



“In the Master’s Service”

Theodore S. Smylie

As the congregation said goodbye to the Fowles, they faced not only the challenge of changing pastors, but also of changing locations. Membership had steadily declined from a high of 1,106 in 1922 to 777 by April, 1929. Competition from the Westminster Presbyterian Church, just down the street on Delmar, was partly responsible and the officers of the church determined that the best course of action would be to move. The congregation concurred on November 17, 1929.

Nearly twenty years before, this very scenario had been predicted. In April, 1910, Central learned that the Session of the Grand Avenue Presbyterian Church (later renamed Westminster) had recommended to its congregation that they purchase the southwest corner of Delmar and Union Avenues for the purpose of erecting a new church. Since Grand Avenue was also a Southern Presbyterian Church and this site was only two blocks from Central’s new facility, Central promptly petitioned the Presbytery to block the move. The overture listed various reasons for the request, among them:

[This location] would work an extreme hardship on us. Central Church has passed through many trials and vicissitudes. For many years it has had a struggling existence. The heroic sacrifices made by our people to transfer the church to its present location...have seldom been equalled. If left in sole possession of this district, we believe that our church will now grow strong enough to be a source of pride and satisfaction to our Presbytery, and that, under the blessing of God, it will be able to do great things for Christ.

But, if Grand Avenue locates so near us, Central might continue to have a struggling and precarious existence, certainly its growth would be greatly hindered and restricted thereby. Their prosperity would, in part at least, be at our expense.



Rev. Theodore S. Smylie. His grandfather, John A. Smylie, was one of the signers of the articles in 1861 by which the Southern Church (PCUS) was established.



The Clayton Presbyterian Church at the corner of Hanley Road and Forsyth. The church merged with Central in 1931.



Central celebrated its history both in 1929 (when the picture was taken) at the final meeting of the Ladies' Auxiliary at the Clara and Delmar location and again in 1934, upon the church's 90th anniversary.

The overture noted that six Presbyterian churches already existed within a one mile radius of the proposed site. Grand Avenue also rejected an offer by Central to sell its building to Grand Avenue and move farther west itself.

Although both the St. Louis Presbytery and the General Assembly agreed with Central, the Grand Avenue Church was determined to move. The church began construction at the Union and Delmar site in 1915 and the building was completed in December, 1916.

Now in 1929, Central faced the necessity of finding a new pastor and a new location. A seminary professor, Robert M. Karr, was hired as interim pastor. The Session praised Dr. Karr as one of the finest preachers in America and urged the congregation not to "become gloomy and despondent and remain away from the church services." They were reminded that "Central is your church...It needs the active support and interest as well as the prayers of every officer and every member. Help now without waiting for a new pastor and leader." The wait would be a long one, twenty-one months.

The search for a new location proceeded much more quickly. On Christmas Eve day, 1929, the congregation voted to sell the Clara and Delmar building to Jewish congregation B'Nai El for \$190,000. By March of 1930, they had approved a new site at Hanley Road and Davis Drive in Clayton and had also agreed to merge with the Clayton Presbyterian Church. Plans for the new building, to be constructed in the style of "the English Country Church of the late Fourteenth Century," were unveiled in May and the cornerstone laid on November 15, 1930.

A week before construction formally began, Central called a new pastor, T. S. Smylie. Theodore Shaw Smylie was born in Jackson, Louisiana, in 1893, the son and grandson of Southern Presbyterian ministers. He received his theological education at Louisville Seminary and Westminster College. Following service as an army chaplain in the First World War, Smylie ministered in West Virginia, Kentucky and Tennessee before accepting the call to Central in November, 1930. He preached his first sermon on January 11, 1931, at the Masonic Temple on Delmar, where the congregation was meeting until their new facility was completed.

Within a month of Dr. Smylie's arrival, the congregation had authorized the issuance of \$150,000 in bonds and had borrowed \$143,150 to pay construction costs. Even as the country slid into the depression following the stock market crash of October 29, 1929, Central remained optimistic about its ability to repay the debt. Dr. Smylie mentioned at the annual congregational meeting in April that "due care should continue to be given to the finances of the church," but of more immediate interest were plans for dedicating the new building in the fall.

The "new" Central Presbyterian Church was officially opened in a week of special services beginning September 27, 1931. Former pastors Mauzé and Fowle participated in the celebrations. The official recognition of the merger of the Central and Clayton churches occurred a month later. Dr. Walter Langtry, pastor of Clayton Presbyterian for 31 years, became pastor emeritus of the united congregations.

The routine of church life continued through the depression years. Sermons continued to be preached, weddings, baptisms and funerals were still performed, various groups and organizations still met. However, the overwhelming burden of debt consumed much of the church's time and energy.

B'Nai El congregation had paid \$15,000 in cash and owed the balance to Central secured by a deed of trust on the property. Central's finance committee made no plans for a special building fund to repay the church's own debts to the bank. In the October 25, 1931 bulletin, the committee only noted that "It has been suggested...that there may be many who have money they would like to begin contributing for the purpose of liquidating the debt which has been incurred..."

By 1932, as the depression deepened, the Board of Trustees realized that the church would face some difficulty in paying off its debt. The initial loan installment was paid in March, as was the first bond interest in September. Clearly, future obligations could not be met, and the Board of Trustees (the church's legal representatives) negotiated a loan extension. They further suggested that the diaconate should "give consideration to increasing the income of the church by way of developing ways and means by which new members can be obtained..."

In February, 1933, the loans were again renegotiated, and the church held a day of prayer in response to the financial crisis. By the following



Dr. Walter Langtry, Pastor of Clayton Presbyterian, 1900-1931, and pastor emeritus of Central, 1932-1947. Records from the St. Louis Presbyterial (made up of Women's Auxiliaries from each of the churches in the Presbytery) called Langtry "beloved by all...always ready with a smile and a word of good cheer."

year, financial arrangements with B’Nai El also had to be renegotiated when it became evident (at least to the trustees) that they could not pay Central what they owed.

Early in 1935, the Session adopted a plan promoted by Dr. Smylie that asked all members to contribute to the church “that part of the tenth [of their incomes] which was not given to other benevolent causes” for thirteen weeks. Although Dr. Smylie had originally proposed that the entire tithe be given to the church, even the modified “Central Covenant Plan” met with some measure of success.

In the summer and fall of 1935, correspondence between Dr. Smylie and the chairman of the finance committee, L. Wade Childress, evinced the growing strain caused by financial pressures. Mr. Childress intimated that Dr. Smylie had failed to grasp the seriousness of the situation and that he had discouraged “proposals that consideration be given the matter of preparing to meet our obligations.” Dr. Smylie, in turn, claimed to have been misunderstood. Furthermore, he indicated, “If I be criticized for saying that I thought the congregation did well last year, and that the people could be counted upon to do well this year, then I have no apology to make...I have just enough confidence in our people to believe they will continue to stand by.”



John F. Green, Central elder, headed the building committee for both the Delmar and Clara Church and the Hanley Road Church. He died in 1932 and his funeral was among the first conducted from the new church.



The newly built church called itself “The New Central Presbyterian Church of St. Louis” resulting from the merger between Central and the Clayton Presbyterian Church.

Dr. Smylie was apparently becoming the focal point of some criticism over the church's failure to attract significant numbers of new members and retain current ones. In a personal letter to one church officer, written in November, 1935, Dr. Smylie assessed the situation from his point of view:

If we are losing ground, which may be possible, it is not surprising: lack of genuine cooperation by the leaders; a campaign of criticism by a few against the pastor; the pressure of the debt situation; the competition against a Southern Church in a Northern area; the reputation that the church has gained for narrowness and inflexibility, as well as its reputation for strife and discord; the failure to adopt approved methods (e.g., the Rotary System of Officers); lack of advertising (not even a decent bulletin board in front of the church); inadequate help, added to the acknowledged difficulties of church work in this day and age, are enough to finally wear almost any situation down.



Today, the dining room and chancel area look remarkably similar as they did when completed in 1931.

The comment about a rotary system of officers referred to Dr. Smylie's attempt to introduce such a plan at Central in 1934, following the General Assembly's action in 1932 that had approved it. Although the plan had been endorsed by the diaconate, the Session had (in Dr. Smylie's words), "either entirely blocked it or talked it to death."

The church embarked on a "Save Central" campaign in 1936, and the trustees were once again able to refinance the debt and keep Central afloat. By that time, serious opposition to Dr. Smylie's leadership had developed. Although the Session gave him a unanimous vote of confidence in March, it came with a promise by Dr. Smylie that "if I was the cause of the troubles in Central Church, I would resign as pastor before March 1, 1937." In November, Dr. Smylie advised the congregation that he would resign. The action was taken, he said, "because there are those in the church who believe that the interest and welfare of the church can best be promoted by a change of pastors." In his letter to the Presbytery, Dr. Smylie stated his belief that the opposition was numerically small, but strategically placed to render his ministry ineffective. For reasons that are unclear, the congregational meeting called in November to act on Dr. Smylie's resignation was postponed until January, 1937. By a vote of 103 to 60, the congregation concurred with Dr. Smylie's request.

Dr. Smylie preached his last sermon on February 28, 1937. The bulletin carried only a paragraph noting that “the present pastorate” came to a close that day. It recited the statistics of Dr. Smylie’s tenure and ended with a brief expression of appreciation from the Smylies for kindnesses shown them. A few members, including some officers, resigned from the church in protest to what they perceived to be a forced resignation.

Dr. Smylie customarily ended his correspondence with the closing, “Yours in the Master’s Service.” The hard experience of the depression years tested the church’s commitment to that service. To be sure, many members, rich and poor, gave sacrificially to sustain Central. And the church responded as best it could to the specific needs of its members.

No one could have anticipated the extent of the financial depression. Nevertheless, in their pragmatic approach to the crisis, records show that a number of key decisions were made by a small group of officers without consultation with or the consent of the congregation or even the various boards, as was required. Dr. Smylie had written in 1935 that “the policy and program of the church is not for me, but for the whole body of the officers - and back of them for the people to decide. Both the officers and the people will support a plan, in the making of which they have had a part, more than one that is formulated by one or two individuals, and then presented to them for formal adoption.”

What is the nature and function of leadership within the church? That question was never asked and never answered. Lost during this difficult time was the understanding that the Master called all those in His service to be servants of one another.



Ministries continued during the difficult years of the depression. Pictured is youth leader, Percy Black, (second from left) on an outing with students, including Garland Smith (far left), a long time member of Central.

Postcard picturing first three church buildings. Probably issued when Central began to build the present church on Hanley Road.

