

## CHAPTER 22

### ANOTHER AGENDA ON THE YELLOW BRICK ROAD

Another dimension in our lives was how often we drove that Yellow Brick Road, especially on Sundays.

**BEWARE OF FRIENDLY DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENTS.** It started innocently enough. A few months after we arrived in Emporia, we had a visitor. He was the District Superintendent of the Emporia District of the Kansas Conference of the Methodist Church. He had come, presumably, to welcome us into his district. We chatted about our coming to Kansas, my connection in the Colorado Conference and our Methodist services in Colorado. Finally he really got to the point: a little church about twenty miles north of Emporia. The preacher was leaving midyear. The D.S. wondered if I would be willing to preach at that church for a few weeks until he could find someone to take over full-time. Why not? So we took on driving to Miller, Kansas each Sunday to conduct worship service, *for a few weeks*. The few weeks stretched a little and in that stretch was another little church near Miller also now needing a preacher. Would I, in true ancient Methodist circuit riding fashion, take on both of those churches: Miller at nine-thirty; Harveyville at eleven. Why not? After all, this circuit riding was only for a few more weeks.

And to be sure the Miller-Harveyville connection did pass away. It passed right into Neosho Rapids, Olpe-Virgil, Americus, and Americus-Dunlap connections, *for all of those few weeks between 1950 and 1969*.<sup>1</sup>

**ASSOCIATE WITH AN OFFERING PLATE.** Most of the time the whole family engaged in the circuit riding. But there was a time when only Michael and his father carried on the ancient tradition. Mamma and Jim had a little Susie to take care of. Olpe and Virgil were two small towns a few miles south of Emporia. Virgil was so small that only a few (8 to 10) people ever got to church services on Sunday morning. But Michael and his father served them diligently. I preached and Michael took up the collection.

**ABORT THAT MINISTRY!** It was after the Chicago episode that Kansas churching got really serious. Back at 1518 Berkeley Road, we were again approached by the D.S. There was a fine little church about ten miles north of Emporia: The First (and only) Methodist Church of Americus, Kansas. I decided to do it right this time. I transferred my conference connection from Colorado to Kansas.<sup>2</sup> From here on it was to be Kansas Conference annual appointments. One full year at a time--thirteen years in a row.

Americus was a fine church. We quickly became attached to the people of that congregation. But then, as reported earlier, something happened at

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<sup>1</sup>With time off for a year in Chicago.

<sup>2</sup>Where it still is.

Kansas State Teachers College. President John King fumbled that Danforth Grant and William C. went looking for a new position, which he got at Kansas State University.

Americus, Kansas is ten miles from Emporia. But from Manhattan it is sixty miles. One-hundred and twenty miles each Sunday just to go to church? No way! So my wife sent me off to the next Annual Conference with strict orders. The conference that year was in Pittsburg, Kansas. I remember because late one evening I called from Pittsburg to Manhattan. "Mike, there is a problem. If we don't go back to Americus, they won't have a pastor. There isn't anybody to take our place." There was a long silence. Then in a voice I have heard on a number of occasions, she said: "Do what you want to do, dear." So I took another step and said: "There is another little church about ten miles north of Americus that also needs a pastoral connection. The place is called Dunlap."

What happened after that? The longest pastorate (circuit riding or any other way) that those two churches ever had.<sup>3</sup>

**SUNDAY: DAY OF REST AND RELAXATION.** First on Sunday mornings Michael and James were up and out delivering the Sunday morning Manhattan Mercury newspaper. Sometime around 8:00 a.m. we were in the car and on our way. Mike driving, while I read and revised a sermon written the day before. Kids in the back seat watching for cows, coyotes, meadow larks, what-have-you. The driving format changed when Michael turned fifteen and got his drivers license. He took over the driving.

Fifty miles down the road we were at Dunlap in time for church service at 9:30. After church service Susan would desert us and go visiting at the Wirsig's farm. The Wirsigs (Harry and Margaret) were a young, fun, farm family. They had four children--two boys and two girls. The girls were Sherry and Cathie, and they and our Susie became great friends. Susie still talks of the wonderful times she had with those people on that farm. Also, of course, it helped Susan escape hearing that sermon twice. The other family members were less fortunate. After Dunlap service the rest of us headed for Americus, ten miles down the road.

**THE REAL WORLD.** How can I summarize those thirteen years of Sunday mornings? They were demanding of everybody in the family. They paid well. In fact, when computed comparatively, they paid better than the University. And what we made from the churches was 100% savings. But more than that, those churches kept me living in the real world.

Universities are interesting enterprises, but they are also extravagantly kooky. University people do not usually socialize with each other in any genuine dimension of friendship. They merely tolerate each other with professional smiles. They are endlessly jealous of each other; seldom honest

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<sup>3</sup>We were at Americus from 1956 to 1969; at Americus-Dunlap, 1957-1969. The longest pastorates either Americus or Dunlap have ever had in their more than 100-year histories.

with each other; and never agree on anything. I am overplaying this, but not much.

Americus and Dunlap church people were more "of this world". Not better, just more in the reality of it. I am sure that being *country* also helped. They had genuine capacity for affection, friendship, concern. They helped keep me in a real world.

Also, I enjoyed all the positives of being a circuit riding preacher and minister, and generally avoided the negatives. Which is to say, I was not trapped in the lives of the members of the congregation, endlessly ministering to imagined spiritual needs. Rather, I was the prophet from a far country who showed up with a message from on high. As long as the message was good, and my wife attractive (both physically and socially), and the kids not little monsters, the congregation applauded me, endorsed me and each year kept asking the bishop to send me back.

And being a circuit riding prophet served the churches also. If the preacher is available, he "runs the show." Whatever needs to be done, he does it or supervises the doing. But if the preacher is not there? Then the people of the congregation do it. For example: the Americus church was a beautiful little church, complete with sanctuary, organ, class rooms both upstairs and in the basement, adequate facilities for meetings and those wonderful things called covered-dish dinners, furnace for winter heating and indoor toilets. Dunlap, however, was not at all "up-to-date" and adequate. The building was old and run down: an old piano, no organ, a pot bellied stove for heating, and a toilet at the end of a path out back. And nobody cared, including me, until one of the television networks did a feature on the Dying Country Town. Part of that program targeted Dunlap--not the church, but main street. And main street was not dying. It was dead. I remember the TV pictures showing the deserted main street and a skinny, uptailed cat walking along the broken sidewalk. The Dunlap people were furious. Dunlap had been violated! Why not picture the fine high school we have? Look at our wheat farms and cattle ranches. Look at our houses. Look at our farm machinery, our cars, bank accounts. Look again! And, of course, the Dunlapers were right. The town was gone, to be sure, but it was gone not because of depression but because of transportation. You want to buy something? Get in your Cadillac and drive to Council Grove, ten miles away, or Topeka, or Kansas City.

Then it hit some of the Dunlapers that there was a reason for a deserted main street to look grubby, but what about the church? The shock registered and the charge lay leader called a meeting, to which I was not requested to come. Next Sunday he told me that the church board had decided to do some renovating. I said, "Great." Then week after week I observed the changes: decorating, painting, repairing; furnace; indoor toilet. It really looked great.

One Sunday morning before church, I congratulated Walter Cobb, the responsible charge lay leader, on the work done. He was pleased with my approval. Then he said, "Sure would be nice to have an organ." I agreed. Next Sunday morning there was a new electric organ waiting for my surprise and approval. Walt said that he had solicited a few church members to contribute. The organ was paid for. Then he said: "Now, Preacher, if you don't like this

particular organ, we arranged to trade it for a different organ you might prefer." Walt had not taken over the church. He was not in charge. I was the preacher. I was in charge. Walter Cobb was demonstrating what ancient circuit riding ministry was all about. The people were the church, caring not only for the physical needs of the building, but also the spiritual needs of each other when the preacher was not in town. The preacher's main job was to bring the word, but he also had a final say in other things as well. It worked in frontier America. It worked in Dunlap and Americus.

**ARROWHEADS IN THE FIELD.** With all that religion and all those miles one might think that Sundays were consistently wrecked for the Tremmels. But that was not necessarily the case. First, as already reported, Susan had a grand time playing farm on a real farm. Also, after we picked up Susan after Americus service, we often went picnicking on our own. Especially in the spring of the year, after the farmers had plowed their fields and before planting, we would have an artifact hunting picnic. Remember, before we stole it from them, Kansas was Indian country.<sup>4</sup> We looked for arrow heads and knife blades and scrapers and anything else made of flint, which always translated "Indian".<sup>5</sup> We would take our treasures home, wash them, examine them, discuss just what each piece was. Mike always accused me of being able to find a useful tool in any piece of flint I found, but endlessly dismissing her unidentifiable flint pieces as just pieces of flint.<sup>6</sup>

James got so interested in artifacts that, while still in the Lab School in Emporia, Professor Don Davis (father of a little girl, Jackie, who was also in the Lab School) began to take Jim to meetings of the Kansas Anthropological Society. Indeed, James became a member of that Society--the youngest member.

**NOSTALGIA.** Through the years many of the Americus-Dunlap people have lived in our memories, and apparently we lived in theirs,<sup>7</sup> as was evidenced in a nostalgia trip we took to Kansas a few years ago. Michael and Georgie met us in Kansas City. We rented a car and drove to Emporia for the initiation of the trip.<sup>8</sup> We planned a quiet invasion of the Americus church on Sunday

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<sup>4</sup>The Kansa Indians lived there.

<sup>5</sup>Flint was not "native" to the area, so we knew that if it was flint, it had been transported from somewhere else by Indians.

<sup>6</sup>Someplace stored away, Mike still has the Kansas artifact collection.

<sup>7</sup>Even I, who can never remember anybody's name, remember the names of Ed and Hilda Luginsland; and the names of Stella Young, and Eugenia Young, Carrol and Elma Keeny and Patty Keeny, Sam and Vanita Weller, Don Brasier, Eugene Daharsh, Walt Cobb, the J.J. Moxleys, and even others along the way.

<sup>8</sup>This was the time when Irene Morgan told us about the painting of the "Tremmel House," as reported earlier in Chapter 16.

morning. No one was to know of our coming, except Eugenia Young, one of our long time favorites with whom we had kept regular communication. She promised to keep the secret, except from her niece Patty who would surely want to be in church Sunday morning. Patty was living in Emporia. Actually Eugenia also tipped off the young minister. She was always a preacher protector, and she did not want this one to be surprised by such an invasion.

On Sunday morning we arrived. Eighteen years had elapsed, but everybody in the sanctuary recognized us as soon as we walked in, and the reception was all one would want. They not only remembered us. They remembered us in love. And also, marvelously, with one slight reprimand.

I had through the years sent the Tremmel Christmas letter to some of the Americus people. Apparently that year the Christmas letter contained a slight profanity--the word damn, I think. My special friend Ed Luginsland after greeting us enthusiastically after church said, "Preacher, as usual we appreciated your Christmas letter, but you should not swear."

Yes, that Americus congregation<sup>9</sup> felt no great restraint in challenging the preacher's statements. I remember one Sunday morning at the church door Eugenia Young<sup>10</sup> was telling me how I was off base theologically in something I had said. Remember, since age sixteen I had never been a very orthodox Christian--if Christian at all. And Eugenia was pointing some of that out. Stella Young, Eugenia's mother was also standing at the door hearing Eugenia's mild tirade. She put a stop to her daughter's affront. She said, "Eugenia, he did not say that at all. He would not say such a thing." The fact was I did say it, but I appreciated my defenders as well as my critics, so I did not interfere with a mother's privilege to discipline her daughter.

Years before the nostalgia trip, one day the telephone rang. A voice I knew immediately, "Preacher, this is a big day, so I called to wish you a happy birthday." Ed Luginsland my critic, defender, and forever friend. And just a few years ago, on Christmas Eve, 1989, at 11:30 p.m., the phone rang again. Ed had called again to wish us Merry Christmas and to tell me that he was thinking about that Christmas Eve sermon I had preached: "No Room In The Inn."

Also, years before the nostalgia trip, I was asked, in 1974, to write a foreword to a book of poetry, *Songs In My Heart*, written by Carrol King Keeny. Carrol, one of our Americus friends, had suffered from Multiple Sclerosis, which eventually took his life. I wrote:

Under conditions which would have broken a lesser man, Carrol Keeny has remained a wistfully joyous poet and marvelously beautiful man...As you read these poems be informed that I for one am convinced that he could actually hear a "Wheat Field" sing and could,

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<sup>9</sup>Which was the congregation always nearest and dearest to my heart.

<sup>10</sup>One of our very special, bright church friends--a never married lady who for years was cashier at the Americus Bank and forever loyal to The Americus Methodist Church.

if he wanted to, take wing with "Wild Geese".  
I wrote this about Carrol. He had already written this about my wife:

"MIKE"

I met a person I admire,  
A lady all the way;  
And every time I see her  
Is a very special day.

It's hard to finger-point just why  
A friendship is so pleasing,  
For reasons have an errant way  
of being coy and teasing.

Her kindly understanding serves  
A very helpful end;  
For this and many other things  
I'm proud to call her friend.

Then, too, I like the way she shuns  
All false and haughty airs.  
And last but not the least of all,  
I like the hats she wears.

GOD IN THE FIELD. I do not know what the rest of the family may have gotten out of those years of circuit riding, but I know that I got more than money--infinitely more; from the churches, the kids, my wife, those picnics, those arrow heads, and a world I would have never known any other way. Maybe I can sum it up by reporting what one of those churchmen said to me one Sunday. I can not remember the circumstances, but he and I were in his car driving by his farm. It was springtime. I saw his straight plowed field and complimented him on how nice it looked. He said,

A straight plowed field is  
a pretty thing to see. It's  
like going to church.

He did not know that he had just fashioned a haiku. Nor did I recognize it at the moment. But it was. It is. Like going to church. Like seeing God.