

## **AT PLYMOUTH'S CENTENNIAL, THE CHURCH LOOKED TO ITS PAST TO PREPARE FOR ITS FUTURE (1847-1947)**

The year was 1949, the one hundredth anniversary of Plymouth Church had passed two years earlier and the current senior minister, the Rev. Dr. L. Wendell Fifield penned these words in the foreword of *A Church in History*, the centennial book recounting the life of the church for the first 100 years of its existence.

“No Protestant church in America has a grander legacy from the past. No Protestant church in America, therefore, has a greater responsibility for the future” (Cochran, ed., 1949, p. XII).

The publication of this book was a seminal aspect of Plymouth's celebration since it was accepted that, to plan for the future, one had to understand and learn from the past. The 183-page book was written in joint authorship which included sections written by: Richard Hillis, Marjorie Hillis Roulston (the children of Rev. Dr. Newell Dwight Hillis), Warren B. Cochran who served as the general editor, Roland Kilbon, a Centennial committee member, and David A. Bergmark, the current executive secretary of the church.

Here is a summary of Plymouth's first one hundred years as recorded in *A Church in History*:



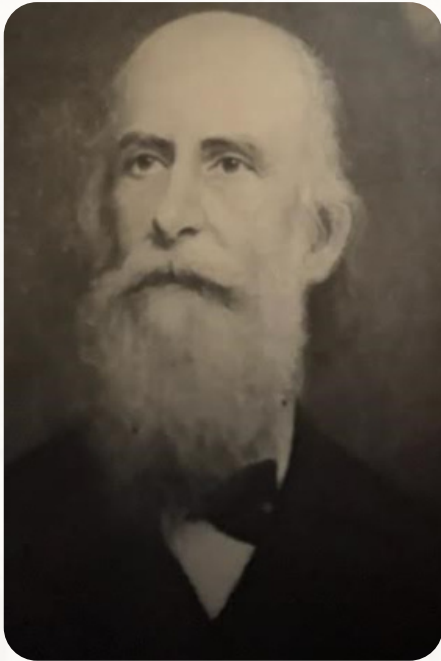
*Rev. Henry Ward Beecher*

In 1847, the year of the founding of *Plymouth Church*, James K. Polk was president of the United States, the Mexican War was all but over, the northern half of the country was still, to white Americans, “unmapped frontier,” railroads were new and most travel was by horse, stage or canal, Brigham Young and his Mormons were just entering Utah, the slavery question was a “dark cloud” still to be decided, and the Protestant Church was the voice of authority (Cochran, 1949, p. 3).

The young, dynamic Indiana minister Henry Ward Beecher was making his voice heard beyond the wilds of the west. The fame of his inflammatory anti-slavery rhetoric had spread, and two offers were proffered from congregations “up North.” The prestigious and well-established *Park Street Congregational Church* of Boston asked him to become their assistant pastor and the fledgling *Plymouth Church of Brooklyn*, with a congregation of 21, called him to be their first senior minister. At first inclined to refuse both, Beecher finally capitulated and accepted the Brooklyn offer because he considered it a “missionary” post.

His unparalleled pastorate and life are all too well known to be repeated here. Let it simply be said that when Beecher agreed to lead *Plymouth Church*, a most extraordinary religious partnership was formed, one that would stamp the age and change the course of American history for all

time. He served well and long, being revered by a loving and forgiving congregation that would support him through all trials and conflicts great and small. When, fifty years later, the pulpit was left empty the question was what now?



*Rev. Dr. Lyman Abbott*

The Rev. Dr. Lyman Abbott, a lawyer turned minister and loyal member of the *Plymouth* congregation, was asked to fill in temporarily. This temporary status was to last 11 years. Considered the “gentle” years, Abbott oversaw a quiet period during which the sermons were devoid of histrionics and politics. A New York newspaper reporter who called on the Abbott household on Sunday evenings would always ask the Abbott children, “Did Dr. Abbott preach anything particularly?” The answer was always the same: “Nothing in particular” (Cochran, 1949, p. 80).

Abbott had no illusions about his low-key sermons when compared to his dynamic predecessor and was to say that he could not preach a better sermon than Beecher, but he could certainly preach a shorter one-and he did. It was under his aegis that Plymouth took on charity work that sought to care for the poor immigrant communities surrounding the church near the waterfront. Teams of volunteer men and women were formed who

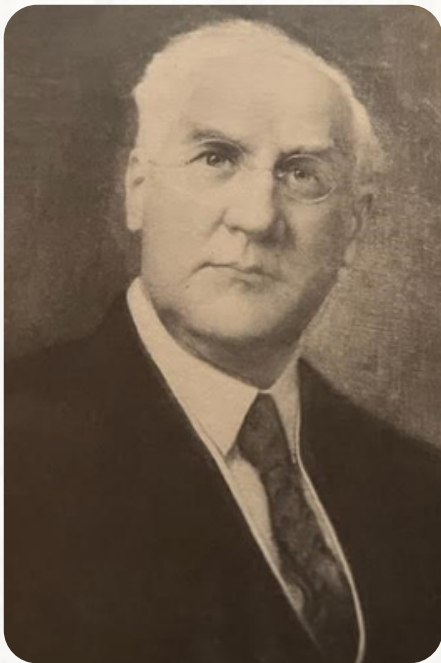
would solicit the grocery stores to either donate food or make it available at cost. Private subscriptions were elicited from church members, and it was believed that, due to the committee's ministrations, no family in the immediate vicinity of Plymouth went hungry. When Abbott retired to care for his ailing wife and to continue his extremely successful editorial work on the religious periodical the *Outlook*, he resumed his role as a parishioner and *Plymouth* began a new search.



*Rev. Dr. Newell Dwight Hillis*

Plymouth's third minister, the Rev. Dr. Newell Dwight Hillis, was a man who shared many of Beecher's most pronounced characteristics. He was charming, eloquent, charismatic, dynamic, ambitious, and controversial. Like Beecher, Hillis came to Plymouth from the mid-west. Under his leadership, the attendance began to swell and the folding seats at the end of the pews were once again in evidence. In 1902, Hillis began work on the *Henry Ward Beecher Memorial Plan* that would give rise to the Lamb Studio sanctuary windows as well as the refurbishment of the Lecture Hall (Hillis Hall), the building of the arcade, the gymnasium, as well as the Plymouth Church House.

Hillis was actively political. During the First World War he was asked to speak on behalf of Liberty Bonds in 31 states and in a matter of a 46-day tour he was able to raise one million dollars! After another devastating war and 25 years of being in the public light, his energies failed, and he suffered a massive stroke. His condition was so fragile that he had to be kept in the reception room until he was strong enough to go to a sanitarium. Sanguine in the end he said, "Not all of us can be exalted or rich, but most of us have to be old" (Cochran, 1949, p. 129). After 25, sometimes tumultuous years at Plymouth's pulpit, Hillis died, and a void was once again created. His tenure, often cause for comment and conflict, is the subject of another work.



*Rev. Dr. J. Stanley Durkee*

For its fourth minister Plymouth called a college president. Rev. Dr. J. Stanley Durkee was the president of Howard University, one of the Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) founded in the aftermath of the Civil War. It was during Durkee's tenure that Mrs. Rose Ward Hunt, the former enslaved child depicted in the Harry Roseland painting in the arcade, returned to the church on May 25, 1927. Dr. Durkee was a calming presence. He formed friendships with leaders of all faiths and periodically switched pulpits with the rabbi of the Eighth Avenue Temple in Brooklyn.

Together they would hold a Thanksgiving Day service at Plymouth Church for the combined congregations.

It was also under Durkee's direction that a great choir was formed led by Mr. Henry C. Pfohl, who assumed the new title of Minister of Music. Pfohl was able to build successful children's and adult choirs, the latter consisting of 50-60 voices. The choir became so large that the organ had to be set back 10 feet to increase the size of the choir loft. It was under Durkee that the great union of *The Church of the Pilgrims* and *Plymouth Church* took place in 1934 (subject of a later essay). The merger brought with it the beautiful Tiffany stained glass windows of Hillis Hall and a piece of Plymouth Rock which was installed after a parade carried it triumphantly down Hicks Street to its new home (1940). After 15 years, Durkee ceded his place to the Rev. Dr. L. Wendell Fifield.



*Rev. Dr. L. Wendell Fifield*

Fifield came to Brooklyn via Plymouth Church, Seattle, Washington in 1941. Under Durkee, Plymouth had been miraculously brought through the Depression without incurring debt. The demographics, however, were changing. Protestantism was no longer the dominant religion of the borough. Immigration had brought thousands of European populations of Catholic and Jewish persuasions to its shores.

*Plymouth* families, outgrowing their living spaces, were leaving the church to settle in the suburbs. The question before *Plymouth* was, “Could the church, while preserving the values of the past and rejoicing in the richness of its history, be so guided as to become a vital part of the present and a leader in planning and working for the future?”

Almost exactly two months after Fifield was installed, word came of the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, and the nation was back at war. The church immediately took up the challenge and went into action. Surgical dressing sessions, first aid classes, and a *Civilian Defense Committee* were formed. Even the Boy Scouts of *Plymouth Church* began collecting old newspapers in the interest of national defense. *Plymouth* was among the 6,500 landmarks to be photographed and measured so that restoration could take place in the event of a bombing. The women of the church enrolled in a class of training for volunteer nurse’s aides and the church was abuzz with activity. Friday nights were devoted to hosting a servicemen’s party held in the 75 Room where the Church School is now housed. The event was sponsored by the Junior Club and continued until after V/J Day. Henry Pfohl, and the organist E. Bronson Ragan, were drafted into service and shortly after the surrender of Japan came the tragic news that Fifield’s son had died in action.



*Remodeled Lecture Hall (Hillis Hall seen from Cranberry Street on left) Projected Plymouth Memorial Chapel (right) pictured with 8 stained glass windows (now located in Hillis Hall).*

With the conclusion of the war Plymouth chose to look forward and began planning for its centennial. The adopted plan called for the restoration of the Lecture Hall to be renamed for Hillis. Along Cranberry Street (playground) was to be built a chapel, named *Plymouth Memorial Hall*. It would hold seating for 200 and provide the appropriate backdrop for the beautiful stained glass windows that the congregants had lovingly brought with them from the Church of the Pilgrims in 1934. This would be accomplished with the raising of a centennial fund. Part of the plan, but not yet within the budget, was a bell tower to be built above the arcade.

The actual observance of the centennial was from May 11 to May 18, 1947. To begin the observance a forum was held with guest speakers. The subject was “The Free Church in the New Age.” The church committees offered events “keyed to the observance” (Cochran, 1949, p. 178). A banquet was held at the *Towers Hotel* where the announcement was made that the \$110,00 goal for the centennial fund had been fully subscribed.

On Sunday evening the choir sang Mendelssohn’s *Elijah*, a highlight and worthy conclusion to the celebrations. On the final Sunday of the celebration, May 18, 1947, Dr. Fifield preached a sermon on “The Horizons of History.” In reflecting on Plymouth’s illustrious past, Fifield said that in reviewing 100 years of Plymouth’s history he had six observations which he referred to as “horizons:”

1. Community Leadership
2. Civic Service
3. Christian Unity
4. Personality
5. Balanced Progression
6. Spirituality



### **Community Leadership**

In elaborating on these six areas of Plymouth's history, Fifield cited Plymouth's role as a community leader, finding a balance between the spiritual and the practical in its involvement with the community at large.

### **Civic Service**

Civic Service, as defined by Fifield meant a dedication to serving the needs of the immediate community of its members: Children, youth, elders, and all those in need within the bounds of the congregation.

### **Christian Unity**

Christian Unity was described as the minimization of denominationalism stating that the strict dictates of denominations were divisive. Plymouth's welcoming community had always welcomed those of different denominations, faiths, and backgrounds.

### **Balanced Progression**

In reviewing Plymouth's history Fifield noted that "Plymouth has always realized that life, while it seeks to learn from the horizons of history, can always set new horizons for the future," underscoring Plymouth's commitment to using its history to guide to a meaningful future.

### **Personality**

In praising Plymouth's individualism Fifield stated that no one ever mistook the *Plymouth* Congregation for "just a mass of people." Plymouth's ability to remain true to its nature, not rooted in dogma," was considered by Fifield, one of its greatest assets.

## **Spirituality**

Fifield referred to the basic loyalty to the spiritual nature of Plymouth saying that in all its endeavors Plymouth had always remembered that the church is spiritual, its heartbeat is spiritual, its purpose is spiritual stressing that all the church does stems from the inspiration of Jesus Christ, the spiritual essence of the church.

In reading these lines I was reminded that Plymouth's aspirations of the past coincide with those of the present. Recognition of the major role our community of faith has played in the history of the country has always carried with it the responsibility and challenge of using our illustrious past to positively influence our decisions in the present and future. This now, in our 175th year, is still the challenge.

~ Valerie Velazquez de Louzonis

## **Reference**

Cochran, W.B., ed. (1949). *The Story of Plymouth's First Hundred Years under Beecher*,

Abbott, Hillis, Durkee, and Fifield. Brooklyn, NY: Plymouth Church of the Pilgrims.