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Mildred Persinger: Autobiography

Mildred Emory Persinger

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Harry put out an urgent plea to "help us explore your spiritual leanings." I don't know how to do that, but he gave us a few hints. Furthermore, he said he really needed help. I am a pushover for that, so here are some facts, if not exactly what he asked for.

My father came from a long line of Episcopalians. He attended the classic Cathedral of the Incarnation, where I went to Sunday school and sometimes to church, in the town where we lived. Bishop Kinsolving was an impressive figure in full regalia and lots of snowwhite hair. The music was magnificent. However, my dad went habitually to early communion, where the bishop did not preach. When asked why he went so early, Dad said the service was shorter.

My mother, a very funny lady, claimed to be a refugee from three Methodist services on Sunday, when she was not even allowed to play marbles, and prayer meeting Wednesday night. She knew a lot of Bible verses, though. After college, her church attendance was confined to family christenings, weddings and a rare funeral. Neither she nor my father divulged what you might call "spiritual leanings," nor did they instruct my sisters and me. I could only observe what they did.

Even though they came out of the South, I never heard a word that could be called racist. Both accepted people on their own terms. They engaged in various forms of community service, including my father's work with prisoners in the county jail. As a 12 year-old, I did not connect this with being a Christian, and they may not have, either.

About that time the question of confirmation came up. Dutifully I went to class. It was the catechism that first turned me off. As I did not understand it, it was hard to buy into, So began my teen-age quest for religion. Methodists presented the same problem. John Wesley's method was too rigid for me. Christian Science seemed more rational; but then, there were those testimonials...

Finally, at Hollins College (Annie Dillard's alma mater) there was a religion teacher who could have come right out of Union Seminary, although her degree was from a close second: the University of Chicago. She practiced "liberation theology" before it was named and she introduced students to writers in "evolutionary theology." Some of these theologians and other intellectually exciting speakers were invited to the campus.

In 1944 when we moved to Dobbs Ferry a creative and free spirited friend informed me that there was a Presbyterian church close by where she felt at home. The minister, David Kendall, she said, exemplified the ideal of Christian acceptance, rather than tolerance, of everyone. The only exception I know of was a neighbor who went to him with a desire to join the church, She laid down her conditions, to which he listened patiently. When he gently reminded her that "the church is not a country club," she bowed out in a huff.

Remarkably, despite a few rough times, South Church, due to inspired leadership from its ministers and among its members, has remained true to what has to be a Christian tradition: spirituality, openness, community, generosity, service and what Joe calls hospitality, The challenge to us ordinary folks is to live up to their example.

Mildred Tessinger