

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF DURHAM

"Downtown by history and by choice"



SESQUICENTENNIAL SNAPSHOT #6

OUR CHURCH IN CRISIS TIMES: WORLD WAR II

The worship service on December 7, 1941, marked the first Sunday in Advent; it concluded shortly after noon. Thereafter, some 320 congregants who had gathered that morning at Roxboro and Main streets on the edge of the Christmas-trimmed downtown shopping district for Rev. Kelsey Regen's "Meditation" scattered to their homes. Then at 2:26 p. m. (EST) radio broadcasts announced shocking news. The Japanese had attacked the American naval base at Pearl Harbor. The next day, the afternoon *Durham Sun* reported both the fast-moving global events and President Franklin Roosevelt's stirring address to a Joint Session of Congress wherein he famously declared that December 7th would be forever a "day that shall live in infamy." Congress thereupon nearly unanimously endorsed a declaration of war on the Japanese Empire.



IMAGE: *Durham Sun*, December 8, 1941, p. 1

A week later in the midst of an unfolding global calamity, Rev. Regen continued with his "Advent Meditations" entitled "Light into Darkness." The theme was based on John's gospel and recounted "God's continuing and unceasing attempt across human history to break through the darkness of man's spirit and make himself known in ways in which man would believe and trust and follow."

The following Sunday, the 21st, was Christmas Sunday celebrated for the first time with “A Christmas Service of Readings, Carols, and Lights, after which the congregation gathered in the Church House for the traditional Christmas party.

Sunday the 28th found Rev. Regen addressing the world-wide conflagration by drawing on the Prophet Isaiah (6: 1-9a) for his sermon, “Through Disaster to Redemption.” The passage embodied the prophet’s life story from living in a land of security and prosperity under the long reign of King Uzziah whose leprosy-caused death plunged all Israel into disaster, despair and gloom. In the midst of the crisis, Isaiah had a deep spiritual awakening as he said: “In the year that king Uzziah died, I saw the Lord...” (KJV) That experience enabled Isaiah “to go through disaster to recovery and redemption.” So too, Regen declared, crisis and disaster can either “ruin us or make us.” But we must rise up beyond the possible collapse of modern civilization which a righteous God will not preserve to save injustice and evils. Nor could saving words be anticipated as emanating “from Washington or London or Moscow or Vichy or Berlin or Rome or Tokyo.” Only a moral and spiritual rebirth and renewal will, he emphasized, lead to a long slow process of redemption such as Isaiah experienced. Concluding, Rev. Regen asked, “how many of us – people like yourselves and myself- will be able by the grace of God to so manage our lives that we shall become a part of that redemptive movement [such that] we move out from impending disaster into recovery and redemption. Can we behold such a cleansing and remaking vision before it is too late? God grant that we may!”

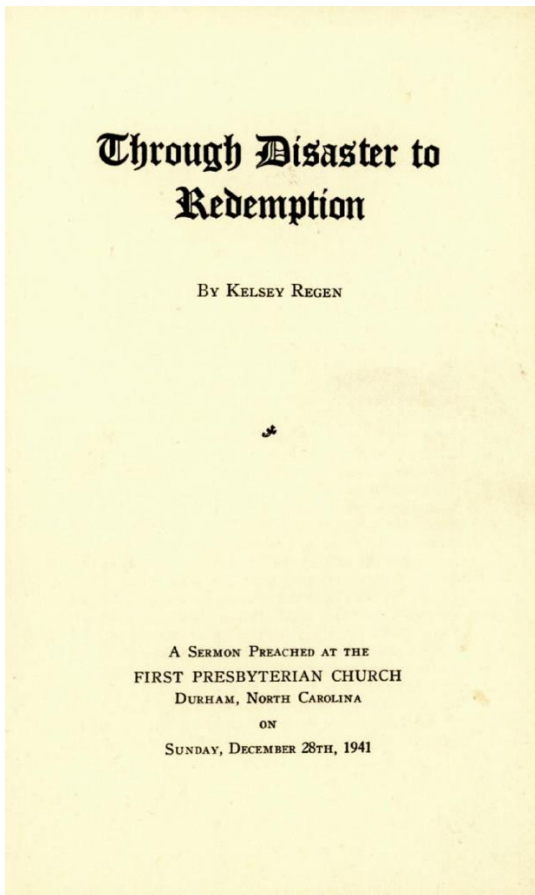


IMAGE: Rev. Regen’s December 28, 1941, sermon

The probing sermon concluded, the congregation exited to Music Minister William Twaddell’s stirring rendition of the “Hymn of Faith: O God, the Rock of Ages.” Giving them pause was an entry in the bulletin that Sunday reporting the death of a child of the church, Foy Roberson, Jr., lost “in the line of duty” off the California coast with the U. S. Army Air Corps. Rev. Regen would continue to preach on the pervasive crisis accentuated by grim reports in early 1942 from Wake Island, Guam and the Philippines.

Meanwhile, the minister turned his attention to construction of a Cloister Chapel on the west side of the Sanctuary. It would serve as the gateway for an urban mission to Durham’s faithful who sought a refuge from the busy world surrounding them. For that purpose, the Chapel opened at 104 North Roxboro Street on January 6, 1944, the day that President Roosevelt had proclaimed as National Day of Prayer. Thereafter, every evening at 6:00 p. m. the Young People’s Church Club, part of the national Youth Angelus movement, held a prayer service in the new Chapel that concluded with the singing of the Youth

Angelus Hymn.

The congregation mobilized as never before to meet the challenge before them, not least of which was gas rationing, coal shortages, and air raid drills. The Woman’s Auxiliary went on a war footing with such topics for its discussions such as “An All-Out Defense of the Home Front,”

“War and the Family,” “How to Live a Christian Life in War and Peace.” Frances Shackelford sent greetings to members in the armed forces who had been in her Sunday school class expressing the hope that “the demands and discipline of these war years gives you strength and vision for the years that we pray may develop unending peace.” The Big Brothers Class, for its part, packed Christmas boxes sent to far-flung church members in the military. Fathers of service members gathered in the Church House to edit one of the church’s mimeograph newsletters sent to all the church’s service members. Titled the “PX” or “Presbyterian Exchange,” the newsletter was, in fact, the product of Rev. Regen and the Church Hostess and newsletter adviser, Clara (Mrs. George) Matthis. The “PX” had begun publication in September 1943 before ending its run in 1945. It contained news of church activities, local sports, and the location and activities of members in the military as well as news of the wives. Issues reported that John T. Kerr, III “is somewhere in the Pacific on the USS Chenango,” that “Lanier W. Pratt’s ship is stationed in port at present,” and that “Lt. Charles T. Wilson is at the Naval Operating Base in Norfolk.”

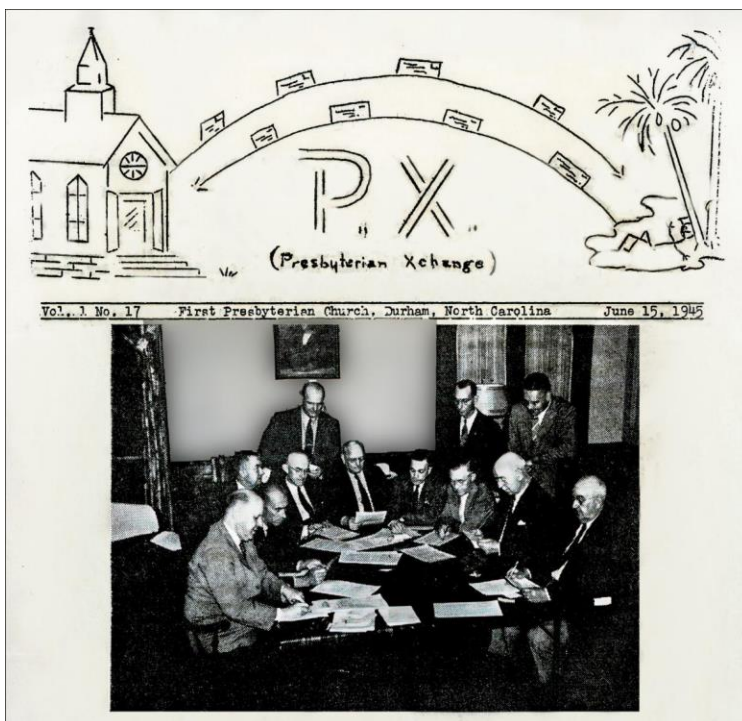


IMAGE: Dads of service members edit the “PX”

Wartime brought a stream of visitors to our church’s pulpit as well as a tidal wave of khaki-clad soldiers. The former were “Service Pastors” organized by the Joint Defense Service Council of the PCUS and the PCUSA. Rotated monthly and housed in the Malbourne Hotel across from the church on the Roxboro Street side, these pastors made 305 East Main Street their local headquarters. The latter were among the 35,000 to 40,000 soldiers stationed for infantry, artillery, and engineering training at Camp Butner. Sprawled across 40, 384 acres of rich agricultural land and wedged between U. S. 501 on the west and U. S. 15 on the east, the camp, opened in the summer of 1942. It then encompassed parts of

Person, Durham and principally Granville counties.

Buses plied between the camp and downtown Durham where they daily disgorged some 4,000 soldiers at the terminal then located adjacent to St. Philip’s Episcopal Church. The passengers immediately found themselves on the city’s streets and headed for the nearby United Services Organization (USO) facilities at 310 East Main Street across from the church as well as to those on Morris, Hunt, and Dillard streets. The camp and its soldiers thus afforded the church a new mission including funding carpeting for the camp’s chapel. But, it was the flood of GIs making their ways to our church’s doors that dramatically impacted church life. To our still rather insular congregation, the visitors came from distant geographical spaces and brought with them diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds. All received a warm welcome at First Church which became in the words of Mrs. Samuel “Peaches” McPherson, “A Haven of Hospitality.”

The Session as early as October 1941 had authorized a vigorous outreach mission to the military newcomers involving offering them home cooked meals and overnight accommodations with

meals provided. At the church, as many as 380 guest crowded the reading and writing areas in the Church House parlors open as late as 10:00 p. m. on weekdays. Reserved too were areas for ping pong tables, board games, record players, group singing, and relaxation on the church's lawn benches. Invitations to Sunday worship were extended and Rev. Regen offered "Fireside Vespers" replete with introductions, hymns, and the minister's closing benediction prayer asking God's care for those who would soon depart for foreign shores: "Be Thou their Pilot, Master, Friend, as they our land and life defend; Give them assurance Thou art there. May they when lonely, sad or ill, know Thou art watching o'er them still; Enfold them, Lord, in danger's hour; safe in Thine arms of love and power."

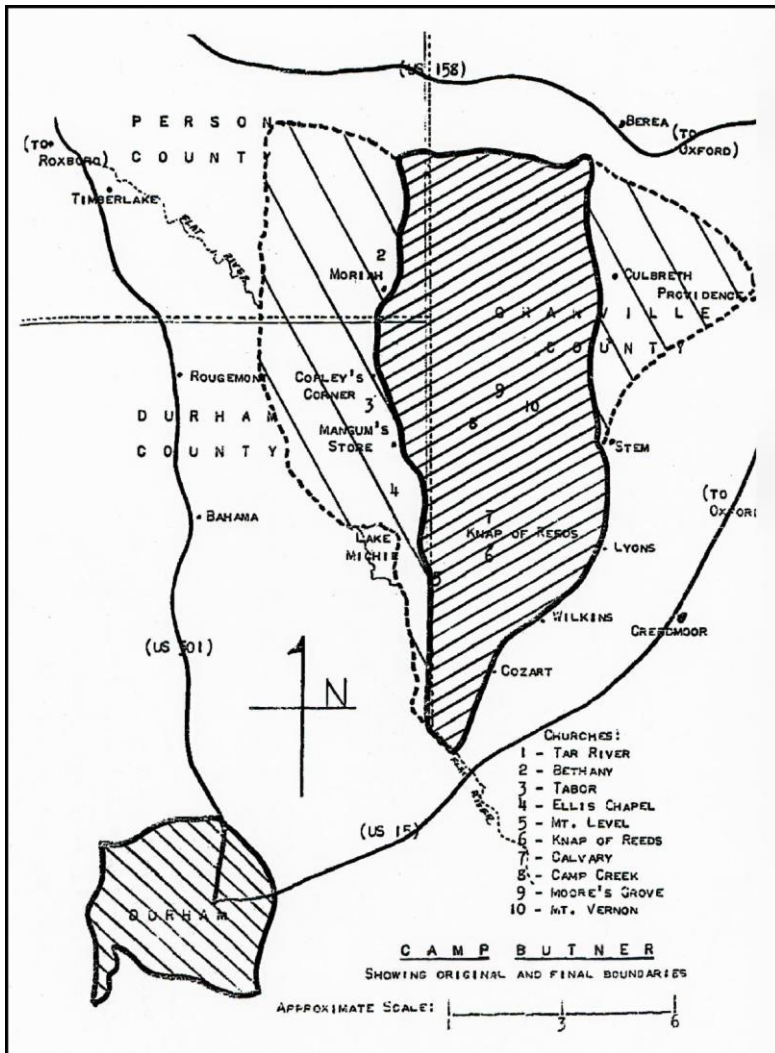


IMAGE: Camp Butner: Granville, Person, Durham counties

Mobilization of the Presbyterian community on East Main did not just happen. It was organized. At the center stood the talented Church Hostess, Clara Pugh White Matthis (Ms. George M.) who chaired the "Soldiers Entertainment Committee" assisted by her able assistant, Marie Penny (Ms. Jackson C. Truitt), both of whom joined the church staff in 1940 during Rev. Marion's ministry. Supporting them was the Woman's Auxiliary's Defense Committee. Together, they maintained a hectic pace to extend Christian hospitality to an unprecedented tide of service men that so stressed the church's facilities to require closing the Church House on Tuesday and Thursday evenings to permit custodial maintenance.

By mid-1944 the camp population had dramatically changed as post-D Day battle front casualties arrived as well as German POWs thereby challenging the church's hospitality-

oriented mission. The exigencies presented by the new camp population caused Mrs. Matthis to recall that "dismayed and bewildered as we were, our show had to go on and despite our own worries we had to try to restore the boys' faith in the lopsided world to which they had returned." Meanwhile, Rev. Regen repeated a theme that he had struck in early 1942. The Christian message to a world at war was, he declaimed, "a message of faith and hope" such that "no matter how deep the hell we may go through, no matter how dark the night that may settle down upon the earth in our time, there will be a tomorrow and it will be good."

Submitted by Peter Fish,
Member, 150th Anniversary Committee