

I REMEMBER

A Eulogy About A Small Country Church

They say you're an eyesore. I remember when you were a sight for sore eyes. You were born out of disaster, confusion, contention, and near-despair. You became a symbol of hope, not only for those who worshiped within your walls, but also those who passed by along the road. Your predecessor that occupied the spot where you have stood for nearly fifty years was destroyed by fire on Palm Sunday, 1944.

I remember the many meetings that were held in order to decide, for sure; will we rebuild, and if so, where? At one such meeting it was questioned if it was God's will to rebuild. My mother, who almost never spoke out in a meeting, said, "I don't see how it can be against God's will to build a church. For me that settled the issue.

An architect, St. Clair Pardee of St. Johns, was hired to draw up plans. To get a permit to build, we needed a contractor's bid which was hard to get because of wartime economics. Eventually one was found; his bid was the astounding figure of \$18,000! Those plans were never used--too many of the congregation said, we will never be able to pay for it! About two-thirds of the congregation transferred out for one excuse or another. Those who remained straightened their shoulders and said, we will rebuild. The youth class decided among themselves that if the adults didn't rebuild, when they were able, they would build a church.

A church near Lowell, whose congregation of old-timers had dwindled to only a handful, was to be disbanded. It had been a part of the former German Methodist Conference that included Michigan, Ohio, and Pennsylvania, as had the Emanuel congregation. Because of this kinship, they offered to give to Emanuel anything that could be salvaged from their building. Men with trucks drove to Lowell and brought back piano, pulpit, chairs, pews, and other furnishings; also lumber, 2 x 4's, boards, and flooring. A man from the Michigan Conference drew up a new set of plans, supposedly to utilize materials from that building, thereby cutting cost and, in fact, much was used in your construction. The flooring in the main level of your sanctuary was from that building.

I remember what a joy it was each Sunday after worship service (conducted in the remodeled parsonage next door) when the congregation wandered across the lawn to see how much you had grown. I remember meeting for worship in your basement before your main floor was completed. In fact, for several years we met upstairs only in summers, and in the basement during the cold part of the year to conserve fuel. We had to scrape hard to get the \$56.00 a month to pay off the loan.

I remember that for the first wedding you hosted, those involved put down salvaged carpeting in the chancel area because the flooring had not yet been laid. I remember helping put down that flooring when we were financially able. There were three men nailing it down and for each man was a woman to hand him the next board of the right length.

I remember that for a time my father brought almost half the Sunday School in his car (7). Total attendance - 15. We had two classes -- children and adults. But your family started to grow.

I did not see all of the construction regularly because in September 1946, I went away to college, but you were always a joy to come home to.

I remember at my mother's funeral the casket was up front with the lid open. At the end of the service, the mortician lowered the lid, and there on the wall behind the casket, I saw for the first time a picture the children had collected money to buy -- a picture of Jesus with his hands outstretched in blessing. It spoke peace to my heart.

I remember one Sunday morning when Billy and Carolyn Crego's first child was tiny, lying in her baby seat, during the sermon she began softly babbling happy baby sounds. The minister paused in his sermon, listened a moment, then said, "Isn't that beautiful!"

I remember for several years you hosted a potluck dinner after church service the last Sunday of each month. I planned my garden to produce green onions for all but a few winter months (among other things). And your family continued to grow.

I remember Foy Scott, Billy Crego's grandfather, and my father working together to construct a wooden cross to be a focal point on your altar.

I remember being handed two identical flower vases with the injunction to provide flowers for the altar each Sunday from my garden - which I did. I also grew flowers to dry for winter bouquets. I remember on Sunday early in the season I had put yellow daffodils in purple vases only to find the white altar cloth had been replaced by a red one. There were some comments about color combinations. After that I planned my garden to include lots of magenta colored flowers - the color that seemed to go best with the soft paneling on the walls. Someone said that paneling was made from shredded cornstalks, but it was the best we could obtain at that time. I also remember going to Saginaw with my father in his one-seated red panel truck (I sat on a wooden box) to come back with it packed as full as possible with cartons of the stuff.

The bell in your belfry was given by the disbanded Wilsey Church, some of whose members had become part of our family. I remember it sat several Sundays in the entry until a work crew could be organized to install it. It is so huge we had to go single file past it to get to the basement.

I remember we bought - and paid for - an electric organ, a new furnace and pews all in one year. And your family grew.

I remember at first you were built with the emergency exit from the basement to be through the furnace room. Somehow that dark, narrow passageway became cluttered with things, including someone's discarded kitchen sink that was to be installed in your kitchen. And the exit from the upper level was an open iron grill-work stairway. My father was so unhappy

about the situation that he planned -- and got permission to build -- a covered exit from your kitchen which also included enclosing the upper level exit. Harold Mayes liked to tell the story of how he and "Henry" put in the door between the kitchen and the steps. The women's group had bought a solid door for that spot, but as they worked Henry kept saying, "I don't like this door with no window. Suppose someone is coming to a potluck dinner with a big dish of hot food, and someone else decided to go out at the same time -- what's going to happen?" And Harold said, "I think you're right. Let's take a vote; Henry, how, do you vote?" And Henry said, "I vote we exchange this door for one with a window." And Harold responded, "That's how I vote, motion carried!" So they loaded up the door they had and exchanged it for one with glass in it and installed that one. No one ever demanded that it be changed.

I remember one time something went wrong with a drain. My father, as head of trustees, couldn't find men available to help dig it up so he called for women, who responded. I was told the ditch was so deep one couldn't see the women -- only shovelfuls of dirt flying out.

I remember the three choirs you had, Cherub, Junior, and Chancel. We usually closed the choir season by the three choirs together singing the "Battle Hymn of the Republic".

I remember Christmas programs. Some were well organized, some merely a collection of unrelated items. One year the class I taught (about age 9) had spent the fall memorizing Matthew's account of the visit of the Wise Men -- one verse each Sunday. When people started asking whatever will we do for a Christmas program, I was quick to say, "My class will do the Scripture lesson." And they did it as a choral reading, beautifully.

I remember one year helping when the youngsters decorated the Christmas tree with strings of popcorn and cranberries. After everyone else had gone to the basement for hot chocolate I was alone with the tree. I heard a crackling noise and thought one of the lights on the tree must be sparking or shorting out. When I investigated, I found, not a malfunctioning light bulb, but a hungry, little mouse who had smelled the popcorn. After I sounded the alarm, the circus began with the fellows scrambling back and forth between the pews trying to catch that poor little mouse!

I remember one fall Sunday the organ didn't work right, one key wouldn't shut off. I was there when the repair man came to find the trouble. When he opened the instrument we were astonished to find it packed solid with kernels of corn carried by mice from ears of Indian corn in the Thanksgiving display on the altar.

I remember that as your family grew, we needed more rooms for Sunday School classes. As a temporary solution, curtains were installed in the basement to separate the space into classrooms. But realizing still more space would soon be needed, we established an Expansion Fund, and we negotiated to buy four acres of a wheat field just to the north of you at \$1,000.00 an acre. We couldn't find anyone to lend us the money, but we kept adding to the fund. When the time came to close the deal, the owner said, "I haven't harvested my wheat yet, can we wait awhile?" So we waited and added to the fund. One or two times more the owner said; "I'm in no hurry;" and the fund grew. By the time the owner was ready to



finalize the transaction, we paid cash.

I remember the last person to officially join your congregation was Lawrence Frees.

I remember the last funeral I attended within your walls--that of my father. Lawrence's brother had set up a PA system so the basement could be used for overflow. And the funeral luncheon was in your basement.

I remember the parade of pastors who served your congregation, young, old and in between--each with his own message to proclaim.

I remember that after your family joined that of the DeWitt church, you were used only occasionally for a Sunday School class, youth meetings, and Easter Sunrise Services. I felt your loneliness during that time until you were remodeled to accommodate several Sunday School classes as an annex to the first phase of a new building.

Little church, somehow I always felt that you never reached your full potential. But maybe God never intended you to be the finished product. Perhaps your ordained function was to hold down this spot of land so that something bigger could come. Certainly, if the congregation that met within your walls had not had the foresight - or divine guidance - to purchase the four acres just to your north, the current building could not have come into being. Perhaps your real function was to prepare the way for something greater than yourself even as John The Baptist prepared the way for Someone greater than he. But you certainly passed out a lot of blessings on the way. And as John said of Jesus, "He must increase, and I must decrease." Now that a greater building has been erected, it appears that your work is ended--almost. Even as a person may designate that organs from his body may be used by another after his death, your bell and stained glass windows will serve as transplants in this newer, grander building where they will continue to bless worshipers from a new location, even though the rest of you is gone.

Good-bye, little war-time-built, cinder block church. Your presence will no longer be a distraction to mar the view of that which is greater than you, but your memory will live as long as there are hearts to remember.

Good-bye, little white church. You have fulfilled your reason for being. Rest in peace.

Reva Frees
