

Groton United Methodist Church Memories

By Carol Jensen Collins

As the 125th anniversary of the Methodist Church of my childhood approaches, how I wish I could be with you all to celebrate the history of this wonderful church. Yet, while I am unable to attend, I hope you will know that I am with you in spirit. As the date has approached, my mind has been awash with rich memories. One after another, they have lapped like gentle waves on a shore. I thought I might share some here that may perhaps bless the reader in some way, as much as these memories have blessed me.

Baptized as an infant by Reverend Luther Benson in 1948, I was served my first communion around the age of fourteen, while kneeling at the altar rail in the present church's temporary sanctuary, now the fellowship hall. In fact, if my memory serves me correctly, Pastor Robert Nielson began the confirmation classes for the future high school class of 1966 in the old church, just before the move was made. I think this is true because my confirmation memories seem to be divided between the two locations.

I was married by Reverend Oliver Brekke in the present fellowship hall sanctuary in 1967, where my bridal shower was also held. I remember each hostess and almost every gift opened there. The congregation's women of my mother's generation have been such a tremendous, tremendous blessing to me over the years; and my heart goes out to each of you who remain today as the congregation's "senior saints". How many showers and weddings and funerals have you served your friends and neighbors? God only knows; and he does know, be sure of that.

Well, anyway, I grew up and moved away. For nearly a half century I have lived and worshiped elsewhere, though, over the years, I have often returned for a grandparent's funeral or a special function held in this building, when I was lucky enough to be "home" for such an occasion. [Groton always seems like home to me, and I have recently found that I am especially at home in this church in recent years.]

As the memories of the church followed one upon another, I have found that they have the same dichotomy as the two locations of my confirmation class. In fact, the sweetest and fondest of them seem to be in the "old" location. For the younger folks, the old location is at the site of the empty gravel parking lot beside the Senior Citizen's Center and across from Paetznick-Garness Funeral Home, which in those days used to be informally called "the English Lutheran Church".

I think the old church memories are so sweet to me because my Grandmother, Hazel Blackmun, lived across the street from the old church and the Methodist Parsonage. Any time I was at Grandma's I was near the church. She knew every pastor's family who occupied the premises and they seemed to have deep neighborly respect for one another. There were always kind exchanges between them. When Reverend Harvey Sanders lived there, he had a daughter Ruthie who was about my age and we played together on a few occasions.

Sometimes my brother, sister and I would stay with Grandma Hazel on weekends and she would see to our getting off to Sunday school before she later went across to church herself. In particular, I remember how she would find all of her loose change and tie it in a pretty lady's handkerchief so we would not lose it before it was put in the Sunday school offering. The older I got, the more embarrassed

I was of this old fashioned purse. With my handkerchief full of change, I would cross the street in a diagonal line and enter through the back door and go down the stairs to the basement level where Sunday school was in session.

I still remember the back stairs that led to the back of the choir loft in the sanctuary above. There was a bend and landing in the stairs half way down. If you were a kid on the way to Sunday school, you went straight down. And, down I went so many times ... past Jesse Kepke's eighth grade room ... past the pre-school and lower grade sand box and slide I found so intriguing in my earliest years ... and into the old fellowship hall with the bumpy stucco plastered beige walls where at least four classes met at separate long tables and some sort of divider partitions.

The first little low table and tiny chairs you passed on your way in was Margaret Blader's little pre-school class. How she loved the children and how they loved her! I remember sitting in her little chairs and then moving up each year to the other grades and their tables in that same room nearer the kitchen. I especially loved the time when all the classes in that room came together to sing. We were accompanied by Margaret's sister Myrtle Blader, the second or third grade teacher, who played the piano in the far corner of the room. I loved *"Jesus Loves Me"* but my favorite song of all was *"Jesus Wants Me for a Sunbeam"* ... *"to shine for Him each day... In every way try to please Him, at home, at school, at play... a sunbeam, a sunbeam, Jesus wants me for a sunbeam ... a sunbeam, a sunbeam, I'll be a sunbeam for Him."* I don't think I ever had perfect attendance and the little foil stars we would get to lick and stick on our attendance chart often had gaps, but I did leave those hallowed halls determined to be a sunbeam!

Now while the girls were intent on becoming sunbeams, the boys, of course, were practicing showing how silly they could be. As the boys got bigger, Jerry Johnson and his cousin Drew would start making faces at one another, pulling their lower eye lids down until every red-orange pouch that held bulging eye balls encouraged the other boys to do likewise. Even quiet boys like Gary Thurston would eventually join in. I especially remember one such silly day in Jesse's class. The boys thought they were quite hilarious.

Mrs. Kepke was keen on the United Nations and the United Methodist Church curriculum for the older grades included lessons on the hope of world peace that this new international organization might bring mankind. If she could be with us today, I think Jesse would be sorely disappointed to find that armaments of war, as yet, had not been hammered by blacksmiths into pruning hooks and plow shares and that weapons of mass destruction had not been laid down by now. I guess only the second coming of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, will usher in these times. Nonetheless, Jesse was a wonderful Christian woman and she taught a difficult age group. May God bless her soul for that!

As I matriculated, some of the other early teachers I remember were Joy Walters, Doris Strom, and of course, Jesse Kepke. I know I am forgetting some others, but the ones that stand out the most from the old church basement are these. However, if you ministered to me in that way also, but I have not mentioned you, please know you were none the less important to my Christian education.

As the memories have surfaced, I went from the basement up into the sanctuary, where worship services and other experiences were equally rich. I remember the series of pastors mentioned above as all eloquent in the pulpit in one style or another. However, next to the pastor, I suppose I next remember Barbara Wegner's place at the organ in the choir loft. A small choir of dedicated souls ministered every Sunday. Some of the faces I remember are Margaret and Myrtle Blader, Bob Hood,

Joyce Sundling, Mrs. Heitman, Dawn Blair, and maybe Vance Miller, and a number of other adults who ministered with regularity. Sometimes in seventh and eighth grade I also sang in that choir loft with the Youth Choir.

I remember going down the back stairs from the choir loft to the back door landing with my Mother, especially when using the back door to go to Grandmother's house for her tasty fried chicken dinner. One day on the way down this staircase, Mother realized that Barbara was slowly struggling as she made her way down the staircase ahead of us. Mother commented and was informed that it was the beginning of a crippling arthritis she would deal with for many years. Barbara was a marvelously educated and talented woman and we were lucky to have such accomplishment in our church. Because music often speaks to the heart like no theological sermon can, I thank God for what she and later Bob Hood and others who have come after them have unknowingly accomplished in their ministries at the key board and the choir, as the Holy Spirit used their melodies to hit their intended mark.

One of my earliest sanctuary musical memories is being taken as a very small child to a see a large black Negro spiritual choir from down south somewhere. Their rich voices and happy faces made a lasting impression upon a small child who had only ever seen Swedish, Norwegian, German, English, Welsh, Irish and Scottish faces before this enlightening evening.

Additionally, there are many other scenes from my youth that were centered in the sanctuary, like Christmas pageants with white gauze angel costumes and silver tinsel garland halos, and boys in flannel bathrobes playing shepherds and wise men. Everyone had a little part in the bigger play. Can you recall with me your nervous childhood gitters, as we stood to say our little memorized pieces? These little assignments had been passed out a month before on a narrow strip of mimeographed paper with purple ink, sometimes so freshly printed they were still damp and smelled of that peculiar fluid when they reached your hand. When the pageant finally came together on Christmas Eve, thankfully, there was always a prompter in the front row, if a sudden case of stage fright addled a small mind. May God bless the prompters, whoever you were, for the prompters have saved many a youngster from years on a psychiatrist's couch later in life!

Though sometimes we came to church through the back door from Grandma's house, many times we came into the church from the front door, as well. It was a special joy to approach the church and hear the lovely bell chimes of familiar hymns being played on an outdoor amplifier, as families passed by on the way to a worship service. In the 1950's, mothers all looked like June Clever in pretty shirt waist dresses or suits, pumps, hats, and gloves, as they escorted their brood along the side walk. They had their children all properly groomed in their Sunday best too. It was called giving God your best. Inside there was more music – the choir and that of the man or the lady with a lovely voice singing beside or behind you. I particularly remember the pretty alto voice of my Mother, who often sang a harmony opposite the melody line that I thought was quite beautiful.

The service always started with a short intro by the choir, "*The LORD is in his holy temple, let all the earth keep silence before Him, keep silence before Him.*" For me, and I wonder how many others, once I was quieted in the pew, the most profound preaching came from something else. It was not human ministry but was made by human hands. Of course I am speaking of the two huge stained glass windows that preached their own sermons through the colored glass. When the eastern morning sun shone through them, it lit the glass and the face of Jesus glowed. In one window Jesus was depicted as the Great Shepherd who loved and tended his flock. In the other He was praying in the Garden of Gethsemane before he would go to the cross. My greatest disappointment when the new sanctuary was completed was that in building a 1960's modern one story, flat-roofed structure, as was the

architectural trend in those days, the windows were trimmed down to tiny miniatures that were stripped of all their earlier glory. Nevertheless, for many generations they captivated small children and wandering minds and revealed just a peek of the splendor of Heaven.

As the waves of memories progress, I am moved into the more recent past and present. I am no longer a child or an MYF youth, or a young bride whose handsome Daddy was only thirty seven years old when he gave her away. The recent memories are bitter sweet. They are of a child who has come of age to tend to aging and ill parents, whose run of bad luck in their last decade or two was very sad. They didn't make it to church much after they moved to Aberdeen. Often they watched Reverend Harold Salem on TV, instead. Before I knew it, my Father was gone. It was Christmas when he passed away and the Reverend Wayne Tieszen was out of town. My greatest consolation is that Dad was baptized by Reverend Benson from a tea cup of water drawn from the tap in the basement kitchen of the old church before the good reverend would marry my mother and father. I will always be grateful for that act of ministry that followed my Father's oral confession. I will also always be grateful that many of you came to honor his memory at his funeral and stood with us at the grave side. The memorial money given in his name was used to purchase the new glass storm doors of the church. That is kind of ironic because he didn't come through them all that often. God has a sense of humor, doesn't he?

My last memories of the church center around my mother's death. I am so thankful for the Methodist ladies who visited her at the Golden Living Center and sent her cards and served her funeral. Wouldn't you know it, her death occurred around Easter and Reverend Jan Price was out of town then, too. But, before she left town for a retreat, she visited my Mother and prayed with her. The pastor told me later that Mother asked to be anointed with oil as she sensed she was approaching death. Much like my Father's baptism, Mother's anointing oil came from the kitchen of the Golden Living Center, but it was "holy oil". How do I know? Because, I know by faith that God blessed it and made it a holy moment. When the pastor left town, I sat by her bedside the last few days and hours of her life. And when the time came, I repeated the Lord's Prayer and the Apostles Creed that I had learned in this church, and I sang her the song I sang to my Daddy as he departed. It was that old Negro spiritual I heard so many years ago in this church, "Swing Low Sweet Chariot, coming for to carry me home". The Reverend Harold Salem preached her sermon in the present sanctuary. Later, as I cleaned out Mother's room at the nursing home, my old fourth grade Sunday school teacher, Doris Strom, was there to give me a hug. She said kind words about my parents and wrote me a wonderfully encouraging note when it was all over. She is as kind and loving today as she was so many years ago; and, I marveled at the fabulous heritage of faith and the blessings of God that this church has given to me in people like Doris. There are so very many of you like that.

As we celebrate the 125th anniversary of our childhood church, I think my Sunday school classmates are much like me. It seems we have scarcely blinked and suddenly we have become or are on the way to becoming the "older generation". The boys have matured into fine men and wonderful fathers and grandfathers, and the girls are aging but we continuously remain sunbeams. As our parents are going home to be with our Lord and the bloom of youth is off our cheeks, we know that we won't be far behind them. While some of us have had much success and little strife in our lives, others of us have suffered various degrees of disappointment or loss. Nevertheless, the presence of God in our hearts keeps us beaming even through our tears.

Over the years, many of us have gone on to join other churches or denominations, as I did. Maybe some married into the other denomination or maybe the gospel message finally clicked for some of us after we left our "mother church", as it did for me. For those like me, we might have originally felt that our

later-gained love for Jesus was due to another preacher or denomination or a clearer presentation of the gospel to which we responded. However, I have matured to see that this is not entirely true. You see, the Bible says that “some plant, others water, and some reap in the harvesting”, as souls who were touched by the Good News of Christ dying for their personal sins finally got the whole point of church! If we all look back we can see a host of laborers used by God to lead us in that ultimate direction. All of this is to say that in my old age, I am coming back to the simplicity and goodness of the Methodist message and witness. It has always been an unpretentious, loving and forgiving church. It has always had open arms and they have reached out to envelope me. I may live a half a continent away, but I shall ever and always consider this church to be my true home.

For all the saints who have gone before us in this congregation, and for those of who remain to celebrate the life and times of the United Methodist Church of Groton, and for all who will come after us as Christ draws others to himself through the witness of the body of Christ on earth, I wish you God’s richest blessings, because the body of Christ in Groton, South Dakota has certainly been a blessing to me!