

Chapter 15

St. Joseph, MO 1966 – 1975

Through the years I have maintained a diary in an effort to keep track of my activities. At my wife's urging I spent some considerable time reading through page after page of the record of my pastoral activities at Hillsdale in an effort to recall precisely why we ever decided to give up the work at Hillsdale, work that we had enjoyed so deeply. There I found this illuminating paragraph that brought back to my mind a conflict I had long since forgotten. Here is what I found:

Wednesday, January 19, 1966.

While I was in the study Alfred Messenger came and told me his opinion that I should leave. I asked him why. He said I was causing divisions. I asked him what I had done wrong and he said that it was my domineering attitude. I asked for an instance. After a long pause he said, "The annex." *[I had indeed pushed for the church to build an addition for some of the Sunday School classes, and this was The Annex to which he referred.]* When I ridiculed this objection he backed off, but failed to come up with anything specific. He blamed me for the fact that his sons are not interested in church, and he promised that he would not be coming to prayer meeting *[any more]*. The boys *[incidentally]* have shown much better interest than the father has! He walked out really mad, refusing to talk things through, and refusing to pray together. This is the first time I have ever heard of a Christian declaring war on the Pastor just as soon as he was given a position on the Board, and even before the first Board Meeting. I called Gaylord *[related by marriage to Nina, a fine Christian man who has served many years as a pastor]* and had a long talk with him. ***We both feel that it is hopeless to try to stay here any longer.***

To this day in the summer of 2004, we enjoy an excellent relationship with the folks at Hillsdale and have returned to speak there on several occasions. When it began to seem possible that staying there might cause trouble in the church, we decided to find the next place where we could serve the Lord. I am deeply grateful for a superb "*forgetory*," and thankful that certain incidents can be completely wiped out of our memory. If it were not for God's grace that enabled us to eliminate the above episode from our memories, it might have been difficult not to hold certain things against people who have been friends over the years. Incidentally, over the past

thirty-five years and more, Nina, the wife of Alfred Messenger has faithfully kept us informed of Hillsdale news and has kept in touch with us better than anyone else in that church.

As soon as we made up our minds to leave Hillsdale, I started putting out feelers, looking for a church we could help. We contacted several churches in the Midwest, and when we heard about a serious need in St. Joseph, Missouri, we moved, leaving a thriving church where we experienced the rich blessing of God. Leaving Hillsdale involved torn relationships. This was the place where our two daughters graduated from high school. It was here they were baptized and here that they were married. And it was here that we formed so many long-lasting friendships. Those good folks treated us to a farewell supper, at which time they presented to us a lovely mahogany table on which sat a beautiful silver tea service. We could never forget their kindness and love.

On June 17, 1966, we received an invitation from “The Easton Church” in St. Joseph, Missouri, a letter that seemed rather like the call that the Apostle Paul received, “Come over into Macedonia and help us!” Less than a month later, on Friday, July 8, we loaded up and left Hillsdale and drove to Kansas City where we stayed with our daughter Ruth Ann and her husband Bill.

At this time Bill and Ruth Ann lived in the Kansas City area where Bill had a job with the Federal Aviation Agency (FAA), so on the way to St. Joseph we stopped at their home for a night and drove to St. Joe the next morning, July 3, 1966. We found the house the folks at the Easton Church had rented for us at 2927 Messanie Avenue. Bill and Ruth Ann and Linda Nichols, who was visiting them, helped us get settled.

As I attempted to back the U-Haul truck and trailer to the back door, I clumsily allowed the wheel of the trailer to gouge a bad rut in the beautifully manicured lawn of our new

neighbors, the Marlowes, who lived at 2929 Messanie. At once I thought, *This is a great way to begin a fine relationship with our neighbor!* And, as expected, Leo (*the name means "Lion!"*) came out of his house with a choice string of curses at a miserable simpleton who didn't know how to drive.

Sheepishly, I apologized and asked him if he could help me get the trailer where I wanted it to go. In the course of conversation, when he learned that I was a preacher, he was embarrassed because of his language. He apologized profusely for speaking as he did, and quickly and expertly helped me back the trailer up to our back door. Very soon Leo and his wife and two girls became close friends. It was April 15 of the next year before Leo asked the Lord to take control of his life.

Our new home consisted of five small rooms and a tiny bath-room that must have been intended for a coat closet by the kitchen door. It contained the smallest cast-iron bathtub we have ever seen, but it served its purpose well. The full basement delighted us, as a place to store what would not fit into the five rooms upstairs. "Delighted," that is, until we discovered how much moisture permeated everything down there. We soon had to purchase a dehumidifier in an attempt to control the wetness, but we never could use the basement to store books or clothes.

Our books remained in twenty-two cartons that we piled up in two closets. Bernadine went through all those twenty-two boxes and pasted on the outside of each carton a list of the books it contained. This proved to be a huge help in studying for messages.

Very quickly we learned the identity of our landlady and her sister, Ann and Lois. What a pair! My son-in-law, Bill, is convinced that Bernadine and I have a special gift for attracting the strangest of strange people. I remember one Friday when the phone rang and Ann wanted to talk. I commented that this was the seventeenth time she had called us since the first of the week.

“You mean you count all your phone calls from me? I can’t believe you would do such an unkind thing!” One day her sister Lois decided to put Ann into a mental institution in Kansas City. They rode a bus for the fifty mile trip, and when they tried to stay in a motel, they were allowed to do so on the condition that they would have rooms on different floors. The next day when Lois tried to put Ann into the mental institution, Lois was the one who found herself put into a straight jacket, while Ann had to go back to St. Joseph alone.

Meanwhile we focused our attention on the purpose for moving to St. Joseph, namely, helping the Easton Baptist Church develop into a sound Bible teaching church. Some time earlier, the folks in the church had contacted the Chicago office of the Independent Churches of America (IFCA) and had been given my name. At that time the church met for services in a building that used to house a dance hall that had been shut down because of a murder and other crimes. The building, hidden in a tiny valley would be quite satisfactory for an organization that wished to escape the eyes of the law. It could scarcely be seen from the viaduct that crossed over the valley. Although suitable for nefarious activities, the building was clearly not the ideal place to establish a church. But the low cost enabled Vernon Meyers to start the Easton Baptist Church in that unlikely setting.

To make things more difficult, a train came in to St. Joseph on the tracks just a few yards from the front door at 11:30 on Sunday morning just as the preacher started to speak. Of course the train had to blow its loud whistle as it clattered and roared down the tracks, making enough noise to make it impossible to hear anything the preacher might have to say. Such a din in the middle of the day might not have bothered the night-club, but it made church growth unthinkable. At our first business meeting we decided to move as soon as we could.

Almost at once we discovered that the extended family of Pastor Vernon Myers made up about half of the congregation that varied from thirty to fifty each Sunday. His daughter played the organ for the services. But Vernon was becoming tired of his role in that church and seemed happy to step down as soon as they secured another pastor.

About a month after we arrived, the church decided to join the IFCA and become known as Maranatha Bible Church. In December we heard that Vernon Myers had started another church in town. Since nearly half of the members of our little group were related to him and all his family would leave Maranatha to go with him including the church organist, we were left in a very difficult position.

We used the radio and newspaper to advertise, but nothing seemed to work. At that time the St. Joseph newspaper published once a week a list of all the newcomers. We visited all of these, and scores of other people, but nothing seemed to work, and the work seemed doomed. Yet, the spirit that united us kept us going one week at a time. On January 25, 1967, we decided to “give up the building but continue meeting as Maranatha Bible Church. We shall meet in the parsonage for a few weeks till we see if we can do any better.”

For three difficult weeks about ten or fifteen of us met in our basement Sunday morning and evening and Wednesday night, as we planned for the future. About this time I met Mr. and Mrs. Ira Hoffsommer who lived in St. Joseph. Ira was a brother of J. G. Hoffsommer, patriarch of the Hoffsommer family in Hillsdale. Although totally blind, at age seventy-four he was mentally alert, taught Sunday school every Sunday, and devoured thirty-five books every year. *If he could keep going that way, I thought, how could I quit just because things were a bit difficult?* The Lord knew how to challenge me at the right time.

One of the men contacted the Electrical Workers' Brotherhood and arranged for us to use their hall for two meetings on Sundays for \$15.00 per week. At the end of February 1967, we moved into the Union Hall. Simply walking into the place on a Sunday morning presented a challenge. We found a nearly unbelievably dense cloud of suffocating smoke filling the entire room. Before the room was useable we had to open the doors regardless of the weather and turn on the fans to blow out the pollution. In about fifteen minutes the air seemed almost fit to breathe, or at least we were getting benumbed to the toxicity. Then we had to find the wall with the least objectionable advertising material where we could set the pulpit and arrange the chairs. That first Sunday we were delighted with a visitor, Kenneth Miller, who soon brought his entire family, including several who stayed with us for several years.

As we met there Sunday after Sunday, the Lord gave us a spirit of fellowship we have rarely known, and we found our Lord's blessing as we studied His Word. We moved our little organ into the union hall, and the first Sunday we found beer rings on the finish that showed the organ had been used the night before in some kind of union party. We were unhappy about it, but that week we built a box to cover the organ and secured it with a padlock.

At the time we had only two wage-earners, Gene Dewey, a brick mason, and Carl Marriott, a body worker in an automobile repair shop. Those two servants of the Lord intended to keep the church going and were determined that their pastor would be a "full time pastor" able to give his full time to the ministry. They definitely did not want me to take a job to support myself. After considerable discussion, they agreed to allow me to find a temporary carpentry job. At the end of March I found myself working for Bob Cobb who built fine homes on the northeast edge of St. Joseph. Later I found small jobs for a day or two at a time, jobs that would not tie me down and prevent me from doing the visiting that needed to be done.

I found the first week working for Bob Cobb extremely tiring as I worked eight hours a day digging ditches. The second week was not much better as I worked with concrete all day. But the Lord enabled, and very soon I could work all day and still have the energy to carry on with the church activities, at least to a limited extent. I remember working on a fine home one day, when we were setting heavy joists for the second story floor. The joists were twenty feet long, and the living room over which we set the joists had a high ceiling of twelve feet. While I was carefully adjusting my end of a heavy timber, something interfered with my attention for just a second or two. The twenty foot joist fell crashing to the floor twelve feet below, and I fell with it. It had to make a terrifying noise as it fell, but I did not hear it, nor did I suffer any damage; I just got up and went back to work. As I thought about it, I marveled at the way the Lord protected me, and was thankful.

The first two Sundays in April proved to be very encouraging, and I had the joy of leading our neighbor, Leo Marlowe, to the Lord. Shortly after that we took him to see the Billy Graham film, "For Pete's Sake," and he had a long talk with pastor of one of the Baptist churches in town. Soon another pastor contacted him and told him that the work at Maranatha Bible Church was a "fly-by-night outfit" and persuaded him to join a denominational church. I have always regretted that I failed to convince him to come to the Bible Church.

All through 1967 and until the fall of the next year we continued to meet in that dismal hall, and slowly but steadily the attendance grew from the low twenties to the thirties and then the forties. Ruth Ann and Bill came up quite frequently to encourage us, and sometimes friends from earlier churches dropped in for a visit.

We kept praying and looking for more suitable property, and checked a number of possibilities. Nothing, it seemed, would be satisfactory, till one day in August 1968 we heard a

rumor that the Olive Street Methodist Church had decided to move out from its location on 15th and Olive Streets. The building would certainly be adequate for our needs, but it seemed highly probable that they would ask far more for it than we could afford. On Saturday, August 17, 1968, when I went to see the pastor, Forrest Williams in his study at 910 South 15th Street, he told me they would be willing to rent the building to us for \$50.00, or sell it to us for \$9,000.00.

Exciting!

The day became more memorable, as four members of the Hoffsommer family from Hillsdale came up to St. Joseph to help celebrate the fiftieth wedding anniversary of Ira Hoffsommer, brother of J. G. Hoffsommer, the patriarch of the Hillsdale branch of the tribe. Our joy was complete when these friends came over to our house for a visit that evening.

The next day, Sunday, the leaders of Maranatha, Carl Marriott, Gene Dewey, Ted Heinz and I met with the trustees of Olive Street Methodist. We explained our situation to them, and then moved to another room to pray. When we met with them again after discussing it together, they said, "We think we should have \$9,000.00, with \$1,000.00 down payment, and \$8,000.00 to be paid over a period of time, and the Methodist Church would carry the paper." Praise the Lord! On Friday of that same week, we signed the contract, and the following Sunday was our last time in the Union Hall.

After we got home from church in the Union Hall on the Sunday night following the discussion of the sale with the Methodist folks, the front doorbell rang. Bernadine answered the door and at once broke down in tears, as our first grandson, Timmy sat on the porch, all by himself. His parents had stepped out of sight. We had no idea that Margie and Jim were coming to visit us all the way from western New York, and Bernadine found it difficult to deal with the shock of seeing that baby sitting there alone on the porch. But seeing that little fellow, and then

seeing Jim and Margie step into the light gave us a thrill that will be hard to forget. As a matter of fact, it was during the years we spent in St. Joe, that all four of our grandsons were born. Our family was growing. Margie gave birth to Tim and Nate, and Bill and Ruth Ann welcomed Wes and Steve into their family.

Then on Wednesday night at our mid-week prayer time, we decided to buy a piano for our new church. We would make the down payment of \$100.00, and Bill and Ruth Ann promised to make the monthly payments of \$35.00. At the same time we ordered forty hymnbooks for the church. Quickly we sent a news item to the paper for immediate release and another for the local radio station. Saturday a good number of our people turned out for a workday at the church. In a week or two we attached a twelve foot sign to the front of the building announcing "Maranatha Bible Church."

Life at Maranatha seemed to become busier and busier as the days went on. Besides the regular church services, we tried to visit every newcomer to town, as well as folks whose names came to us for one reason or another. In addition, we visited regularly in the local jail. We began to visit the monthly meetings of the Missouri Regional of the IFCA, and were also able to enjoy the fellowship of the Gospel Missionary Union (now known as Avant Ministries). When a flood inundated their property at Smithville, some forty miles south of St. Joe, we were able to help them clean up the mess, shoveling tons of mud out of the buildings.

Steadily we saw folks coming to the Lord, and the attendance grew month by month, and of course each new person who came meant that a family must be visited. One of the families who joined us was the Rutherford family. Frosty and Edna had one teen-aged son, Gary. One dark night Gary and the two boys riding with him were killed in a tragic accident. We were grateful for the opportunities that presented themselves to be of assistance to the bereaved

parents. The insurance company treated the family well, and Edna called me one day, wishing to do something in memory of Gary. She wanted to install an air-conditioning system in the church building. I told her we would have to decline the offer because the furnace system was obsolete and would have to be replaced before we could think of air-conditioning. Edna answered, "I understand, but we would like to include a new furnace as well."

This generous gift led to remodeling the church building, which had been erected in the 1890s. This building was unusual, to say the least. The ground floor, about ten feet above the sidewalk, contained one big meeting room with a ten foot ceiling, two classrooms, restrooms, a kitchen, and a furnace room. A broad flight of stairs on each side of the entrance hall led to the sanctuary on the second floor. Eight strikingly beautiful stained glass windows gave the sanctuary a really attractive atmosphere. From the rear of the sanctuary another flight of stairs led to the balcony.

The first problem needing immediate attention was a flock of pigeons roosting in the attic. High up on the front gable above the balcony in the sanctuary, a set of false windows had rotted out over the years providing an inviting entrance for the filthy birds. Those windows directly above the church entrance afforded those birds a perfect perch, offering an ideal site for them to bomb any innocent person who might attempt to enter the front door of the church thirty or forty feet below. There was little or nothing we could do to get rid of the birds. Ted Heintz suggested praying that the Lord would take care of the pesky critters. We did, and overnight the whole flock relocated in another building at the opposite corner of our block. We thanked the Lord, and just as soon as we could afford to repair those windows we did. Gene Dewey, our brick mason, brought a set of scaffolds and we closed up the undesired openings.

One morning as Bernadine walked alone into the sanctuary, she was shocked to see a homeless man suddenly sit up in one of the pews. The man left with no problem, but Bernadine wondered how he had entered the building. A day or two later she saw another man coming out of the furnace room. Then we discovered that homeless men simply had to open a kitchen window at the back of the building, crawl in and make themselves at home. It didn't take long for Gene to brick up the kitchen windows. Then we hauled in a number of big truck-loads of dirt to make a parking lot in the space behind the kitchen. From that parking lot we built a new entrance to the sanctuary. This enabled folks to come to the worship services without having to climb the stairs at the front of the building.

The gift of a furnace and air-conditioning system proved to be just the beginning of the revamping of the building. There seemed to be no end of the work. We worked on the roof, in the attic, in the crawlspace under the ground floor, and under the platform in the sanctuary. Installing a baptistry involved building dressing rooms. The new entry-way from the parking lot into the front of the sanctuary called for breaking a big hole in the wall, installing a gate, and pouring a concrete slab supported by concrete posts. The air-conditioning system also required a completely new electrical service to the building. The Lord supplied every need beautifully. In addition to all that was accomplished in the church building, the Lord enabled us to purchase the parsonage right beside the church. Looking back to the days when we met in the dance hall, we had to marvel at all the way that the Lord had led and how He had supplied. We were amazed.

At the same time, visitation continued, and the jail ministry, and Vacation Bible School. People were coming to the Lord for salvation, and the believers continued to show good solid growth.

Ruth Ann and Bill, just fifty miles away in the Kansas City area helped us tremendously and also provided a place where we could occasionally get away from the stress of the work. Two fellow-pastors, Kenneth Chadbourn of Atchison, Kansas, and Olan Baxter of North Kansas City met with us on a regular basis, providing fellowship and prayer support. In addition the Lord sent us many wonderful men and women to encourage us at just the right times.

We were delighted with being able to see our daughters and their families frequently during these years when the grandsons arrived. On the Monday morning just before Christmas in 1971 both girls arrived with their children, and as soon as I cleaned up the mess left from the Christmas program the night before, we spent as much time as possible with them. Bernadine and I were a bit annoyed because Bill and Jim seemed so busy making some vague purchases that they didn't have time to be with the rest of us. On that Tuesday I made some visits until about 5:00 P.M. When I arrived at home it was good to see Jim and Bill both present and for some reason both were anxious to see me. As I came in, I had noticed a strange car right outside the house, and the boys now presented me with the keys to an almost new Ford, a demonstrator that had only 4200 miles on the speedometer. The two of them had spent nearly two full days dickering with salesmen, as they bought three cars at one time, one for each of them, and one for Bernadine and me. It seemed they were continually looking for ways to help us in our work. And over the years they have continued with the same practice.

Time would fail us if we tried to tell all that the Lord did during those years. In attempting to describe the situation one time, I told a friend that we started well below zero. He challenged me, "What do you mean by 'below zero'?" When I described the discouraged handful who met in an abandoned dance hall with the train interrupting our morning worship service, he agreed with my assessment. From that dance-hall we moved into a basement, and a union hall,

and finally into a building that had once housed a Methodist congregation. That building became Maranatha Bible Church with an attendance of 100 to 130. We had the thrill of seeing scores of folks make a profession of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, as well as the thrill of seeing a group of three or four discouraged men and their wives become effective leaders in the church.

During that time also, the Lord added four grandsons to our family, and we had the opportunity of seeing them frequently in those early years. We moved out of the tiny house on Messanie Avenue into an old but spacious parsonage right beside the church. We had the joy of becoming involved in the Independent Fundamental Churches of America (IFCA), and attended several of the national IFCA conventions in different parts of the country, making great new friends every time.

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