

[Stockholm (Winthrop), St. Lawrence Co. NY]

## HUNDRED SEVENTY PREACHERS

There are two Universalist churches in the north country which are still served by students from the Theological School in Canton, and the two have had the stamina to survive... The two surviving Universalist churches are in Winthrop and Henderson... The two churches and the others that have died were not able to support resident ministers and therefore it was necessary to engage students for the Sunday services. The students needed the weekly check and experience but they could not be in town for parish work during the week on account of classes and study hours. The policy had to be student ministers or none.

The Universalist church in Winthrop celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of its dedication on November 20, 1938. The historian was Ralph O. Stearns and he has loaned his manuscript to the editor for the excerpts that follow. Mr. Stearns is the clerk of the parish.

Members of the faculty and students of the Theological School of St. Lawrence University conducted services in Winthrop and vicinity as early as 1875. Increasing interest in the liberal faith culminated in the organization of this Universalist parish in the home of Omar P. Stearns on March 26, 1888. One hundred persons contributed to the building fund and the present wooden edifice was completed on September 1 at a cost of three thousand dollars. At the dedicatory service on August 30, Dr. J. S. Lee read from the Scriptures; Dr. Henry P. Forbes gave the charge to the minister and Dr. I. [Isaac] M. Atwood delivered the sermon. The church school was organized on December 2 with thirty-two members and Mr. Stearns was the superintendent. Five persons are now living who became members of this church in its first year of existence.

The first settled minister was Dr. Harry E. Townsend, a graduate of the Theological School and now pastor of the Universalist church in Westbrook, Me. Dr. Townsend married one of the daughters of the late O. P. Stearns and returns to Winthrop each summer. His salary as pastor of this church was \$600 per year.

Father's Day was first observed in this church. Mrs. Maud Ellison sensed the need of this day in the church calendar and it was first observed on the third Sunday in June, 1912, as a special tribute to the life of her father, Omar P. Stearns, who was then living. Her agitation for the observance of the Sunday in the State and outside is responsible for the general observance.

A bell was presented to this church by Miss Mena Stearns on March 15, 1918, and appropriate services were held when the bell was installed. This church gave \$785, its quota, to the Universalist General Convention in the

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Million Dollar Drive. The dedicatory service for the addition to the church occurred on November 11, 1934, during the pastorate of the Rev. Jeffery W. Campbell.

"I believe I am safe in saying," writes Mr. Stearns, "that there is no other church of the age of this one, whose congregations have had the opportunity of hearing as many sermons on the subject, 'Prayer.' With but few exceptions, each student who has had the stamina to stay with us for three months, has given us a more or less lengthy discourse on prayer, gained from his broad experience of about twenty years on life's highway. With but few exceptions, each member of our congregation has had the stamina to sit through these discourses, usually marvelling at the new ideas (that is, new to the speaker) presented in each discourse. Many of the theologs have felt that it was a backbreaking ordeal to stand up before a harmless congregation, like ours, and conduct a service. Oftentimes, we of the congregation wondered who was actually required to give the most thought, the student preacher or the experienced listener.

"Possibly a stranger here, tonight, might think that we had it in for our students and maybe we have, as evidenced by the fact that in addition to the many ministers from other denominations who have honored us by their presence, we have furnished a practice ground to about one hundred seventy students who have been willing to honor us by their presence and in the meantime better prepare themselves for their life's work. At times, an excess of student preaching may get slightly monotonous, but we may feel repaid a hundred fold if we but think of the worthwhile accomplishments of such successes as Roy Coons, Lyman Ward, Owen D. Young, Harry Townsend, Edward Downey, Fred Line, Fred Leining, 'Luke' Gardner, Emerson Lalone, Jeffery Campbell and a host of others. These have entered our doors as student preachers and were encouraged by us of good imaginations yet clear visions with such words as 'How rapidly you are improving!' or 'That sermon was the best yet.'

"Reminiscing would not be complete without mentioning a few of our old time preachers, who are most certainly ministering in another world. We, who have been fortunate in hearing them, would include the names of I. M. Atwood, H. P. Forbes, Caleb Fisher, George Sahlin and Manley Townsend.

"I am not going back over the dates to fifty years ago but some people eat their piecrust first while others put off the hardest part to the last. On January 14, 1934, it was noted with deep regret that the majority of the Potsdam Universalists had thrown up the sponge. During the existence of these two parishes much good fellowship had resulted. Your clerk has concluded that if all people, Catholic, Protestant or Jew, took one half the interest in the upkeep, functioning and attendance of their respective churches, that some of them do in the golf courses within a radius of fifty

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miles or the latest moving picture in adjoining towns, none of us would hear the continuous pleadings, 'Unite or die from starvation,' but rather all would soon be voicing the demand, 'Build more churches or become overcrowded and die of suffocation.' This is no idle jest for I honestly believe it to be a fact. Its truth is borne out by the events of the past few years.

"Granted that modern times are with us, nevertheless the meaning of the lessons presented through the teachings of Him, whom we term our Saviour, has never changed one iota nor will it ever change as long as life exists."

*Empire State Universalist, Cortland NY, January 1939*

Transcribed on 5 Apr 2013 by Karen E. Dau of Rochester, NY