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A Church Divided

By Margaret Shannon

ONE day this fall after a parliamentary move derailed the proposed sale of a religious conference center on the Gulf of Mexico, an agitated minister walked out of the cathedral-like sanctuary of the First Presbyterian Church in Dothan, Ala., seething with disappointment. "We've lost Gulf treat," he said. "They've stolen it from us."

Elsewhere in the church, another minister and a reporter sat down at a table in a Sunday school room and talked. The reporter asked the minister about a prominent conservative layman in the denomination.

"He is a mean man," the minister said. "A genuinely mean man."

So it goes these days in the denomination officially known as the Presbyterian Church in the United States, abbreviated lately to PCUS and formerly almost always called the Southern Presbyterian church. The tenets of the church admonish peace, unity and purity. The unity is gone and with it the peace, and at least one side in a lengthening controversy accuses the other of defiling the purity of PCUS doctrine.

There is a split in the denomination, and if all goes as planned, the Continuing Presbyterian Church will be formally organized at a meeting in Birmingham Dec. 4 with approximately 300 churches and 65,000 members, most of them from PCUS. It will

be a sizable start for a new denomination, although PCUS will remain by far the dominant Presbyterian sect in the South with 4,000 churches and more than 900,000 members.

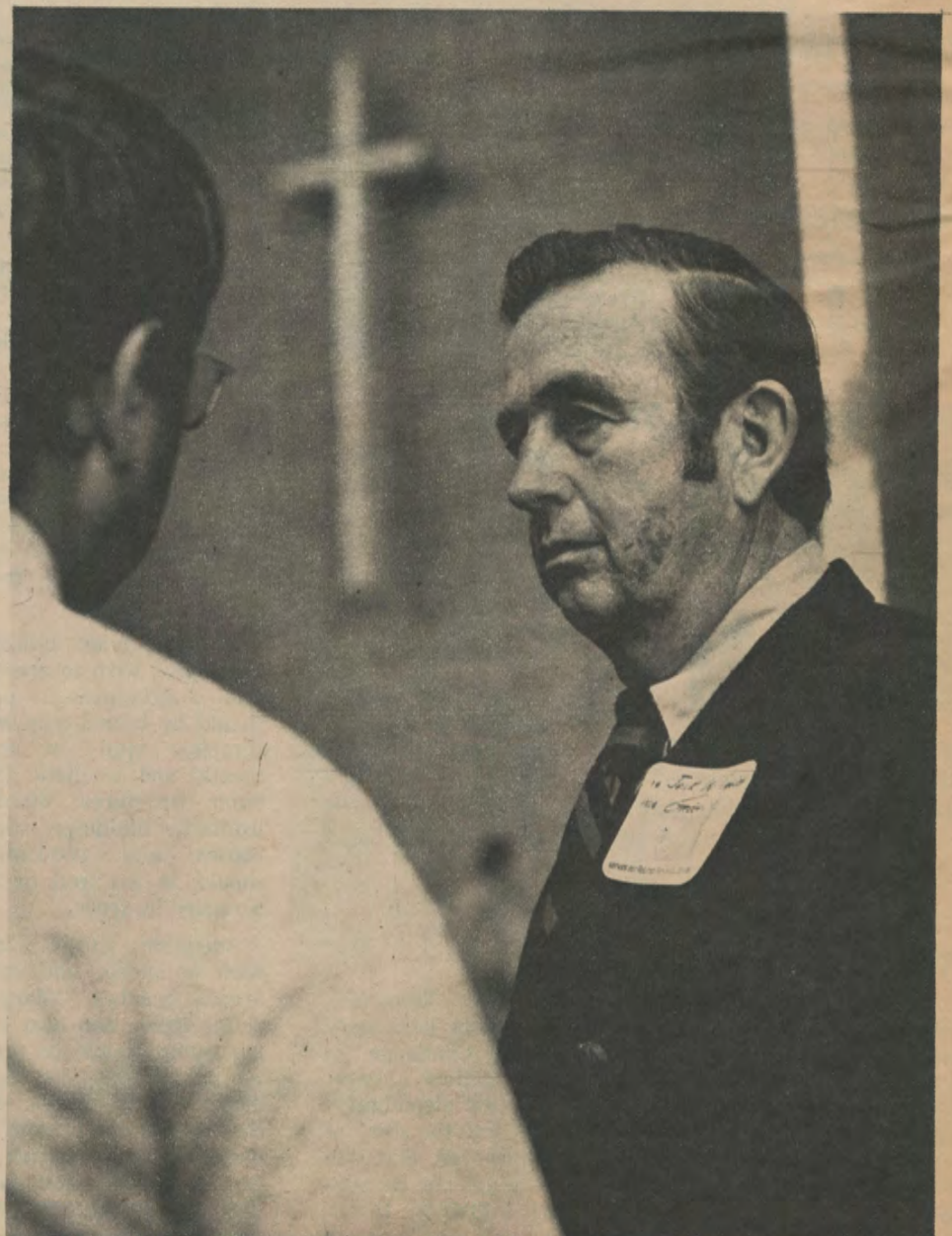
THE times that have tried men's souls in Dixie in recent years have not left the churches unscathed. Although few churchmen consider racial problems and civil rights issues to be a principal element in Southern Presbyterianism's present troubles, they plainly have been an influence. The times pushed PCUS into pronouncements on social concerns, and this, as much as anything else, aggravated dissidents into action.

Men have come to this parting different

Photography by Floyd Jillson



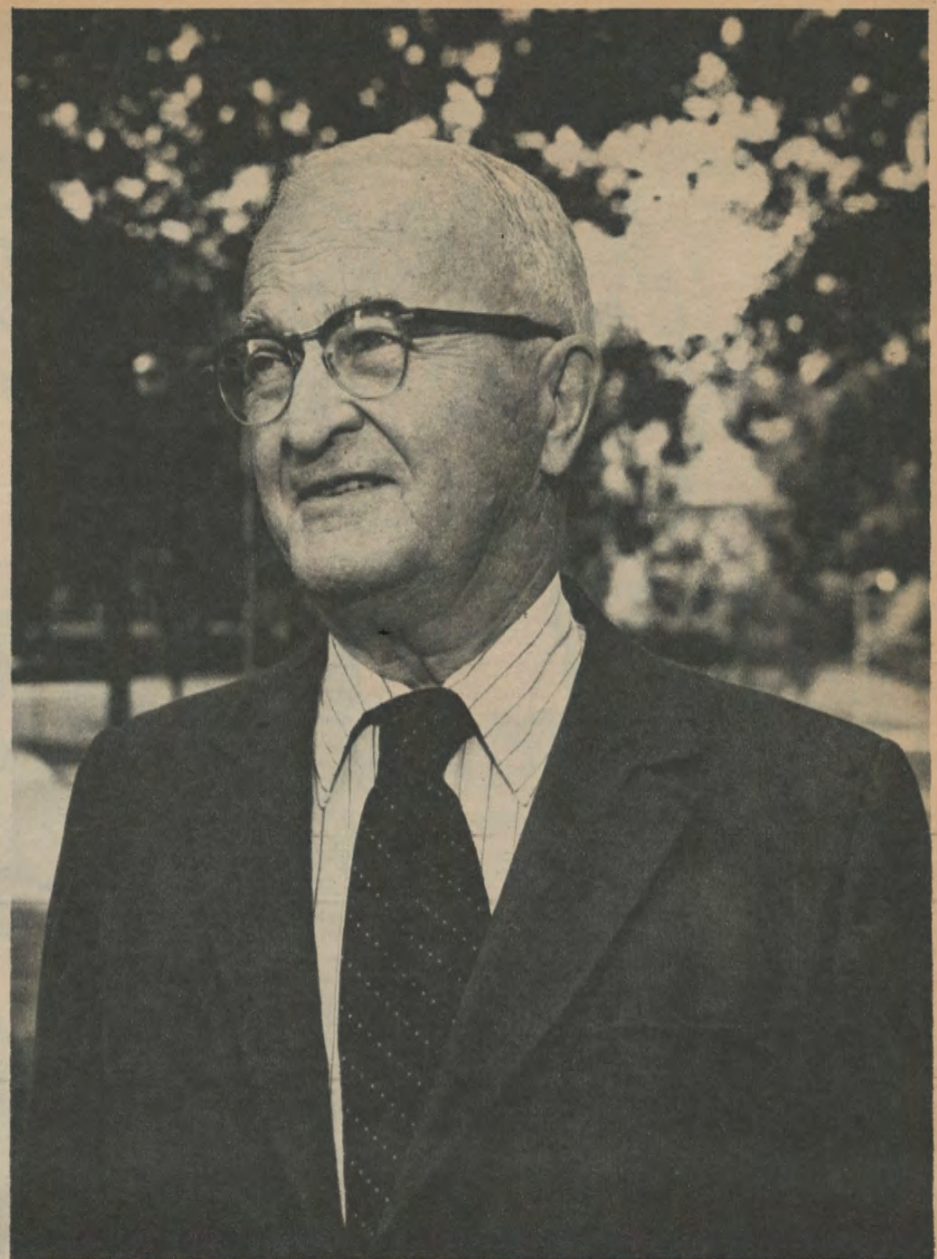
Rev. Wick Broomall is pastor of the separatist church at Sparta.



Jack Williamson of Greenville, Ala., heads the dissident churches.



Rev. Barry Van Deventer of Montgomery: "I'm ready to let them go."



Rev. McDowell Richards: "There's no real basis for separation."

An ultraconservative movement in Southern Presbyterianism has reached a decisive stage—and there could be trouble ahead

ways—and believe me it is a matter among males. Despite rules changes to allow women to hold church office, men dominate Southern Presbyterian affairs. One of the big objections of dissidents, in fact, is that women have not been kept in their place.

"To my mind it's not what I like as a Christian, but what God has revealed in His word, and if I were a woman, I would accept that," Rev. Wick Broomall, of Sparta Presbyterian Church, said.

Broomall is 71, serving a tiny church which, he says, has no real future. Most of its members are growing old, and the prospects for young blood are poor. Sparta and Hancock County are 80 percent black. Broomall's church is white. It voted this year on Easter Sunday to leave PCUS and go into the Continuing Presbyterian Church, which

will be possibly one-ten-thousandth black when it is formally organized in December.

Race is not the issue with Broomall. He is a theologian, a former professor in the Associate Reformed Presbyterian seminary and Columbia Bible College, an author, compiler of a 300-page cyclopedic index to the Bible included in a recently published edition. Church activism in social affairs bothers him, but his disapproval of PCUS is made of sterner stuff.

"ONE of the things that hurt me most," he said, "was about five years ago when our presbytery let a minister come in that didn't believe in the virgin birth of Christ. He was a retired man from the Northern church that came down here to

live. To my mind, if a person doesn't believe Christ came into the world that way, then Christianity is not Christianity anymore."

Presbyterian churches are subject to a system of ruling bodies. The session, made up of elders, rules the local church. The presbytery has authority over a number of churches in a given area. The synod embraces several presbyteries. In PCUS, the top ruling body is the General Assembly. Ministers and laymen share the authority at every level. One of the functions of a presbytery is to administer an oral examination to clergymen who wish to labor within its bounds.

One of the hotbeds of dissent in PCUS is the East Alabama Presbytery, which until recently was made up of 63 churches. Now some of them are (Continued on Page 26)



Jack Williamson addresses an East Alabama Presbytery meeting in Dothan.

What sort of stand should the church take on social, economic and political issues?

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pulling out to go into the Continuing Church. It is estimated that by December maybe half of them will have cut the ties that bound their hearts in Christian love.

THIS presbytery produced the current head of the splinter sect, Jack Williamson, a Greenville, Ala., attorney, who believes that the mission of the church is to win souls to Jesus Christ and nurture them in the faith, but not to march against war or support garbage strikers or oppose anti-busing amendments.

"Christ put His church here that through it people might be told the good news that there is a savior who will save their souls from eternal hell," said Williamson. "Christ went about doing good—we don't deny that—but the liberals, we think, totally neglect the spiritual. We feel they've overemphasized the social, economic and political mission of the church."

Williamson is articulate to the point of glibness. He glides through a maze of arguments with fast talk and smooth phraseology. The words come easy. Fast and easy.

If there had to be a center for the secession movement, the East Alabama Presbytery had qualifications. It is in the section of Alabama that had the Montgomery bus boycott and Martin Luther King Jr. in the 1950s and school desegregation and the Selma-to-Montgomery civil rights march in the 1960s. The politics of the white people was and is conservative.

Williamson is a Republican. He said he is regarded as a liberal in his hometown because he helped to bring about school desegregation with peace and harmony. He did not start the pullout movement. Doctrinal differences in the Southern Presbyterian denomination have been developing for many years. But the breaking point did not come for Williamson et al until the church began paying attention to the real as well as the spiritual world.

Rev. Barry Van Deventer, a PCUS loyalist and pastor of Memorial Presbyterian

Church in Montgomery, said some churches in the area that wanted to preserve the status quo sought out extremely conservative ministers. Mostly they came from outside PCUS. A prime source was the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, a Northern Presbyterian splinter group.

"These churches wanted men who wouldn't say anything about race or the church's need to become involved in the really troubled areas of a community's life," Van Deventer said. "Our presbytery became more and more conservative, even reactionary. Some churches and some ministers managed to hang on and remain loyal, though."

"Now these people realize time is running out," Van Deventer continued. "They thought they could turn the tide and take over the denomination. When they realized two General Assemblies ago that they couldn't do it, plans began to be laid to leave. The attempt was to be made through the escape clause."

JACK Williamson's version of events is not essentially different from Van Deventer's. Williamson was involved in the formation of Concerned Presbyterians, a laymen's organization, early in the 1960s. He was secretary; Kenneth Keyes of Miami was president. The organization hired a staff, published literature and set about remolding PCUS.

"After about five years it was apparent there was no way we were going to change the trend," Williamson said.

Three or four years ago, about 60 conservatives met in Atlanta. They decided division was inevitable in the Southern Presbyterian church and the only question was how it would come about. They decided on the escape clause.

This clause would become a part of the plan of union between the Southern and Northern churches—that is, between the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS) and the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (PCUSA). The union had not then taken place, has not now taken place and seems unlikely to occur anytime soon. A plan of union was in the making, however, for submission to congregations in the two denominations for a vote.

The escape clause provided that if a local church did not want to go into the union, it could stay out by a two-thirds vote of the congregation and keep its property.

Anti-union churchmen argued that one of their number should be on the committee working on the plan of union and that Northern opponents of union should be represented also. They won their point and Williamson went on the committee of 30. "I principally attempted to preserve this method of escape," he said.

"I went out to Dallas this year, thinking the plan was all worked out, but at a meeting of this committee, the liberals said, 'Let's throw this plan away. We're not going to have any escape clause.' They said to us candidly, 'You go do your thing.'"

So they're doing it. Through the years, other forces besides Concerned Presbyterians had been at work on the conservative cause. The Presby- *(Continued on Page 29)*

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terian Journal, published in Asheville, N.C., has been a voice of conservatism since the 1940s. Presbyterian Churchmen United, a ministers' group, and the United Presbyterian Evangelistic Fellowship worked toward similar goals. Two years ago, the three organizations and the board of the Journal formed the Steering Committee for a Continuing Presbyterian Church, Faithful to the Scriptures and the Reformed Faith.

Rev. John E. Richards, until last year pastor of the First Presbyterian Church at Macon, became administrator of the Steering Committee. He set up offices in Perry, Ga., and ran the committee business from there. He chose Perry because he owns a farm five miles out from town and had moved there after leaving the Macon church, where he was pastor 16 years. "I was 62, and I felt that what time and energy I had remaining I could best give to trying to continue the faith of my fathers," he said.

THE faith of John Richards' fathers is also the faith of Rev. McDowell Richards' fathers. They are first cousins. McDowell Richards is the retired president of Columbia Theological Seminary, which some conservatives regard as a den of radicalism. McDowell Richards is moderator—that is, chairman—of the Synod of the Southeast, which combined and replaced the Georgia and South Carolina synods as of July 1 this year.

"This tension between the archconservative and the less conservative has been under the surface ever since I've been in the ministry," McDowell Richards said. "I first heard the term 'Continuing Presbyterian Church' in 1930. There's no 'continuing' about it. What these people are endeavoring to do is form an entirely new Presbyterian church."

"These people" talk about PCUS being under the control of radical liberals. "Almost the whole ministry of the Presbyterian Church U.S. would be accounted exceedingly conservative anywhere else in America," McDowell Richards said. "It's just a tragic situation. There's no real basis for separation."

But he does not despair for his denomination. "I'm distressed that anybody feels it's necessary to go off," he said. "I don't think there's any reason to panic about it. These are good men that are going out, sincere men. They and we are agreed on so much more than we are disagreed on that why we should have to separate is hard to understand."

The pullout wing several years ago established a new school for ministerial students, the Reformed Theological Seminary in Jackson, Miss. Some people think that racism more than religion might have inspired some of the money gifts to the seminary.

"As things have developed, at least half of the faculty out there has taken a commendable stand on the race question," McDowell Richards said. "They're not willing to be agents of promoting racism. This has been an agreeable surprise to many of us."

He says, however, that the central issue in the split is the interpretation of the Bible. "I don't think by any means all of those arguing for a new church are motivated by racial feelings," he said.

The arguments over interpretation of the Bible become profound, abstruse, picky.

The Westminster Confession of Faith and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms, framed by the Assembly of Divines in England in 1643-49, are the doctrinal standards of both the PCUS and the pullout group. But the separatists say PCUS has been negligent in enforcing these standards and may soon change some of them.

The big issue is the inerrancy of Scripture. Is every word in the Bible literally true, or isn't it?

One of the churches pulling out is Emmanuel Presbyterian in southeast Atlanta. The pastor is Rev. Eugene Hunt, who came there last year from Greenville, Ala., home of Jack Williamson, who is moderator—the head—of the denomination that will come into being officially at the meeting in Birmingham on Dec. 4, the 112th anniversary of the founding of what was then called the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America and is now PCUS. That 1861 assembly took place at the First Presbyterian Church in Augusta.

Last Easter Sunday, the same day that the Sparta church voted to secede, the Augusta church also voted to pull out. So did Emmanuel in Atlanta.

"We were not happy with having to break away," Gene Hunt of Emmanuel said. "It was sort of like a divorce. In that case, nobody's really pleased."

He says the dissidents tried to turn PCUS around. "I think the church has taken a drastic step to the left," he said. "Finally we just came to see the handwriting on the wall. It became so clear that there was no way, humanly speaking, to bring the church back to its historic position. I don't rule out the providence of God in this, but to our way of thinking God was not going to bring it back."

"We were having to spend all our time, money and energies fighting within the church. To me it was a waste of time. We wanted a positive ministry."

EMMANUEL is the old Pryor Street Presbyterian Church. Some years ago, with the neighborhood going black, the Pryor Street church moved into white territory. Now that territory is turning industrial—and black.

"Our people are moving because of the situation," pastor Hunt said. "In fact, I live in Morrow right now. The church had a manse on Oak Drive, but that street has become totally black. We were one of the last ones to move."

Hunt has a list that he hands out of 25 points of complaint against PCUS. No. 1 concerns union with the Northern church—the union that has not taken place and seems unlikely to occur in the foreseeable future. Hunt's paper says the Southern church's Book of Church Order allows no such union.

Among the other complaints against PCUS on Hunt's list are these:

—"In May 1961, the General Assembly declared . . . that 'in its judgment the doctrine of foreclosure to everlasting death as formulated in the Confession (of Faith) is not an adequate statement of the Christian faith.'"

—"In May 1964, the ordination of woman elders and ministers was formally enacted."

—"In May 1965, poverty was set as the theme for the PCUS mission's program."

—"In May 1966, the General Assembly voted to condemn capital punishment and for the second time endorsed civil disobedience."

—"In 1968, the Board of National Ministries contributed *(Continued on Next Page)*

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(Continued From Page 29)

\$5,000 to striking garbage workers in Memphis. (This was benevolent money given by local churches.)"

—"In 1971-72, the PCUS spent \$92,166.65 to secure abortions for 341 persons."

—"In 1971, Orange Presbytery received two candidates who denied the visible, personal return of Jesus Christ."

Of such, schisms are made.

Some 225 churches had already left the Presbyterian Church U.S. by the end of September. Some were big, like Westminster in Atlanta, with 800 members. Nobody who had

groups, like one in Sylvania, Ga., may leave the church facilities with the minority who stay. But there is going to be litigation in many instances.

The East Alabama Presbytery, meeting in Dothan in late September, tangled over Gulfstream, the presbytery's coastal conference center on five acres close to the beach near Panama City, Fla. The secessionist forces won passage of a resolution giving them an option to buy it, but the loyalists effectively killed the action with a parliamentary move.

This is what inspired Rev. Donald C. Graham, executive director of the National Presbyterian Reform Fellowship, another



Rev. Donald Graham, Rev. Robert Strong and Rock Chambliss, a layman, at the Dothan meeting, which adopted a plan to make church division easier.

followed Westminster's course in recent years was surprised. It has been a conservative stronghold since—and before—it lent its sanctuary to Lester Maddox for his segregation rallies even before he got to be famous.

THE biggest Presbyterian church in Alabama, 1,800-member Trinity in Montgomery, pulled out, led by laymen. Its pastor, Rev. Robert Strong, a strong conservative, retired shortly before the vote. He wanted to stay with PCUS at least until union with the Northern church or changes in the Confession of Faith made staying in PCUS repugnant to him.

The question of church property is going to end up in the courts. Some seceding

conservative group headquartered in Montgomery, to protest to a reporter, "They've stolen it from us."

Jack Williamson, the leader of the separatists, put before the presbytery a lawyer-like resolution providing an escape mechanism for PCUS congregations that want to get out and join his Continuing Church. The resolution won by a 2-to-1 margin.

"I'm not sure that it's bad that they leave," said Barry Van Deventer, the loyalist, during a lunch break. "I'm ready to vote to let them go. I'm not ready to let them take all the church facilities with them. These are things that were given to the glory of God and given to the church, and those who leave just leave and they leave what's there as they go."