

THE FUTURE OF FIRST CHURCH

The Rev. John Dixon Elder

What will be the future of the First Church in Oberlin? The colonists who paused for worship as they began to clear the forest and build their outpost in the wilderness in 1833 could not have imagined the technological marvels of our computer age. But their conviction that they must minister to a dying world still has meaning. They attacked the problems of their society as they perceived them--slavery, war, ignorance, intolerance, lack of women's rights, intemperate use of alcohol and other physical abuses--with a vigor that astounds us. Yet to a surprising degree, many of these themes remain fresh in First Church today.

Peace: Maintaining a peaceful world has always been a predominant concern of the church. Asa Mahan, who, in addition to his duties as Oberlin's first President and Professor of Mental and Moral Philosophy, also frequently served as Associate Pastor of First Church, exemplified the colonists' early concern for peace. Despite Oberlin's desperate financial plight Mahan and Hamilton Hill, the College Treasurer, were sent as delegates from Oberlin to the Paris Peace Congress in 1849, where President Mahan argued for a permanent international arbitration congress very much like the later Hague Tribunal. Last year, First Church welcomed a speaker on "Dispute Settlement and Law Enforcement in the International Community"--precisely Mahan's concern--and also heard Mahan's biographer, Edward Madden, talk on "The Religious Basis of Mahan's Social Action" recognizing that peace has always had a moral dimension.

Today, the danger of a nuclear holocaust posed by new weaponry gives an urgency to efforts for peace by both pastor and members of the First Church congregation, which voted almost unanimously to endorse a resolution calling for a mutual U.S./U.S.S.R. nuclear freeze. Modern technology poses still other threats to humankind, and the First Church Social Action Committee recently initiated a resolution, adopted by both the Western Reserve Association and the Ohio Conference, opposing the production of lethal nerve gas and other chemical and biological weapons.

Until the time comes when the peoples of earth "learn war no more," the members of First Church will continue to make, as they have made for this biennium--along with their denomination--"peace and conflict resolution" a priority concern.

Family Life: Maintaining the quality of family life is First Church's second priority, also shared by the denomination. It is a matter of deep concern when drastic changes in family patterns become commonplace in our community and in the society at large. A First Church "Task Force on the Family" has interviewed its members to determine what resources the Church should bring to bear on the needs, for instance, of the growing number of single-parent households within the "First Church family." And a committee is developing a program on "Human Sexuality" to be part of the Christian Education enterprise of the Church. These efforts are rooted in the early Oberlin debate about how to maintain a strong family structure while providing full educational and vocational opportunities for women ... and the debate promises to go on as changes in the northeast Ohio economy force both men and women to develop new vocational skills and responsibilities in the home.

Women's Rights within the Church: The pioneering Oberlin women who entered the ministry have been followed by a large sisterhood of women clergy--half the U.S.C. students now in seminary are women, and annually in recent years at least one woman college student active in First Church has gone on to theological school. The emphasis on inclusive language in the worship and in other areas of congregational life indicates a growing sensitivity as to how self-worth is shaped by language. The creative talents of Oberlinians in music and literature at work today give promise that First Church will make a significant contribution to a new hymnody and liturgy for the larger church in the years to come.

Ecumenical Vision: Oberlinians have always tended to strive for Christian unity over against the splintering denominationalism of American Protestantism. It was evidenced by First Church's early support of the

National and World Councils of Churches, its role in bringing together the Congregational churches into a national body and in 1956 the merger of four denominational strands into one United Church of Christ. In our "global village" there is the realization that there must be communication between adherents of the various religious faiths, ideological commitments, and cultural traditions. This global vision of God's kingdom of justice and peace for all humankind motivated the early Oberlinians to give generous support to missionary activities and continues to be an impetus for First Church involvement in worldwide service that respects each person's worth and dignity. The participation of First Church youth for the past ten summers in a work camp with the Sioux Indian YMCA, under the leadership of Oberlinian Dwight Call, and their experience of Indian community life, typifies the broadening of horizons that First Church seeks.

Growth in Faith and Faithfulness: The confidence of Finney, Mahan and other Oberlinians in God's empowering presence--"Whatever the Lord requires of us, we can do"--was the vital center of an immensely energetic enterprise. Though we may be more sophisticated now about the dynamics of personal development and social change, we do not outgrow their recognition that each of us is granted the divine gift of human responsibility. So we pray for God's Spirit to clarify our sense of how best to reform whatever demeans or destroys the fullness of human life, to enlarge our vision of God's rule, and to strengthen our commitment to its ultimate realization, despite the foreboding threats of nuclear catastrophe. The future, in God's grace, is open to us, and we hope that the gathered community of Church, like the Meeting House in which we worship, will have lasting value in the century and a half that is to come.

