

History 1967

by Vance E. Miller

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The Methodist Church in Groton has served this community for over 80 years, ministering to the needs and giving spiritual guidance to many people and their families. The church has grown and prospered under the guidance of 22 ministers and numerous dedicated laymen. They have been exciting years. The shortest pastorate was less than one year, while the longest was nearly 20 years. The first pastor, reporting to the Annual Dakota Conference said: "At Groton I can report five members, two men and three women, and they are all on the Official Board." Today's membership totals 350. The church had its good years and its poor years, very much related to the economy of the rural farming area it serves. God has worked with and thru our church, often in mysterious ways, his work to perform. The Groton Methodist Church has been one of the strong churches of Dakota Methodism.

For our early history, we are indebted to the book, "Dig or Die, Brother Hyde", published by Harper & Brothers in 1954, written by Harriet Harmon Dexter, as told to her by the first pastor, Rev William J. Hyde, just shortly before his quiet passing, at the age of 90 years, in 1953. The first six chapters are devoted to his work in establishing and building our first church structure. He relates many interesting and some humorous events about Groton. It is good reading and I would recommend it for all members of our church. In 1955 a film, of the book was shown nationwide on the TV Show, "Crossroads". The film was secured for showing locally during Groton's 75th Anniversary, in June of 1956.

In the spring of 1886, William J. Hyde had accepted the terms of a letter written to President Jacques, of Albert College by Dr. Traveller, the Presiding Elder in Dakota, in which he stated; "I need a man, a young man who can face the impossible and conquer it, even if it takes a life time." In June of 1886 this 22 year old preacher, fresh out of College from Canada swung off the "mixed local", in the flattest prairie he ever saw, in Groton, Dakota Territory. The farewell from his Presiding Elder was, "Dig or Die, Brother Hyde". He got a shock when he looked up the leading Methodist in town, and him say, "I'm sorry you came."

Rev. William J. Hyde dug in and within the short period of over two years, had held his first service over a saloon, held two revival meetings, organized the Groton Methodist Church, a Sunday School with A W Johnson as the first Superintendent, built the first church building, returned to Canada to marry his boyhood sweetheart and dedicate the church building, just before annual conference, when he was sent to Faulkton. Mr. Wesley Bowles, is the only known member living that became a member, "On confession of faith" at age 14 while Reverend Hyde was pastor. Mr. Bowles is now living in Minneapolis, MN.

Each Pastor made his contribution to the Church and the community. Surely each member of the congregation, could relate some event that has made an impression. In the time allotted, I should like to briefly relate some of the highlights from my memory, and Pastors I knew.

The second Methodist Church was built in 1911, while Rev S E Brown was the Pastor, and is now used for the Eastside School. Building started in the spring, when the new wheat

fields were green, but by harvest the crops were a total failure, many fields were not harvested. God blessed the area in 1912, with ample rainfall, which produced bumper wheat crops, and our church was able to meet its financial obligations. Perhaps we might take a lesson of the "summer fallow" from this experience.

Rev C B Harold followed Rev Brown, in 1915. He was a very sincere, sympathetic man. He loved and was loved by all of the people of the community regardless of denomination. I believe he was the only Pastor to serve as a delegate to General Conference, while serving the Groton church. In 1922 he was elevated to District Superintendent of the Northern District.

There was an Adult Men's Sunday School Class, probably started during the Pastorate of Rev Paul Gardner, but reaching its fullest membership, of some 100 men, under the Pastorate of Rev Fred Ray. The class Motto was, "Where men lead, boys will follow". the lives of many men were touched at that time, bringing them into closer relationship with our church.

Rev L C Benson, held the record of serving our church for nearly 20 years. He and his family came to our church to serve during the "Dust Bowl", "Depression", and WW II years. He was a man of small stature, quiet and calm but scholarly, with a great philosophy of life and an immovable Christian faith. Thru many trials and tribulations, financial difficulties and deprivation to himself and family he kept the faith and preached God's word. Her personally kept the church in good repair and worked in the community wherever help was needed. During his pastorate, the churches of Andover, Bristol, and Bath were added to his circuit. He filled the pulpit of these churches each Sunday, when other ministers were not available, even filled the pulpit of local churches for funerals, weddings, and Sunday Services, when they were without ministers of their own denomination. Following his retirement, after spending a winter or two in Florida and other southern states with relatives, the Benson's purchased a home in Groton. He lived here until his passing in January of 1961. Mrs. Benson and a daughter Mrs. Joyce Sundling still reside in Groton and remain interested and active in our church.

Because the retirement of Rev Benson, came at mid-conference the pulpit was supplied by various pastors and laymen that were available. Our District Superintendent, met with our Official Board, at a downtown business office, to show us a list of prospective, available ministers not only from our Dakota Conference, but from many parts of the country. From the list of some 17 interested parties, the Board was particularly interested in one, a Rev Frederick G. MacKenzie of Mechanicville, NY. It was voted to extend him an invitation as our first choice. It was later learned that on the same day, Rev Mac, as were later to become to know him, was in Groton, inspecting the parsonage, our church and giving a quick look at our town. I have always felt, that while this was coincidental, God must have something to do with bringing us together.

Rev. MacKenzie and his fine family arrived just preceding Easter. Being a young man, and coming from an Eastern Conference, he brought new vigor to our Groton and Andover churches, he was to serve. He gave each church a full program, starting MYF groups, Methodist Men's Clubs and lead the WSCS into the new enlarged program. He started a Building Fund, with plans for remodeling the church with the addition of an Educational wing before his transfer at mid-conference, to serve the Vermillion church.

Rev Harvey Sander followed, and successfully continued the work of his predecessor, as well as inspiring us with new programs, and thoughts of a new church building on this property, given to us by Mrs. Ethel Ragels. He added Bath to our Parish, when Miss Marilyn Haskell came to serve as Parish worker. It was his work in forming our Parish, to better serve our small churches, because of a declining rural population, that he was chosen for the District Superintendent, of the Western District.

Our next Pastor was Rev Robert P. Nielsen, who worked hard, often under adverse conditions, as poor crops and family sickness, to bring to reality our building program, upon which we are breaking ground today for the second stage. He rendered many fine services to our members and people of this community, before he was transferred to Wesley Church in Sioux Falls.

Rev K Oliver Brekke, our present pastor, has served faithfully. Visiting the sick and the aged, keeping present programs running smoothly, paying off our indebtedness and bringing us to the service of "ground breaking" today, for the new sanctuary.

While we have not supplied a Methodist Minister from our membership, two of our young men, did become Ministers of other denominations, and one very promising Minister in our South Dakota Methodist Conference is the son of an active member of Men's Sunday School Class in 1925-26.

Our congregation today consists of a large number of young adult families, and a group of ambitious MYF'ers. It has been encouraging to have received gifts from a large number of former friends and members, which gives evidence, that our church rendered satisfying service, and spiritual uplift, to them and their families. I think it is gratifying to know that a son and daughter of the Rev. William J. Hyde, our first pastor and several former pastors have made sizeable gifts to our building. Surely the future of the Groton Methodist Church can be just as exciting and spiritually helpful, as it has been for the past 80 years. May God continue to bless and inspire us in the work of his kingdom. And may we so live that we may be worthy of His Blessings.