

Chapter 2

On December 19, 1977 the Session had set in motion a one and one-half year Mission study for Presbytery. The committee's work was completed in 1979. Harold Wallace was the committee chairman. Working with him were Vern Austin, Ralph Bergquist, Anne Juhnke, Jerry Lounsbury, Fred Phelps, Joanne Roy, William Sleeper, Dorothy Theunissen and Cathy Willwerth. A vast amount of data was accumulated, primarily through the efforts of Lounsbury and Theunissen. A profile showed that church membership was 1000; average Sunday Worship attendance, 562; Church School enrollment 562; average Church School attendance 157 (including adults); 25% of families had a child under eighteen years at home; 8% were single adults; 54% had no children at home; per capita giving was \$130; and resident giving units in the church totaled 300.

This study provided the first solid indication of a rift within the church. There seemed to be growing division between the evangelistic thrust group of membership and those who would prefer other avenues of worship and Christian action. The communication between the Reverend Malcolm Brown and those who did not accept his vision deteriorated. There was the feeling among many long-time members of the congregation that the evangelistic groups, e.g. the Covenant Community, had a disproportionate influence on the direction of the church. There was a primary concern that there was a direct shift of the church's direction towards a charismatic influence in both the worship service formats and church related groups and activities. The gravest concern was directed toward the existence and operation of the Covenant Community. Many members appreciated the performances of the Maranatha Singers, but others resented them when they took part in a church service. It was ironical that 100 years earlier (1879) the church had gone through a similar unpleasant situation where dissension was apparent within the church. In 1879 it involved the Reverend Edmund Borden and is described in A Silver Spire on pages 17-20.

Members of the study committee offered four suggestions:

1. the need for periodic forums in which the congregation could bring to the ruling body of the church their concerns
2. the need to study the need for an additional Minister
3. the need for review of the Christian Education program - some of the youth were apparently being "turned-off"
4. the need for investigation of the Covenant Community to determine its emphasis and direction

The Ministers reportedly were spending a disproportionate part of their time with the Covenant Community.

The input of the Mission study had demonstrated concern regarding both the fellowship and congregational care of the church. Related to the concerns already mentioned was the apparent disregard for regulations that governed the election of the members to the Session and the fact that employees of the church served on the Boards of the church.

Letters were received by the Session and by Presbytery's Ministerial Relations Committee from congregation members questioning the Covenant Community and its spin-off ramifications. On June 20, 1979 the Session received a letter from the Ministerial Relations Committee explaining the concerns of the letters that they had been receiving. Issues brought into focus were:

1. whether the United Presbyterian Church of U.S.A. was an exclusive or inclusive denomination
2. the issue of religious elitism in the church
3. how human relations problems and conflicts are constructively and openly dealt within the community of the church
4. how negative emotions, like anger, fear, and resentment are constructively and openly dealt within the community of the church

The letter outlined these concerns/problems that had arisen, and it asked the Session to study them and subsequently the Presbytery and the Session should meet together. The three Ministers were asked to remove themselves from the leadership of the Covenant Community. Several special meetings were held, and in October the Session voted against accepting the recommendations of the Ministerial Relations Committee. In November, Presbytery appointed an Administrative Commission to review the Ministerial Relations Committee's recommendations. A petition, with ninety signatures, mandated that there be a special congregational meeting in February so that the ministerial staff of the church could inform the congregation of the events and issues that led to the formation of the Administrative Commission. The meeting was well attended and debate occurred. In March, the Commission met with five different groups of the church to gather further information.

After fourteen months of study, counsel, and inquiry regarding circumstances at First Presbyterian Church of Mt. Pleasant, the Presbytery of Lake Huron acted. At its June 10, 1980 stated meeting at Alma College, the Elders and Ministers from fifty-six area churches received the report of its Administrative Commission and adopted its recommendations. The Commission had noted a serious polarization within the congregation, and the Session had reached the point where there would be no reconciliation unless major action was taken by Presbytery. Their decision was forwarded to the Mt. Pleasant Session which acted on June 16. Present at this meeting were the Reverend Dr. John McDowell, moderator, and members of the Presbytery's Administrative Commission and Presbytery's Ministerial Relations Committee. Included in the recommendations that were carried out were:

1. dissolved the Covenant Community
2. dissolved relationship with the Reverend Malcolm Brown
3. Several families in the congregation had placed their pledge dollars into an escrow account the previous year to be held there until the church problems were resolved. These individuals were directed to close out this account and transfer the money to the church.
4. The relationships with Ministers VanDam and Osborn were dissolved.
5. Employment was terminated with the Director of Christian Education, Director of Music, Sexton, Financial Secretary and Treasurer, and Church Secretary.
6. Presbytery would appoint an interim pastor (Session's choice) for one year and then review the program.
7. Session would make monthly reports to the Administrative Commission.
8. The three Ministers were enjoined from all functions of the church for a period of six months.

Committees of the Session, with much assistance from members of the congregation, continued all major church functions. This had been

a crucial year in the life of First Presbyterian of Mt. Pleasant, and the Session had worked long and diligently. In addition to the twelve Stated Meetings, the Session had held eleven Special Meetings. Each committee met several hours to prepare for each of the Session Meetings.

The church was without a pastor for approximately three months. Services went smoothly with the help of Presbytery, willing and competent supply pastors, and able lay participants. Supply pastors during the summer of 1980 came from Midland, Alma, Flint, and Mt. Pleasant.

After studying the credentials of several candidates presented by Presbytery, the Session recommended to them that the Reverend John Deason be hired as interim pastor for one year. Kay and John Deason had visited Mt. Pleasant and met informally with Session, and members of Session had heard John preach in Fenton on July 13.

As was anticipated, the church almost immediately realized many resignations including fifteen from the Session, twenty from the Board of Deacons, one member of the Memorial Committee, and two members at large to the Nominating Committee. A large number of the members that resigned from the church rolls went to a newly formed Community Church which later affiliated with the national Evangelical Presbyterian Church. The Reverend Malcolm Brown became pastor at this new church. On the positive side, a class of sixteen new members was received into First Presbyterian Church in November.

The Reverend Dr. John McDowell from Midland continued as moderator of the Session over the summer months. He gave outstanding assistance to the Christian Education Committee and helped with all of the changeovers that were occurring within the church.