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Welcome: Earl and Shirley

Senior pastor finds vision in place at UPC

by Sue Lockett John

Earl Palmer pauses and looks around Pastor Tim Snow's first-floor office. "I love this office," he says. I was the first person to occupy it--although it was only half this size--when I was minister to youth and this was the brand new addition to the church."

Later this month, Rev. Palmer will move into the senior pastor's study, coming full circle in his ministry at UPC. In the intervening 27 years he has served six years at Union Church in Manila and 21 years at First Presbyterian Church in Berkeley, Calif., written 15 books and earned an international reputation for his teaching on applying the Scriptures to his daily life



'Low-profile' wife looks forward to a new season

In 33 years as a pastor's wife, Shirley Palmer has seen her role change "with the place and the seasons in our lives, and with the needs of our family."

Now a new season is upon her as she and Earl return to the church where they met when she was a student leader at the University of Washington and he was minister to youth at University Presbyterian Church. She's waiting prayerfully and eagerly to see what it holds.

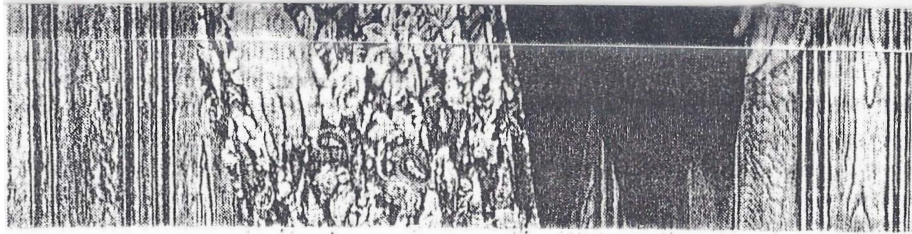
While involved in Bible studies, Sunday school and student ministries both at Union Church in Manila and at First Presbyterian of Berkeley, she describes her approach as "very low-profile."

"I think the call for me was to raise our three children: to be Girl Scout leader, room mother, math tutor, driver, etc. I've taken that very seriously."

He and his wife, Shirley (see adjoining interview), also have raised three children: Anne, a Seattle native who now is a senior resident at Children's Hospital; Jonathan, a second-year law student at the Bolt Hall of Law, University of California in Berkeley, and Liz, a UW senior and active participant in The Inn, who now is working on a community service project in the Dominican Republic.

Just as UPC eagerly awaits his formal arrival the week of Sept. 23, Earl radiates excitement about being part of "the marvelous things that are happening in this church." A July 1 meeting with program staff confirmed his conviction (from meetings with the Pastor Nominating Committee) that UPC's vision for ministry matches his own. "Several things drew me to this church and really made me feel this move was in God's will for my life. The committee—and now the staff—have shared with me their goals of being a Christ-centered church that helps people come to know Christ, to be part of the family of Christ and to be deployed into the world.

"That has always been a fundamental part



Earl and Shirley Palmer are enthusiastic about their years ahead at UPC.

of my own vision. The fact that it's already in place here is so exciting. I just want to be a part of it."

He continues, picking his words carefully. "Also, I wondered, 'does this church need me?' The committee shared its feeling that the gifts God has given my life are qualities of ministry that this church needs. It's exciting to think this is a church that needs me and wants some of the vision I have.

"My goal throughout my career has been try to help people be Biblically literate, Biblically based in faith and growing in understanding of the Scriptures so they can see their lives grow as Biblical Christians.

"Now I know that it's also the goal of this

GET ACQUAINTED with the Palmers at one of three upcoming "Afternoon With Earl & Shirley" events later this fall.

Sponsored by the deacons, these gatherings will be held on three successive Sundays—Oct 27, Nov. 4, and Nov. 10—at 4 pm in Larson Hall. Watch for details as the dates draw near. In the meantime, contact Kristi Russell (485-2192) with suggestions or offers of help.

staff. It's so exciting to see that each one of these young pastors and program staff people really want to see people of this fellowship count, to see their lives have impact," he says,

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Ten years ago (when their eldest child, Anne, entered Stanford) Shirley felt the need to provide a "college fund" and returned to work as an educator, first as a high school math/science teacher, then as a health education administrator in the Richmond School District.

Building on her UW degree in public health (with teaching experience at Garfield High School), she earned her master's degree from San Francisco State University.

"It was a busy time, but it was good," she recalls. "God opened many doors.

"I went back not to develop a career, but to support, Anne, Jon, and Liz during their university years," she says. "It turned into a career because the needs are so great."

In her strategic administrative role, she not only designed and implemented comprehensive health education policy, curricula and training (including AIDS, drug and alcohol education) for the Richmond schools but became involved in state and national projects as well.

"I really feel that God put me in a place

Please see Shirley Palmer, page 4

Earl Palmer: Helping people live by the Gospel

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noting that he feels the same kind of “fit” here as he felt at the outset of his tremendously fulfilling ministry at Berkeley.

With his passion for young people, he’s thrilled to hear “James B. (Notkin) and Kay (Broweleit) talk about their goals: to see young people come to see Christ as their best friend and also to see youth make friends with each other. There’s that strong desire to see people enriched, to see people have a place here at U. Pres. where they can make friends. I feel that’s a vital role of the church.

“I see that also in John Westfall’s view of single’s ministry: to build a fellowship where people can make substantial lifelong friends.

“We aren’t in a mode of trying to use people’s lives for the Kingdom. We want to see people grow and become pro-active Christians who can think for themselves, do Bible study for themselves, yet not be by themselves. They’re not lonely. They have friends.

“That’s what really excites me about

Christian ministry. The Christian Church is a fellowship involved in ministry. It’s not a bunch of Lone Rangers.”

When asked about his own gifts for ministry, Earl observes that “other people can usually tell your gifts better than you can.

“I’ve been told that I am able to get people excited about studying the Bible.

“I’ve been told that I’ve had a ministry of encouragement where I’ve helped people discover their own gifts and strengths—that I’ve helped turn people loose with their own gifts. I want that to be true.

“I tend to be an upbeat and optimistic person about life. Many people have felt that’s a gift.

“I think of myself as encouraging people to discover the Gospel.”

He outlines his pastoral style in similarly low-key terms, shying away from references to the honorary doctorate in front of his name. “That’s not an earned degree. I’m just a working pastor like everybody else.”

Accustomed to writing out many of his letters in longhand, he surprised the support

staff by predicting that he won’t need a full-time secretary. Time will tell, they say, noting that UPC’s membership is half again as large as Berkeley’s.

He looks forward to meeting one-on-one with members, but stresses that he’ll play a pastoral, not a therapeutic role.

“A pastor gives friendly advice, as an amateur or a mentor,” he explains. “I strongly support Christian therapy for working through difficult issues, but that’s not my role. Mine is to be a pastoral friend to members of the church.”

While in demand for speeches and conferences around the country, he has made it clear that his focus will be on UPC’s people and its pulpit. In addition to his preaching series with the Letter to the Philippians, he will teach a six-week adult education study of the Psalms starting Oct. 2 (7-8:30 p.m. in the sanctuary).

Describing his preaching style as expository, he seeks to “honestly and thoughtfully allow a text to make its own point and see its implications collide with what we’re facing

in the world.”

And when those implications collide with controversial political or social issues? “I try to be forthright and share the convictions I feel are coming out of my Biblical text. I want to be aware that there are people within the congregation who may hold different views and not unfairly use the privilege of the pulpit. But the gospel has implications that touch all of life.

“This is a very exciting time. The gospel is relevant, it’s durable, it wears well and it lasts where fads come and go. I think you get a truer and better ethic if you take a text and bring it out toward the world and let it collide, than when you try to be politically correct or say what seems to be the ‘in’ advocacy of a particular generation.

“I think tremendous implications flow out of virtually every Biblical text. When the law and the gospel come into our lives, they challenge us at every level. I feel it is the Christian church’s responsibility to help laypersons and clergy—every one of us—to see that challenge.”

Shirley Palmer: Looking forward to ‘new season’

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where there was a need. Most school districts don’t have health educators,” she says, explaining that her office was funded almost entirely by grants.

“The needs are so great. There’s a lot of pressure on school districts to take on more and more of the tasks that families might have done in the past. This puts a lot of pressure on schools and on teachers, especially if they haven’t been trained to deal with the things they come up against. They can’t teach if they don’t address the issues kids

deal with in their daily lives,” she says.

“I really honor and value the parents’ right and need to be involved in their children’s education, especially regarding sensitive health issues,” says Palmer, who even met with parents in their work places to discuss curriculum concerns. “But for some parents that’s difficult and it doesn’t happen.

“Schools can’t take the place of parents, but the more people who are involved, the better it is. I’ve learned that parents want the best for their children, even if they aren’t always able to provide it.

“The church is a wonderful community for caring about children and seeking the best for them,” she adds. “Christians’ influence is absolutely critical for schools. They can be a real positive influence on what’s going on.”

Difficult as it is to leave the health education office she built from the ground up, Shirley is genuinely excited about the adventure that lies ahead. “It’s hard to believe we’ve been gone [from UPC] so many years,” says the Tacoma native.

“One of my first priorities will be getting to know people—learning who they are, what

their needs are. It will be a challenge, particularly with a staff and congregation this large.

“My prayer is that you’ll allow us to be part of your church family. We need to establish a home. And we will need prayers of acceptance of us as real people.

“I sense that already. I sense tremendous support. I’ve been really impressed with the welcome we’ve received, with how open and real people are.

“This is a wonderful beginning. We are really looking forward to the years ahead.”

— by Sue L. John