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Ruth

COURTSHIP AND MARRIAGE,
PASTORATE AT WESTERN SPRINGS,
YOUTH FOR CHRIST

“Saturday nights I dedicate to prayer and study, in preparation for the Lord’s day.”

What kind of a romance could a college man have with a woman who said a thing like that? Dating Ruth Bell had to be creative. And I did my best. For example, on one occasion we took a long walk in the countryside surrounding Wheaton to a graveyard, where we read tombstone epitaphs! It was a far cry from careening through Charlotte in a jalopy.

Ruth, born in China, had spent her first seventeen years in Asia. Her father, Dr. L. Nelson Bell, was a medical missionary in the eastern Chinese province of Northern Kiangsu, and her family lived in the hospital compound. Theirs was a hard existence, and certainly not a sheltered one. She remembers it as a happy, interesting childhood with strict but loving parents, among happy Christians, both fellow missionaries and Christian Chinese friends and helpers. But they were all exposed to everything from monsoons, sandstorms, and epidemics to bandit attacks and civil war. For high school, Ruth went to the Foreign School in Pyongyang, Korea (now North Korea).

In more ways than one, she was one of the belles of Wheaton campus. This I learned during my first term from a fellow I met at the Lane home, Johnny Streater. To pay his way through college, Johnny ran his own trucking service. For a price, he would haul anything in his little yellow pickup. I gladly accepted his offer of work at 50¢ an hour and spent many afternoons at hard labor, moving furniture and other items around the western Chicago suburbs.

Johnny was a little older than I and had been in the Navy before coming to Wheaton. He had a vision for the mission field and felt that God had called him to serve in China, where he intended to go as soon as he graduated. He told me about a girl in the junior class—one of the most beautiful and dedicated Christian girls he had ever met. Sounded like my type. I paid attention.

One day we were hanging around in our sweaty work clothes in front of Williston Hall, the girls' dorm, getting ready to haul some furniture for a lady in Glen Ellyn, the next town over, when Johnny let out a whoop. "Billy, here's the girl I was telling you about," he said. "It's Ruth Bell."

I straightened up, and there she was. Standing there, looking right at me, was a slender, hazel-eyed movie starlet! I said something polite, but I was flustered and embarrassed. It took me a month to muster the courage to ask her out for a date.

The Christmas holidays were fast approaching, and the combined glee clubs were presenting Handel's *Messiah*. One day in the library in Blanchard Hall, I saw Ruth studying at one of the long tables. Johnny Streater and Howard Van Buren urged me to make my pitch to her right there. The expression of the librarian at the desk turned to a frown as we whispered among ourselves. Undaunted, I sauntered nonchalantly across to Ruth and scribbled my proposal for a date to the concert. To my surprise and delight, she agreed to go.

That Sunday afternoon was cold and snowy. With Ruth Bell sitting beside me in Pierce Chapel, I did not pay much attention to the music. Afterward we walked over to the Lane house for a cup of tea, and we had a chance to talk. I just could not believe that anyone could be so spiritual and so beautiful at one and the same time.

Ruth went back to her room (she told me later), got on her knees, and told the Lord that if she could spend the rest of her life

servicing Him with me, she would consider it the greatest privilege imaginable. So why did she make it so hard for me to get her to say yes out loud?

If I had not been smitten with love at the first sight of Ruth Bell, I would certainly have been the exception. Many of the men at Wheaton thought she was stunning. Petite, vivacious, smart, talented, witty, stylish, amiable, and unattached. What more could a fellow ask for?

Add to that the fact that her Virginia-based parents and their missionary companions were all in China under the auspices of the Southern Presbyterian denomination. Not the Associated Reformed Presbyterian Church I had grown up in, but close enough.

“Billy, hold your horses!” I fell so head-over-heels in love with her that Johnny had to caution me. “You’re going too fast.”

And there was one minor problem that kept coming up. She wanted me to go with her as a missionary to Tibet! My mind was not closed to such a possibility. Not completely. After all, I had chosen to major in anthropology with just such a contingency in mind. But missionary work was a lot more comfortable to consider in the global abstract than in the Tibetan concrete.

In that list of good adjectives I just assigned to Ruth, I omitted one: *determined*.

She felt that God had called her to be a missionary to the remote borders of Tibet just as strongly as I felt that He had called me to preach the Gospel. In my case, though, there was not a geographical stipulation.

Ruth was deeply impressed by the life of Amy Carmichael, that single—and indeed singular—woman whom God had called to devote herself utterly to the children of Dohnavur, in southern India.

She reinforced her case by telling me about Mildred Cable, who had rejected the young man she loved because marriage to him would have cut across her call from God to do pioneer work in China.

Two things I felt sure of: first, that Ruth was bound to get married someday; and second, that I was the man she would marry. Beyond that, I did not try to pressure her or persuade her—that is to say, not *overly* much. I let God do my courting for me.

But as the months went by, I asked her to at least consider me. It would not have been right to let her assume that what seemed to be my heroic understanding of her concerns was a lack of interest or expectation on my part. We had lots of discussions about our relationship. I wouldn't call them arguments exactly, but we certainly did not see eye to eye.

In the meantime, Ruth enjoyed the social life at Wheaton, as I did, with many friends. One day she went canoeing on the Fox River in St. Charles, about ten miles west of Wheaton, with classmates Harold Lindsell, Carl Henry, and Carl's fiancée, Helga. Somehow the canoe capsized, and Ruth went under. Since both men were staunch Baptists, I suspected them of wanting to immerse the pretty Presbyterian missionary kid from China!

Because I was already an ordained Baptist minister, our divided denominational allegiance was another topic of conversation between us. Ruth stuck to her convictions.

"We've both got such strong wills or minds or something, I almost despaired of ever having things go peacefully between us," she wrote to her parents, "but I wouldn't want him any other way, and I *can't* be any other way. But you know, it's remarkable how two strong minds (or wills) like that can gradually begin to sort of fuse together. Or maybe we're learning to give in and don't realize it."

I was making some adjustments, certainly. At the Lane house one evening, I was so busy talking at the supper table that I ate three helpings of macaroni and cheese before I woke up to the fact that I had told Ruth I hated macaroni and cheese. That incident encouraged her to hope she could feed me anything and get away with it!

One Sunday evening after church, I walked into the parlor of the Gerstung home, where I was rooming, and collapsed into a chair. That dear professor of German and his wife, with three young boys of their own, were getting accustomed to my moods and always listened patiently. This time I bemoaned the fact that I did not stand a chance with Ruth. She was so superior to me in culture and poise. She did not talk as much as I did, so she seemed superior in her intelligence too. "The reason I like Ruth so much," I wrote home to Mother, "is that she looks and reminds me of you."

By now I had directly proposed marriage to Ruth, and she was struggling with her decision. At the same time, she encouraged me to keep an open mind about the alternative of my going to the mission field. She was coming to realize, though, that the Lord was not calling me in that direction.

One day I posed a question to Ruth point-blank: “Do you believe that God brought us together?”

She thought so, without question.

“In that case,” I said, “God will lead me, and you’ll do the following.”

She did not say yes to my proposal right then and there, but I knew she was thinking it over.

A test of our bond came when her sister Rosa was diagnosed as having tuberculosis. Ruth dropped out of school in the middle of my second semester to care for her. Rosa was placed in a hospital in New Mexico, and Ruth stayed with her the next fall too.

That summer I returned home and preached in several churches in the South. Ruth’s parents had returned from China on a furlough—actually, the Japanese had invaded the mainland, so the Bells were not sure if they could ever return—and had settled temporarily in Virginia, their home state.

While I was in Florida, preaching in Dr. Minder’s church, I got a thick letter from Ruth postmarked July 6, 1941. One of the first sentences made me ecstatic, and I took off running. “I’ll marry you,” she wrote.

When I went back to my room, I read that letter over and over until church time. On page after page, Ruth explained how the Lord had worked in her heart and said she felt He wanted her to marry me. That night I got up to the pulpit and preached. When I finished and sat down, the pastor turned to me.

“Do you know what you just said?” he asked.

“No,” I confessed.

“I’m not sure the people did either!”

After I went to bed, I switched my little lamp on and off all night, rereading that letter probably another dozen times.

At the close of a preaching series just after that at Sharon Presbyterian Church in Charlotte, those dear people gave me, as I

recall, an offering of \$165. I raced right out and spent almost all of it on an engagement ring with a diamond so big you could almost see it with a magnifying glass! I showed it off at home, announcing that I planned to present it to Ruth over in Montreat in the middle of the day. But daytime was not romantic enough, I was told.

Ruth was staying part of that summer at the cottage of Buck Currie and his wife, whom she called uncle and aunt, and their niece Gay. Buck was the brother of Ed Currie, one of Ruth's father's fellow missionaries in China. Their house on Cragmont Road in Black Mountain was built near a stream and had swings that went out over the water.

As I turned off the main road and drove toward the house, which was some distance off, I saw a strange creature walking down the road. She had long, straight hair sticking out all over, an awful-looking faded dress, bare feet, and what looked to be very few teeth. I passed her by, but when I suddenly realized it was Ruth playing a trick on me—her teeth blacked out so that she looked toothless—I slammed on the brakes. She got in and we went on to the Currie house deep in the woods.

I had the ring with me.

We went up to what is now the Blue Ridge Parkway. The sun was sinking on one side of us and the moon rising on the other. I kissed Ruth on the lips for the first time. I thought it was romantic, but she thought, or so she told me later, that I was going to swallow her.

"I can't wear the ring until I get permission from my parents," she said apologetically.

They were away, so she sent them a telegram: "Bill has offered me a ring. May I wear it?"

"Yes," they wired back, "if it fits."

Later in that summer of 1941, Ruth decided to visit her parents. She took a train to Waynesboro, Virginia, where I was to join her. I had to go, of course, to meet them. No, to do more than that—to pass inspection. I drove my Plymouth from Charlotte through North Carolina, stopping on the way to give a brief message on a Christian radio station. About five miles out of Waynesboro, I stopped and changed into a suit and tie. I finally found the small

brick house; and when I pulled up, Ruth rushed out to greet me. She had expected me to hug and kiss her, but I was so nervous about meeting her parents that I froze.

Dr. and Mrs. Bell came out right behind her. That night we all had dinner together with Dr. Bell's mother. I enjoyed it, though I was still tense. Dr. Bell had booked a room for me at the General Wayne Hotel, and I was surprised (and relieved) in the morning to find that the \$3 room charge had been paid.

When I went to visit Ruth later in the morning, Dr. Bell asked if we would like to follow him and Mrs. Bell to Washington, D.C., where he had several appointments. We did, and we enjoyed a memorable walk down by the Potomac River. Only later did I learn that he had gone to warn the State Department about the danger of the Japanese and their increasing military power. Dr. Bell said he could not get anyone in Washington to take him seriously, though—except Congressman Walter Judd, who himself had been a missionary to China.

Ruth was the woman of my dreams, but the delightful in-laws I would gain in the process would make our eventual marriage all the better.

Our relationship deepened in the next year. I was studying, working on the truck with Johnny Streater, and preaching regularly at the Tab. I began to listen to Torrey Johnson's *Midwest Bible Hour* on Sunday afternoons at five o'clock, and to *Songs in the Night*, a forty-five-minute program on WCFL, Chicago's most powerful radio station, on Sunday nights.

During this time, after Rosa got better and Ruth returned to Wheaton, there came into Ruth's mind a serious doubt about me, centered on my uncertainty about my calling (if any) to the mission field. She even reached the point of feeling that we ought to quit dating and not see each other for a while. I said I would appreciate having the ring back, in that case. She could not accept that, though. She was emotional about the ring and would not give it back to me. And that was the end of her doubt.

But we did not move ahead with any haste. Although we were engaged, we felt that it was right for us not to get married until after our graduation.

During the next academic year, 1941–42, I changed where I lived, now rooming with Ken Hansen and Lloyd Fesmire. Ruth roomed with Helen Stam. Lloyd and I both admired the other's girl greatly, and Helen would later become Lloyd's wife.

The early months of 1943 found Ruth making trips to Oak Park or to the downtown Chicago Loop to shop for her trousseau. I could not get all that excited about the shopping, but when her folks offered to give us silver tableware as a wedding gift, I decided to go along with her to Peacock's Jewelry. And it was a good thing too. The pattern she chose had knives and forks in two sizes, and I talked her into getting one of each in the super size for me to use; they cost 20¢ extra.

In addition to Ruth's shopping and finishing up her senior year at college (with an earnest plea to her parents to pray that she would pass the comprehensive exams in the spring), she joined me on Sunday mornings, first at the Lane home for a Plymouth Brethren meeting, then later at the Tab, where I preached.

But I too had schoolwork to finish, and I think she was exasperated by the fact that I was on the road so often. After telling her folks about my coming itinerary in Flint, Michigan; Rockford, Illinois; and then "Wisconsin or Pennsylvania or somewhere," she wrote, "I can't keep control of him much less keep track of him."

Already she sensed what kind of future we faced together. "I'm a rotten sport when it comes to his leaving. It's no fun. I never thought about this side of it. What is it going to be like after we're married? I probably won't see as much of him then, as I do *now*."

Something loomed immediately ahead, though, that made Ruth and me both expect me to stay put a little more.

One day a big Lincoln Continental pulled up in front of the house where I was rooming. Out of it popped a young man who bounded up the steps and asked to see me. He turned out to be president of Hitchcock Publishing Company in Chicago and treasurer of the National Gideon Association, the group that distributed Bibles to hotels.

His name was Bob Van Kampen, and he wanted to sound me out about becoming pastor of the church where he was a deacon, Western Springs Baptist Church, about twenty miles southeast of

Wheaton. Since my work at the Tab had been an extracurricular, part-time thing, I felt ready to consider a change.

In January 1943, midway through my senior year, I began to feel the responsibility of supporting a wife. I was also attracted by the proximity of the University of Chicago, with its strong anthropology department offering advanced-study opportunities. Hence, I accepted the call to Western Springs; I had already preached there as a student, and I could begin work there after college commencement. In my enthusiasm, however, I forgot to consult my bride-to-be! She let me know in no uncertain terms that she did not appreciate such insensitivity. And I could not blame her.

Both Ruth and I felt sure the pastorate would be a temporary thing. For me, it was a possible stepping-stone to qualifying for the Army chaplaincy. I made this priority clear to the church in Western Springs, and they accepted the condition. They even gave me the freedom to travel occasionally to evangelistic meetings. In the next months, I preached there several times, and Ruth was introduced to people as “our pastor’s future wife.” She had her own reasons for viewing the placement as temporary—“since we’re planning on going to the mission field as soon as we can,” she wrote home. For that reason, we asked the church to find us a furnished apartment so that we would not get encumbered with a lot of possessions.

In June 1943, Ruth and I graduated from Wheaton College in the same class. (Although she was a junior when I entered as a second-semester freshman, we ended up graduating in the same class. She fell behind because of the time she took out for Rosa’s illness, while I advanced because the school later transferred some additional credits from Florida Bible Institute.) During the ceremony, she sat in front of me. When she received her diploma, I laughingly whispered, “At long last!” She turned around, and I could see that she was not amused. Even so, she made a cute little face at me.

Ruth’s parents had moved from Virginia to a house on the Presbyterian conference grounds at Montreat, North Carolina, just east of Asheville. We were married there in August, on the night of Friday the thirteenth, with a full moon in the sky. In Gaither Chapel at eight-thirty in the evening, amid candles and clematis, my beloved Florida mentor, Dr. John Minder, pronounced us husband and

wife. Dr. Kerr Taylor, close friend of the Bells and former missionary to China, assisted him in the ceremony. Sophie Graham (no relation), a missionary from Haichow, China, played the piano and accompanied Roy Gustafson in two solos before the ceremony. Andrew Yang from Chinkiang, China, sang two solos during the service. All the details took up two columns on the social-news page of the Asheville paper; that was because Dr. Bell was well known in the area. It was the most memorable day of my life.

For a wedding present, my father had already given me \$50. I had \$25 of my own saved up. That meant I had \$75 to pay for a honeymoon and get us back to Chicago.

The first night we went to the Battery Park Hotel in Asheville; that cost us \$5 for the night. I had wanted Ruth to have the best, but the Grove Park Inn would have cost \$20. I couldn't sleep in the bed, so after Ruth fell asleep, I got up quietly, lay down on the floor, and dropped right off. (I had suffered from insomnia all through school, and Chief Whitefeather, who had come through town once and given his Christian testimony, had suggested that I sleep on the floor. He promised that though it would take a couple of weeks to get used to, it would help my problem, and he was right.) The next morning, when Ruth woke up, I was gone . . . or at least appeared to be gone. It took a few minutes for her to find me on the floor, sleeping like a baby.

We then drove to Boone, where we went to a private home that let out rooms; ours cost \$1. To get to the bathroom at night, we had to go through two other rooms where people were sleeping. At the end of our stay, Ruth confided in the lady of the house that we were on our honeymoon.

"Yes, I know," she said. "I've been sweeping up the rice every day."

We ate out at little sandwich places and played golf. Ruth knew nothing about the game, and I knew little more, in spite of the caddyng I had done in Florida. There were many people behind us on the course each time, and we did not know we were supposed to let them play through.

One time we decided to splurge. We ate a meal at Mayview Manor, *the* place to eat in town. Lunch was \$3. My money was

going fast. But we decided, just for one night, to spend \$2 at the Boone Hotel.

Then we went back to my family's home in Charlotte, but there was no room for us. My sister Catherine was getting married; Jean had a room, and so did Melvin. So we slept on the floor in what my mother called her sunroom.

Our trip back to Chicago, after our brief honeymoon in the Blue Ridge Mountains near home, was uneventful. "Hit two starlings, that was all," Ruth recorded. "Everything else we ran over had already been run over before." Like most travelers in those days, we had along a trusty thermos bottle filled with Dr. Pepper and crushed ice, plus a supply of cheese and crackers and raisin wafers.

We stopped at a hotel in Indianapolis and got a small, dirty room. After the maid changed the soiled bed linens, we still had to scrub the ring out of the tub ourselves. Then, in the dimly lighted and thickly carpeted restaurant downstairs, the host would not admit me without my jacket (packed in the car) or Ruth with her pigtails. We were as disgusted as could be at the management, and as happy as could be with each other!

When we arrived at 214 South Clay Street, Hinsdale, Illinois—the furnished apartment found for us by someone at Western Springs—our landlady, Mrs. Pantke, had our four upstairs rooms tidy, with a welcoming bouquet of flowers from her own garden. We unloaded the car and stowed everything away in less than an hour, including more than two bushels of canned goods that the church people had brought in. Ruth served us supper using all her lace, china, crystal, and silver. Then I did dishes while she rushed through a bath and pressed her travel suit so that we could get to the church in time for our reception.

The small group in the Western Springs church—fewer than a hundred members—had been able to construct only the basement of what they hoped someday would become a church building. It was not a very impressive place to meet. Ruth thought of it, in those war days, as an air-raid shelter. But the congregation really put themselves out to make us feel welcome. After hearing various speeches, we were handed an envelope with a gift of \$48 in it. In addition, Ruth received two dozen red roses and I was presented with a huge

bouquet made out of fresh vegetables. They even had a wedding cake for us to cut.

The aftermath was anything but romantic. Soon Ruth came down with a sore throat and a 101-degree fever. I nursed her as well as I could, cooking my own meals and eating them on the floor in the bedroom so I could be near her. Her temperature was higher the next day. I put her in the Seventh Day Adventist hospital because I had to go out of town for the week; it was for a speaking engagement in Ohio substituting for Dr. Edman that I felt I had to take. She recovered quickly and was discharged. By the time I got home at seven on Friday morning, she had the apartment straightened up from my mess.

As newlyweds in a first pastorate, Ruth and I were pretty typical lovebirds, I guess. We took hikes in the sunshine and in the rain, especially enjoying the arboretum nearby. On rare occasions, I went golfing and Ruth caddied for me. It was a major excursion to go into Chicago to see movies at Telenews, an all-newsreel theater on North State Street.

On the spur of the moment late one Monday, which was my day off, I took Ruth out for supper at a restaurant in La Grange. I was wearing my battered Li'l Abner brogans, and Ruth was in her loafers and sport coat. While we waited for an empty table, a lot of the people pouring in—and quite a crowd it was—stopped and shook hands with us, saying how glad they were to see us there. Then it dawned on me that there was a youth banquet upstairs at which I had been invited to speak—an invitation that I had declined. We ducked out in a hurry.

Our old car was in bad shape and needed about \$100 worth of repairs. But I got a good trade-in allowance from a local dealer on a 1942 maroon Pontiac. Our budget was given a big break by the fact that the church paid the \$55 in monthly rent directly to the Pantkes. That meant that by law our dwelling was considered a church parsonage; therefore, the money paid toward rent wasn't chargeable to us for income tax purposes. That kept our total income so low that we did not even have to file a return. Ruth thought that put us in a class with tramps, but we were the happier for it.

We lived in downtown Hinsdale, a block or two from the Burlington railroad tracks. We enjoyed hamburgers and Cokes

when we stepped out for a newspaper, and hot gingerbread and Postum when we stayed in. Sometimes we listened to a murder mystery or *Henry Aldrich* or *Truth or Consequences* on the radio while we ate supper by candlelight. While I studied, Ruth looked up sermon illustrations for me in old *Reader's Digest* magazines.

I needed to do a lot of studying, as well as work on my sermons. I was still blithely mixing my metaphors, as in this letter I once wrote to Ruth's parents after we returned from vacationing down South: "Things were so piled up here in my absence that I have had quite a time catching up, but at last I can see daylight. It was hard to come back from a month of do-nothing and get down to brass tacks, but I am again in the rut."

I had addressed them fondly for the first time as Mother and Dad in that letter; for the rest of his life, though, I generally referred to my father-in-law as Dr. Bell.

Occasionally Ruth's sense of humor landed us in hot water, even with her parents. One day she sent one of her regular postcards home to her folks in North Carolina, keeping them informed on developments with the newlyweds. It was postmarked October 26, 1943, about ten weeks into our marriage. At the very bottom and squeezed up along the left side, she penned an apparent afterthought: "Guess what? Bill and I are going to have an addition to our family. He's not so enthusiastic. Says it will be too much trouble, but I think it will be fun. More later. Adoringly, Ruth."

The rejoicing in the Bell household down South immediately prompted her doctor father to send us by return mail a glowing letter of congratulations—a classic of paternal pride, love, and fatherly advice. What second thoughts they might have had about their son-in-law, I could not imagine, but Dr. Bell assured us of their prayers.

For the *three* of us. For Ruth. For me. And for "Junior," the name Ruth gave the alley cat we had just adopted!

Instantly remorseful over her little joke, Ruth followed up the postcard the next day with a letter of explanation. It crossed her father's in the mail. The damage was done.

I did not let her off easily. "Now they will never believe you," I scolded her. "You've forfeited the privilege of ever getting another letter like that from your father when the real thing comes!"

She promised her folks that the next time she announced an addition to the family, it would not have whiskers and a long tail.

I rubbed it in. “Just think of your mother and daddy praying for a cat!”

Things could only get better after that.

In spite of my rough edges, the church people could not have been nicer to us. Attendance began to grow steadily, getting into the 90s by October and passing 100 two months later—about double the previous average.

It was still a basement church with high windows that we could not see out of. In the winter, visibility was obscured because of snow; in the summer, the weeds interfered. The “sort of junky” building, as Ruth described it, was redecorated free of charge by a member who was in the business, and the building committee met constantly to discuss completion plans. I preached twice on Sundays and attended youth meetings in members’ homes after the evening service. In addition to a midweek prayer meeting, Ruth and I both taught Child Evangelism classes on Wednesday afternoons. She went with me on many pastoral calls.

One day, as I was driving down the street, a man driving in the opposite direction pulled up next to me.

“You’re Billy Graham?” he asked.

“Yes, sir.”

“I’m Torrey Johnson,” he said by way of introduction.

“Oh, yes,” I responded enthusiastically. “I’ve heard you lots of times on the radio.”

“I’d like to talk with you,” he said.

“Certainly, any time,” I agreed.

He called on the phone a little later. “I’ve got too many things on my plate, with a large, growing church and my main radio program on Sunday afternoon,” he said. “I have another radio program called *Songs in the Night*, and I’d like to give that to you. I’ve prayed about it and thought about it, and I think you’re the one who should have it.”

I said I would think and pray about it too, and I would have a talk with the deacons at my church.

“Okay,” he said, “call me when you’ve made a decision.”

So I took it to the deacons at the church. It would cost \$150 a week for the radio time on WCFL in Chicago, a station heard in the Midwest and into the South and East. A big decision! Little did I realize that it was one of the turning points of my life.

Ruth did not like the idea at first. Ministry at the Village Church—I had suggested the change of name from Western Springs Baptist Church because there were mainly Lutherans and Congregationalists (but very few Baptists) in the surrounding area—already was demanding more than enough of my time and strength. She figured I would be in the Army chaplaincy before long, and right after the war we would be on the mission field.

Initially, the church board rejected the idea due to lack of money. But when the needs for financing and staffing were provided, God's answer seemed clear to go ahead. Bob Van Kampen agreed to provide the start-up funding. The quartet from the Wheaton College women's glee club who had sung with me from time to time agreed to come on Sunday nights and sing for the live forty-five-minute program.

The first thing I wanted to do was to get a marquee name on the program. It was unlikely that listeners would have heard of our church, or of me. But what about George Beverly Shea, the handsome bass baritone who at that time was a staff announcer at the Moody Bible Institute's station, WMBI?

In my bold fashion, I headed to Moody and went to the radio station office located on the top floor of the main building. There I asked for Mr. Shea. I could see him through the glass door of his office, but a secretary said he was busy in a meeting. Well, I did not want to waste a trip to Chicago, and I believed as much in the importance of his being on our program as I did in the Fuller brushes I had sold not so many years before. So I waited until I saw his door open for a moment, and then I brushed past his secretary.

"Mr. Shea," I said, "I'm sorry to intrude, but I just have a quick proposal for you."

"Yes?"

"My name is Billy Graham, and I'm pastor of the Village Church in Western Springs."

"I've heard of you," he offered.

“Torrey Johnson has asked us to take over his Sunday night radio show,” I said, too frightened to be flattered by Shea’s recognition of my name, “and I’m convinced that the program would be most successful if you’d agree to appear on it.”

“Well, I don’t know . . .”

I plunged on, outlining how I saw his singing fitting into the forty-five-minute program. I think he agreed to give it a try only because he could see that that was the only way he was going to get rid of me.

We did not have a typewriter, let alone a secretary, so Ruth helped me write the scripts. The program consisted of vignettes about three minutes long, in which the preacher would say a few things, and then there was a song. I preached for the radio program for the first time in early December, and several weeks later, following our Sunday evening service, we started broadcasting live from our basement church in Western Springs. We signed on with the program’s same theme song, “Songs in the Night,” inspired by Job 35:10, with lyrics by George Graves and music by Wendell P. Loveless.

Our church, which sat only 125 at the most, was filled for the first broadcast. Very few people except our own congregation knew that Bev Shea would be there. But one visitor was an emotionally troubled woman who had been following him around obsessively for some months. He was embarrassed by all her attention. At the end of the program, Bev whispered to me and asked if I could sneak him out.

I knew of an exit through the furnace room in back. We had to balance our way across a single plank in the dark to make our way through. Bev fell off, but he made his escape.

I built my radio talks around the events of the day. Keeping up with current events through newspapers and radio news programs, I began each message with a reference to something people would have been hearing and talking about that very day. Then I moved into a biblical message, showing that God and the Scriptures are relevant to every problem.

That first broadcast really put our church on the map. People started piling into our little building on Sunday nights to watch the show, and we got letters from listeners all over the Midwest. The

Chicago Tribune sent a reporter out to write a story about our radio ministry. My filling station attendant in Hinsdale gave me \$1 to support the program. A poor woman sent us 10¢. A carload of people listening as they rode took up a collection for us on the spot. When I went over the books with the chairman of the radio committee at the end of the first two months, our average income from listeners had been \$105.07 per week. The Lord kept the budget in the black with other contributions.

To add to the excitement, station WMBI signed us up to broadcast our regular Sunday morning service from the church during March and April of 1944. One of our listeners wrote in to request fifty copies of my latest sermon—mixed metaphors and all. I was swamped by all the incoming mail, which I had to handle personally. We asked for volunteers. Only one showed up, a young woman from Knoxville, Tennessee, whose husband had a defense job nearby.

The year-end flurry of activity kept us from going south at Christmas, our first time away from our families at the holiday season. It made us terribly homesick to hear our landlords downstairs playing Christmas carols on their old Victrola while they bustled around trimming the house and wrapping packages. My cousin Steve Hunter, who was stationed at nearby Great Lakes Naval Training Station, came on Christmas Eve to spend the weekend with us; Ruth made us both hang up our stockings. And the Lanes invited us to Wheaton for Christmas dinner at their house.

By the middle of April, with an increasing number of people not only attending the church but coming to faith in Christ, Ruth and I began to feel that we might be there for several years. But two factors were working to redirect our lives.

First, there was discontent among a few of the deacons about my going away for evangelistic meetings so frequently. Of course, they had agreed to those meetings when I accepted their call, and the church letterhead listed me as “pastor/evangelist.” At the same time, they probably were justified, because I was accepting a number of invitations to speak in several surrounding states.

Second, from my standpoint, preaching throughout the Midwest made me restless with the pastorate. It seemed to me, perhaps because of the war, that the whole world was ripe for the Gospel.

I wanted to be moving, traveling, preaching, anywhere and everywhere. Ruth soon began to realize, as she later told me, that her life was going to be one of good-byes. Already it seemed I was gone as much as I was home.

That pattern was made even worse when I got another call from Torrey Johnson. He was heading a committee to start what was to be called Chicagoland Youth for Christ. The plan was to reach the flood of servicemen and young people who hit Michigan Avenue in Chicago on Saturday nights. The first meeting was to be held in Orchestra Hall, which sat about 3,000 and was internationally noted for its concerts. He asked me to preach an evangelistic message that first night.

Many of Torrey's friends and advisers were against my participation because I was so little known. There were many famous preachers from all over the country who might have been more likely choices, but Torrey was interested in only one thing—someone to preach the Gospel and invite young people to receive Christ. He believed I was the one for the task. I was honored and overwhelmed.

That first Saturday night—May 27, 1944—proclaiming the Gospel live before a large crowd (the auditorium was nearly full), I was tense, *very* tense, but I found I had great liberty in speaking. When 40 came forward to receive Christ, it was one of the most humbling and spiritually encouraging moments of my life up to that time.

Other Saturday night Youth for Christ (YFC) rallies were springing up in Indianapolis, Philadelphia, and Detroit, and I was asked to go to each. When I filled in for Torrey Johnson on short notice in Detroit, I took my first plane ride.

Nevertheless, my constant absences understandably caused some concern in my Western Springs congregation. Things came to a head when I got back from a week of preaching services in Columbus, Ohio, in March 1944.

Good Presbyterian that she was, Ruth could not tolerate those Baptists “running their preacher,” she wrote home. “You can't have a lot of respect for a pastor who is just a button for everyone to push.”

Still, I was probably out of line. I got upset when someone re-

marked that the church would have to cut my pay if I went off much more. *What* pay? Thinking of my very modest salary of \$40 a week, I told them that I was their pastor, not their employee, and that if they deducted 1¢, they could start looking for another man. They were not used to that kind of straight talk, and maybe it was good for them. But to this day I am not sure it was right for me to say it.

Harder to take than that, though, was the superior attitude some of them had toward the new believers and people from other denominations who were coming our way. It was a judgmental attitude based on different lifestyles and associations. Take, for example, the concert pianist and orchestra conductor who was married to a former chorus girl—not the right type for our congregation, some thought. By contrast, Ruth and I found such people refreshing; we enjoyed their enthusiasm and earnestness in their new-found Christian life. They helped us to believe more than ever in the power of the Gospel to produce the more abundant life the Bible described.

One Sunday night, I bluntly (and perhaps brashly) told the people from the pulpit that some of them needed to confess the sin of troublemaking. I told them I would get the job done in Western Springs that God had brought me there for, regardless of their attitudes and opposition. Nobody talked back. But there remained an underlying tension that contributed to my restlessness about staying.

There were plenty of opportunities to leave for greener pastures. There was a big church in Fort Wayne, Indiana, that wanted me to come as pastor. And one in Chicago with an office staff, great music, a large salary, and a home for the pastor. As I recall, even Wheaton College got into the act, with a request for me to become one of their field representatives. None of the opportunities, however, seemed compelling enough for me to forsake our suburban basement flock, nor did I sense that God was calling me to do so.

But a couple of things happened to shorten the pastorate.

I was accepted into the Army's chaplaincy program. I would have passed my previous physical in Chicago and joined up earlier but for the humiliating fact that I was three pounds underweight. I had requested a couple more months to fatten up. The Army granted the extension.

The second thing was completely beyond my control. Ruth had just gotten home from a visit to Montreat in September 1944, and I had worked hard to get the apartment in order, adding gladiolus in the dining room, carnations in the living room, and rosebuds in the bedroom. That was enough domestic activity to make any man sick! And I was. In bed. It seemed like a toothache, but one worse than I had ever experienced. Dr. Richard Matthies made a tentative diagnosis that sounded ridiculous to a twenty-six-year-old man and his wife.

Mumps?

Mumps it was. Ruth applied hot packs, but they did nothing to alleviate the pain. She thought I looked funny, but I felt frantic. That very night, attorney James Bennett was to speak in our church. A funeral was scheduled for Wednesday afternoon. The night of the funeral, I was to begin two weeks of meetings at a church in Roseland, on Chicago's South Side. But mumps would keep me in bed for at least two weeks, it was estimated.

That did it! I had put on the three pounds the Army wanted, but now, because of the mumps, I could not go to Harvard, where the chaplaincy school was located.

Ruth, daughter of a doctor, thought it was hilarious. "I spent all morning telephoning, and others called, such as Mrs. Armour," she wrote to her folks. "She just howled when I said Bill had the mumps. So did I. Everybody does when you say *mumps*." Since I was bedridden, Ruth went on to say, "I guess to be impressive I should say, 'Graham's maid speaking.'"

She talked about our plans to be in Montreat for Christmas: "The specialist said Bill's throat has a form of nervous paralysis," she wrote to her parents. "It's improving. The mumps will help him forget it." She updated them a few days later, reporting that it was definitely mumps, on both sides, and said "Ha, ha" when she told of feeding me mainly liquids and strained baby foods, and giving me a bath in bed.

Before long, however, no one was laughing. The fever raged, and the two weeks stretched into two months as mumps turned into orchitis. People prayed on my behalf, and Dr. Matthies exerted his skills to keep me alive.

A radio listener who had heard of my plight sent Ruth and me a check for \$100 to finance a recovery vacation in Florida. We gratefully accepted and left as soon as I was able, which was in December. I had lost a lot more than the three pounds I had gained for the Army (indeed, a lot more than was healthy for my already slight frame), and my eyes were dark and hollow. The doctors warned us that because of the orchitis, we probably would not be able to have children. I needed desperately to regain my strength, and Florida seemed like Heaven to me.

We rented rooms in a small, inexpensive hotel on Seventy-ninth Street in Miami, about a mile from the beach. Soon we discovered that Torrey Johnson and his family were renting on the same street, but closer to the beach. I looked him up and thanked him for his confidence in me and for all the opportunities he had sent my way. He invited me fishing. . . .