

BETHANY TEMPLE PART IV

This is part four of “My Ministry at Bethany Temple Presbyterian Church” – 1953-1960.

FIRE DESTROYS BETHANY TEMPLE – MARCH 10, 1960

On Sunday March 6, 1960 we celebrated the fifty-fourth anniversary of the church and followed it up with a Family Night program on Thursday, March 10. It was a very cold evening with temperatures in the low teens. Though we met in the Educational building attached to the sanctuary by the offices between, the furnace was located in the basement of the church directly under the pulpit, choir loft and organ. Apparently, the wood floor-joists above the furnace began to smolder for some time but was unnoticed by anyone while we were still in the church. After everyone left and had gone home, the wood began to flame.

Isabel and I, living next door to the church, were just getting into bed when a policeman rang our doorbell. He told me that there was a fire in the basement of the church and the firemen were asking for a key so that they wouldn't have to break down the door. Hurriedly we ran to one of the entrances of the church on 53rd. Street, the closest to the furnace. Fortunately, the fireman with us told us to stand back as he unlocked the door and opened it. Immediately, the smoke-filled sanctuary exploded in flames.

What happened in the following moments I don't recall but after checking for the safety of Isabel – who was expecting again in July - Beth and Barbara,, I proceeded to enter the Sunday School building and go down the hall to my study located between the two parts of the building. I entered my study, the lights still working, but in a moment realized that I was being engulfed in smoke. Fearing that I would not be able to retrace my steps back through the hallway, I opened my study window and jumped six or eight feet to the ground.

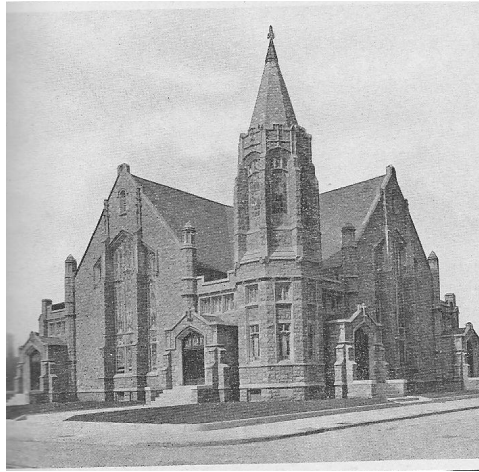
Having left the window open, it was not long before the firemen began to direct their hoses into my study hoping to keep the flames from going down the hall to the Sunday School building. The fire was halted before it got that far. Unfortunately, however, many of my books were destroyed, not by fire but by water.

During the fire, I stood with one of our elder, Ned Cox, and watched the destruction. We saw one of the hook-and-ladder fire-trucks fall over toward the fire and three fireman on the ladder narrowly missed being cast into the fire. The ground supports for the truck were insecure on ground-ice, and slipped. Such an unusual phenomenon made head-lines in the newspapers. It also caught the eye of the Choir-Director of the church while he was on vacation before he could be notified.



Because of the low temperature, water from the fire-hoses turned to ice and accumulated on top of what was already there.

Apart from the three firemen, no other injuries occurred.



The Sanctuary was completely destroyed with only the stone walls remaining. The carpet, pews choir-loft and organ were gone. The pulpit desk stood eerily in its place with the pulpit Bible gone. Note the circular Baptismal font at left in front of the pulpit.



As dawn came on Friday morning, we were all devastated. But we knew we had to go on. I immediately called for a meeting of the Session to discuss our future. As I met the Elders of the church, I explained to them that I, personally, was in the worst situation of my life. I told them that I had accepted a position in the Administration at Eastern Baptist College to begin on July 1, just four months away. Furthermore, if I did not announce my resignation on Sunday, to be effective in July, and defer the announcement until some time later, there would be many who would think that my departure was a result of the fire.

BETHANY TEMPLE AND OAK PARK PRESBYTERIAN CHURCHES COMBINE WORSHIP SERVICES

There were several nearby churches that offered us the opportunity to use their sanctuaries and buildings for our continued ministry. We accepted the invitation of the Oak Park Fourth Presbyterian Church just three blocks away at the corner of Fifty-First and Pine Streets. This church had originally been a part of the United Presbyterian Church denomination until the 1958 merger with our denomination the United Presbyterian in the USA. At the time of the fire, they were without a minister. So, we began our relationship with them on Sunday March 13, 1960, combining our worship services. Though they had already scheduled an interim guest speaker that morning, Dr. Lee E. Walker, I participated. Sadly, I announced to a sorrowful congregation that had just lost its church building, that I was resigning, as of July 1, and it was losing its minister, too. I can only imagine their feelings and emotions. I know what were mine.

Though Oak Park did not usually have an evening service, we transferred ours there and I preached at both morning and evening services, as well as on Wednesday evening.



Isabel, Beth, Bev, and Barb at Oak Park-Fourth Church

My Assistant, Rev. Samuel J. Seymour was also on hand as needed.

On April 3, Rev. Raymond W. Nicholson, the new minister of Oak Park Church arrived on the scene. He and I alternated in preaching responsibilities. Both congregations met for worship at the same time but separate offerings were taken.

It was with mixed emotion as the Bethany Temple congregation returned to Fifty-Third and Spruce Streets on Sunday May 15 for worship services in the Sunday School Building. I preached at the morning service on "Measuring the Church" using Revelation 11:1-14 as the scripture.

During the night of the fire, our home next door was a very busy place. Members of the church, policemen, firemen, neighbors and friends came by to ask questions, inform us as to the fire and damage, to console and comfort us and to inquire as to future plans for services and rebuilding. My assistant came from his home along with members of the Youth on the March Quartet. Isabel prepared hot beverages for everyone. The phone kept ringing. Doctor Gordon, next door, arrived with sleeping pills for me to take when I could get to bed. After standing in the hot shower for twenty minutes to help me thaw out, I got to bed at 5 am only to awaken at 6 to an extremely busy day.

A building contractor friend, J. Price Norman, a wonderful, devout Christian, showed up with a building crew and plywood to secure openings at the various church doors and windows to prevent unlawful entry. The fire was halted at the end of the hall leading from the sanctuary past the church offices into the Sunday School Building. My secretary's was untouched though as I said, water from the fire-hoses directed into my office window had made my office temporarily unusable. Fortunately, I had an office in the Manse.

Just a few days after the fire, I was visited by Dr. Kenneth Hammonds, the Executive Presbyter of the Philadelphia Presbytery who gave us valuable assistance in future planning. He outlined seven alternatives we had, such as rebuilding the sanctuary, demolishing the burned out-building and restructuring the Sunday School auditorium for worship, merging with another church, etc. Always having been impressed and challenged by the Biblical story of Nehemiah who rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem after its destruction, I thought we should follow his example. The magnificent stone walls of our church were still standing. Why not rebuild the church as it had been and restore its past glory. Unlike so many inner-city churches now surrounded by commercial structures in the place of former homes vacated by those moving to the suburbs,, there were actually

more people living in the houses surrounding Bethany Temple than ever before.

At one of our several meetings with the twenty-one members of the Session, I kept saying that rebuilding was the way to go. Not being convinced, one of the elders commented that it was easy for me to suggest that but I would be leaving to go to Eastern College and wouldn't be faced with the burden of it. I understood his concern. The membership was declining and would get smaller, so why not down-size now?

Knowing that the only way that the church could grow was to minister to the whole neighborhood, and believing it could and should be done, I replied in no uncertain manner. I said that if the elders would go on record that the church would without reservation minister to everyone in the area without prejudice, I would be willing to stay and would call Eastern College in the morning and cancel my commitment to them. Silence and unbelief followed. There wasn't a single elder of the twenty-one who said they would stand with me in that endeavor.

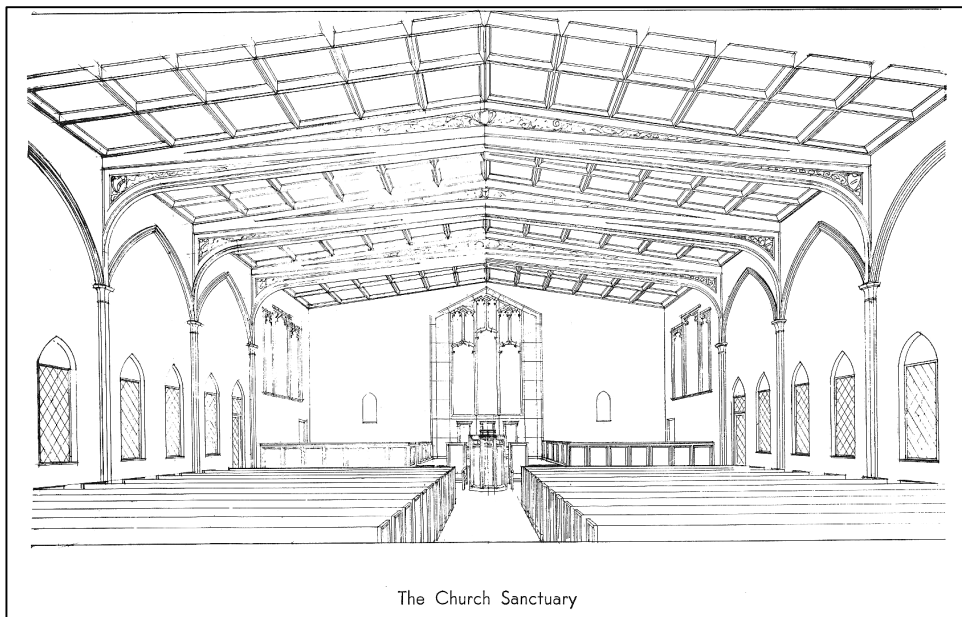
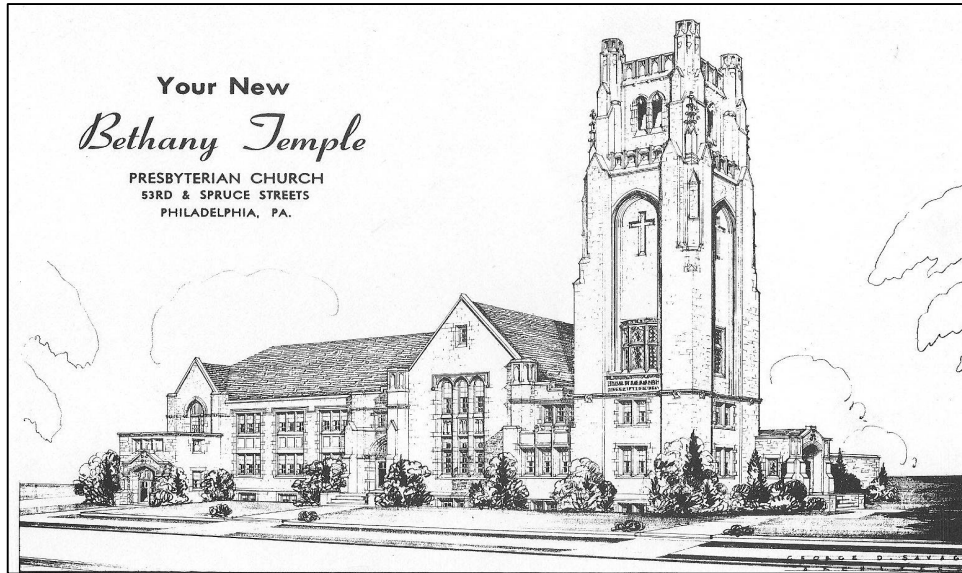
That night as I returned home, with a sorrowful heart and tears in my eyes, I told Isabel how sadly I felt for the church and the cause of Christ's Kingdom, but now I knew I had made the right decision to leave.

June 26, 1960 was my last Sunday at the church. At that time, Isabel was waiting momentarily for the birth of our third child, my father was gravely in a hospital in Montrose, PA, we had purchased a home in Glenmoore, PA, and planned to move as soon as the baby was born. At the morning service I announced that my father was getting better. On Wednesday evening, the church was holding a farewell service for us and as the people walked in and greeted me, they said how glad they were to hear that my father was improving. Sadly, I had to tell them that Dad passed away that morning.

MY DEPARTURE FROM BETHANY TEMPLE - JULY 1, 1960

On July 1, I began my work at Eastern College. The church allowed us to continue occupying the manse until the baby arrived. I also began a five-Sunday preaching engagement at the Bethany Collegiate Presbyterian Church in Havertown, PA at both morning and evening services. This was the mother church of Bethany Temple – both founded by John Wanamaker. Little did anyone know in 1960 that Bethany Temple would close its doors in 1969, sell the building to the Zion Hill Baptist Church and then merge with the mother Church.

Sometime after my departure in July 1960, Bethany Temple called Rev. John M. Rittler, from Baltimore, MD, to be the pastor. He led the church in the transition, restructuring the Sunday school building, demolishing the ruined sanctuary and constructing a parking lot in its place.



In the following years the congregation struggled to regain its former impact upon the community but continued to lose members. I was privileged to be the guest minister on several occasions in 1962, '64,'65 and '66, but

saddened, as I saw it, that the church had lost its vision and was steadily dying.

In 1969, Bethany Temple closed its doors at Fifty-Third and Spruce Streets, sold the church building and manse to the Zion Hill Baptist Church, an African/American congregation, and merged with the Bethany Collegiate Presbyterian Church in Havertown, PA at a special service on Holy Thursday, April 3. Rev. William Howe Wellman and Rev. John M. Rittler participated along with Dr. Kenneth A. Hammonds, Stated Clerk of the Presbytery, and Mr. Charles S. Drain, Jr., Moderator.

GUEST MINISTERS AND PREACHERS AT BETHANY TEMPLE

In another place I have listed the guest ministers and preachers we were privileged to have at Bethany during my years of ministry there.

REFLECTIONS AND GRATITUDE

As I look back, I am grateful to the Lord and so many people for the opportunity I had to be a part of the history of this great church. I can hardly believe the wonderful experience I had during those years from 1953 to 1960.

The effect that those seven years in ministry at Bethany Temple had upon my life and future ministry cannot be overstated. It seems to me that the Dean of Eastern College must have felt that my leadership and administration of the church qualified me to become an administrator at the College, thus inviting me to become Director of Admissions. Thirty years of service there in a Christian College was simply an extension of my ministry begun at Bethany.

Serving at a church founded by John Wanamaker gave me an insider's advantage leading to the research, writing and publication of my book, John Wanamaker: King of Merchants. Over seven thousand copies were sold. Secular organizations, inviting me to lecture about him, enabled me to present the story of a Christian businessman practicing his faith. Without him knowing it, his life-story was an inspiration to me – and still is.

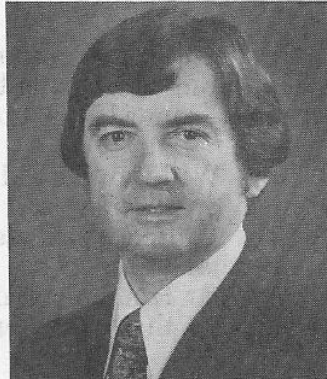
Entering the Presbyterian ministry at Bethany Temple, doors opened for me to be elected Moderator of the Philadelphia Presbytery out of the large pool of qualified candidates.

As Moderator, I officiated at the monthly meetings of the Presbytery consisting of approximately three-hundred twenty-five ordained clergy, and an elder representative from each of the one-hundred sixty churches. I also

officiated at each ordination service of a new minister, and at each installation of a new minister at one of the churches. Several times during the year I was the official representative of the Presbytery at various functions such as church anniversary services or dinners. It was a tremendous honor given to only a few.

MODERATOR TO BE INSTALLED

Rev. William A. Zulker, Dean of Christian Life at Eastern College in St. Davids, will be installed as Moderator of the Presbytery for 1978, when the Presbytery meets at the College on Tuesday, January 10. He will succeed Dr. James C. Caraher, pastor of the First Church of Olney.



Rev. William A. Zulker

The new moderator is an alumnus of Eastern College and the Temple School of Theology, and received a master's degree from Villanova University. He is currently a candidate for the doctor of ministry degree at the Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Before joining the administrative staff of Eastern College, Mr. Zulker was pastor of the former Bethany Temple Church in West Philadelphia.

In addition to his service as First Vice Moderator in 1977, he has been a member of the General Council and of the Candidates for Church Vocations and Session Records committees.

My sermon preparation at Bethany Temple not only served me then, but also in an extended preaching ministry after I left Bethany. Hundreds of doors were opened to me.

My pulpit, once limited to the church at Fifty-third and Spruce Streets in Philadelphia, extended significantly, and unexpectedly, to pulpits in many places beyond West Philadelphia.

Some of the records I kept during my ministry at Bethany Temple indicate that I conducted 148 funerals while at the church - (1950-1955 - #6;

1956 - #25; 1957 - #27; 1958 - #33; 1960 - #19); (after leaving the church 1960-2010 – I conducted 24 more – for a total of #172).

I also performed eighteen (18) weddings while at the church (1956 - 1960). Since leaving the church I have performed an additional twenty-five (25) weddings (1960-2010) for a total of forty-two (43) during my ministry.

The names of the deceased, and the married couples, are found elsewhere in my files: “Funerals by WAZ,” and “Weddings by WAZ.”

At Bethany I preached four-hundred forty-three (443) sermons - (65 in 1956; 115 in 1957; 112 in 1958; and 45 in 1960) - the titles of which are in my record book. My handwritten manuscripts along with the notes from which I delivered the messages are in individual file folders numbered sequentially.

After leaving Bethany I have given eighteen-hundred (1800) messages at two-hundred twenty-seven different churches (227). Generally, I preached more times in a year after I left the church than I did when I was its pastor. In each of two of those years, I preached ninety-three times.

In addition, I gave one-hundred forty-eight lectures (148) on the life of John Wanamaker at one-hundred nine (109) places other than churches, such as college, libraries, retirement communities and social organizations. The dates, places and topics since 1960 to 2010 are all listed in my “Preaching Schedule” notebook. Individual church file folders indicate dates of engagements and message titles.

CONCLUSION

My hope and prayer is that my life and ministry at Bethany Temple and beyond has been a means of furthering the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and that I was able to impact lives for God’s glory.



Bill Zulker 2009

Bill & Isabel Zulker



2009

Beth – Isabel – Bev – Barb – Bill



THE END