

“For Worship, Fellowship and the Work of the Kingdom” Rev. Christine Chakoian
Hebrews 11 – 12, selected verses First Presbyterian Church
July 26, 2009 Lake Forest, Illinois
On the Occasion of the 150th Anniversary

“It was on a bright and pleasant Lord’s Day, July 24, 1859” that the First Presbyterian Church of Lake Forest opened with worship.ⁱ The little congregation gathered at the newly built Academy Chapel as the Reverends C. L. Bartlett and Yates Hickey presided. Assisted by Elder D. R. Holt and Reverend A.G. Norton, the Session recorded twelve persons received into membership by letter: James Anderson, Elisabeth Baldwin, Harvey and Jessie House, Samuel and Charlotte Miller, Dr. Charles and Ruth Quinlan, Hugh and Elizabeth Samuel, James and Eunice Wright. Two more were received on examination: Miss Elisabeth Disencamplor and Miss Mary Lynch. We are the product of their vision, their faith, and their legacy.

How did it all start? In 1853, Presbyterians in Chicago had come to believe that Lane Seminary in Cincinnati was too far away, and a new training ground for clergy was called for in the northwest. Commercial factors propelled the project northward when the new railroad line out of Chicago was completed. When a severe cholera outbreak hit, flight from Chicago grew urgent and desirable. All these factors drew our founders toward Lake Forest.

It may not be politically correct to say so, but a little healthy competition inspired them too. In 1855 the Methodists founded Northwestern University, soon followed by the Baptists’ University of Chicago. The Presbyterians wasted no time. That very year the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. placed mission agent Ira Weed in Waukegan, a site for the new Presbyterian school was chosen in Lake Forest, and a \$40,000 donation from Mr. Gibson in Cincinnati was procured via fundraiser John Slocum. It turned out that Mr. Gibson’s money was ill-gained from whiskey distilling, and so rejected.

Still our founders proceeded undeterred. Sylvester Lind stepped in with the pledge of a matching gift of \$100,000 and the State approved the charter of the newly named Lind University, “a college and seminaries or departments

devoted to instruction in Theology, Law, Medicine, General or Particular Sciences and Literature or the Arts.”ⁱⁱ Later, when Sylvester Lind’s fortunes changed and he was unable to fulfill his pledge, the school was quietly renamed Lake Forest University. No one held a grudge. Sylvester Lind was a stalwart church member and beloved character. Instrumental in choosing the site of Lake Forest, he knew the area from his work in the 1830s carrying funds between Chicago and Milwaukee on behalf of entrepreneur George Smith. Later he admitted that sometimes his bags were empty, but he kept making the trek between the two cities to give the appearance to Smith’s creditors that business was moving. Our forebears knew about financial downturns. The big white garage at the side of our parking lot, next to the cottage, was Sylvester Lind’s stable. It is the last remaining building from his property. Though it is in miserable condition, we are blessed to own it.

But I’m getting ahead of myself. With Lind’s pledge for the University in hand, fundraising for the community proceeded in earnest. The Lake Forest Association was founded at Second Presbyterian Church in Chicago for the purpose of raising subscriptions. At a public sale in July 1857, over \$96,000 was raised – an enormous amount of money in that day. Initial shareholders included future leaders of First Church: Lumber baron D.R. Holt and his wife Ellen of Chicago’s founding Hubbard family; H. M. Thompson, D. J. Lake, Sylvester Lind; merchandiser (and future Senator) Charles B. Farwell; Dr. Charles H. Quinlan, who revolutionized anesthetics. Also on the roles was Samuel F. Miller, civil engineer of the north-bound rail line, the first teacher at the Lake Forest Academy for boys, and our first Clerk of Session. Reverend Patterson of Second Presbyterian Church in Chicago was also counted among the subscribers; later he would play a crucial role as the first President of Lake Forest University.

Now the real work could begin: creating a community of Presbyterian faith and education in a wholesome retreat from Chicago’s illness and vice.ⁱⁱⁱ Trustees called in landscape gardener Almerin Hotchkiss of St. Louis to plot the town in the latest picturesque style. Unlike formal New England towns, Lake Forest would be left largely untamed, emphasizing not man’s mastery

over nature, but God’s blessings of beauty and strength. In this new planned community, homes for Chicago’s elite would stand alongside those of merchants, servants, and teachers. At the center would stand the edifying institutions of the Presbyterian church and university.

Soon the first public buildings were erected – the Railroad shed, the Old Hotel in Triangle Park, and the first Academy at the site of what is now the Durand Institute. Sunday School lessons were begun, as well as preaching services led by Reverend Weed. To cap it off, in 1858 the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., meeting in Chicago, came to witness the site of their future university and congregation. The *Chicago Daily Tribune* reported that nearly five hundred people took the train to Lake Forest. From the Hotel in Triangle Park they hiked across Academy Park, University Park, and Female Seminary Park – still in reality just untamed woods - “after which,” reports the paper, they “plunged down a perpendicular glen, startled a flock of partridges, scaled two brooks, ‘rolled in to one,’ and finally deployed on the opposite summit” to view the spectacular lake. “Crinoline,” it was noted, “was not in all respects successful, and several ‘braids’ were left crowning the underbrush, but the divines triumphed.”^{iv}

The divines triumphed indeed, and the project was unstoppable now. Finally, at a meeting on July 19th, 1859, the Presbytery of Chicago voted to found the congregation of First Presbyterian Church in Lake Forest. That Sunday, July 24th, the first members were received on the roll and our church opened with worship. The following Sabbath, July 31st, the Sunday School was permanently constituted; Velasco Chandler serving as secretary/treasurer. We didn’t have a building for two more years. But we were a church nonetheless: a congregation that gathered to worship the Lord, to grow in discipleship in Sunday School, and to pursue our mission of education beginning with the Academy.

Like the Biblical writer of the letter to the Hebrews, “time fails me to tell” of all of the saints who made our founding possible. Clergy and elders, deacons and Sunday School teachers, members and boosters who, to

paraphrase the Scripture, conquered the wilds, administered justice, quenched myriad financial fires, won strength out of weakness, put fear of failure to flight. Yet all these, though commended for their faith, did not see the fruits of what was promised. We are the ones who bear witness to their labor.

The question is: *how* shall we bear witness to them? With historic reminiscences alone? With dinners and parties, concerts and reunions? Those are hardly enough. Our *deeds* will be the measure of our testimony to our founders. The extent to which we dedicate ourselves to our central purpose in joyful service to God: this will be the true honoring of their vision, their courage and their faith.

I believe we are well-poised to do so, and to move ahead with faithfulness and conviction. Just a few years ago, our congregation rededicated ourselves to our sacred purpose when we endorsed our mission statement: “Trusting in the transforming power of Christ, we join together to proclaim Christ’s message, provide a community of spiritual nurture, and promote God’s vision of justice.” Since then our worship series have been devoted to proclaiming Christ’s message; our small group studies to providing spiritual nurture; and our mission committee and deacons on promoting God’s vision of justice. These three Great Ends have been supported concretely in budget and personnel decisions as well. The development of our music staff has helped us proclaim Christ’s message in worship. The calling of Amy Pagliarella as our pastor for Children’s Faith Formation, the redeployment of Youth Director Kristie Finley to Middle School, and the search for a new pastor for Youth and Young Adults will help us continue to provide spiritual nurture. The calling of Corey Nelson as our pastor for Mission has helped us realize our third Great End of promoting God’s justice. I have been confident we are on the right path.

But a funny thing happened on the way to the Sesquicentennial. As often happens, almost in a parallel universe, our 150th Anniversary Committee has been at work planning our celebration. Last Friday’s Charter celebration in Triangle Park was the first event – and a rousing success it was, I might add,

topped off by a reception here at the Cornerstone Courtyard. Guest preachers have been lined up – including our beloved pastor Herb Anderson, returning here to preach September 20. Concerts have been scheduled – the first in late October to mark Reformation Sunday. And then there’s the book, my own baby that is *way* past due. In many ways, I confess, I’ve compartmentalized my work writing our church’s history – leaving the office each afternoon to go home and write for a few hours. It is as if I am working two different jobs at once.

But then something happened that slammed these two universes together – the celebration of the past and our commitment to our calling in the present. One day when I was researching our history, I came across some of the stellar writing of Dr. James Gore King McClure, our church’s pastor from 1881 to 1905. Though he started his ministry here twenty-two years after our founding, in many ways he was our galvanizing pastor, the man who led us from our nascent beginnings to our fully formed substance. He wrote many wise and wonderful things. But in a moment that struck me like thunder, I discovered *his* summary of our congregation’s purpose, written exactly a century ago, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of First Presbyterian Church of Lake Forest.

This is what he said: we are “a company of believers in the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ ...associated for the purposes of worship, fellowship and the work of the Kingdom.”^v We are “a company of believers in the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ ...associated for the purposes of worship, fellowship and the work of the Kingdom.” This is the light that struck me: it is the *same* purpose to which we have just recommitted ourselves. Proclaiming Christ’s message in worship. Providing a community of spiritual nurture in fellowship. Promoting God’s vision of justice in the work of the Kingdom.

This has always been our calling. And it is our calling still.

In the year ahead we will hear many inspiring stories of our church’s challenges and triumphs. We will testify to the faith of our founders and the legacy of our members who have come since. But it is not just with our words that we bear witness. It is through our faith, our actions, and our very nature – to whatever extent we remain faithful to our highest calling – in “worship, fellowship and the work of the Kingdom.”

We have so much to be grateful for. Sometimes I laugh at how much we are like our founders. I am now almost four years into my ministry here. In 1884, on the occasion of our 25th anniversary, Reverend James Gore King McClure was just three years into his ministry here. He shared this observation:

“It must ever be considered in discussing the life of this congregation that the place itself was the idea of men marked by certain strong phases of character and that it has always been distinguished by the individuality of its residents. It is a matter of delight and gratitude that with elements so diversified in tastes and temperaments, guided by moral, social, political and religious views so dissimilar, there should have been a willingness all these many years to make this church building the common gathering place for worship upon the Sabbath. It has certainly been a very beautiful sight to see those holding divergent beliefs on so many subjects, coming as one to this church life.”^{vi}

We are still divergent, still individual, still diversified in tastes and temperaments. But it is a beautiful sight indeed, to see all of our gifts, from generation to generation, come as one to this church life. Come as one in “worship, fellowship, and the work of the Kingdom.”

Today we remember that “we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.” Let us be faithful to our calling – not only for their sake, but for future generations still to come. Amen.

ⁱ James G.K. McClure’s “Historical Discourse Delivered on the 25th Anniversary,” July 27, 1884.

ⁱⁱ *30 Miles North*, p. 16, citing another document.

ⁱⁱⁱ McClure, July 27, 1884

^{iv} “The Presbyterian General Assembly, *Chicago Daily Tribune (1847-1858)*, May 24, 1858

^v James Gore King McClure, “Historical Sermon Preached at the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Lake Forest Presbyterian Church, Lake Forest, Illinois,” October 17, 1909, p. 9

^{vi} “Lake Forest Presbyterian Church Historical Discourse Delivered on the 25th Anniversary, July 27, 1884 by the Pastor James G. K. McClure”