

PASTORS OF FAIRFIELD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Rev. Charles Dennison
Pastor from 1972—1976



At the time when Fairfield Church was without denominational affiliation, God blessed the congregation with an energetic young pastor who brought clear direction from the Word of God. The following is Larry Roff's account of Pastor Dennison's ministry at Fairfield Church.

As soon as consideration was given to leaving the UPCUSA, the elders knew that they were going to need outside counsel. It was to come from sympathetic hearts in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

Once the church had exhausted (and was exhausted by) the list of suggested candidates from the Presbytery, the session found men to supply the pulpit from many different sources. The entire summer of 1970 was taken care of by a student from

Princeton Theological Seminary, Ronald Russell. He was a Baptist, preparing for service in Canada. He recognized the church's doctrinal position and appreciated its dilemma. He made the suggestion that the session might find both compassion and compatibility in Westminster Theological Seminary of Philadelphia. This is the institution organized by Machen, Van Til, Stonehouse, and Wooley at the time of disenchantment with "modernism" in the Presbyterian USA of the 1920s. It was a seminary, though remaining independent, that had provided training for a great number of men entering the ministry of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC).

A phone call to Westminster resulted in contact with Rev. LeRoy Oliver, Director of Development for the Seminary. Having served as a pastor, he was able to sympathize with the agony of the people in Fairton. And as a minister in the OPC, he was in a position to give them wise counsel in ecclesiastical matters. He came immediately to meet with the session for a briefing on the situation in the church. He promptly agreed to provide regular preaching from the Seminary's resources. Faculty members such as Ray Dillard, Jay Adams, and Harvey C. Oliver himself; and a number of different students brought a new kind of preaching that delighted the officers and members of the church. Not only was there hope of escape, there was hope of a new dimension of ministry and teaching in their midst.

By January of 1972, with details almost complete for their separation from the UPCUSA, the congregation had become sufficiently enamored with the pastoral abilities of one young man from Westminster that arrangements were undertaken to call him as the minister of the church. Charles Dennison was completing his senior year of seminary. On January 9, 1972, the congregation voted to call him as their pastor. By the end of the month, he and his wife, Virginia ("Ginger") had moved to Fairton, living first in the home of Karl and Florence Dix, while the manse was being renovated.

The New Jersey Presbytery of the OPC met in April to examine Dennison for licensure. His ordination exam would come after graduation from Westminster in May. His ordination was held on Tuesday evening, May 9. The service was led by Rev. George Cottenden, with Dr. Richard Gaffin preaching, Rev. Robert Marshall charging the pastor-elect, Rev. LeRoy Oliver charging the congregation, Rev. Lendall Smith offering prayer, and with the participation of Fairfield's elders Arthur Lewis and Clarence Johnson. One of the first visible changes that came with a new pastor was the reactivation of the Sunday evening worship services, long since defunct, renewed at first on a once a month basis.

Rev. Dennison's ministry came at a time when the church needed everything that a pastor could possibly give: encouragement, counsel, instruction, motivation, guidance, and leadership. The many years that the Fairfield Presbyterian Church had continued without active pastoral leadership testified to the faithfulness of the elders who performed an invaluable ministry in the interim. But it was by divine design that a Pastor be placed at the head of a church—that a Shepherd be given responsibility over a flock. It was now finally possible for the Biblical patterns of church leadership to be renewed.

The need for solid doctrinal foundations was immediately evident to Dennison. Without delay, his preaching and teaching began to focus on essentials of belief. The church had long held to evangelical commitments. These had grown even stronger during the tense years leading to separation from the UPCUSA. But the lacking dimension was clearly articulated convictions about the Reformed faith. It had been a long time since the Westminster standards had been actively used within the life of the church. These were revived, especially in catechism studies with youth. "Sovereignty", "Election", "Depravity", and "Providence" were re-introduced into the vocabulary of the Fairfield Presbyterians. Conversations turned from marigolds and petunias to "T-U-L-I-Ps", as the five points of Calvinism were drawn out in their Biblical authority and practical benefits.

Changes are never easy for people accustomed to the regular and the predictable nature of country life. This was especially so in the introduction of doctrines which seemed to many to be not only new but also confusing and unnecessary. But with great determination, Dennison continued to explain the system of doctrine that had for generations been the foundation for the church in Fairton, and thousands of others like it in the traditions of the Reformed faith. Little by little objections were overcome, the newness wore off, and hearts were persuaded in the truthfulness and significance of these teachings. With encouragement from the session, Rev. Dennison held to his convictions and found increasing numbers of people who stuck with him coming to the same conclusions.

Not only was there the need for instruction in doctrine, but also in polity. The dissatisfaction in the UPCUSA had forced Fairfield, even before separation, into the position of a practically independent church. The late 1960s saw the church contributing less and less to denominational causes, participating less and less in denominational programs, and using less and less of the denominational materials. When Fairfield was

declared to be an independent church in 1972, it was a declaration after the fact. It had been virtually independent for years.

Pastor Dennison began early to lead the elders, and then the congregation at large, back to an understanding and implementation of Biblical forms of church government. "Presbyterianism" as a form of polity had become suspect because of the church's feelings about the UPCUSA. It was an extremely difficult task to persuade the people that this form of church government need not be feared just because of ways in which it had been abused by one Presbyterian denomination.

In February 1973, the session agreed to begin a pattern of study of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. Both elders and congregation were to be introduced to this denomination through study of its Book of Church Order, guest speakers on Sunday mornings (ministers from the OPC), and information supplied by the pastor. This plan was carried out over a period of several years in hopes that the congregation would be induced to move out of its independent status into full membership in the OPC. It was a key goal of Dennison's ministry that would be achieved only in part. The church would become Presbyterian, but PCA instead of OPC.

By the summer of 1976, after four years of ministry as pastor of the Fairfield Church, Charles Dennison had achieved more than many pastors whose labor might have stretched to twice that period of time. The congregation was back on track in its understanding of doctrine. The session was back on track in its understanding of polity. And the course ahead looked much smoother, despite the roughness of many of the



changes that had been necessary since 1972. Feeling that he had accomplished the work God had sent him to do, Dennison made himself available for a call to another church.

In July 1976, he announced his resignation, to be effective the following September. At that time he and his family moved to Sewickley, Pennsylvania (a suburb of Pittsburgh) where he was installed as pastor of the Grace Orthodox Presbyterian Church, where he served with his wife and children until his death in 1998.

Before his departure, a special service was held in the Old Stone Church. On Sunday July 4, 1976, as the nation celebrated its bicentennial, a joint service of praise was conducted in the venerable old building. That afternoon at four o'clock, pastors and members of the Fairfield Church, the Calvary Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, and the First United Presbyterian Church in Cedarville met together to give thanks to the God who had been the key to the nation's unparalleled blessings. Rev. Robert Ekhardt, pastor of the Vineland church, brought the sermon, "God and our Nation," based on Daniel 4. It had been many years since regular summer services had been held in the Old Stone Church. The next summer would see them revived as an annual event.

(The Fairfield Presbyterians Puritanism in West Jersey from 1680, Lawrence C. Roff, Pgs. 71-73)



*The photos in this article are
From the 300th Anniversary in 1980*