

XII. Open the Doors to Sligo

By Kit Watts

Sociological studies in the early seventies portrayed Takoma Park as a city in transit, destiny unknown. Old Victorian homes filled with communes of young people. English became the foreign tongue in some neighborhoods as Spanish-speaking families found residence. Meanwhile many middle-class whites moved on to suburbs of the suburbs.

Drugs and more blatant crime insisted themselves upon the town as they did upon the nation. Even Sligo came in for some unsolicited attention one Sabbath in 1968 when robbers held up the deacons in a back corridor and stole the morning offering.

In 1974 Takoma Park is stabilizing. Among other things, the energy crisis slowed down the American way of life that conquers, makes waste, and moves on to virgin land. Faced with dwindling resources people think more of caring for what they have.

The church is changing too.

In November 1970 a handful of Andrews University students visited Columbia Union College. The spontaneous revival they had experienced on their own campus suddenly spilled over into the Sligo congregation. Church service that week lasted into late afternoon.

A few weeks later, in February 1971 six CUC students sparked Berkshire.⁸¹

Four hundred young people from as far away as Nebraska and Tennessee spent the weekend in prayer, study and joyful togetherness at the New York retreat camp.

The Gate experiment continued to unfold. In July 1970 the coffeehouse opened; Wayne Estep became director in September. With financial backing from the Washington Adventist Hospital, a full-time health clinic coordinator was hired in 1971. The Inner City Department of the General Conference granted \$10,000 toward the construction of the clinic.

Xerox Corporation granted young executive Lionel Reim a one-year social leave with full salary to assist in developing Gate facilities. That meant a lot of just plain hard work to get the clinic ready to use by April 1972.

Meatless food and healthful drinks characterized the third Gate witness--the juice bar, opened in September.

Becoming director in October 1972, Ray Greenley noted that the street culture which had prompted the Gate's formation was gradually subsiding. His programming began to focus on the more permanent Georgetown resident. Monte Sahlin joined the staff in September 1973 as an administrative assistant.

Cooking schools, weight-reduction classes, cardiovascular screening tests, evenings for films and discussion and a Friday night worship and love feast were among these programs. A highlight came within two weeks of dinner theater in December 1973 when capacity audiences enjoyed gourmet vegetarian food and relived Charles Dicken's classic, A Christmas Carol.

In spite of the seventies' runaway inflation, significant capital improvements have been made at Sligo.

Chief among them is the \$300,000 addition to Sligo School finished in 1972. Extra classrooms, a music room, art center, home economics laboratory, a spacious library, and a Pathfinder and craft center make the facility large enough to accommodate 500 students and a host of extracurricular activities during non-school hours.

Sligo-in-the-Woods, recreation property near Gapsville, Pennsylvania, with a stream and forest to delight Pathfinders and family camping groups, was purchased in 1971.

Worship services during the summer of 1972 met in Takoma Academy gym while the first major renovation of the sanctuary took place. The ceiling arch and front wall were opened up to directly connect the organ chambers over the choir with the sanctuary. Thousands of new pipes were added to the organ making it one of the finest in the Washington area.

On the platform new walnut wood-work matching that used in the entrances and Memorial Chapel, brought a harmony of color and design to the whole church. Wide curving steps the length of the rostrum made it friendly and accessible. It also provided a useful area for orchestras, choirs, wedding parties, ordinations and baby dedication services.

The entire church was carpeted. Lighting was improved. The back wall received acoustical treatment. And paint in fresh colors gave a final touch of newness. Renewing the landscaping was authorized in 1973.

Follow-up of Christian Urban Service Corps took place when Sligo bought a row-house on 12th Place from which to maintain a live-in Christian ministry. Renovation of the house took place over the summer of 1974.

With more than 3200 members Sligo Church is larger than a small conference. To offer more than a crisis ministry, Hannah requested additional staff.

The "flock system" he conceived gave each of his six associates a particular group to care for and make his or her own. (Josephine Benton became the church's first woman pastor in September 1973.)

The concept brought a campus chaplain to CUC; a youth pastor for academy age students and their families; a full-time pastor to Sligo Elementary School for the teachers, children and their families; one pastor to take primary responsibility for the elderly, the sick and hospitalized; another to touch base with Sligo's more than 300 single adults; and one to give considerable time to family-life support and counseling.

In addition to providing more personal contact between pastor and people, more consistent printed communication was made possible by adding a publication editor to the staff.

Church renewal and the concept of lay ministry became topics of Hannah's sermons. He backed them up with supporting programs.

Small groups for prayer and personal growth were encouraged; periodic marriage enrichment retreats were held.

In October 1973 the entire church was invited to join small neighborhood groups meeting in homes during the Sligo Week of Prayer. On March 30, 1974, nineteen of these groups sent representatives to a congress and love feast held at Sligo School. A committee of pastors and lay persons was asked to foster small groups in the church program.

Lay persons have taken the lead in many outstanding Sligo programs over the years, particularly Sabbath School, Ingathering, and Christian Urban Service Corps.

Layman on the Line put them in the pulpit.

For three weekends in the fall of 1973 a team of three men and two women shared how their study of Scripture affected how they worked with people and how they grappled with the issues facing contemporary man. In March 1974 a dozen lay persons took the church service to share how they were discovering their own gifts and how they were beginning to use them in Christian witness.

The church year has always been rich at Sligo with its sacred concert series and special programs sponsored jointly with the college. A church calendar for 1973-1974 helped solidify programming and add to it.

Three seasonal traditions have brightened Sligo: the Thanksgiving Festival of Praise which culminates in food distribution to local families; and the Christmas and Easter Sabbaths which fill the church with music, drama, and the color of poinsettia and the fragrance of hyacinths and lilies.

The present challenge to pastors and congregation is to open doors to Sligo. It is to make the renewal of one's own Christian life tangible--and inviting--to others.

"When should we evangelize? Every day. Our whole church program should reach out and draw people into a loving, accepting fellowship," the senior pastor says.

Ellen White once said we have nothing to fear for the future--except as we shall forget.....

Footnotes:

81. Insight, "Berkshire," by Roh Graybill April 1970.