

In mid-April 1876, the village of Mt. Pleasant was again subjected to calamity. Unusually heavy spring rains combined with a rapid melting of the snow cover to send the Chippewa River far over its banks in the worst flood the valley would know for many years. Despite serious damage to town and countryside, the people of the village shook off the disaster and, as the skies cleared and the waters receded, prepared to take part in the months-long celebration of the nation's centennial.

To commemorate the centennial Governor John J. Bagley of Michigan suggested that citizens plant shade trees around their homes and along their streets. By the Fourth of July newly-planted elms and maples lined the route of the holiday parade of decorated wagons and oxcarts which traveled up and down the village streets to a gathering place on the courthouse square opposite the Presbyterian Church. There a happy throng of townspeople and county visitors stepped carefully among the young trees which now graced the churchyard and the courthouse lawn to salute the momentous day with prayer, patriotic song, oratory, feasting, games, and fireworks.

The Presbyterians, meanwhile, were without a minister until late in May when the Reverend J. Nesbitt preached his first sermon. No record exists of this message, but if he called for the wrath of heaven to descend upon all sinners, he must have preached effectively. The following day the clouds gathered and a fierce storm lashed the town, bombarding it "with hailstones as large as hens' eggs." The rain of ice ruined budding fruit and newly-sprouted field crops and severely damaged property. When the storm ended the Presbyterian Church was a shambles, its north side open to the elements and its sanctuary littered with melting ice and the shards of more than a hundred shattered window panes.

The records of the church for 1876 are sadly deficient and contain no reference to Nesbitt and his brief ministry. In the church directory which it published weekly, however, the local newspaper listed him as the Presbyterian pastor. He served the church only three months, closing "his labors with his people" with a farewell sermon on August 20. Evidently he left the town on good terms, for the weather the following day was fair and warm.

After preaching to the Presbyterians early in October, the Reverend Charles A. Taylor of St. Louis, Michigan agreed to serve as their stated supply or interim pastor. An elderly man with a long record of service to Christ, he quickly won the admiration and regard of young and old alike. In February, 1855, as a pioneer settler he had built a log home on a 240 acre wilderness tract in Chippewa Township. The next month he preached the first sermon—"a genuine good old-fashioned Methodist sermon"—ever delivered in Isabella County.

The impact of Taylor's evangelism became apparent from the moment he took over the Presbyterian pulpit. Within a month's time, largely as a result of his leadership and determination, the congregation enjoyed a richer and more pertinent program of worship and instruction than ever before. The new pastor did not confine his preaching to the usual morning and evening services on the Sabbath, but, as the Christmas season approached, conducted meetings every weekday evening. Nor did he neglect the Sunday School. When he met with the classes following the Sunday morning services, every teacher and student found inspiration in the words of this dedicated man of God.

In Mt. Pleasant the holiday season of the centennial year culminated on Christmas night with an unusually elaborate and festive Sunday School program at the Presbyterian Church. To greet the many children and adults of the town who crowded the sanctuary was a giant sailboat with ribbons and banners streaming from its masts as, seemingly, it floated along on a gentle sea. After distributing its cargo of gifts to the children, Taylor called upon all present to find joy in Christ not only during the Christmas season, but throughout the year. With Him as their helmsman, in all probability he told his listeners, they might sail on through life on a sea of peace and contentment and fear no tempest.

Taylor had already determined on a course of action for the winter months. He would make certain that the religious fervor engendered by his weeknight services and the Christmas celebration remained alive and strong and encompassed others who had yet to find Christ. Undoubtedly, his Methodist background and experience had much to do with developing closer ties between the Presbyterians and their Methodist brethren. The Ladies' Association of the Methodist Church and the Presbyterian Ladies' Aid Society had conducted "union" activities in the past, but not as frequently nor on as large a scale as was now their practice.

This closer association soon became even more apparent. Early in the new year, Taylor and the Reverend W. H. Ware, pastor of the local Methodist Church, instituted a series of evangelistic services which continued nightly through January and February. Each evening the townspeople filled the Presbyterian Church, the larger of the two edifices, to capacity. Never before had the town been in the grip of such religious fervor. Many merchants closed their establishments early in order that they and all in their employ might attend each session. "We are led to believe," said the local editor, "that good pastors make good people." In his opinion the sermons were timely and effective. Not only had a number of young men and women "resolved to follow the Lord," but so, too, had a number of the "older and more staid citizens." Certainly, the meetings would have a beneficial impact on Mt. Pleasant, he concluded, for "some men [would] be made better, and some homes happier. . . ." On a number of evenings during the revival, Ware alone conducted services in the Presbyterian Church, Taylor journeying to the countryside to carry his message of hope to farmers and lumberjacks gathered in a lonely meetinghouse or school building.

By the time the revival ended late in February, more than fifty citizens had accepted Christ and affiliated with one church or the other. Some, said the editor, had "been brought back from a back-slidden condition," and many church members themselves now faced the future with strengthened convictions.

The records of the Session bear out the newspaper evaluation of the revival. Frequently, after an evening service, Taylor, the moderator, and ruling elders Bouton, Slater, and David Morse would examine those wishing to join the church. Indeed, during the first three months of 1877 more were admitted than ever before in a like period. Among the new members were some such as Wilkinson Doughty and John R. Doughty who heretofore had strongly supported the church and served the church but had failed to profess their faith in Christ.

During his few months as pastor, Taylor had given freely of his time and labor with small regard for his own well-being. In appreciation, late in March his parishioners and other townspeople congregated at the school-house for a "donation" honoring the aged clergyman. The \$95 taken in at the affair was not to apply to his salary but was "a donation in the true sense of the word"—a gift from his Mt. Pleasant admirers.

Unhappily, Taylor would soon have need for the additional funds. Late

in April he became ill and was bed-ridden for several weeks. "Providence permitting," he informed the church on May 16 when he was again on his feet, "I contemplate addressing my people once more, on the coming Sabbath. My subject will be 'Willing Service.' Should I be unable to meet my people at any time in the future, a notice to that effect will be posted on the church door before the bell rings for service." On June 28, however, knowing that he could no longer continue, he resigned as pastor. After presiding at a communion service on the following Sunday, he wrote with trembling hand his last entry in the Session Record and departed for a milder climate and the six months rest decreed by his physician.

For almost a year following the Reverend Taylor's departure, the First Presbyterian Church sought in vain for a pastor. Sometimes a visiting minister would conduct a Thursday evening prayer meeting and preach to the congregation the following Sunday, but on most Sabbaths, except for Sunday School activities, there was no religious service whatsoever. As a result the church seemed to lose much of the momentum that it had gained during the brief span of Taylor's inspired leadership. Mt. Pleasant, with a relatively new Presbyterian Church and a rapidly increasing population now numbering nearly a thousand, was a logical site for the meeting of the Saginaw Presbytery in September, 1877. The local congregation held high hopes of securing the services of a minister at this conclave, but were disappointed. Indeed, winter had come and had all but gone before the Reverend Edmund W. Borden of Ann Arbor and the Detroit Presbytery accepted a call to the Mt. Pleasant church.

With more than twenty years' experience in the ministry, and highly recommended by an elderly Ann Arbor clergyman who knew him well, Borden appeared to be an excellent choice for the First Presbyterian pulpit. After hearing him preach, the officers of the congregation made verbal contract with him for a year's service at a salary of \$700. Of this amount the church would accept responsibility for \$400 (\$100 quarterly), but, as was done in the past, would request the Board of Home Missions to pay \$300 in mission funds directly to the new pastor.

To raise the \$400, the trustees, as was now the practice, circulated a "subscription list" and called upon the membership to pledge liberally. Payments were to be made quarterly in order that the pastor's salary might be paid promptly. When the list was returned, unfortunately, the total subscribed amounted to only \$350. Hopefully, funds would be forthcoming from other sources to pay the remainder.

Evidently dissension developed in the church soon after Borden's arrival. The few passages in the records relating to his pastoral year indicate that the elders—who had met so faithfully and frequently with the Reverend Taylor—seldom responded to Borden's call for the Session to convene. In like manner, the trustees apparently gave little attention to their duties. As a Board they met in September for their only official meeting of the year. On that occasion they took no significant action other than to authorize Charles Slater to examine and make the necessary repairs on the church steeple and to appoint a committee "to look up and get a correct list on church erection." By this time the trustees were so much in need of operating funds that any money collected on overdue building pledges would be most welcome.

This financial crisis was undoubtedly another indication of the growing unrest and dissatisfaction within the church. During the first quarter, parishioners had honored their subscription commitments and Borden had received the payment due him. Thereafter, however, many members neglected or refused to meet their pledges when due. Indeed, one prominent trustee

later declared that he could find nothing wrong with this practice--especially if the money when finally paid would enable the minister to leave the town immediately. As a result of this delinquency the trustees were able to pay Borden only a fraction of the salary due him for the second and third quarters. Had not the minister received \$150 from the Home Mission Board, he would have had difficulty supplying his family with even the barest comforts. Adding to the seriousness of his position was a blunt notice from the Mission Board that its treasury was empty and that "he must look to his people to help him provide for the winter." Borden informed the trustees of the Board's action and its recommendation, but, in his words, "they did not regard it." As winter neared its end, however, the trustees knew that within a few weeks they must pay in full their obligation to the pastor. Hopeful that church members would provide most of the necessary funds by meeting their pledges, the trustees proposed a "donation" to raise the unsubscribed portion of the salary. When questioned as to his feelings in the matter, Borden consented to the affair provided it was advertised "as a donation to the church" for the purpose of raising funds for his salary.

The published notice of the donation, however, failed to indicate its true purpose. "The Presbyterian Society of this place," it read,

will have a donation for the benefit of Rev. Mr. Borden on Wednesday evening Feb. 26 at Swart's Hall. It is desired that this donation shall be very successful socially and pecuniarily. Let none of the numerous friends of Mr. Borden and the Church be behind in aiding to convince our pastor that there is a tangibleness in the affections of his congregation and friends which is pleasing to contemplate. In other words, let this be a rousing donation. . . .

The people of Mt. Pleasant thoroughly appreciated "donations" and, as usual, turned out in substantial numbers for the advertised "great treat that awaited them" at the Borden supper. When the treasurer totaled the receipts for the evening, he had collected \$80.66 in cash and \$12.75 "in promises." Of this amount, the trustees tendered \$50.00 to the hard-pressed pastor, and retained the remainder to balance unpaid subscriptions when they made final settlement with him.

This action of the trustees served as the final straw in the breakdown of relations between the pastor and church officials. In light of the published announcement, Borden believed that the entire amount collected at the affair was rightfully his--a gift to him from those who attended--even though its acceptance would increase his total local income to an amount larger than the contracted salary. Now thoroughly disillusioned with the church and his future as its pastor, Borden informed the trustees that he did not intend to renew his contract when his year ended a month hence. "A large portion of village churches are unable or unwilling to pay, year by year, an adequate salary," he later explained, "and so soon as the pay begins to come with difficulty, then it is well for a minister to seek another field."

Many in the church were disappointed with Borden's decision and urged him to remain. So strong was this sentiment that the trustees, recalling the difficulty previously experienced in securing a pastor, sent Wilkinson Doughty and Charles Slater to learn from the unhappy minister the terms he would demand for another year of service.

Borden submitted his conditions in writing. First and foremost, he

declared, there must be "an assurance of such unanimity" in the church as to "promise success to my ministry." He further specified that the church must contract to pay him a salary of \$700.00 in quarterly allotments, each payable six weeks before the end of the quarter. At a congregational meeting called to consider these demands, a large majority of those present opposed them and voted not to offer the pastor a new contract.

If the matter had ended at this point, the church would have been spared much embarrassment and injury. Soon after learning the decision of the congregation, Borden announced from the pulpit that on the evening of his last Sunday as their pastor he would reveal to the congregation the true circumstances regarding his decision to leave.

An expectant audience overflowed the 400 seat sanctuary as the grim-faced pastor took the pulpit for his final appearance. Even one of his critics later admitted that the pastor on this occasion "preached a very fine sermon." When the religious service ended, however, Borden immediately set forth on a denunciation of the trustees and elders of the church--accusing them of penury, deceit, and outright dishonesty in their relations with him during the past year. The audience, excited by the tirade, punctuated each accusation with shouts of applause and stamping of feet. Although he had now received his \$400.00 salary in full, Borden recalled with bitterness the many weeks with little or no income and, especially galling, the injustice of the donation for his benefit. At last, speechless with emotion, he stepped down from the podium, donned his overcoat and overshoes, and stalked from the church for the last time.

The dissension within the church was now clearly apparent. Only one of the seven trustees had voted to retain Borden, but there were many in the congregation who firmly believed that the pastor had been treated unfairly. On the Tuesday evening following his diatribe, a large number of church members and townspeople gathered at his home for a surprise "donation." At the conclusion of the fun and feasting, the "collector" for the evening did not, as Borden expressed it, "run off with the bag," but presented the minister and his family with a purse containing \$55.00. For the next month and more, until Borden had disposed of his household goods and departed for Ann Arbor, the local newspapers devoted column after column to the charges and countercharges of the minister and of those who were the targets of his accusations. The church had been severely tried. If it were to survive, it must forgive and be forgiven. Somehow, somewhere, it must find the leadership in Christ that would heal its wounds.