

# FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF DURHAM

*"Downtown by history and by choice"*



## SESQUICENTENNIAL SNAPSHOT

### OUR CHURCH IN CRISIS TIMES: WORLD WAR I

The Great War broke out in 1914, but the United States did not join the devastating European conflict until April 1917. Meanwhile, the Twentieth Century had produced domestic turmoil: labor strife, opposition to monopolies, woman suffrage marches, temperance campaigns, race struggles in a Jim Crow world. Reformers emerged to confront the challenges, among them the minister of our church, **Rev. Edward Ridley Leyburn** (1902-1919). The 38 year old whom the Durham Presbyterians called to their pulpit had been born in Lexington, Virginia, graduated from Washington & Lee College and Virginia's Union Seminary, and been ordained in 1895 by the Winchester Presbytery.

#### **Rev. Edward Ridley Leyburn (Pastor: 1902-1919)**



Rev. Leyburn was soon regarded by his peers in the Durham Ministers' Association as "a wise and fearless leader of all that concerned the common good of the community." A major perceived "common good" was the civic and moral uplift of the local community by observing, as the Commandment of the Lord stipulated, the seventh day of the week when God rested from his creation labors and "blessed the Sabbath day, and hallowed it" (Exodus 20: 11, KJV). Thus ensued ongoing efforts to safeguard the Sabbath by suppressing sales of "unnecessaries," a variety of public amusements, and otherwise challenging erosive forces at work in a secularizing urban and industrial town of the New South. America's entry into the war against the Central Powers would pose a new threat to keeping the Lord's Day holy.

Outbreak of war spurred Durham Presbyterians to support the "war to end all wars." At Roxboro and Main streets, the Woman's Auxiliary produced copious quantities of "white gifts" (fabrics, bandages) while the congregation funded

copies of the New Testament for distribution to soldiers and sailors. An Honor Roll of members in the armed forces appeared in the Narthex of the then new sanctuary. In the pulpit, Rev. Leyburn called on members to pray for the physical and moral safety of the youth who found themselves in dangerous and profane environments at home and abroad.

Wartime desecration of the Sabbath was seen to tear the civic and social fabric; Rev. Leyburn rose to the occasion. As one of five members of an Orange Presbytery committee charged with countering the ever more apparent threats to the Sabbath, the committee petitioned the Presbyterian president, Woodrow Wilson, and his Secretary of War, Newton Baker, to minimize Sunday work and travel as well as military parades at troop transfer points. Local governments located near military cantonments were urged to curb recreational distractions – movies, baseball games and other amusements. The committee emphasized, Sundays were “not a holiday, but a holy day, not a day of sports, but of rest and worship.”

Superheated patriotism, flag waving, and demonization of the enemy emanated from some pulpits, but not from our church while Rev. Leyburn held the pulpit. The minister warned the congregation that it was “a crime against the country as well as disloyalty to our Savior for the church to become simply a recruiting station for the army, and a preacher of patriotism and a promoter of war.” Rather, the church had a higher calling, to make and keep “men true to the highest and purest and noblest ideals and character and service.”

Events soon outpaced Rev. Leyburn’s shepherd of the flock approach when in May 1918 he informed the Session that he felt such an “urgent need of religious work among the soldiers that he had offered his services to the Y. M. C. A.” The Session and congregation granted him six months leave to serve initially as the YMCA’s Religious Work Secretary and subsequently as Director at Camp Wadsworth, a military cantonment outside Spartanburg, South Carolina. There, he joined a precursor of the U. S. O. in an unprecedented mobilization of social services to address the temporal and spiritual needs of the soldiers through recreational facilities, library services, Bible study, and religious services.

**Y. M. C. A. facilities, Camp Wadsworth, Spartanburg, SC  
(Credit: Spartanburg Public Library)**



Twenty-seven year old Rev. Herbert Snipes Turner took Leyburn's place. A graduate of Virginia's Union Theological Seminary, he had been ordained by Orange Presbytery in December, 1917. He was no match for the church leaders who staged, during worship on Sunday September 22, 1918, a dramatic presentation of a new American flag with its 48 stars and a service flag (red border on a white field with 32 blue stars representing church members in the armed forces). Both flags initially stood in the Narthex, but soon migrated north to the organ rail.

Presentation of the flags unleashed a tidal wave of patriotic fervor by Elder and prominent local barrister, Victor Silas Bryant. He castigated Germany as waging a war that contrasted "atheism to Christianity, of barbarism to civilization," and unleashed a litany of atrocities committed by the Central Powers. No so, the American cause and its symbol, the stars and stripes, which he declaimed stood for "heroic deeds and splendid accomplishments in the past," and also for "the teachings of the lowly Nazarene." Heartening indeed was a cause that sought to "make the world safe for Christianity."

By the time Rev, Leyburn returned to Durham in December, a new crisis had erupted. The war had ended with an Armistice on November 11, 1918 in the midst of the second and third waves of the world-wide influenza epidemic, misnamed the "Spanish Flu." The pestilence began in August and spread west in September from the port of Wilmington along the railroad. In October, the North Carolina Board of Health had banned all social gatherings as the state's meager medical resources became overwhelmed by the influx of those stricken by the virus often accompanied by bacterial pneumonia (the "Blue Death"). Businesses, especially the tobacco warehouses, resisted the unenforceable ban as apparently did the devout Calvinists at Durham's Roxboro and Main streets. As the state's death toll soared toward 13, 000, the Session met in person at the church once or even three times a month and approved an April 1919 joint choral concert with neighboring Trinity Methodist Episcopal Church.

### **Influenza Strikes North Carolina**

(Credit: UNC Library (34 *Health Bulletin* (Oct. 1919))



Meanwhile, the troops returned home amid flu outbreaks aboard the troopships. The Durham Y. M. C. A. nevertheless welcomed them home with a dinner on May 9, after which the Session met in the Association's assembly hall. Less welcomed were other events staged for the returning soldiers. Disapproval greeted triumphant Victory Parades and dances, one of which took place on a block of Duke Street, and which Rev. Leyburn warned was likely to "degenerate into license."

Our minister soon departed, answering a call from the First Presbyterian Church of Rome, Georgia. His impending departure evoked heartfelt lamentations from the congregation and officers of the church. The assembled congregation acted by soundly defeating by a vote of 161-86 the motion to dismiss the beloved pastor. That outcome was subsequently reversed by Orange Presbytery which lauded the faithful pastor as a "tower of strength, not only in our Presbytery, but in the Synod of North Carolina and the General Assembly of the Church."

By Peter Fish, member,  
150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Team