

6 Telling the Nativity story: the 1930s: a thin time during the Great Depression

The Rev. David J. W. Somerville, The “Man For All Seasons” our rector since 1904, had seen the congregation double when his career ended tragically in 1929.¹ The Reverend Theodore M. Burleson succeeded Rev. Somerville and served as rector until January 15, 1936--during the worst of the Great Depression.

Call it synchronicity or the hand of God or whatever, Nativity experienced a connection to its living history last Sunday June 28, 2015. Rev. Burleson’s son and daughter-in-law, Forrest and Rose Burleson appeared out of the blue in morning worship. They had visited with Gretchen on Saturday and stayed for the Sunday morning service. Forrest told of his pilgrimage to visit all the churches his father had served.

I asked him about what he recalled about his early years at Nativity. **He spoke with admiration of the beautiful sanctuary—it made an impression on a ten-year old.**

Then I asked him what had changed.

His bright eyes lit up—and he laughed at the obvious. Then, he spoke of his father, who had compiled the first history of the church. Much of the early data in later reports was due Rev. Burleson’s diligent labor, as he wrote the first history of Nativity.²

Gretchen told us in the last Messenger of some of the “simple marks of the **change that is real and constant...** ‘challenging’...everything which we do is done because at one time it served a valuable purpose, a problem arises when the action remains long after the purpose has

changed, or been forgotten.” History addresses CHANGE: Forrest and Rose have changed—all of us born in the 1930s saw great changes in our communities, but miraculously, Nativity’s sanctuary has received only minor changes since it was hauled up the hill from 11th and 17th Street in 1920. The church was moved from approximately where the present rectory is to a point closer to the corner of 8th and 8th. The new basement was dug for Sunday school use and included a guild room, also a kitchen and a new furnace was installed. The Chancel has been widened [sic] ten feet, and its height increased to add solemn atmosphere to the church, increasing the Narthex in size.³

Its like a story from the a 1921 cook book: How to cook a ham. Take the ham and cut off an inch on each end. When asked why one should cut off the ends of the ham, the reply was that Mother had to cut off the ham to fit in her roasting pan.

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Rev. Theodore Burleson



Forrest and Rose Burleson

I asked several parishioners to write down a change experience they have experienced or observed. Maxine Hubbel relayed this change story about a former unnamed Episcopalian parishioner who could no longer worship as an Episcopalian because he was alienated by the 1979 Book of Common Prayer. He could only worship with the 1928 Book of Common prayer. The pan wasn't big enough for the ham.

In 2000, the [General Convention of the Episcopal Church](#) issued an apology to those "offended or alienated during the time of liturgical transition to the 1979 Book of Common Prayer." Use of the 1928 Book of Common Prayer is currently discouraged. Article X of the Canons of the Episcopal Church provides that "[t]he Book of Common Prayer, as now established or hereafter amended by the authority of this Church, shall be in use in all the Dioceses of this Church," which, of course, is a reference to the 1979 Book of Common Prayer, but some parishes still use the 1928 book either regularly or occasionally, for pastoral sensitivity, for doctrinal reasons and for the beauty of its language.

The controversies surrounding the Book of Common Prayer contrasts with the Episcopal Church's description of it as "the primary symbol of our unity." Diverse members "come together" through "our common prayer."⁴

Change is 'challenging'...everything which we do is done because at one time it served a valuable purpose. On the Sunday Forum, and in the small groups we are learning about change—sharing our faith. Tyler _____ and Liz _____, our summer clergy interns, have been modeling for us-- telling our stories, deepening our prayer lives and helping us become comfortable with unbinding [our] hearts. Here is a story about change from Tyler _____:

More change stories to come—we are telling stories of 150 years of change and 150 years of diverse members coming together through our common prayer and liturgy..

End notes:

- 1 Jennings, John Richard, A Brief History of THE CHURCH OF THE NATIVITY: Lewiston, Idaho p 7.
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 Church of the Nativity "THE MESSENGER" Volume 2015 Issue 7 p1
- 4 "The Book of Common Prayer" at <http://www.episcopalchurch.org/page/book-common-prayer>.
- 5 Jennings, J. R. *A Brief history of THE CHURCH OF THE NATIVITY* P8.

Works Cited

- Church of the Nativity "THE MESSENGER" Volume 2015 Issue 7 p1
- Jennings, John Richard, A Brief History of THE CHURCH OF THE NATIVITY: Lewiston, Idaho p 7.
- Editorial Contributors, McCurdy, Bayne and Campbell, Thomas, Supervisor The Rev. Peter Stretch undated [Stretch was ordained in 1958, and in 1959 Mr. Stretch was elected as Rector.]
- "The Book of Common Prayer" at <http://www.episcopalchurch.org/page/book-common-prayer>.