



U P C T I M

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'The gospel will win out'

*Pastor relies on basic truth
over 40 years in the ministry*

by Jean Reichenbach

Jesus Christ is His own best witness. Rev. Earl Palmer realized that in the mid-1950s when he was a seminary student at Princeton University. Today, as he moves through his 40th year as a pastor, that "fundamental confidence," as he puts it, remains a cornerstone of his ministry.

In fact, if you ask him how his ministry has changed over the last four decades, he'll begin by telling you the ways it's stayed the same.

"If I (can) get somebody to read the text of the New Testament, sooner or later the faithfulness of Christ and His goodness (will) shine through and He wins them to Himself," he says.



Princeton graduate '56

and trust that the gospel will authenticate itself. That hasn't changed in my entire 40 years."

"Some pastors, I think, are worried too much about the church, worried about how the church is making mistakes, and how they're making mistakes," he adds. "I figure if we can be faithful and faithfully try to teach and grow, that the gospel will win out in people's lives. There will be setbacks because, after all, we can't tamper with people's freedom. Everybody has to have their own journey."

Reflecting on his own pastoral journey, Earl believes he's grown "more mellow ... more seasoned" over time. Although he doesn't mention it, his resume hints at an accumulation of wisdom. He's the author of 13 books and serves on the boards of directors at Princeton Theological Seminary, New College Berkeley and Whitworth College.

If his convictions and approach haven't changed much, society and congregations have. He has seen several American generations pass by: the student radicals of the 1970s, the baby boomers now approaching the half-century mark, and the so-called "generation X" of 20-somethings.

"There's no question that this generation, people in their 20s and early 30s, are a much more pragmatic generation than previous ones," he says. They're also less connected to institutions like the family and the church.



Rev. Earl Palmer returned to U PC as senior pastor in 1991.

Ironically, when these pragmatic, less-connected younger adults DO connect, they want to be very involved in a hands-on sort of way. He believes this offers the church an important opportunity.

"If we can offer them a place where they can actively get involved in a Christian project—tutoring, doing a house like United We Build, being involved with others, teaching—we have no problem getting people.

People today have shorter attention spans. "You see that in television People don't write letters as much. They talk on the phone and they use E-mail You have sound bites, everything is short, there's less depth in the way things are engaged intellectually," he observes. "In sharing the gospel you have to be alert for that."

Family traditions also change. "We don't have the situation, here in the West especially, where people come to church because the family has always gone to church," he reflects. "You come because you want to come, and that means it's got to be worthwhile to you."

Making it worthwhile means sticking with his tried-and-true preaching approach. "Basically, it's what does the text actually say, and what do the words mean? What did they

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Pastor reflects on 40 years in the p

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mean in the First Century, and what do they mean to the world today?"

Contrary to the current trend toward "sound bites" and "short snippets of information," Rev. Palmer takes the long-range view. Looking at an entire year, he begins by developing a thesis and working it into a 10-week series of sermons. The object, he explains, is to get people thinking about something over a long period of time.

"On the other hand, I want every single sermon to stand on its own feet so if a person is just there that day it still makes sense."

With his theme and general sermon organization in mind, he prepares the necessary research. Associate pastors get their preaching assignments. A series overview is printed and Music and Worship Director Tony Catanzariti selects appropriate music.

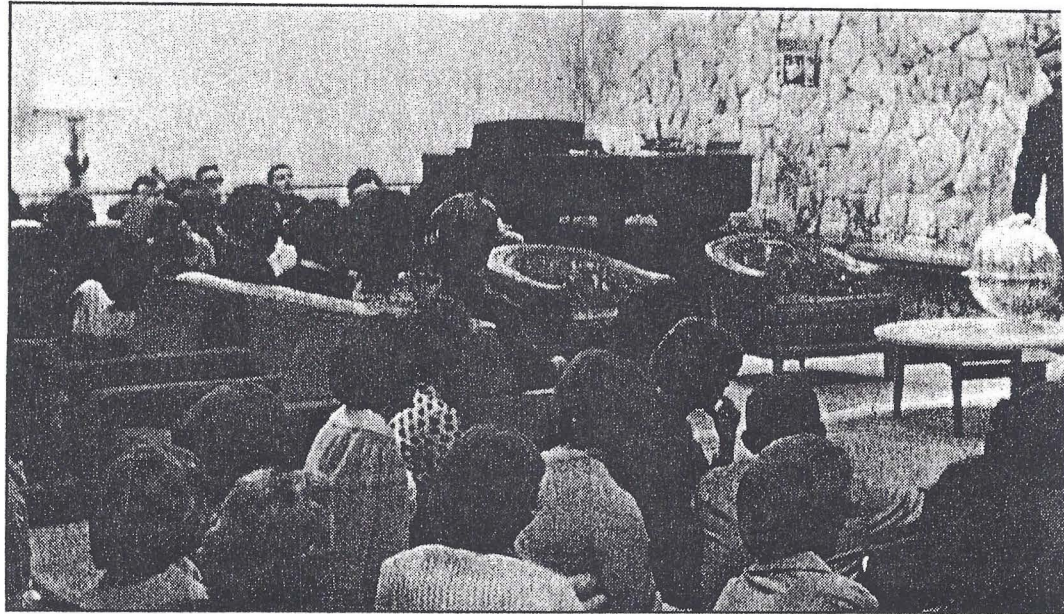
"By and large on Sunday mornings, when I finish the sermon, I could go right on and preach the next week's sermon too," he says. "I've found that you have a better sermon this week if you know what you're going to do next week. Then you don't throw in the whole kitchen sink every single week."

Earl Palmer made his pastoral debut at UPC in 1956 when, fresh out of Princeton Theological Seminary, he was called as Minister of Students. He arrived knowing absolutely no one in Seattle and recalls that his ministry took a while getting off the ground. First off, he felt "out of my league" following Rev. Gary Demarest (his popular predecessor).

"It's interesting," he observes. "Within four weeks or five weeks of starting I got pneumonia. I was in the hospital for a week. What in the world must the church have thought of me? Here about one and a half months and I'm already sick." It was his one and only serious malady. In his 40-year career he has missed only one Sunday because of illness.

His early months with the college-age Calvin Club were less than sparkling. "I was basically preaching the messages I had given at Princeton with the students there, because I felt they were good. But nothing was really clicking in my mind."

Then he took the train home to McCloud, Calif., for Christmas. "On the way back I started to write a brand new series of sermons to give on Tuesday nights to Calvin Club. They were on the Parable of the Prodigal Son. I came back and gave that message, and



Called as Minister of Students in 1956, the newly ordained Rev. Earl Palmer speaks to college stu-

dy ministry took off.

"It taught me a great lesson you can't ride on what you have done before. And I never looked back. Since then, I've never preached a message I had given before."

His six years with UPC's youth were both exciting and exhausting. His staff was small. "We had all the college and all the high school groups. We had Deputation and the Tuesday evening meetings of Calvin Club. I had the high school group on Wednesday, called the Highlanders, and we had retreats (as many as eight a year)."

But there were lighter moments. He spiced up the youth meetings with a piano and comedy routine which he still performs occasionally, recently for UPC's Skymasters.

Two years into his busy youth ministry, the young pastor met UW student leader Shirley Green. He claims to have proposed marriage after their second date. A slightly more cautious Shirley didn't accept right away, but they were married June 14, 1958.

"When we were first married I thought I had married a stand-up comedian," she remarks. "He still has that quick wit that we hear brought into sermons...but now he's a theologian. Life's experiences have added wisdom and depth to his ministry."

Shirley taught math and science at Garfield High School and plunged right in with youth at UPC. The Palmers were "just going all the time," he says.

The 1962 arrival of baby Anne changed things significantly. "Up until then I was really on a burn-out course," he recalls. Their

two other children, Jonathan and Elizabeth, were born after they moved to the Philippines where he served at the Union Church of Manila, from 1964 to 1970.

That he says, is "where I really learned how to preach." Meanwhile Shirley was making her own mark pioneering and publishing work on providing low-cost nutrition for mothers in the barrio.

Then in 1970, "out of a clear blue sky," he was called to become senior pastor at the First Presbyterian Church in Berkeley, Calif. "Berkeley was the center of the student protest movement. Every radical in America, at sometime in their lives, passed through Berkeley," he notes.

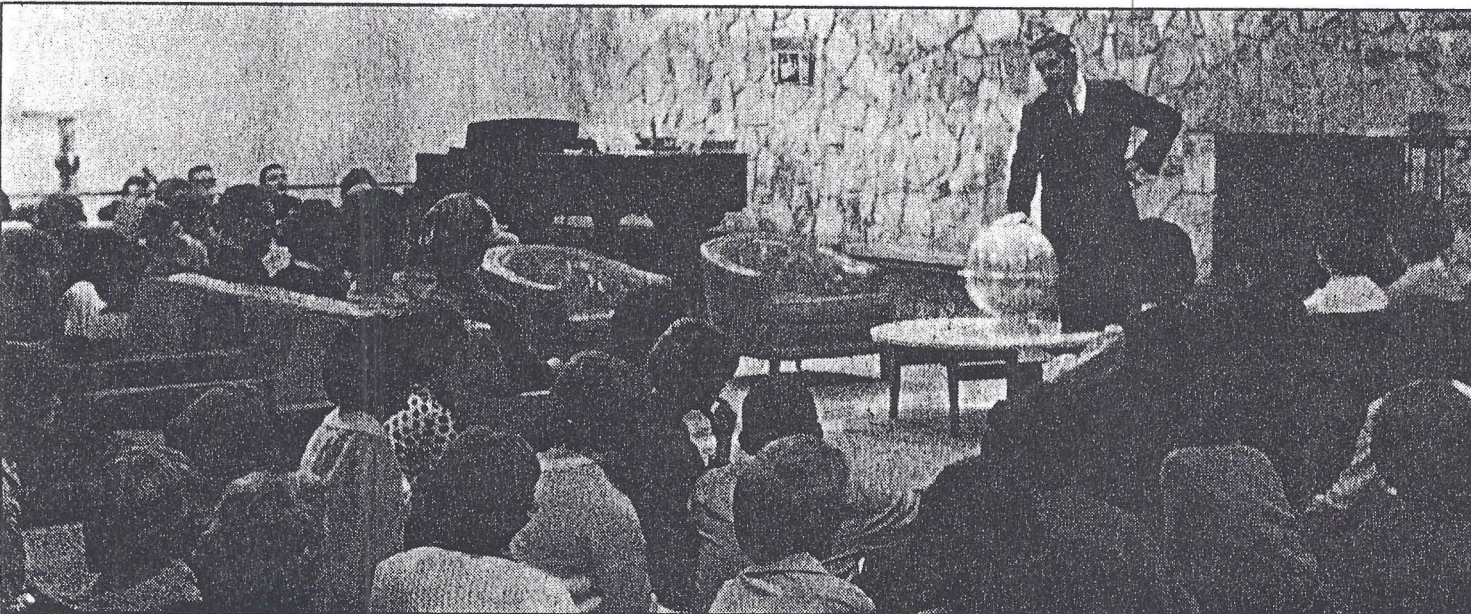
He saw quite a change from the 1949-53 era when he was an undergraduate at the University of California at Berkeley earning a degree in political science and, more important making his lasting commitment to Christ.

Despite the political unrest, the family thrived in the Bay Area. The children attended public schools. Shirley went to work in health education and school district administration. He assumed he would end his career in Berkeley.

But another twist in the road brought him full circle. On Oct. 1, 1991 the man who 35 years before had arrived in Seattle friendless and fresh out of Princeton Seminary, returned to UPC as Senior Pastor.

His "call" came, quite literally, as he was walking through the front door of his El Cerrito home after a somewhat clandestine meeting with the selection committee. He

ects on 40 years in the pulpit



Called as Minister of Students in 1956, the newly ordained Rev. Earl Palmer speaks to college students at the Calvin Club.

asked for a week to consult with his family. Much as he loved his work at Berkeley, he was excited about the prospect of returning to Seattle for a few ministry. Part of the attraction was the vacation home on Whidbey Island which the Palmers bought in 1963 and have since remodeled from a "fishing shack" into a house. But the biggest sacrifice would be made by Shirley who was then head of health education for the Richmond (Calif.) School District. Supervising a staff of 38, "she was at the peak of her productive career," he says with obvious pride.

But she was game, and now is enrolled in a Ph.D. program at the University of Washington. "She's absolutely loving it," he says.

Things have worked out pretty well for Earl too. He continues to be, in Shirley's words, "the most exuberant and enthusiastic person I know"

He concludes, "As I look to my whole career I've had more and more validation that God is His own best proof." This conviction, he notes, has made him less judgmental toward people and the church as a whole. "Sometimes you have to wait it out with some people. They make decisions that you're very sorry about.

"So there are surges and then recessions. But over the long haul Jesus Christ validates Himself in people's lives. I guess that's been my convictional anchor throughout my whole career. It's made the ministry really fun. I have really enjoyed being a pastor and I can say honestly that I've never had more fun being a pastor than I'm having right now."