

NORTHFIELD'S FIRST CHURCH ROOTED IN PURITAN PAST

By Maureen Moore

Today's First Parish Church is the fourth to stand at the center of Northfield, a graceful descendent of the town's Puritan heritage. The Puritan Congregationalist faith first expressed itself in Northfield in the 1670s outdoors under a big oak tree at a spot still identified by a marker to this day, though the plaque fails to note that this first service was followed by (what else?) a potluck supper of "venison and samp and dandelion greens, corn-bread and tea." (Parsons, 36) When inclement weather drove worshipers indoors, they initially gathered in private homes, preferably ones with the largest kitchens.

AN OLD CHURCH

By the early eighteenth century, however, Northfield Puritans began to yearn for more permanent arrangement. Captain Benjamin Wright complained, for example, that Northfielders "were more nearly like heathen in having no minister of the gospel." (Parsons, 98) This concern led him and his neighbors to heartily welcome the arrival of James Whitmore, just 20 years old and fresh out of Yale divinity school and eager for a pulpit of his own. After preaching some months, Whitmore was not encouraged to stay, for his sermons seemed to savor "of the formalities that had been left behind in England." In 1717 the Mattoon family suggested another youth, Benjamin Doolittle, as being more sympathetic "with the simple, unadorned faith of the people." (Parsons, 100)

Mr. Doolittle did prove pleasantly unaffected and popular with the townsmen, so he was offered "encouragements" of some substance to serve the town's religious needs. These "encouragements" included 50 acres of meadowland, 10 acres of pasture (and later another 10 acres of upland), a house, firewood, and one hundred pounds sterling per year plus a fifty-pound bonus the first six years of service to be increased to 75 pounds the remaining years of his service. In addition, his services were sufficiently valued to inspire the town to order construction of a church in which to nurture the new minister's simple, unadorned preaching. (Parsons, 101-2) The town secured authorizations for and financing of the new church from the General Court and in 1718 a rough-sawn barn of a church, 45 feet by 30 feet, appeared in the middle of the road in the town center. Rev. Doolittle served nobly as minister for 30 years.

In 1750 Rev. John Hubbard was ordained as minister (remaining until 1794). First Parish Church and the new young minister proved irresistible, or so we infer from the report that the town meeting of 1762 rang with unanimous cries for a new, larger church. The only conflict arose over its placement: should it go in the middle of the road, should

it be moved to one side of the road, or should it be placed off the road. The issue was so emotional that outside referees (from Hinsdale, Hadley, and Sunderland) were called in to help moderate matters. Finally, put to a town vote, the issue was settled by locating the new building – in the middle of the road! Town land was sold to finance the construction, including two barrels of New England rum and four gallons of West Indian rum to sustain (and recruit?) the volunteers for the church raising.

AN ESTABLISHED CHURCH

The reason for placing the first and then the second church in the middle of the road is unclear, but it invites metaphor. It is certainly central, evoking the importance of the church to the Puritan founders of Northfield: it served as meeting house not only for spiritual instruction, but as the meeting place for secular concerns and debates as well. It was indeed the place to which all roads – literally, it seems, converged in Northfield, and the place in which all concerns – spiritual, political, economic, social, and practical – were aired, debated, and thrashed into consensus during the eighteenth century. It was also the place where moderation (the middle of the road) was esteemed and sought with fervor, if not always with success.

Being smack in the middle of the road made it hard to ignore, as well. And Northfield Puritans, like all their fellows in Massachusetts Bay Colony, intended that church be attended to with regularity and vigor. All town residents and visitors were expected, on penalty of a fine and without regard to their personal religious opinion or preference, to attend its services twice every Sunday, with a brief intermission for a modest meal at mid-day. In addition, all residents were expected to support the church financially through taxes collected by the town. The town also regulated church practices, helping to enforce conformity to the Calvinist principles upon which it originally rested.

A PURITAN CHURCH IN CONFLICT

Calvinist principles such as predestination proved tough to enforce, however. The trend to the liberality of Arminianism, which rejected predestination and affirmed universal salvation, had been creeping into vogue throughout New England much to the dismay of a young, but ardently conservative minister, Jonathan Edwards. In the 1730s, Edwards began preaching vigorously for a return to Calvinism, so vigorously that his sermons unleashed a storm of passion, called the Great Awakening, in which churchgoers were impelled to make their stand for or against Calvin.

The sturdy, plain church in the middle of Northfield's Main Street was buffeted by the waves of this doctrinal debate too. Its minister, Benjamin Doolittle, was clearly "tainted with doctrines of the Dutch reformer Arminius" (Parsons, 124) and his congregants were "split asunder" over whether to support his liberal leanings or run him out of town on a rail. Calls for calm and patience fell on deaf ears, efforts to find some middle ground went unheeded. But gradually, as passions ebbed, it became clear that the majority in

Northfield, as in the rest of New England, favored Rev. Doolittle's Arminianism. Although the minority eventually conceded to majority rule, a few were greatly pained. Eleazer Mattoon was so disturbed by this development, he "left town to spend the rest of his days in Hadley."

The Church weathered the storms of Revolution as well, despite their minister's Tory leanings. Otherwise much loved and satisfactory, the conservative Rev. John Hubbard insisted on offering, as had been his custom, a prayer for God's protection of the King of England even as the town was assembling troops to wage war against that King. The town demanded the minister desist; the minister huffed that the town had no authority over what prayers he offered. The residents of Northfield divided once again; congregant against congregant, family against family. Over the course of the war, the minister's Tory leanings remained firm and oft mentioned; a few congregants were so offended, they refused to attend his services. A great council of churches convened in 1779 to debate the issue and carve out a resolution. Before the council could dictate a solution, the minister and his friends in church and town signed and offered an "accommodation" – a gently worded, conciliatory document that bound the minister to pray for the success of American arms against British enemies and to "embrace with affection those who had been in opposition to him." In return, he asked to be acknowledged by all in the village as the rightful minister due all the "love and esteem which is due to the faithful ministers of our Lord's Kingdom." With this reciprocal promise, peace returned to the sturdy, plain church in the middle of the road. (Parsons, 187).

Whether Arminian or Calvinist, Tory or Patriot, early Puritans shared a conviction that they, as God's elect, were all equal in the eyes of God—a conviction that fostered egalitarian values within the church community, but these values proved harder to practice than to espouse since the impulse to enjoy special favors is hard to resist. For Puritans, this impulse manifested itself prominently in the matter of church seating arrangements. Throughout the eighteenth century seating controversies were a constant, arousing as much or even more passion than any dogma. In Northfield's first church, no sooner had benches (without backs, presumably to prevent slouching) been installed than the problem of who would get the best seats reared its head. The town appointed a committee to assign seats according to distinctions such as age, wealth, and "respectability" – a term fraught with the potential to inflame controversy. Single or widowed older ladies enjoyed the honor, along with men of property, of being seated in the front, near the pulpit where they could be admired and envied most easily. But the young folks were seated together in the distant galleries, each to his or her assigned seat, where their decorum could be readily enforced as need be. Northfield's youth were noted for their decorum it seems, for they required far less "reproval as in older Northampton, where ever so often the town meeting had to condemn the galleries' disorderly conduct and finally [even order in the] the constables to help the tything men to suppress it." The middling remainder had to content themselves with being scattered about the less pretentious pews.

Many however, would not rest content, and so the seating assignments could trigger "strange complications, and jealousies, and heart burnings, and strifes..." according to a

paper given by Mr. Charles Calvin Stearns to the Northfield Historical Society in 1945. People offended by the indignity of poor placement would often apply to the Town for different seats, or just ignore their assignment and seat themselves as they liked despite the certainty that they would then be “taken into hand by the tything man.” With an inducement, such as the offer to donate a new window or provide janitorial services, a disaffected churchgoer might cajole the Town into allowing them a pew of their choice. When the second church was built, a committee headed by Captain Samuel Hunt took on the task of seat assignment. Presumably, the Town hoped that a battle-hardened veteran of the French and Indian War was just the man to enforce respect for the invidious distinctions to be found in the simple act of sitting in church. Seating was reviewed every few years by a committee appointed for the purpose of assuring “careful consideration to the distinction due leading citizens.” Indeed the whole matter was of such importance then that “in some instances it was the only business of the town meeting called for the purpose.”

While eighteenth century Puritans are often thought of as seriously sober folks with a passion for plainness, the Northfield church reveals them to have been divided in their allegiances to the plain and simple life. An intolerance for self-indulgence expressed itself to be sure, especially in the matter of weather to provide warming stoves during winter when a righteous minority denounced the idea s “an unholy innovation and a sign of modern effeminacy....” In the 1780s, however, the church ventured into frippery and thereby inaugurated a new fashion in town; namely, “coloring” houses. In 1787, the town voted to finance, by the sale of surplus flax seed, the painting of the church. It took two years to grow and then send to Boston 42 ½ bushels of flaxseed which were exchanged for linseed oil and “dry red”—which when mixed was applied to the plain, weathered boards of the church. It must have been a fine, admirable sight, for some house owners soon followed suit and so did the school, although either of the costs or conservatism held back the majority so that most buildings in Northfield continued to present the varied browns, grays, and dapples of exposed boards.

As the eighteenth century drew to a close, the now reddened church stood squarely in the middle of the road, still the center of the town’s spiritual, economic, political, social, and geographic life. It had weathered dogmatic and political and social strife—each time seeking and finding a compromise that most could accept more or less graciously as they were wont. The nineteenth century church would face new doctrinal controversies and schism, adapt to the separation of church and state, see the end of assigned seating, recover from a terrible fire, and find a new location—no longer in the middle of the road, but still occupying an important and respected role in Northfield town.

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Sources:

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