

A CONVERSATION WITH HELEN SICKLES ALLEN by Aletha Carlton
June 1989

IN PREPARATION FOR THE 325 YEAR CELEBRATION OF THE FOUNDING OF
THE FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OLD GREENWICH CT,
10/25/1989

(Aletha) When did you start coming to First Church?

(Helen) Well, we moved the family moved here in 1941. Mrs. Moore happened to be our real estate agent. She had five daughters; there was Ruth Reed, Olive Caird and Miriam Fossom. The fourth daughter was my age. Her mother introduced me to her. She got me into the young peoples group; it was called the "Fireside Fellowship". So I got started going there almost immediately because of the young people. As a matter of fact I joined the church before my parents did. I joined in 1942 on Maundy Thursday. Marion and Thiel (Ficker) were in that group, Betty and David (Ficker); Dotty Ficker Jenkins was there. I think there were seven couples in that group that got married, including myself. Yet, we all met there; Jena and Bob Franks were in the group. War was declared. I heard about it up in the church.

In those days we met where Tom's office is now. That was the Conference Room. It was the only place we had to meet because they had not built what is now the educational wing with the lounge and so forth. So we met in that room for quite a few years. It was a nice room for that.

(Aletha) Who was the minister then; who ran the group?

(Helen) You know, I don't remember. There was a Mrs. Fish there. She had been there a long time with Mosshammer, but I think she had left then. As a matter of fact we came after Mosshammer and before Dr. Daniels. The interim Minister was a Rev. Beard.

I remember the story about him. He was in his 70's and had never married. But, he said he had a diamond. He said he was waiting for the 'right one'. And so help me he got married. After he left here he found somebody and married her! I think he was almost 80 when he finally got married. Well, it's never too late. Isn't that funny!

DR. DANIELS

Then Dr, Daniels came; I think in 1942, because he was here when I joined the church. So, he didn't have a car. They didn't have much money. He rode all over town on his bicycle. He made all his pastoral calls and everything on a bicycle. I don't know how he got to the hospital. He was quite a character. With his hair blowing in the wind; riding around on the bicycle. I think the church helped him to get a car fairly soon.

He was a remarkable person. He knew everything about everything. There was hardly any subject he wasn't an expert on from gardening to carpentry to mysteries. He was a great mystery novel buff; he just loved his mysteries. I think he was probably under a great deal of pressure and this was one way he unwound. He would read these mystery novels. Any thing to do with the Bible; any thing to do with the history of the church. He knew everything about it. He was a remarkable man. Cooking, anything; anything you name, he was an expert on. I've never known a man with that kind of personality. When he

walked into a room full of people, immediately, he didn't have to say anything. He was the dominant personality. And, everyone knew it. The only other person like that, that I have ever known is Herman, Herman Riessig. He had that kind of personality too. Just overwhelming. You just knew that you were in the presence of somebody very special with Dr. Daniels.

I know he used to preach with just the roughest of notes. He was an absolutely marvelous speaker. His English was perfect. He spoke so beautifully. But, he told my father once that the words were in his head so fast that he almost couldn't get them out. There were so many words that he had to say. They just kept tumbling out. And, yet he had just this very bare outline. He never wrote out a sermon. But, he knew exactly what he was going to say and it just came out. And, he also preached to the congregation that he had. He could feel in a sense how the congregation was reacting to him. When we finally had to have two services; we just had too many people coming to accommodate them in a small church. It was a different group. It was a younger group earlier and a slightly older group later. He used to preach, the subject would be the same, but the way the sermon came out it would be slightly different because it was geared to two different groups who were listening to him. I know that one time, (this is a funny story); a cap came off his tooth while he was preaching. It came off and flew out of his mouth. He just scooped it up out of the air; went on without missing a word. He never missed a beat. The last sermon he gave was on September 5th in 1963. At least I think it was. He died just a few days after his last sermon. He had been out ill all summer. He hadn't preached for several months. He came back. Everyone was so very happy to have him back. He talked and he talked and he talked. The sermon lasted at least 45 minutes or more. It was almost as if he was trying to say everything he knew and just pass it all on, right then. As if somehow he knew that perhaps this was his last sermon. Whether he knew it consciously or not, I don't know, but, he talked and he talked. Then a couple of days later he died. It was a distillation of everything he believed. It was a very powerful experience. He didn't go out to the back of the church to the narthex because it had been a strain. He had been away for so long. He stood in the front of the church. Quite a few people went up and spoke to him. I know; I was one of them. I was always so glad that I had. Most people just didn't realize that he hadn't gone out. He apparently felt it was too much for him to go back. He had heart trouble.

We had no choir when Dr. Daniels first came. We had Viola Worell. She was the organist. She had been the organist for years and years. There was no choir. There were no choir stalls. I can remember at one time that the young peoples group did sing. I remember, because, I was one of them. We just had a railing up. This was before they even enlarged that part where the old narthex was. This is where the old choir used to be. There was just a railing across there. There were just six of us. We just stood there in a line and sang some sort of song.

THE HEAD OF CHRIST

Then in the 1950's they built the educational wing. When there was a railing, there was the head of Christ stained glass window up there. (ed. Same location where it is now.) There was nothing behind it so the light came through it there. When they put in the education wing they put in space for choir stalls and so forth and moved where the organ had been. They had to take down the head of Christ. Well there was some lady who was very upset about this. I think they had moved it upstairs or something. It was a stained glass window, about, oh, a couple of feet high. It was just an oval. And, there was a woman who was very fond of that window. She threatened to kill Dr. Daniels. She was going to shoot him. She warned him, if he preached that certain Sunday morning. She would come in the church with a gun and she would shoot him. So, there was a great deal of uneasiness that Sunday morning amongst the people who knew. My father knew about this, you see. Most people didn't know. They had police all around the church to stop her if she came in. They think she walked up and down Sound Beach Avenue, but she didn't come into the

church. She must have gotten cold feet, or something, and maybe she knew the police were there. I guess she was slightly deranged anyway. So, that was one very tense moment.

NO ONE IS TURNED AWAY

He used to take everybody in. People would come and knock on the door anytime of the day or night and he would take them in. It worried everybody. We never knew what he would be getting into. He would give people money and feed them. And then send them off again. Later on the young people went out New Years Eve and they got drunk. He would get them and take them home and hand them to their parents. It was interesting.

CHILDREN, SUNDAY SCHOOL AND CHOIRS

In those days the children's choir sang every Sunday. They rehearsed during the week. I think they rehearsed on Thursday or something. The Sunday school had half an hour in their classrooms and then they met in the auditorium. They had a regular church service. There were ushers among the children, they sang hymns; I guess they had scripture reading. The superintendent of the Sunday school would give a short sermon and the choir sang. So the choir got to sing; the choir was very important because it sang every Sunday just the way the big choir sang. The children robed every Sunday. They had little red robes with white collars in the green room. There are a number of closets along there and one of the closets had all the children's choir robes in it. I was one of the mothers that helped the children robe.

(Aletha) When did they start having choirs?

(Helen) Oh, I don't know; I don't remember. I know many children were in it from the very beginning; from the time they could be. So it was quite an important part of their lives to be in the choir because they used it all the time. They didn't sing in church, the way the children do now, but they sang for their own church service. They got used, that way, to having a church service and what it was about. The boys; they didn't have the girls at that time, but, the boys got used to ushering and take up a collection

(Aletha) Where did they have the services for the children?

(Helen) In the Auditorium. There was also a dreadful room down stairs under the church. Susie Craig spoke about it the other day. There was a stairway to it from the outside. I don't know how all the children fit in there. I know that after Dr, Daniels had been there awhile and the church had grown so phenomenally; they had 1000 children in the Sunday school. Of course they had two sessions. Every nook and cranny was filled with children. This was before other churches came and took up the slack. There wasn't - the Presbyterian Church didn't do it and St. Saviors was not the same way. There were not as many churches that were active, so, we had an awful lot of children. And, then things just kind of fell away. I don't know why. It was a big operation. A lay person was always the head of the Sunday school. I know Dexter Bruce was for a number of years. Steven Benis was.

(Aletha) I know Fran Woodward came in there some place; but she was a professional wasn't she?

(Helen) Yes, she came in with Duke, with Duke Potter. Let's see; Earnestine Aukerman was there when Dr. Daniels was there, but, she was a professional. He finally brought in Earnestine. Then after Dr. Daniels' death, she resigned. She didn't know what was going to happen. She just decided it was time to resign. So Duke came. And, he brought in Fran Milne, as she was then. So they had a professional there.

And we never used to have a choir. We just had soloists on Sunday with the organ. When they finally had the room for the choir, I guess that's when they got Jerry Mack, who taught at the high school. He was very good. Of course, Mary, his wife, was a beautiful soprano. She did a lot of the solo work. He didn't bring in a lot of people. Mary did the solos when they needed them.

TURNING THE CHURCH

(Aletha) What do you remember about turning the church around?

(Helen) That was very exciting. I remember that my daughter was one of the groundbreakers, Meredith was. Because, at that time, she was president of the young peoples group. So, they had representatives from all the different groups in the church who broke ground. Karl (Allen) was Senior Deacon. Peg Orham was from the Women's Fellowship. I remember that. It happened after church. Everybody went out and stood about. They had quite a ceremony. They had a beautiful model of what the church was going to look like. In fact, I have a picture upstairs of that; an 8X10 glossy print of that. Meredith had a hard time. The ground was hard and of course there was grass and you can't get a spade through grass very well.

(Aletha) Who was the minister here then?

(Helen) Dr. Daniels.

(Aletha) So, he was the person that got that off the ground.

(Helen) Yes, they had another ceremony when they laid the corner stone. They put in various items from the time. I'm not sure what is in there, but it's still there. I know the corner stone is hollow and has the things in it. But, this was a big ceremony when they broke the ground for the church. They got the stone; the reason why the stone looks exactly the same, there was a church in Stamford that was torn down to make room for offices and so forth, as Stamford grew. And, someone; I think it was Percy Letz, was farsighted enough. He knew it had come from the same quarry, so he bought all of this stone quite a number of years before we put on the addition. So we had all the stone. Of course it was cut, I'm not sure it was cut the same way to match what we had. But, it all came from the same quarry. Otherwise you would have been able to see the difference where they started to build. It was all stored out in the back of the cemetery, out where the columbarium is now. They had trucked it all over here. It was a very foresighted thing. They had been talking for years, you see, about doing this. So he got the trustees to buy this stone in case this ever happened.

EDMUND SICKLES

(Aletha) How about if we get into some stories about your father? What's the first thing that comes into your mind?

(Helen) I think more than anything he was kind of the conscience of the church; he wanted everything done properly, as everybody knew. And, I think he rubbed a lot of people the wrong way because sometimes he wanted things done right. He wanted the proper procedures and he wanted the bylaws followed and of course they kind of bend them to what they want to do. And, he was very much against this kind of thing. But, it meant so much to him, the whole church did. It was really a very big part of his

life. He gave a number of sermons there. He always liked to do the beach service during the summer. This is what Jeanie has, she has all these sermons. He had a great number of sermons that he had written and also many many prayers. He did a lot of things that they still do. I can't think of anything in particular now, but a lot of the things he wrote they carried on for many many years and in the way that he suggested they been done.

(Aletha) How long had he been in the church?

(Helen) Well, I think since 1943. No, I think it was later on in 1942 that they may have joined. I joined Maundy Thursday, but it was later on in the year that they joined. He was senior deacon twice. He was the church clerk and he had served on many many committees, He gave an awful lot of time. Even when he was no longer an official he did a lot of counseling and telling the ministers; pointing out things that they might have done that perhaps weren't right. Or, you know, pointing out, good things that they had done. And he spent quite a lot of time just talking to them about the way things were and the way they did things. I think he had quite an influence on a great number of people.

He wasn't very much open to change; he liked things done the traditional way. But, I think at that point he was getting a little old to change when all the changes began to come and there got to be balloons in church and guitars and things. He didn't think too highly of that; clowns and things. He didn't think he'd been to church unless it was a real church service. He had been raised as a Christian Scientist and I was raised that way also. So, he had a very different approach to religion. In a way he was much more open and he was also very much interested in the spiritual teachings. He studied the Bible, for instance. He was not as much interested in the history as he was in what it meant; the spiritual meaning of the Bible. He read the Bible every single day of his life. He really was a very fine student of the Bible.

He was very much against the Church Committee meetings being open to all the committees to anything but the Deaconate. Because, he thought the Deaconate should be able to discuss what was going on in the church without all the special interest groups being there. He was very distressed when they opened that up to the Women's Fellowship and the Music Committee and so forth. Because, he felt, well, if one of these committees wanted to go beyond, really their authority to do it. He thought the church committee should be able to say no and discuss it without those people being there. That had never been the case, until I don't know, the last twenty years perhaps.

It used to be when he presided over the Church Committee it was the Deaconate only and the clergy. That was one thing he felt was very wrong, I think the Deaconate is meeting as a group, aren't they?

One thing I know my father was very much against was this "COCU" which was joining a great many churches together, the Episcopal and so forth, because then we really would have lost our identity. We would have had quite a different kind of hierarchy; I think they are still trying to get bishops in the United Church. But they would have had those as the Episcopal Church has and so forth. He was very much against that and that finally was dropped completely.

(Aletha) Was he still around when this 'Ecumenical' thing started the sort of sharing of ministers?

(Helen) Oh yes; and I think he was very much in favor of that. He thought it was good to be open and know how everybody was thinking.

We have a pair of hedge clippers out in the garage. They were Dr. Daniels'. My father was talking to Dr. Daniels one day. This was before anyone called a minister by their first name. Nobody ever called him anything but Dr. Daniels. I guess my father towards the end was calling him by his first name, but it wasn't the same as it is now. He mentioned that he needed some hedge clippers. Dr. Daniels said he had some, he said since he was living right there in the little house. The place was going to be taken care of anyway by the men there, whoever cut the grass. And he said 'I don't need them anymore.' He said, 'you can borrow them.' We talked about it several times should we give them back but, he didn't need them, so we still have them.

He was very fond of Tom. I think he wasn't as fond of Duke. He was immensely fond of Zan Harper. I don't think he as very taken with Paul Yinger. He, (Yinger) did a lot of unusual things; he was an actor. He would come out in the center and 'do his thing' dressed in some long flowing robe and recite a poem instead of a sermon or give a little skit. Just a one-man skit you see. He was very good at this. But, that didn't please my father. He didn't think too much of that.

(Aletha) He preferred things to be more ordinary. What would tend to be spiritual rather than dramatic?

(Helen) Yes, he didn't care for the dancers, for instance, when they had the dancer coming down. He didn't understand that at all. He was too traditional. But, that was all right, that was his way. He felt that if he went to church it had to be a proper service. He told me once when he was 92, 'I hope when I get to be an old man I don't get crotchety'. He didn't retire until he was 95. That's when his eyesight gave out and he couldn't do anything any more. He still went to church. Until, just about that last year he had to stop going to church. It just got too difficult to take him. He wasn't steady enough on his feet. But, he wouldn't use a cane.

(Aletha) How did he feel about approaching his decline, as he was getting old?

(Helen) He told me about a month before he died. He said, 'I can feel my strength declining and I know that I haven't too much longer.' 'But,' he said, 'it doesn't worry me, I know how things are. Don't grieve. It's just. I'm not afraid.' I think he knew that his time was short.

I put off for a long time going in and trying to clean up his things. He had an awful lot of things that he had written, things from the church and so forth. I just couldn't bring myself to go in his personal things and get rid of things that had been his. Finally one day, this was several months after he had died, we were going to Australia. I thought I better, I just better do it. And, I went into the room and I started to go through the things. It was almost as if I could hear him say in my head; 'Well, I'm so glad you're finally doing this. And, don't feel badly about it. It has to be done and I want you to do it.' All of a sudden all of this feeling I had, that I didn't want to do it, just went away from me, just left me and I was able to do it. It was almost as if he spoke in my mind and I could hear him. He wanted me to clean up. So I didn't throw away any of his papers. Everything at his funeral he had written. We used all the things and also at my mother's funeral. All the prayers and things had come from my father's writings.

But for a while he kept every bulletin. Toward the end he had begun to clean out. He wondered what could he do with them. It's all right if the church has them, but who else can keep them for years and years? But, I still have a lot of things that I didn't throw away, things that were of any historical value. Just of interest.

DUKE POTTER

(Helen) Well, Duke? You have to be careful what you say, I think. Duke was interested in preaching. But, I don't think he was interested in much else, like counseling; I don't think that was his thing. He was willing to preach, but unfortunately people got a little tired of hearing about his sailing and what his wife did to his shirts etc. I shouldn't say that, but it was thought by some that his sermons were not as spiritual as they would have liked. There was one sermon, however, that I have always remembered. It was a sermon he preached on Easter. He was trying to explain why Mary Magdalene and the Disciples did not recognize Jesus. You'd think that knowing Him as well as they had, they would have been able to see who it was after He rose, you see. He said, (Dr. Potter), "I'll tell you something that happened to me (when he was in Springfield). There was a man in the church who was a pillar in the church and with whom he, (Dr. Potter) worked closely. He got word in his office one day that the man had died very suddenly; it was a heart attack. He was absolutely horrified, and shocked. He rushed right over to the family's home and knocked on the door. The man was standing in the door, and he said, "I didn't know him. I knew he was dead". (Because he had heard that rumor, you see.) "When the man opened the door I didn't recognize him! It took me awhile to realize that the thing was not true; that it was just a rumor. The man had not died. But, when he opened the door I didn't know him!

(Aletha) Because of his mind set!

(Helen) Because of his mind set. If he knew that the man had died, then when the man opened the door it couldn't have been he. He said, "The same thing probably happened to the disciples when they saw Jesus." That made an impression on me. That's the only sermon I remember; the only story really about a sermon. I thought it was a good one.

MERTON LIBBY

(Helen) Merton Libby had left. Nobody wanted Merton to leave, but he felt he could not get along. He did not want to try to get along with somebody else. They would have liked Merton to take over as the Senior Minister, but Merton did not care about preaching, particularly. Merton said that it took him something like 30 hours to write a sermon. It didn't come easily to him. He did not want to have to be the person to give a sermon every Sunday.

BOB CROSKERY

(Helen) Then there was Bob Croskery, who was the minister at the Stanwich Congregational Church. It was very tiny before Nathan Adams went there. Bob first came over to the church as head of the day camp. Dr. Daniels got him into that; I worked at the day camp with him. Then he left that church, I think then he was here for about a year as Dr. Daniel's assistant. He was quite young at the time. They were quite a nice young couple and had quite a few young children, four I think. Bob was always very distraught because he didn't look old enough. He wanted to look older and more mature. He didn't feel he carried the weight because he didn't look the way he felt. Then, after he left the day camp, Earnestine Aukerman ran the day camp. It was part of her job to run as head of the Sunday school to run the day camp in the summer. We had some very nice years with her. I worked there quite a few years. I did the Arts and Crafts.

ZAN HARPER

(Aletha) What do you remember about Zan?

(Helen) I was on the Search Committee. He was one of our candidates. We interviewed him. We heard him preach in Norwalk. We liked him very much. But, he had been in New York. He apparently lost his job, (was laid off when they reduced the staff). He was anxious for a job, so, he removed himself from consideration as a permanent pastor and said he would come in as interim, which meant he couldn't be considered as a permanent pastor. Of course after he had been here for a year, everyone loved him and would have liked him to become the permanent minister. He was the one who brought Herman in because he and Herman were very good friends.