
Dean Wright

Dean Wright was minister of students at Judson from 1948 to 1952. _____

In 1947 Bob Spike was associate minister at the Granville Baptist Church in Ohio. He had graduated from Colgate Rochester. I had graduated from Yale Divinity School and got a job working with students, also in Granville. We were very good friends with the Spikes. I was doing student work for the state and Bob was related to the church, and we were the same age. Spike then decided that he wanted to get his doctorate degree at Columbia. He and his family moved to New York, and he took a little church in Queens, a small Baptist church, that was just part-time while he was doing his graduate work.

Margaret and I decided we might come back, too. I would follow the same course and study at Columbia. I would need a part-time job as well, so I approached the New York Baptist City Society (NYBCS). As luck would have it, my request came at a good moment.

Judson House was occupied by the Judson Health Center, which was begun in 1921 by Dr. Eleanor Campbell to bring free medical care to the Italian immigrants in the neighborhood. The clinic occupied the ground and second floors. On the third floor were rooms that were rented out to various people, including two men who were part of the quartet that sang at Judson services each Sunday.

We still had an organ then. A woman who had been a home missionary who played the organ had married an Italian from the neighborhood. Her name was Mrs. Cavalieri. She played the organ, the quartet was on the balcony, and the congregation was below in pews, which we still had then. We also had carpeting, which made for very good sound. We had a seminary student, Danny Novotny, who came only on Sundays to preach. This was his field work. None of the Judson Council people, of course, came to church.

A LABORATORY FOR CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

The wife of the secretary of the NYBCS was Melissa Russell, and she was a very strong, bright woman. She had been at the YWCA for

years as a volunteer. Mrs. Russell became very interested in Judson. She was also interested in the NYBCS's Department of Christian Education. Her idea was this: She would work out something with New York University so that the Judson House would become a laboratory for Christian education at New York University. Students would be involved and some of them could even live in the house. The Judson congregation had nothing to do with it. When I say congregation, there were fifteen people there, and that would be counting the Spikes and us.

So when I asked the NYBCS if they could offer me a part-time position, Mrs. Russell had this grand idea and took it to the Judson Council. They said this is great, go ahead. Margaret was on her way to New York at the time. Mrs. Russell interviewed her and I got the job. In her letter of August 25, 1948, in which Mrs. Russell officially offered me the position of Director of Student Work, she enclosed the following job description:

1. to develop and carry out a plan of work with the students attending New York University
2. to be a staff representative to work with the New York University Christian Association
3. to be a representative of the New York Baptist City Society on the Board for Protestant Student Work in New York City
4. to carry responsibility for the Roger Williams Club and to strive to interest the residents of the Judson dormitory in the Club
5. to work out a relationship with the Department of Christian Education of the New York Baptist City Society as applied to students
6. to develop a subcommittee for student work, working with the committee on Program and Personnel of the Judson Memorial Church.

Mrs. Russell did add in her letter that I might want to have a new job description after being at work for a while.

That's how we got to Judson House. We moved in in September in time for the school year at NYU. We decided we wanted to make what space we had available to students. We lived on top of 81 West Third in a nice apartment with two bedrooms. We could walk right

across the passage to get to the third floor of the building on Thompson Street (81 West Third and the building on Thompson Street were collectively referred to as Judson House). In the summer our apartment was unbearably hot. There was no insulation, just a metal-pressed ceiling with a skylight. But our living room was big, and later we had student meetings at least once a week. When we moved in, Robert Boyd and his first wife were living on the first floor of 81 West Third. They were in charge of the building at the time.

THE STUDENTS MOVE IN

We advertised on bulletin boards at NYU. When students started moving in, we put the men on the third floor of Judson House (this was not yet the day of mixed dormitories). The rooms on the first and second floors of 81 West Third were for women. One woman was black. Her name was Camay Procter. She was the daughter of Cab Calloway. We did not know this at the time. Her dad had said that he would pay her way through college if she would break with her mother, and she refused to do that. Instead she gave up her name and she chose Camay for the soap and Procter for Procter and Gamble. She had a great sense of humor. She moved in with a friend, also black. Camay had all the personality in the world but she never talked about her dad. We did not know who he was until she got married and we were invited to the wedding at her father's estate in Long Island.

Patricia White, another student, was from Wooster College in Ohio, very WASPish. It was about as big a mix as you can imagine, including a student from India, people who would otherwise never have met. The man from India, for example, had never made a bed in his life (everybody had to do their own cleaning). He was used to servants, and house work was beneath him.

We had a little room up on the third floor of the Thompson Street building where they could do some cooking, but it was not really meal-type cooking. Anyone who lived there had to give four hours a week of community service, and that could be all kinds of things: helping in the church (although that was not pushed at all), working with a political party in the Village, lots of things.

When Danny Novotny finished his internship as a seminary student, Bob Spike came from Queens part-time, except he ended up

doing a lot more. Bob and Alice Spike and their son Paul first moved in where the Boyds had lived, in the building at 81 West Third.

During the summer of 1950 we were out west visiting my family, and when we came back the building was gone. It had developed a big bulge overnight and basically collapsed, so it had to be torn down right away. We had to find housing for some of the students and for us, and we found it on the second and third floors of a very nice brownstone on Jane Street. I don't know why these people rented to us. We lived on the third floor and the students lived on the second floor in bunk beds. Bob Newman was in that group.

THE FIRST CHURCH IN URBAN LIFE PROJECT

We had planned to have a summer service project that year. The idea was to bring students from other places in the country to New York to work in the city and to study the work of the church in the city. Howard and Lorry Moody came to run the project.

Howard and I had known each other in Ohio and had worked together on various projects and committees. Howard had chosen to be ordained at Judson earlier that year. When we wanted someone for the summer project, Howard and Lorry were our natural choice, and they loved the city.

This summer program was strictly for Baptists and had nothing to do with the year-round program with NYU students. The Baptist students did their own cooking and had a wonderful time. It was a terribly hot summer. Some of the students ended up sleeping on the fire escape in back of the building.

On several occasions the students went up to Harlem to help serve at one of Father Divine's dinners. People who had nothing would come for a meal, but they would dress up. This was at a time when a lot was happening in Harlem. Father Divine had his angels, white women, who would hand out the food, and they would say "no salt." This was long before people knew that salt was bad for people with heart problems.

That was just one activity the students were involved in. During the day they went to their various jobs to earn money and at night we had discussions and speakers. The students also went to plays and movies.

The Judson Health Center moved out of the building in 1950. Margaret and I moved back into the Student House and Judson took over the whole building. The Spikes moved to the floor above us. We now had a full kitchen and we hired a cook and became more of a co-op.

As time went on with Spike, a few more people were coming to church, but still the largest group that met was the students. Young people who lived in the Village, who had no connection to the house, would also come to the evening meetings.

JUDSON BECOMES INDEPENDENT

About that time, the Judson Council voted to give us a tremendous amount of authority. That was the beginning of Judson's autonomy. When Howard was called in 1956, it was not the Judson Council but the congregation that called him. Checks were still signed at the City Society, but in terms of program, Judson was now on its own.

Margaret and I left in 1952 a month before our daughter Cynthia was born. Around this time the congregation began to withdraw from being a church for the university. This happened gradually as the church reset its priorities. At the end of the 1940s, many veterans had returned to school on the G.I. Bill, and there was a great need for student housing. In later years, students were better off financially and were not necessarily looking for cheap housing and a commitment to do community work. There never was a time when a church committee said: "Now the work with students is over." It was a natural transition. Students still lived in the house, but it was no longer a program of the church. Still later, in the 1960s, the students moved out altogether and artists moved in.

DEAN AND MARGARET WRIGHT

live in Montclair, New Jersey.