

HOW I NEARLY BECAME A PRESBYTERIAN

Frank A. Parsons

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ON THE MORNING OF JULY 18, 2000, I was well into my retirement, never before with such power over my own calendar and daily schedule. I was a full participant in Washington and Lee's alumni college on the topic of Japan, and the next May, I looked forward to a trip back to Japan with an alumni college tour. Later that summer, I was scheduled to join another alumni college group for several days at Bar Harbor, Maine, and visiting Ted and Susan Van Leer at their lakeside home, not far away. Then I was going to head inland for the sylvan shores of Whetstone Pond and three weeks of counting fluffy clouds, skipping smooth rocks, and nudging bullfrogs into the lake with a long stick. TIAA-CREF was sending me ever-increasing income. Life was good.

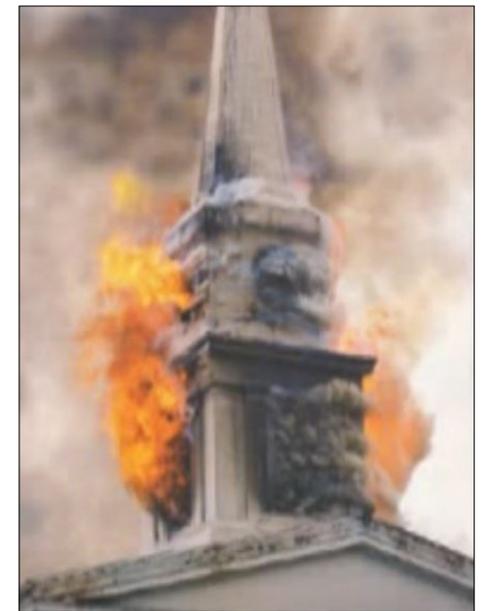
We alumni had our first class break around 10 o'clock on that July morning. Before we resumed our study of things Japanese, special programs director Rob Fure informed us that he had just learned there was a fire at the Lexington Presbyterian Church, but he had no details. An hour later, his report was that the Presbyterian church itself was "on fire." When we broke for lunch at noon, he suggested that

those housed on campus might want to purchase some bottled water at the Co-op, for there seemed to be a problem with water pressure in parts of Lexington, probably related to the fire.

I didn't realize it, but my life was changing in ways I would never have imagined. I went quickly to a campus vantage point where I'd be able to see the Presbyterian steeple. It wasn't there, and I felt my heart sink and begin to ache for good Presbyterian friends whose hearts, I knew, were broken. Through one of my very best friends, the late Pat Brady, I had come to know the Presbyterian pastor, Bill Klein, and I had nothing but admiration for this remarkable young man. That afternoon I wrote him a note of encouragement and included a check to help begin the recovery I knew he would lead so well. It wasn't the first such check he was to receive, but he did tell me later that it was the second.

Three days later, I received a somewhat cryptic phone call from Pat Brady, asking me to "go somewhere" with him early in the afternoon the next day. It was a very warm Saturday when we parked on White Street, in front of the Presbyterian manse. There, we were greeted by Bill Klein, and we sat on the side porch where there was a welcome pitcher of iced tea. Whereupon Pat and Bill proceeded shamelessly to ply me with this iced tea until I agreed to serve as the project coordinator for restoring the church. Actually, my first glass was only half empty when I made up my mind. There was no way I could have said no to these friends. I wasn't sure just what my role would be. The one thing I was sure of: I wanted to help.

The church's response to the tragedy was as swift as it was strong and resolute. A small group, designated the Point and Pivot Committee, was already hard at work when I joined them for the first time the following Tuesday in Murray Hall. This adjoining Sunday School and administrative building had suffered only minor damage from the fire, mostly from smoke and some water.



The steeple ablaze at the height of the fire. Photo courtesy of New Holland Church Furniture.

Mr. Parsons, a 1954 Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Washington and Lee University, spent 45 years at his alma mater, as executive assistant to three presidents for most of that time. In addition, he had overall charge of facilities (overseeing a great many construction projects) and institutional communications. He retired in 1999 and died in 2016.

What a remarkable committee this proved to be. It consisted of Bill Klein, the pastor; Pat Brady, approaching his mid-eighties, one of the more elder of the church elders; Dianne Herrick, of boundless energy and feisty intellect and common sense; and Mike Strickler, soft-spoken, levelheaded, a veteran of controversial issues, and wise beyond his years. In the first week following the fire, the most important member of the committee, in my opinion, was John McNemar, an engineer with great experience in building projects, who had a keen understanding of things that needed to be done and done quickly. It was John who swiftly arranged for experienced demolitions crews to remove dangerous debris, especially the twisted metal roofing hanging over the walls, as well as the remains of the fallen steeple. He was the initial church delegate to work with Cincinnati Insurance Company's representatives, accepting their quick first proffer of funds in order to lift the church's collective spirit and begin the restoration process. Pat Brady, with his background as superintendent of buildings and grounds and plant projects manager at Washington and Lee, worked closely with John, and together they had the recovery well under way by the time I became involved just a few days after the event.

Discounting the initial terrible event of the fire itself, the "good news / bad news" equation came into play. It was good news that the church had recently reworked its fire insurance policy. The expanded coverage appeared to be adequate to cover the repairs. The bad news: You have to work hard to separate all the money you deserve from the insurance company's tightly squeezed fists.

Bad news: We would have to deal with a third-party representative of the insurance company. In a moment of indiscreet candor, a claims adjuster for the Cincinnati company referred to this person as "our hired gun." The good news: There is a whole separate enterprise available to serve as the insured party's own "hired gun" in doing battle with the company's hit man. These folks are known as "public adjusters," and they work much like certain lawyers who are known as "ambulance chasers." Representatives of these companies began to show up at Lexington Presbyterian two days after the fire. Their pitch: Hire us, or you'll never get all the insurance money you have coming to you under the policy. But are they really good news?

Generally, these folks are former insurance men themselves, and they know how to negotiate with the insurers. They understand the arcane lingo of the policy. They know both sides of the street, where the wiggle-room might be found. It could go without saying that they expect to be paid for their services. There are those who have suffered devastating fire and other loss who swear by the efficacy of these ser-

vices. I found strong support for the public adjusters among some trusted architects with whom I had worked at Washington and Lee. Among them was a parishioner of St. James Episcopal in Richmond, which several years earlier had suffered severe damage in a fire caused by lightning. I learned that there are, indeed, instances when an owner, the insured, does benefit greatly from such a knowledgeable ally.

What the public adjusters' sales pitch doesn't include is this simple fact: The insurance company doesn't owe you a nickel more than the coverage described in the policy, the amount you've purchased with your premiums. If it turns out your recovery requires more than the coverage, then you were underinsured and will probably have to get your additional funds elsewhere, or accept a restoration less expensive than the value of what was lost. Even so, the public adjusters will expect to be paid.

Good news: Because these public adjusters had come on so strongly, the Point Committee decided not to share its resources with either of the most reputable of these firms. The bad news? I suddenly was aware that I was going to be the person facing off with the insurance company's hired gun. I was going to be Gary Cooper, out in the street at High Noon bringing out a six-shooter to confront a menacing Jack Palance.

Lexington Presbyterian's adversary, the insurer's Hired Gun, was likely to remind you of a fireplug and a bulldog at the same time. He works for a number of insurance companies, not just the company that had insured Lexington Presbyterian. The companies pay him because he is a former general contractor who knows the construction business inside out, and — certainly this is true of the Cincinnati Insurance Company — insurers often know very little about repairing, rebuilding, and restoring. The Hired Gun looks after these companies' dollars as if they were his own. He stays in business by saving money for his clients. He is very good at what he does. Once I understood what motivated him, I came to like him — for a while.

As I began my work with the Point Committee and the church, I was surprised to discover how easy it was for me to use first-person plural pronouns in conversing with my colleagues and reporting to the church. I could speak comfortably of "our sanctuary" or "our steeple" and the things "we need to do." Somehow, though, I was never able to disabuse myself of the notion completely that perhaps Lexington Presbyterian had brought in the fellow from the Baptist church up the street to be the scapegoat if things didn't work out well. Of course, I don't really mean that.



Lexington Presbyterian Church after the Civil War. Michael Miley photo courtesy of the church.

“We” faced an array of decisions there in the late summer and early autumn of 2000. Perhaps the most important of all turned on the historic nature of the church building itself. Established in 1789, the church used temporary facilities for ten years before it occupied its first sanctuary near what today would be the northwest corner of Stonewall Jackson Cemetery. One of the things I learned fairly early about my Presbyterian friends is that they aren’t comfortable about being too comfortable. Nevertheless, Robert Hunter’s fine history* notes that by 1843, the congregation was considering “the propriety of providing ourselves with a more comfortable place to worship.” This led to the acquisition of the present property at

the corner of Main and Nelson, and the involvement of a rather famous American architect, Thomas U. Walter, who also designed the former Rockbridge County Jail in Courthouse Square, a block north on Main Street, and, later, the dome and office wings of the U.S. Capitol. The basic structure of the new sanctuary was established in 1845. Later, wings and a towering steeple were added to the rectangular church building. That same year, a local woodworker by the name of Rapp skillfully crafted new oaken pews, some of them curved in ways that would baffle pew builders more than a century later. Mr. Rapp got \$1,340 for his pews. All were damaged beyond recovery from the fire, water, and falling debris, and the insurance company ultimately agreed to a replacement value of \$583,000 for the lost pews that we argued were in effect antiques.

Back to the historic building, listed now for many years on the National Register of Historic Places. To what condition should it be restored? Just as it was on July 17? Or to some other historic period? Are there changes or improvements to be made? Now was the time. The slate would seldom, perhaps never, be so clean. Dianne Herrick was especially helpful in gathering members’ opinions through a carefully crafted questionnaire, the responses to which were reviewed just as carefully by the Point Committee. As it turned out, there was a strong consensus to make no significant changes to the exterior appearance, but inside, there would be some important ones.

As this thoughtful process unfolded, I found myself coming to understand some interesting and important differences and similarities among my widening circle of Presbyterian friends. I’m not revealing any secrets if I mention here that many feel the Lexington church’s rich musical heritage is of paramount importance, while equally devoted others acknowledge the primacy of the spoken word in focusing their worship. There are the balcony people and the main floor people. There were those who could recall exactly the way the inside of the church looked the Sunday before the fire, and there were those who thought they remembered, but didn’t, not really. When the steam heating system cranked up on chilly Sunday mornings, some found comfort in the knocking pipes and radiators and urged us to keep it that way. Needless to say, others disagreed. Almost everybody wanted better speakers for the sanctuary sound system. Many wanted a few more inches of knee room between the main floor pews. Upstairs, the balcony people wanted a higher, safer railing that would permit them to occupy the front row again. Only one or two vocal members insisted the steeple’s copper ball, reputed to be part of a whisky

* Robert F. Hunter, *Lexington Presbyterian Church 1789–1989*, published by the church, 1991



They said at first that it couldn't be done: New curved pews, supplied by New Holland Church Furniture.

still, had to be repaired and used again. It seemed that everyone told time by the old clock and wanted the new one to be just as dependable.

The Point Committee selected an architect with strong credentials in historic restoration. This was important, for we had no dimensions with which to work in rebuilding the steeple. Our architects used photographs, the remains of the copper ball, and a few other physical artifacts from the fire to calculate the dimensional relationships of the steeple's design elements, both structural and decorative. I was pleased with the committee's choice of an architectural firm, although I insisted that the committee come to its own decision on this matter. I had worked with three of the four finalists in projects at Washington and Lee, and I would have been glad to work with any one of the four.

After we had negotiated the fee, however, the insurance company's Hired Gun decided he could find an architect who would work for less and tried to impose his view. Bad news. On the other hand, he supported me in my recommendation that we be permitted to select a general contractor and price the work by a method apparently heretofore unknown to the Cincinnati Insurance Company. Good news. With some difficulty, all this was sorted out in a major powwow involving insurance company regional representatives, the company's Hired Gun, our architects, the Point Committee, and, for good measure, another member of the church, Edgar MacKinlay, an attorney experienced in construction legal matters. His support and expertise were reassuring.

I had also worked with the excellent Roanoke construction firm of J. M. Turner Co. on several major Washington and Lee projects. After I was assured by the company president that we could have the project personnel I wanted, I recom-

mended that Lexington Presbyterian engage Turner in a negotiated contract for fast-tracking a new roof, followed by a measured process of pricing out the rest of the work. The church approved, and with the Hired Gun's encouragement, so did the insurance company.

Meanwhile, the church's music committee had begun its own process of selecting a new firm to build the organ that would replace the one upon which fiery debris had fallen, literally melting its pipes and burning its cabinetry. The committee recommended replacing the electropneumatic Mohler organ with the older and more expensive design technology and craftsmanship known as a tracker organ. Two firms were selected as finalists, one of them a world-class organ builder located just up the road in Augusta County, the other just as good but situated in Gloucester, Mass.

The Fisk Company of Gloucester, headed by a former associate of the Staunton-area firm, won out. I played absolutely no part in this procedure, for if I had, I would have chosen the other firm, Taylor & Boody. Its president is a Washington and Lee alumnus, George Taylor, a friend of mine dating back to his undergraduate years in the early 1960s. It was he who convinced Washington and Lee that it should restore the Lee Chapel's Erben organ during that building's historic renovation and preservation. He later studied organ building in Germany.

But whether it be a Fisk or a Taylor & Boody organ, we were soon to discover that builders of tracker organs are the most arrogant vendors of any product I can think of. I won't devote time here about why I think this is true, but perhaps one of you will put the question to me later.

By now it was late December, and I was laid up at home with a broken femur. With telephones, fax machines, e-mail, and weekly Point Committee meetings in my living room with architects and engineers, we were able to keep the project moving ahead. Pat Brady came to see me at least once every working day, and when the Hired Gun and pew salesmen came to town, I was able to call on two good friends to serve as my orderlies and get me and my wheelchair down to the church and back.

By early August 2001, the planning and pricing process with J. M. Turner was ready for a final review with the Hired Gun and the Cincinnati insurer's regional reps. It was a daylong affair, but as August 6 dragged into late afternoon, I felt we were at last ready to get the main restoration under way. We had agreed on five areas where the work could be fast-tracked, even as the final contract was readied for the appropriate signatures.



The new steeple goes up.
Photo courtesy of the
Lexington News-Gazette.

Good news? Not necessarily. Some of the Hired Gun's other projects developed squeaky wheels much louder, apparently, than ours. His promised swift approvals of the fast-track sequence failed to materialize. He began to do something called, in construction parlance, "shopping the subs." That is, he again tried to find subcontractors willing to work more cheaply than those he had approved on August 6. And many days — most days it seemed — he was unreachable. When we did talk, he reneged on earlier commitments, and this discombobulation continued for the rest of the calendar year. The project was essentially at a standstill.

On September 11, Osama bin Laden became involved in our project. In the aftermath of the New York tragedy, military reserves were called up. One of those reservists summoned to the Pentagon was the regional Cincinnati Com-

pany claims agent, a Virginia Military Institute grad who wrote checks for Lexington Presbyterian only when he had the Hired Gun's blessing. Back in Cincinnati, his boss — a very nice man, Bud Stoneburner — decided he would take over our project personally, more than a little embarrassed, he said, that he had not been as attentive as the situation warranted.

Stoneburner quickly discovered that it was quite apparent that our legitimate costs were going to take us well beyond the limits of our policy coverage. In other words, we deserved all of the \$3.7 million in the basic coverage, and we probably would qualify for some \$130,000 in other provisions for meeting changed code requirements, something called "extra expenses," and another smaller bucket of some money for inventory appraisal. We wouldn't have to put up with the Hired Gun's nickel-and-diming us to the point of distraction any longer.

I don't know for certain that Bud Stoneburner suspected the Gun was prolonging the project for his own financial benefit in the form of fees from Cincinnati, but I wouldn't be surprised if this were true. Nevertheless, he pulled the Gun off the job in mid-December, and sent us all the money in the basic coverage. For the next year, progress toward completion was gratifying, often uplifting and inspiring,

occasionally a bit frustrating. In the main it was steady, reasonably predictable, and ultimately successful by almost all measureable accounts and in the views of the congregation.

My greatest regret, of course, was that Pat Brady could not be with us to share the joy of seeing his beloved church restored to its former beauty. I was instructed by other members of the Point Committee to keep Pat from overworking himself in his role as our clerk of the works. I tried, but his dedication to the task was strong. I don't think this contributed to his sudden death, but my sense of regret that followed his loss was overwhelming.

For me there were many memorable moments:

The excitement of seeing the steeple go up that bitterly cold March 5th Tuesday, its base settling coincidentally into place precisely at noon, just as indicated on the locked hands of the four steeple clock faces. Then, a few hours later, the placing of the spire atop the base, followed by the new copper ball and finial, and the unfurling of the American flag by the men riding the lofty basket at the end of the crane's long arm.

There was the ceremonial opening of the sanctuary on the first Sunday in January, 2003 . . . the dramatic march of the congregation through falling snow from the interim Dunlap Hall sanctuary, following the piper around the block to the church's front door. There was the personal privilege I enjoyed in assisting Mary Brady, Pat's lovely widow, return a smoky and charred banner to the sanctuary, one that had somehow survived, miraculously, one might say, fire that fell just a few feet away. That banner showed the Phoenix arising from flames, a renewal of life. It was such a joyous day for the church.

It was almost enough to make a Baptist become a Presbyterian.

I had been made welcome by everyone at Lexington Presbyterian. Some thirty-five years earlier, as a Baptist deacon, I had helped Manly Memorial* fund its new educational building through the successful sale of church bonds. Now, the warmth of the friendship I felt among the Presbyterians created an even stronger sense of belonging, a stronger sense of having been a part of something truly wonderful.

Bill Klein says he hasn't given up on me. And indeed, were I to consider such a conversion, it would be because of the respect I have for this young man of God's calling, because of the esteem I have for the way he has led his flock to a renewed

* A block south on Main Street; Mr. Parsons's congregation.



The author and the preacher: Mr. Parsons and the Rev. Mr. Klein. Photo courtesy of New Holland Church Furniture.

and even stronger faith through the months of adversity, because of his unfailing good humor, patience, and intelligence.*

Let me conclude with a brief story about an unforgettable moment, a week or so before Christmas 2001. I had heard such good things about Bill's father, the retired pastor of Second Presbyterian Church in Roanoke, but until that morning in the hallway near the Main Street entrance to Murray Hall, I had not met him. Bill introduced me to his father, but was called away, giving me an opportunity to tell the senior Bill Klein of my admiration for his son. As we talked, Bill returned, and with apologies to me for interrupting our conversation, he said, "Come on, Dad, we have to go see about the poor." As I walked to my office, I was filled with the Christmas spirit, thinking warm, comforting thoughts about this father and son going off to look after the poor, perhaps to Virginia Military Institute to help pack Christmas baskets for the needy. Later that day, I had occasion to tell young Bill of how he and his father had lifted my spirits. He broke into his broad boyish grin. "It wasn't quite that," he said, hardly keeping from laughing, "I'd just seen a ready-mix truck pull up in front of the church and I wanted Dad to go with me to see the concrete *pour!*"

* In 2016, the Rev. Mr. Klein presided at Mr. Parsons's memorial service and interment.