

## **Reverend William Sheldon Blair (1908-1979)**

Minister of Derry 1950-1959

Reverend William Sheldon Blair was born in Franklin, Pennsylvania (near Oil City) on November 11, 1908 to William A. and Josephine Kunkel Blair. His family included generations of dedicated, church serving Presbyterians. Reverend Blair and his wife Frances both graduated from Grove City College (Reverend Blair in 1933) and both pursued graduate work. Reverend Blair attended Princeton University, receiving his masters of Divinity in 1937 and his wife, Frances Blair, did graduate work in Public Speaking and Dramatics at North Western University, Chicago. Prior to their marriage, she taught high school English. They married in September, 1937 and began their ministry in Ocean City Maryland. The Blairs would have four children, a daughter Sheila, and three sons, Theodore, Robert, and William.

Prior to coming to Hershey, Reverend Blair served the First Presbyterian Church, Sharpsville, Pennsylvania. He was called to Derry Church in 1950, following the resignation of Reverend William Longbrake. He was installed on October 12, 1950 and served until 1959 when he resigned to accept a call to Westmont Presbyterian Church, Johnstown, Pennsylvania. In his 41 years as a minister, he also served as the Moderator to three Presbyteries: New Castle (Delaware-Eastern Shore, Maryland), Carlisle (central Pennsylvania), and Shenango (western Pennsylvania).

Reverend Blair knew when he accepted the call to Derry Church that a building program to add an Educational Building was planned and that a Building Committee was already in place. During his first years he led the congregation to raise money for the new educational building with a variety of creative activities. Of course, there were congregational pledges, but at that time Hershey Park Pennsylvania Dutch days had recently been launched (1949) and quickly became a popular week long summer event. Dutch Days created an opportunity for community organizations to support this event. Dutch Days offered limited opportunities for food for purchase. Derry Church, located just a few blocks away from Dutch Days activities, offered meals for sale with a Pennsylvania German theme: chicken pot pie, ham and beans, roast beef and filling. The church also provided transportation between the church and Hershey Park to facilitate access. Other fund-raising activities were a public Auction Sale in May, 1951 and the distribution of small wooden banks resembling a church (made by men on the Little Church Bank Committee) to children and adults in the congregation to encourage their participation.

The Christian Education Building cornerstone was laid on April 22, 1951 and the completed building was dedicated seven months later on November 11. This was the second addition to the 1884 Chapel, the first being the John Elder Memorial Chapel in 1935. The church's

efforts at fund-raising were quite successful. Four and a half years later, on Thursday, February 2, 1956, a Recognition and Mortgage Burning Dinner was held in the new downstairs social room to celebrate the Church's freedom from mortgage debt. Although this building project consumed a great deal of Reverend Blair's time and energy, he did not neglect his other pastoral duties. He continued the popular Sunday evening services at 7:30 pm . The congregation continued to grow reaching almost 700 members and 350 Sunday School participants during his tenure. In 1954, he also oversaw the repair and rebuilding of the cemetery wall for the 4<sup>th</sup> time. The the parking lot was expanded, and several new oak trees were planted, He led the way in broadening church leadership to elect the first two women to the Board of Deacons.

In addition to his church duties, Reverend Blair also involved himself in the Hershey Community by joining the Hershey Lions Club, and serving as chaplain to the Hershey Volunteer Fire Company and the Pennsylvania State Police. Reverend Blair was also a 32<sup>nd</sup> degree Mason and a member of the Brownstone Lodge in Hershey.

Reverend Blair resigned his pastorate in January, 1959 to accept a call as the Assistant Pastor of Westmont Presbyterian Church, Johnstown, Pennsylvania. He served Westmont Church until the spring of 1963, when he accepted a call from Connellsville (Pennsylvania) First United Presbyterian Church. He served there until his retirement in 1974. Reverend Blair died at home in Indian Head, Fayette County on July 17, 1979 and was interred in the Crest View Memorial Park at Grove City, Pennsylvania.