

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Swedish Baptist Church

Church Life

O.H. 437

DR. WILBERT PORT

Interviewed

by

Rich Gustafson

on

July 9, 1979

DR. WILBERT PORT

Dr. Wilbert Port was born on November 24, 1916 in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania. One of six children, Dr. Port came to Youngstown, Ohio when he was one and a half years old. Upon graduation from South High School, Dr. Port enrolled in Ohio Wesleyan College in 1934, leaving this institution in 1937. He received his Bachelor of Science degree in 1939 from Western Reserve University and then continued in the same school until receiving his D.D.S. in 1941. He served a year internship at Youngstown Hospital Association from July 1, 1941 to June 30, 1942. Soon after his internship, he enlisted in the United States Army, serving from August 25, 1942 until his honorable discharge in January of 1946, which included fourteen months in Europe. Previous to his service in the military, Dr. Port was married to Virginia Nelson on October 18, 1941. Their marriage was fruitful and six children were born into their family: Terry, Dennis, Sandra, Lynnette, Susan, and Laurie. After returning from his overseas service, Dr. Port opened up his own dental office on Market Street in 1946. Organizations of which he is a member include the Corydon Palmer Dental Society, the Christian Businessmen's Committee, the Ohio Dental Association and American Dental Association. He is a life member of the last two.

Dr. Port and his family have played a significant role in the history of the Swedish Baptist Church. His father, Samuel, served as the Sunday school superintendent for over twenty-five years and was a central figure in the Middle East Baptist Conference. Dr. Port has continued in his father's footsteps and has occupied

important positions in the administration of the church. He has served on numerous delegations to the annual meetings of the Middle East Baptist Conference, and has been on many different boards of the church. Some of these include the Deacon Board, the Mission Board, the Board Chairman of the church, and the Trustee Board. He has also served ten years on the Baptist General Conference World Mission Board. He has been active also in the music ministry of the church, and his family has contributed significantly in this respect. He currently resides at 7497 Elmland Drive in Poland.

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INTERVIEWEE: DR. WILBERT PORT

INTERVIEWER: Rich Gustafson

SUBJECT: Linwood Camping Program, Annual Conference of the Middle East Baptist Conference, Early recollections of the church, Prominent individuals in the history of the church

DATE: July 9, 1979

G: This is an interview with Dr. Wilbert Port for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on July 9, 1979, at 7:00 p.m. at 7487 Elmland Drive in Poland, Ohio. The subject of the interview is the Swedish Baptist Church.

Dr. Port, perhaps you can give me a short biographical sketch of your family, your background, when you were born, this type of information.

P: I was born in 1916, November 24th, in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania. Mom and dad were Christians and active in the church there. We had a large family; there were six children. There were two older brothers and two older sisters. I was the fifth and then there was a younger brother born eleven years after. I was a year and a half when we left Punxsutawney and moved to Youngstown. It was at that time, of course, that we went to the Swedish Baptist Church on Woodland Avenue. It is the only church that I've ever known really. I was carried to Sunday school. I was brought up in the church.

When I was a boy we used to have joint evangelistic meetings with the First Covenant Church across the street, which was the Swedish Covenant Church at that time. The three Swedish churches were in the same area. The Swedish Lutheran was around the corner on Ridge Avenue. We had meetings with the Swedish Covenant Church and Dr. David Nygren was the evangelist at that time, when I was twelve and accepted Christ as my Savior. I was baptized shortly after that in the baptist church. I've been a member of the church for fifty years now, over fifty years. Dad and mom, of course, were very active

in the church. Dad was Sunday school superintendent for twenty-five years, I believe. He was a deacon and held a lot of offices in the church.

- G: Maybe you can just give some of the early recollections that you have growing up as a child in Evangel.
- P: Our whole life was centered around the church. I remember so distinctly the Sunday school picnics on the Fourth of July and the races especially. Herb Johnson and I were rivals; we were good friends, but we were rivals. They always had races with prizes and we would always run against each other at the picnics. I remember those as just a wonderful time. Then, of course, all the activities of the church . . . I remember David Nygren so well as a great preacher. He played a very significant role in my life.

Reverend Magnuson played a very important part in our lives because he was there during the war, while I was in the service. In fact, he had a part in our wedding along with Reverend Gorden Anderson who later became secretary of home missions of the denomination. I remember the evangelistic meetings we had very well. I remember Harry Bundy, who was a singer; he was a great tenor. He traveled with Nygren. Then there was another singer by the name of Wedge; a powerful baritone. They used to pack that little church out. Maybe that's why we moved across the street then on some occasions, because the Swedish Covenant Church was larger.

I remember meeting for Sunday school in the furnace room. The ashes from the furnace would be in tubs sitting around the floor. Mr. Davidson was our teacher. Bless his heart; we used to drive him crazy. He was the most patient man I've ever seen. I remember sitting in the back pew in church which ran clear across the church. Then there were a couple pews up to the entrance, which was off to the left. I remember sitting back there with my cronies. My dad was a strict disciplinarian and he usually saw that I behaved myself.

I sang in the choir. I remember Jody Shogren leading the choir from the organ. By the way, my dad gave the first electric organ to the church. It wasn't electric; it was a pump one at first. He had a motor put on it so she didn't have to pump it. She played the organ and never directed us with her hands. We just followed her sitting down there on the organ bench. She just watched us and we watched her closely.

I remember singing with the men's glee club when I was quite young. We had a good men's glee club. They traveled around to different churches.

The Middle East Conferences were a big thing for us. I've gone to conferences ever since I was a kid. I remember we have pictures that were in Akron and McKeesport when I was six or seven years old where the Middle East Conference would meet. My family would always go, so I guess that's where I got into the habit of going to the annual meetings.

I remember the baptistry in the church which was right in the middle of the platform. You would have to take the floor up and then put up curtains along the side for modesty. Then they just had tubs that you stood in. You would come out of there wet and stand in the tub to take your wet clothes off. I was baptized there after I was saved.

- G: During Reverend Magnuson's ministry, the church had been affiliated with the Trumbull Baptist Association. It was during Magnuson's ministry that they actually became an active member of the Baptist General Conference.
- P: It was always a member of the Baptist General Conference. It was sort of a dual membership. The Trumbull association was secondary. We were listed in the American Baptist records for some time too, but were really never a member of the American Baptist Convention. We had to send out missionaries through them because they had the mission board. We supported the Swedish Baptist missionaries under their board. As the years went on that affiliation was clarified. We sort of dropped out of the Trumbull association, which was at that time the Northern Baptist Convention; it was not American then. The affiliation was strictly local. There was some discussion when I was young regarding our affiliation with them. Really, we have been a Conference church from the church's inception. It was a Swedish Baptist church and the denominational headquarters were in Chicago.
- G: Maybe you could just digress a moment about the Baptist Young People's Union. Maybe you can elaborate a bit on that.
- P: The BYPU. The thing I remember about the BYPU was that when we had our Young People's meeting at 5:45, all the older people came, too. It wasn't limited to young people. Anyone who wanted to, came, even Grandma Johnson and BYO who were in their seventies. I can remember meeting on the left-hand side of the main auditorium for our Young People's meeting. There were some activities in the Trumbull association too. Of course, we had no paid youth leaders or anything like that. As I recall, we didn't have too much social life. There wasn't the stress on that. It was a bible study and singing. We had it like a regular church meeting.
- G: You had it before the church service?

P: Yes, we just came early. We never went out after church in the evenings. We had refreshments between BYPU and the evening service and the young people went home with their parents. We had basketball teams when I was quite young. We used to play at Christ Mission and various places. We had those kinds of activities. As I said before, our social activities were very limited. It was strictly a spiritual organization, a learning thing.

G: Do you remember anything about the camping program that they had at Linwood?

P: Linwood Park was owned by the United Brethren. We rented the facilities to have a summer assembly. This was before we had our own bible camp. We went out there for a week every summer. We had a program during the day and night. We would have classes in the daytime and every night we would have an evening service in the tabernacle with a visiting speaker who was part of the program. We had a sports program and played baseball and had a beautiful beach. We had a dining hall with rooms up above. Many of us would rent cottages and take part in the entire program. As I recall, we were up there for an entire week. Sometimes we rented the hotel there. I remember living there and eating our meals there too. The afternoons were usually recreation.

G: Was this solely the Swedish Baptist Church?

P: It was the Middle East Baptist Churches or district. Other groups would rent it at other times of the year, but the week we were there it was the Middle East Baptist Conference alone. At the time we only had seven or eight churches.

From there we went to Findlay Lake, N.Y. I think that was the next place where for six years I directed the camping program. We had three separate camps running at the same time. We had an adult program and a young people's program and a kid's program running simultaneously.

G: At different locations?

P: No, on the same camp. Of course, we had different living accommodations. Most of them were single rooms as I recall though, but families would come. We had a separate bible time. We were there for six straight years. If you remember Bill Adam, he was a basketball official at St. Paul and he served as our athletic director and lifeguard for those six years and did a tremendous job. We had 225 people there that last year and it got so large that we had to look for a larger camp. It started on a small scale. We had some outstanding speakers there during that six year period. We had Dr. Carl Lundquist, Culley Olson; they were just pastors. Eugene Johnson, the art professor at Bethel, was there.

Then for several years we rented camps at Chautauqua and Lake Erie. We did that until we moved to Burton and Len Ericson gave us that property and helped develop it into a beautiful bible camp.

We became Conference-minded during Geroge Magnuson's term. We heard about Bethel then. That was the first that we had any stress upon Bethel College. He had a great ministry here. When he came he was really sort of backward and was just learning to preach. By the time he left he was a polished speaker. You could just see that man grow and develop here. He really got us Conference-oriented. As a result all six of my children have gone to Bethel.

G: Maybe you can articulate something about the conventions because you've been very active. Maybe you can first talk about the conventions that were held at our church.

P: I can't remember individual speakers, but one of the highlights of the year was always the Middle East Baptist Conference. It would move from church to church every year. We had that about every seven years. That was always a fun time because you always had people in your home; there were no motels. The visitors who came stayed in the members' homes. It has always been a time of business and fellowship. There has always been a warm spirit. We've always stressed the inspiration and the spiritual aspect of the union with Christ and with one another. Then we did the business also. One of the highlights was always the Saturday night Young People's concert. Every Saturday night was devoted to that at the annual meeting and the representatives from all of the churches would sing or play. They would put on a complete program. It was usually individual representatives. That is when Ginny (my wife) and her sister used to sing a bit of the time. We partook in many of those concerts. The people really looked forward to them. We always tried to get outstanding speakers at those. It has always been pretty much the same format. We had bible studies or messages interspersed with the business sessions. There was always a song leader who was in charge of the music program. Saturday night we had the big concert and most people stayed overnight.

G: You mentioned earlier that one of the important facets of the church ministry was evangelistic meetings.

P: Almost every year we had evangelistic meetings of some kind. It was a regular thing. They would last from a week to two weeks. They always had an outstanding evangelist that would come in with a singer. We always had results--many souls saved. It was a part of the church program. They always stimulated new activity in the church. There was always a sense of revival after that carried on. It seems to me that they were usually in the fall of the year.

We've always had a good Sunday school at Evangel. Good teachers! They've always been true to the Word of God. We put them everywhere for classes. They built on a couple of rooms at the old church to accommodate the Sunday school. We've always had faithful teachers.

G: Can you elucidate a bit on the Sunday school program and some of the teachers?

P: There wasn't as much organization then. There wasn't the division in the Sunday school. It wasn't so closely graded. We had mainly a men's class and a women's class and a Swedish class. The men's and women's classes were separate. Then they would get together for fellowship. I think Jody Shogren taught a class for fifty years. Aggie Hammar was teaching then too. We had classes for the youngsters also.

I remember the Sunday school picnics and the lawn fetes we used to have. The lawn fetes were fun; we used to have them at Warren Court at the parsonage. That was the highlight of the season too. Those were held in the summer time. There was a total program from the cradle role to senior citizens (Swedish).

We've always been a singing church. We've always had good music. We were blessed of God with much talent for the size of the church. We had congregational singing as well as specials.

I remember we used to meet together before Sunday school classes. They had an opening session first. I remember John Larson, who was the Sunday school teacher we had for so long. I think he must have followed dad.

One thing I remember in the Sunday school is the penny march we had. It was used for various missionary projects. One was Klingberg's Childrens Home which was a home for orphans founded on faith. My dad always had a few ideas to get a few more dollars for the church and the Lord's work.

G: Could you tell us the physical arrangements of the church, renovations and things like this, the cellar?

P: I remember when they had big, round pipes down the basement for heating. They squared them off and made them rectangular. They changed all of the pipes and this gave us more head room. They put a gas heater in there eventually so we got rid of the ashes and dirt. They also finished the rooms upstairs for additional Sunday school rooms. Then we put an addition on the back--two rooms to serve as dressing rooms for baptismal services. They had to take them down later because after they were up we found out they were encroaching on someone's property. That hurt us, too, because we needed all the space.

Then they put up partitions downstairs and painted the basement. It seems to me they were working on that most of the time.

I remember when we moved from there our Sunday school attendance was around 80.

G: What was the reason for that move to Southern Boulevard?

P: We were so close to town and most of our people lived south of the uptown district. At one time I think they planned on building on Warren Avenue, Warren Court. Then they bought a piece of property out farther on Vermont Avenue. In fact, they changed the name to Vermont Avenue Baptist Church. Then the Depression came and they lost that property. The movement out to the suburbs began about that time. Also, the church building was too small and as the church membership grew we needed more space.

G: Can you describe the neighborhood right there?

P: There was a grocery store next to the church. There were stores on Market Street too, in a little plaza. Then it seems there weren't any houses for a while.

All three Swedish churches moved out to Boardman, and are relatively close to each other.

G: You mentioned there was contact with the other Swedish churches, can you describe the kind of contact that there was?

P: We were in the Swedish Covenant Church quite a bit. Smorgasboards were held together. Our close affiliation was with the Covenant Church more than the Lutheran. I remember the pastor of the Swedish Lutheran served there his entire ministry. He went there from seminary and retired and died there. I don't think he was there when they moved to Boardman though.

We went through a sad time when the church was really in bad straits. Attendance was falling off and we had to do something about it at that time. This was before Nygren. The leadership at that time took the bull by the horns. The pastor was asked to resign and finally did. Rapid growth took place when we first moved to Boardman, then the pastor split the church and took 100 people with him. We survived however and continued to grow.

G: You've been a central figure in the church for many years. Maybe you can elaborate on your involvement in the church as a deacon and a teacher and give some insights as a leading figure in the church.

P: I was a leader in Young People's when I was a kid. Then I

went away to college and into the service. It wasn't until 1946 when I was discharged that we were able to become really active. I was chairman of the church at the time of our move. I also served as a teacher for many years. My wife and I led the Juniors Youth Group. Also, both of us sang in the choir. As a leader in the church, I found that there are additional heartaches that one endures, but there are also extra blessings received.

G: Could you talk about some of the cantatas and organizations?

P: As I said, we had a men's glee club. Mr. Keller's time as choir director stands out in my mind. He was an excellent choir director. Then Professor Jim Johnson was here for a while and led our choir. We have sung and had special music as long as I remember. It goes way back, even to the old church, where we put on special musical programs for holidays. It has always played a very integral part of Evangel. It is now under Dick Barne and he has done some excellent things. Some of the cantats were so moving that they would just make you weep. Music has been such a dominant part of our lives and family life. We used to put on musical programs at various churches on Sunday nights with the family. We would put on an entire evening program with the children singing and playing with mom and dad. Music is an important part of the ministry and always has been at Evangel.

G: We haven't talked about Barber's and Kolmodin's ministries?

P: Barber's ministry was just a tremendous blessing to us. His messages were just masterpieces. Pastor Kolmodin brought good messages too. He came at a time when he was needed--after the split. He was positive from the time he came. Those seven years were good years (a real healing ministry). Pastor Barber has few peers when it comes to delivery. He has a real gift in the pulpit. The blessing of the annual meetings of the General Conference is that we see these men and renew our friendships. The Lord is blessing so wonderfully in the growth of the Conference. Twenty-five new churches were taken in this year.

I should mention Herb Hage who has been a real bulwark in the church. He must have taught for twenty-five years.

The church has been a vital part in our lives because it has backed up what we have taught at home. The children had double support of the Sunday school teacher and the parents.

G: Thank you very much.