, Raver and another lay leader presented ideas that they carried from church into the city’s public affairs. Judge Alfred Sulmonetti defined God as “the Love and the Power that men live by.” When we choose to follow this God, he told his friends in the church, we are

inspired to help feed people around the world, resist the idea that wars are inevitable, and develop poise, patience and steadiness in life. Also speaking that morning, Raver based his message on his experience the previous year at a national conference on the church and economic life. He described the significant imbalance throughout the world in the production and distribution of goods and services. In this time when “the ancient brotherhood of man is on trial,” Raver asserted, the world can come out of this danger “with the aid of the church and a rededication of ourselves to the teachings of Christ and prompt action in the area of social responsibility.”^{vi}

Liberal Minded Religion

When these two men delivered their sermons, Tom Shannon was no longer pastor, having left Portland in 1946 to become pastor at First Christian Church in Oakland, California, and professor of pastoral counseling at Pacific School of Religion. His successor was Myron C. Cole, who stood in a ministerial tradition of liberal theology, open-mindedness, and practical religion. During his theological studies at the divinity school of the University of Chicago and in his previous pastorate in Cincinnati, California-reared Cole had learned to connect liberal theology, high-toned spirituality, and active involvement in public affairs.^{vii} Following the example of colleagues at First Unitarian and First Presbyterian Churches, he joined the City Club and quickly was thrust into the forefront of Portland’s political life. A City Club committee on which Cole served influenced an election that led to the defeat of a long-time Portland mayor and the election of a new mayor on a reformist platform.

One result of this activity was that this new mayor, Dorothy McCullough Lee, named Cole to chair a citizen’s commission to craft an ordinance on non-discrimination for the city of Portland. Three of the eleven other members—

Alfred Sulmonetti, Paul Raver's wife Loy Raver, and Stephen P. Epler – also served on this commission.

Epler had come to Portland soon after the close of the war to create a way for the Oregon system of higher education to care for an influx of service personnel who would be taking advantage of the G.I. Bill. Although, the program was intended to be short-lived, Epler was able to keep it going, enlarge its scope, and create what was to become Portland State University. The fledging university found its permanent home in the South Park Blocks, only two blocks from First Christian Church. Stephen Epler was the son of a Disciples minister in Iowa, and because of that lineage, says the author of a history of the university's first fifty years, the liberal spirit of that denomination became part of the spirit of the University.^{viii}

In 1952, Fern Epler, member of the sanctuary choir and chair of the church's music committee, recommended that the congregation hire Laurie Pratt to become minister of music, which included serving as organist and director of the church's three choirs. Pratt and pastor Cole worked together closely to strengthen the Sunday services and to key the music and spirit to the progressive character that churches like First Christian believed to be appropriate. Pratt was especially influential in developing what one long-term member has described as "an acoustic sacred space which welcomes all and nurtures an informed spirituality."^{ix}

For the next fifty-six years, until his retirement in 2008, Pratt embodied this sense of the religious spirit. At the peak of his ministry of music, Pratt and the church's Sanctuary Choir led the congregation's worship with strength and also sponsored concerts at the church by university and community choirs so that First Christian Church became a strong contributor to Portland's artistic and spiritual culture.

During the Cole years, the congregation sponsored political forums while major political campaigns were in progress. Edith Green, a woman with strong political hopes, was attracted membership in the church by one of these events. Soon thereafter, as part of a political revolution that ushered in a generation of leadership by Oregon Democrats, she was elected to the U. S. House of Representatives, a post she held for twenty years. During all of these years, Green retained an active presence at First Christian Church and, for many years, regular participation in a D. C. area congregation whose pastor, Charles Bayer, was one of the Disciples' most activist ministers. When she began her Washington career, Green was known as a progressive in her political agenda. In later years she was thought by most observers to have moved toward a more conservative position, in part because of her opposition to student activism during the Vietnam War and her unwillingness to condone some of the aggressive forms of social protest during those years.^x

Standing Against the Culture

In 1956, Harold Glen Brown was called to be pastor of First Christian Church. He too was Chicago-trained and he came to Portland following strong ministries in Texas. Brown combined a strong, thoughtful pulpit presence with a vigorous commitment to the basics of congregational life, such as evangelism and the acquisition of real estate so that church facilities could expand as its membership grew. During his decade in Portland, Brown (alone or with his wife Alberta) hosted several series of Bible studies or religious affairs programs on Portland TV. Although less active in city affairs than his immediate predecessors had been, Brown participated in community activities and frequently offered his theological commentary on public affairs. During the Kennedy-Nixon presidential campaign, Brown's sermon on the separation of church and state and the intertwining of religion and politics made the national news.^{xi}

Brown believed that this course of action—giving thoughtful but non-confrontational attention to public affairs—would contribute to congregational strength. In one column, he affirmed the statement that Raymond Grant, bishop of Oregon Methodists, had made a few days earlier at the church's scholarship aid banquet. "In those churches of ours where our ministers are afraid of their shadows the churches are dwindling, but in those congregations of ours where the men are speaking without fear, willing to receive criticism, above all concerned about being prophets of God, the congregations are thriving and the people are coming to hear the Word of God."

Sensing that a cultural revolution was coming, Brown told his congregation in a sermon on June 23, 1963, that "sixty percent of the American people now belong to the Church, but already there seem to be signs that a wave of secularism is coming in and that the tide of organized religion is moving out." He then confessed his concern "about the decisions in the hearts of men to embrace the secular culture and to turn away from the grace, the light, and the power of God."

One of Brown's great interests was Portland State University that was developing next door to the church and where his wife, Alberta Z. Brown, taught in the English department. With Brown's encouragement, the church called Rodney I. Page to its staff, with a contract to spend half of his time as campus minister.

Although the attitudes of these two pastors toward the place of religion in public life were compatible, their styles of engagement differed, as can be seen in columns on race-related tensions that they wrote in 1965 and 1966. Discussing the assassination of Malcolm X, Page rejected the idea that the church should have no role in dealing with these crises but instead get along as "a nice, pietistic club to which they come each Sunday to be entertained by a sermon and some good music." "If the church is going to be at all relevant to the life of the world,"

Page insisted, “then it is going to have to be allowed to sometimes stand against the culture to judge and redeem it.”

Brown wrote more cautiously. While expressing his sympathy for non-violent demonstrations, he defended his decision not to go on the Civil Rights Demonstration in Selma, Alabama. After writing that he agreed with Reinhold Niebuhr, who had declared that the race crisis had saved the churches from irrelevancy,^{xii} he asked “Are we relevant?” He answered with the hope that God would help them keep their roots deep in theology and their branches productive in the social conditions around them. Discussing the ideological split that had occurred in the Civil Rights Movement, Brown noted that some leaders were “obsessed with the love of power rather than the power of love.” Christians should continue to support civil rights leaders who believed in non-violence and to work for the kind of society we believe in.

As the two pastors were debating these matters, lay member Don Barrett was moving forward effectively through his work as teacher in Jefferson High School. The majority of Portland’s small, but impoverished, African-American community lived in neighborhoods close to that school. Although white, Barrett became actively involved in the struggles within the school and between the school and the community. In January 1969, Portland’s downtown Kiwanis Club named him “Layman of the Year” in recognition of his dedication to God and his outstanding contributions to the spiritual life and welfare of his community.”

Turning of the Tide

In 1958, Harold E. Fey, editor of the *Christian Century*, announced that 1957 was the year that religion passed crest. That cultural shift was slow in coming to First Christian Church for two reasons. The Pacific Northwest was isolated from some of the cultural trends, and Brown was highly skilled in maintaining a steady hand in congregational life.^{xiii} With Brown’s departure in 1966, however,

even First Christian Church experienced the distress that was affecting American life. Because of its proximity to Portland State University, the congregation was especially vulnerable to the disruptions brought on by the cultural revolution of the 1960s.

A new pastor, Dan Kechel, emphasized congregational life and ministries in the community that were non-confrontational. Paul Raver and Stephen Epler had left Portland. Because they disagreed with the way that Rodney Page was conducting his work on campus, some of the leaders of First Christian Church took action that terminated his position. He and a group of church members who supported his ministry left the church. Taking their places in church leadership were business leaders who represented a more traditional view concerning the church's role in public life. Congresswoman Edith Green found herself increasingly distanced from the progressive wing in Congress and her church. She and her new pastor Kechel were aligned in their desire to separate public affairs and the pulpit. Among the ministries that could be emphasized, because they did not question societal structures, were a pre-school program that had been initiated with the strong influence of Alberta Z. Brown, and a daytime program that provided meals for seniors.

Two aspects of First Christian Church's identity were being challenged by events during the late 1960s and 1970s. The first was its emphasis upon liberal theology. In one of the letters generated by the crisis, a university student expressed her fear that liberal Christianity itself was being threatened. The student's premonition was confirmed in a column that her pastor wrote in August of 1970. Acknowledging that colleagues in other churches considered his position to be conservative and unhelpful, Kechel declared that "if being 'open' and 'liberal' is defined as cooperating with any new force that comes into the national scene, then I resign as a liberal." We would be "only a step away from

the sacrifice of the real prophetic power of the church—its untangled freedom to speak God’s judgment to all men and organizations of whatever bias.”

The second issue that was under debate was the form of public presence that a church should take. In an interview in the *Oregonian*, Kechel declared that throughout the church’s history “service in the Christian sense has been emphasized...but socio-political activism as such has been avoided.” Later in the article, this position was reiterated by Dwayne W. Heathman, Portland businessman who chaired the church’s expansion committee. “We have noticed through the years that the certain way to cause friction in the congregation and lose members is to take political stands.”^{xiv}

This point of view seemed to be confirmed in a book by William B. Cate, who had come to the city in 1958 as head of the Greater Portland Council of Churches. Cate declared that churches should commit much of their responsibility for social activism to ecumenical agencies, such as the one he headed, because they could use personnel and financial resources more efficiently than the congregations. Especially important for First Christian Church was Cate’s claim that congregations would be less exposed to risk when administrative oversight of confrontational ministries was lodged in these agencies.^{xv}

Two developments seemed to confirm Cate’s analysis. The first was the dramatic success of Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon, the ecumenical agency that was created by merging the Oregon Council of Churches and the Portland Council of Churches. Soon after losing his post at First Christian Church and Portland State, Rodney Page had joined the staff of the Oregon Council, and a little later became executive director of the new agency. During his two decades with EMO, Page led it from being the smallest local or regional council of churches in the United States to the largest.

When life at First Christian had stabilized and Page was once again listed in its membership, he initiated a program to resettle Vietnamese refugees in

Portland. For more than a decade, this serious but non-confrontational ministry was headed by First Christian layman, Roy Metcalf, who in 1984, in a CBS TV special received a Jefferson Award from the American Institute for Public Service “for his devotion to the cause of refugee resettlement.” At the 1989 General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), First Christian Church was recognized as one of five “vital congregations” because of its “significant contribution to the life and witness of the whole church.”

Retraditioning

Having told the story of an important period in the life of First Christian Church, I want to return to Bass’s thesis concerning the recovery of vitality in mainline Protestant churches. At the outset, it is essential to note that every generation has distinctive, once only factors. Communities are always changing. Ministers, with their varying abilities, come and go, but so do all of the other members of a church. Every moment in a congregation’s life develops as it does because of the dynamic interaction of specific people and the ongoing processes of the world. Yet congregations like people develop character, style, deeply ingrained patterns that persist over time. The dynamic recovery of tradition leads to vitality because it allows this deep character to come forward again. As a church becomes what it really is, it gains confidence, and that confidence leads to energy and life.

Four themes can be seen in the narrative I have presented. The first is that during these years of strength the congregation identified itself with Protestant liberalism, a theological point of view that believed that religious faith can coexist with the historical and scientific world view that is one of the foundations of Western culture. A revitalized mainline church does not cling to its previous way of explaining its faith, nor does it replace its liberal heritage with some version of conservative theology. Rather, Bass proposes, it moves to what she calls postliberalism, “an independent, constructive theological turn birthed

within classical liberalism.” It is a “position that combines the openness of liberalism with a commitment to Christian particularity.” At the same time, a church needs to be ready to critique its culture as was the case at First Christian Church during the period covered by this study.

A second theme in the recent history of First Christian Church is that religious conviction leads to lives devoted to doing good for others. This theme was expressed by Sharon E. Watkins, our church’s general minister and president, in her sermon at the prayer service on the day after President Obama’s inauguration: that we show our love of God by the way we love our neighbor. At its most vital period, pastors and members of First Christian Church found ways of expressing what they believed by the way that they engaged in private benevolence and public service.

This conviction leads to a third element that can be seen in the story of First Christian Church. Its primary mode of engagement in the life of the world was by the actions of individuals, both pastors and lay members, in their professional lives and personal involvement in the affairs of the city and the neighborhoods where they lived. Throughout this period, it is clear that pastors of the church shared a commitment to public service, seeing their work in community activities as one of the ways that they conducted their ministries to the congregation. Furthermore, an important part of the congregation’s program was to teach its members about public affairs and guide them in their personal ministries in the world.

A fourth theme is that the congregation itself sponsored activities that stood at the interface of the church’s belief-centered life and values-seeking aspects of the larger community. Its outward-reaching music program, its practice of holding forums to introduce candidates for public office, and its weekday pre-school program are but three examples from the period we have reviewed.

I have told these stories from the life of one church for two reasons. One purpose is to make my historical craft useful to this congregation as it continues its ministry in a new century. A second purpose is to use these reflections from one church as an example of the historical work that many congregations could undertake with great benefit. At the heart of their craft, historians are storytellers and by their stories historians help congregations that have grown old become young again. With their new youthful enthusiasm, these churches find themselves able to redevelop the disciplines and practices that make them and their members strong in the faith and effective in their witness to the gospel in the communities that they serve.

ⁱ *Seventy-Five Rewarding Years: A History of First Christian Church, Portland, Oregon* (Portland: First Christian Church, 1955). See also *Stained Glass Windows of First Christian Church* (Portland: Media Weavers, 1999).

ⁱⁱ Diana Butler Bass, *The Practicing Congregation* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2004), 97.

ⁱⁱⁱ Thompson L. Shannon, "Faith for the Adventure," *International Convention of Disciples of Christ, The Disciples Speak: One World Through Christ, Columbus, Ohio, October 17-22, 1944* (St. Louis: Christian Board of Publication, n.d.), 239-246.

^{iv} *The Oregonian*, January 6, 1946. Shannon's involvement in the city was evident at the reception in the church's community room at the conclusion of his ministry in Portland when more than 1,475 people passed through the receiving line—more people than the church listed in its membership and probably three times the number that would have attended worship on an average Sunday.

^v E. Kimbark MacColl, *The Growth of a City: Power and Politics in Portland, Oregon, 1915-1950* (Portland: The Georgian Press, 1977), 555 ff.

^{vi} Manuscripts for both sermons are in First Christian Church Archives, Cole file. The previous year, Raver had been attacked by a writer in *The Readers' Digest*, who accused him of being a socialist because of his record with Bonneville Power Administration. Not only Cole, his pastor, but also Henry M. Jackson, congressman from Washington, and Franklin T. Griffith, head of Portland General Electric, came to his defense.

^{vii} Cole's interpretation of his approach to ministry appears in *Myron Here* (Santa Ana, CA: Mills Publishing, 1982).

^{viii} Gordon B. Dodds, *The College That Wouldn't Die: The First Fifty Years of Portland State University, 1946-1996* (Portland: Oregon Historical Society Press in collaboration with Portland State University, 2000), 1-15.

^{ix} "Nurturing an Informed Spirituality: Reflections upon the Music Ministry of Laurie Pratt," by Keith Watkins, 2007.

^x During a period of congregational conflict, Green left the church, as did the minister who was serving the congregation at that time.

^{xi} All of Brown's columns and approximately eighty of his sermons are preserved in the church's archives.

^{xii} Despite this positive reference to Reinhold Niebuhr, who understood himself as a realist in ethical and political matters, Brown continued to represent the liberal theology of preachers like Harry Emerson Fosdick.

^{xiii} A revealing interpretation of religion in the Pacific Northwest is *Religion and Public Life in the Pacific Northwest: The None Zone* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2004).

^{xiv} Velma Clyde, "First Christian Church to remain firmly rooted in city hub," *The Oregonian*, September 4, 1976, 6.

^{xv} William B. Cate, *The Ecumenical Scandal on Main Street* (New York: Association Press, 1965), 94.