

Editorial\*

By Helen Olson

In 1932, when she was 19 years old, my mother moved to Harbor Beach with her 18-month-old son and infant daughter to join my father stationed in the Coast Guard. She took in washing to supplement his wages. Having grown up a Presbyterian, she began attending the Presbyterian Church. Her home church had been the gathering place for all the Christians in the area who weren't Catholic or Lutheran, and most of its members were as poor and as "countryfied" as she. In this more "Presbyterian" church, she was conscious for the first time of class; more specifically, that despite her recently-acquired high school diploma and her love of Shakespeare, in this Presbyterian Church she was lower class.

Nonetheless, she attended regularly and joined the Ladies Aid. At Christmas time, they held a party with a "grab-bag" gift exchange. My mother didn't have money to buy a gift, so she made some fudge and, lacking a real box and wrapping paper, devised the best she could manage. The woman who drew my mother's gift did not receive it gracefully and acknowledged it only perfunctorily. My mother was humiliated. She was too embarrassed to return to the Presbyterian Church and began attending the Baptist church instead. There, no one seemed to notice that she was poorly dressed. She soon became a close friend of the minister's wife, a librarian who shared her love of literature. Teenagers in the congregation sought her help with math and Latin. Her gifts were recognized and appreciated.

I remember the hurt I felt when my mother first told me that story. I also felt "let down" by Presbyterians, since I, too, had been raised in the little country Presbyterian church of my mother's and my hometown.

More recently, a friend left one of our large churches saying, "They don't need me." We know that we do need my friend and every other person we can call to the Kingdom. Declining membership and resources, both talent and money, are realities we as Presbyterians face. I don't believe that the Presbyterian Church in 1932 wanted to shut out my mother any more than the Presbyterian Church in 1989 wants to exclude those who need it and are needed by it. So why aren't we "connecting"?

Obviously, simple answers won't suffice, but I wonder if we shouldn't begin by looking again not at who we are and who we want to be, but at what we look like to others. In *Fifth Business*, the Canadian novelist Robertson Davies describes the Presbyterian church as "solvent and thought--chiefly by itself--to be intellectual." There have been times, sitting in presbytery meetings, when I thought our Bible was *Robert's Rules of Order*. I've had friends say they attended Presbyterian church X because of the superior choir. We all know that the proper worship service is supposed to be exactly 59 minutes long.

Must we always serve God "properly and in good order"? In my little rural church we sang hymns like "The Old Rugged Cross" and "Dwelling in Beulah Land." They may have been theologically questionable but singing them I learned to "rejoice in the Lord." Do we need to space ourselves properly in the pews and receive communion bread that has been carefully cut and spaced on the trays? Can we learn to touch one another both physically and spiritually? Can we report our hurts and fears in *Rejoice* as well as our accomplishments? Can we expose our needs and our weaknesses to a shabbily dressed 19-year-old mother who just might have a special gift to offer us?

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\* First published in *Rejoice*, October 1989. I was the editor of *Rejoice*, the newsletter of the Presbytery of Detroit 1987-1991. This is the only editorial I wrote for that publication. I include it here because it talks about my mother, Isabel Piper Olson.