

CHURCH OF OUR FATHER

By T. E. Potterton [Rev. Thomas Edward Potterton]

A double anniversary was observed by the Universalist Church of Our Father, Grand avenue and Lefferts place, yesterday, the sixty-third of the founding of the society, and the sixtieth of the organization of the church. The pastor, the Rev. Dr. Thomas Edward Potterton, preached an appropriate sermon. The text was from Deuteronomy 10:9: "Take heed to thyself, and keep thy soul diligently, lest thou forget the things which thine eyes, saw, and lest they depart from thy heart all the days of thy life; but make them known unto thy children and thy children's children." Dr. Potterton said in the course of his sermon:

The earliest record that we have of the proclamation of our faith in Brooklyn dates from the year 1830. In January and February of that year the Rev. Mr. Fiske came over the river from New York, preaching with no convincing evidence of permanency. Two years later two of the patriarchal preachers, the Rev. Shaler J. Hillyer and the Rev. Thomas J. Sawyer, D.D., repeated the experiment, preaching in a school house on Concord street. A society was formed, but the faith was exceedingly unpopular and the adherents so few in number that the effort, in the early part of 1833, was relinquished. There may have been occasional preaching in the nine years which followed, but of those services we have no record. In 1842 another and a successful attempt was made to found a society, the society whose anniversary we celebrate to-day.

A church edifice, on Adams street, which the First Unitarian Society had vacated, was leased to the Universalists, and upon Sunday, April 3, 1842, was opened for service, the clergymen resident in New York officiating. Different ministers preached during the spring and summer until August, when the first pastor of the church, the Rev. Abel O. Thomas, came to Brooklyn. Under the effective administration of Mr. Thomas the congregations increased; "the house was well filled at morning and afternoon service, and crowded at evening lectures." The need became urgent for a more commodious building, and after much difficulty a lot of land on the corner of Fulton and Pineapple streets was secured. In November, 1842, Dr. Canfield, in his farewell sermon, preached Sunday, October 26, 1890, tells the story of the undertaking, which met such strenuous opposition from our old-time antagonists, now happily our friends. The effort to secure a lot proved a difficult undertaking owing to the intense sectarian prejudice of the people of Brooklyn at that time. They were largely the wealthy or influential portion, the descendants of Dutch farmers, a class whose sterling character was yet very conservative and thoroughly Calvinistic in theology. More than once was the nearly successful purchase prevented by the interference of the church to which the seller or owner belonged. The new church was denounced as "a nest of heresy," a "synagogue of Satan," and "a nursery of devils." Persecution at length produced its legitimate effect, and a lady owning land at the corner of Pineapple and Fulton streets was induced to inquire as to the cause of the denunciation, and becoming convinced of the harmlessness of the objects of the Universalist society, a sale of the land was effected.

The pastor of the lady, the Rev. Mr. Jacobus, endeavored to prevent the business transaction, going so far as to threaten her with discipline and excommunication. She remained firm in her intention to dispose of the real estate, and thus give the Universalists a fighting chance. Those were the days of theological warfare.

Ground was broken early in December, and the building was dedicated June 22, 1843. In the following October (October 22) a Sunday school was organized, The meetinghouse, to use the nomenclature of the early part of the nineteenth century, was built with stores in the basement, after the fashion prevailing in many New England towns. The first pastorate was two years and three months in length, and at the close of his administration, Mr. Thomas was

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pleased to testify that he never had "seen the blessedness and blessing of unity more thoroughly exemplified."

In the spring of 1845 the Rev. T.[Thomas] B. Thayer, of Lowell, Mass., was settled as minister, the Rev. F. F. Thayer having served as a supply during the interval between Mr. Thomas' departure and the coming of Dr. Thayer. Upon October 19, 1845, during the first year of Dr. Thayer's pastorate, the church was organized, granting to us the joy of this sixtieth anniversary and countless blessings to the communicants during all the years. Dr. Thayer was a man greatly and justly beloved. He was recognized not only as a man of gracious manner and noble character, but as a preacher of power, with a message. It is related that he was present at a meeting held in New York to consider the cruelty practiced upon convicts of the state prisons[.] [A]fter two hours of feeble speaking from ministers and others who were too lukewarm or too discreet to voice the popular indignation which had called them together, Mr. Thayer, last on the list of speakers, and reluctantly announced, darted forward, and arresting the departing audience by a few ringing sentences, held the people spellbound for an hour, smiling, weeping, applauding, swaying to his eloquence as he pleaded the cause of his oppressed brethren, "sorely wounded, falling where they stumbled, yet still capable of angelhood, still heirs of God, joint heirs with Christ." Horace Greeley was there and the tears fell unheeded down his face. Peter Cooper was there and wrung the speaker's hand with a "God bless you" at the close, while another of New York's large hearted philanthropists cried, "If this be Universalism, in heaven's name, let us have it. The world is sick for want of it."

In the church records I find this note over the signature of E. Winchester: "Church burned. About 12 o'clock on Saturday evening, September 9, 1848, a fire broke out in Fulton street, opposite Sands, which raged with frightful violence until 6 o'clock Sunday morning, sweeping away every building on both sides of Fulton street, from Henry and Sands to Pineapple and Concord, and extending from Henry street on the west to Washington on the east, excepting a few buildings on Sands, Washington, Henry and Pineapple. Our beautiful church on the corner of Fulton and Pineapple is included in this fearful conflagration."

This misfortune to the young and struggling society was seized upon by their theological adversaries as a sign from heaven, for it was openly declared that "Brooklyn was chastened by divine wrath for suffering these pestilent doctrines to be taught." Dr. S. H. Cox was especially bitter, declaring, when the remark was made to him, "This is a sad night," "I do not feel so. It will purge the city of the awful heresy taught there. That society will never be able to rebuild." His prophecy, however, was doomed to failure. The fire brought into relief the better parts of some lives. Henry Ward Beecher, after a battle with his trustees, which involved his resignation, was able to offer Plymouth Church. The society had accepted the invitation of the Unitarian Society to meet in their new arid beautiful edifice upon Monroe place until the new edifice upon the corner of Monroe place and Clark street was completed. The first church had been known as the "Brooklyn Tabernacle", the society, upon entering the new church, adopted the name "The Church of the Restoration."

The Monroe Place Church was dedicated July 2, 1850; and for the first time in the history of the parish clergymen of other denominations were present and had part in the service. Mr. Thayer resigned May 1, 1851, returning to his old parish at Lowell, stipulating, however, that if the Brooklyn church could not unite upon a pastor during the year, he would return. Happily, the parish was able to agree upon the Rev. H.[Henry] R. Nye, the third pastor, an indefatigable worker and a strenuous warrior, who remained until January 1, 1857, when he resigned. In February of the same year the Rev. Henry Blanchard, whose scholarship and oratorical powers have been widely recognized, became the fourth minister of the church, and is to-day the primate among the former pastors of the parish. At the end of Dr. Blanchard's first year a few members established a Sunday school at 274 Cumberland street. The room secured for this

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missionary movement was dedicated September 5, 1858, by Dr. Blanchard and Joshua P. Powers, superintendent. This marked the beginning of the society, which later was housed in the church upon Greene avenue, near Adelphi street, known as the "Church of the Redeemer."

As the years passed the movement of the members of the Church of the Restoration was up-town and away from the Heights, thus weakening the body, until it was decided, wisely, to sell the Monroe place property and unite with the daughter parish on Greene avenue. In November, 1868, the church property on the corner of Monroe place and Clark street was deeded to the 'New Church Society' for \$40,000, and that society continues to occupy the church at the present time.

In November, 1868, the Rev. Henry Blanchard resigned, to take effect January 1, 1869, and at that time the First Universalist Society moved into the church erected by former members of the Monroe Place church, on Greene avenue.

In October, 1860, the Rev. N. W. Gaylord was called, and in the following year, June 12, he resigned, declaring his intention of seeking a chaplaincy In the army. He was succeeded by the Rev. Charles Cravens, who served a little more than one year. [On] February 13, 1863, the Rev. L. J. Fletcher was called, and it was during his pastorate of two years duration that the church edifice on Greene avenue, now occupied by Polish Catholics, was erected, the cornerstone being laid October 3, 1863, and the dedication of the church occurring June 19, 1864. [On] May 1, 1865, Mr. Fletcher resigned, and the Rev. J. G. Bartholomew, at a meeting November 8, was elected his successor. Three years later Dr. Bartholomew offered his resignation, that a union between the two churches might be effected. This plan became a fact in the early part of 1869, when the Rev. E. C. Bolles, D.D. became the pastor of the two societies united in the Greene Avenue Church. Dr. Bolles' acceptance from Portland bears date April 26, 1869. Under inspiring and eloquent preaching of this attractive speaker, the church edifice soon became inadequate, compelling the society to cast about for a new location and to plan for a larger building.

At a meeting on Wednesday evening, July 7. 1869, the trustees were empowered to purchase the lots between Vanderbilt and Clermont avenues, near Atlantic avenue, at a cost not to exceed \$20,000. A week later it was reported by the trustees that the lots had been purchased, and it was voted to build a chapel on the Clermont Avenue side of the property to seat 700 or 800 people at a cost not over \$20,000. That building is still standing, and has been known for years as the Duryea Presbyterian Church. The Greene Avenue Church having been sold, for immediate occupancy, the society worshipped in Adelphi Academy Hall, entering into possession of the new church on Clermont Avenue, June 19, 1870.

Dr. Bolles resigned on March 18, 1871, terminating his pastorate the third Sunday in June of the same year. At a meeting held Monday evening, November 27, 1871, the Rev. H.[Henry] R. Nye, D.D. was selected as minister. And upon the first of January, 1872, he commenced his second pastorate with the First Universalist Society.

It was in this decade that the society was plunged into gloom, because of the bursting of a threatened storm, which left desolation in its wake. A law suit against the church, which had been decided adversely to the society and sustained by the Court of Appeals, left the parish financially prostrate. To meet the obligation, which, with interest and costs, amounted to nearly \$10,000, the society sold its lots on Vanderbilt avenue, and later, on February 18, 1879, accepted an offer of \$12,500 from the Clauson Avenue Presbyterian Church for the chapel. Thus it became a fact that the First Universalist Society was homeless, owing nothing and owning nothing. Dr. Nye, in a long letter, was impelled to observe that the resources of the society had been wasted by poor judgment and stupid business practices. The appalling fact, however, was that after thirty-five years of sacrifice and labor the parish was penniless and forlorn.

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In seeking a temporary abode the Bedford Avenue Congregational Church, now the Aurora Grata Cathedral; the Ormond place church. Music Hall and Polytechnic Institute Hall were considered, and finally for a while the remnant of faithful believers met in the State Street Congregational Church, now the Synagogue Beth Elohim. From this ecclesiastical edifice the little company moved to Music Hall, at the corner of Flatbush avenue and Fulton street, and then to Conservatory Hall, at the corner of Bedford avenue and Fulton street. Previous to these latter removals, in December, 1879, Dr. Nye resigned, and his period of labor ended July 1, 1880.

For a few months the Rev. Selden Gilbert supplied, and then, in the early part of 1881, came the minister who was able to build a monument to his own zeal and ability on the corner of Grand avenue and Lefferts place—the Rev. A.[Andrew] J. Canfield, D.D. The result of Dr. Canfield's coming and work was that this church was dedicated June 17, 1833, and in 1887 he celebrated the jubilee, having paid off the debt. Dr. Canfield reviewed the matter on the occasion of his departure to Chicago, in 1890.

Before this church was occupied, the congregation having outgrown the hall on Bedford avenue and Fulton street, met for several months in the church on Gates avenue and Irving place, now owned by Unity Society of Unitarians. The dedication of this edifice occurred on June 17, 1883, in the presence of a most representative gathering. The Hon. Seth Low, then Mayor of Brooklyn, and many leading clergymen participated in the religious service of dedication, and had part in the social joy over the splendid success of Dr. Canfield and his faithful helpers. To say that this eminent minister enjoyed a brilliant career in Brooklyn, and builded a noble Institution for the worship of God and the service of man, is only the truth, and let the truth be told. In 1890, after nearly ten years of wonderful success in our city, Dr. Canfield accepted a call to St. Paul's Church of Chicago—one of the richest and most influential churches of that city. The winter of 1890-91 was spent in candidating, during which individual preferences were freely revealed and inability to agree upon the man for the vacancy made fully manifest. At last agreement was reached, and the choice of the parish revealed in a call extended to the Rev. C. Ellwood Nash, of Akron, Ohio. Dr. Nash is a human dynamo. He is the incarnation of rugged integrity, unquestioned loyalty and supreme devotion to duty. A tireless worker, he labors and always has with indefatigable zeal, for Christ and the Church. The first year of Dr. Nash's pastorate was severely handicapped by a prolonged illness, during which the man himself went down into the valley of shadows, and the church partook of the gloom and depression. During this trial year the society lost in enthusiasm and numerical strength. Dr. Nash, having returned to health and strength, labored strenuously for the uplift of the church, and gave himself with unstinted measure to the work of his Brooklyn ministry, until the powers that be caused his promotion in 1895 to the presidency of Lombard College. There was universal respect for his high character, and the affection of his many friends attests the esteem in which Dr. Nash was held. Another winter of candidating and indecision ensued. Long periods of candidating is one way that the devil has of putting churches in the graveyard of dormant parishes.

The church was pleased and fortunated to call the Rev. Lewis E. Pease from Massachusetts, and almost immediately his buoyant nature, unflagging zeal, pastoral excellence and sermonic efforts began to tell in increasing the interest and adding to the membership of the church. Mr. Pease possesses a magnetism that wins the throng. He is remembered with genuine esteem by the people of the church.

(In parenthesis, I desire to say that there is nothing I enjoy more than the kind words spoken of my predecessors; and allow me to further testify that I am moved to steer clear of the person who presumes to win my favor by uttering harsh reflections, in an un-Christian spirit, of my brethren.)

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Mr. Pease, after nearly three years of strenuous and successful labor, resigned, much to the regret of his friends. Then came back the builder of the church. Dr. Canfield, from Chicago, to what he has playfully and tenderly termed his "child." The "child" had grown, the city had changed, old friends had passed on into the invisible silence, and the environment of the early days was no more. Two or three years of reunion and service, and Dr. Canfield resigned to accept a call to All Souls Church, Worcester, where he is now. The present pastorate began March 22, 1903.

The good and encouraging present conditions may be briefly and modestly summarized:

1. The existence, completely, of the spirit of unity and co-operation.
2. The undoubted increase in missionary pride and zeal.
3. The appreciation of devout and helpful formalism.
4. The enlarged belief in the church as a spiritual dynamo—a religious institution devoted to worship of God and the service of man.

Viewing our location in Brooklyn we are moved to note that the movement in the population that would naturally form a constituency for our church is suburban. We shall some day be in the center of the business life of a great city—we will be a "downtown church."

The duty is upon us to prepare for those conditions. Hence the recognition of special needs: Further utilization of the plant, to increase our church usefulness,

1. Enrichment of the church auditorium.
2. Permanent endowment fund to insure perpetuation of the work of the church.
3. Bringing in young men and young women to the church.
4. Continued and, if possible, increasing loyalty to the church by our members living far from the church.

In the evening a platform meeting was held, when the representatives of the auxiliaries made brief addresses: H. L. Brant, on "The Ideal Sunday School"; Miss Grimes, "The Ideal Young People's Society"; G. W. Knight, "The Ideals of the Woman's Alliance", and M. M. Wagner, on "The Ideal Men's Club." On Wednesday evening the anniversary reception will be held, when greetings will be heard from Drs. Frank Oliver Hall, Nehemiah Boynton, President Almon Gunnison, the Revs. J. P. Forbes and C.[Charles] R. East.

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