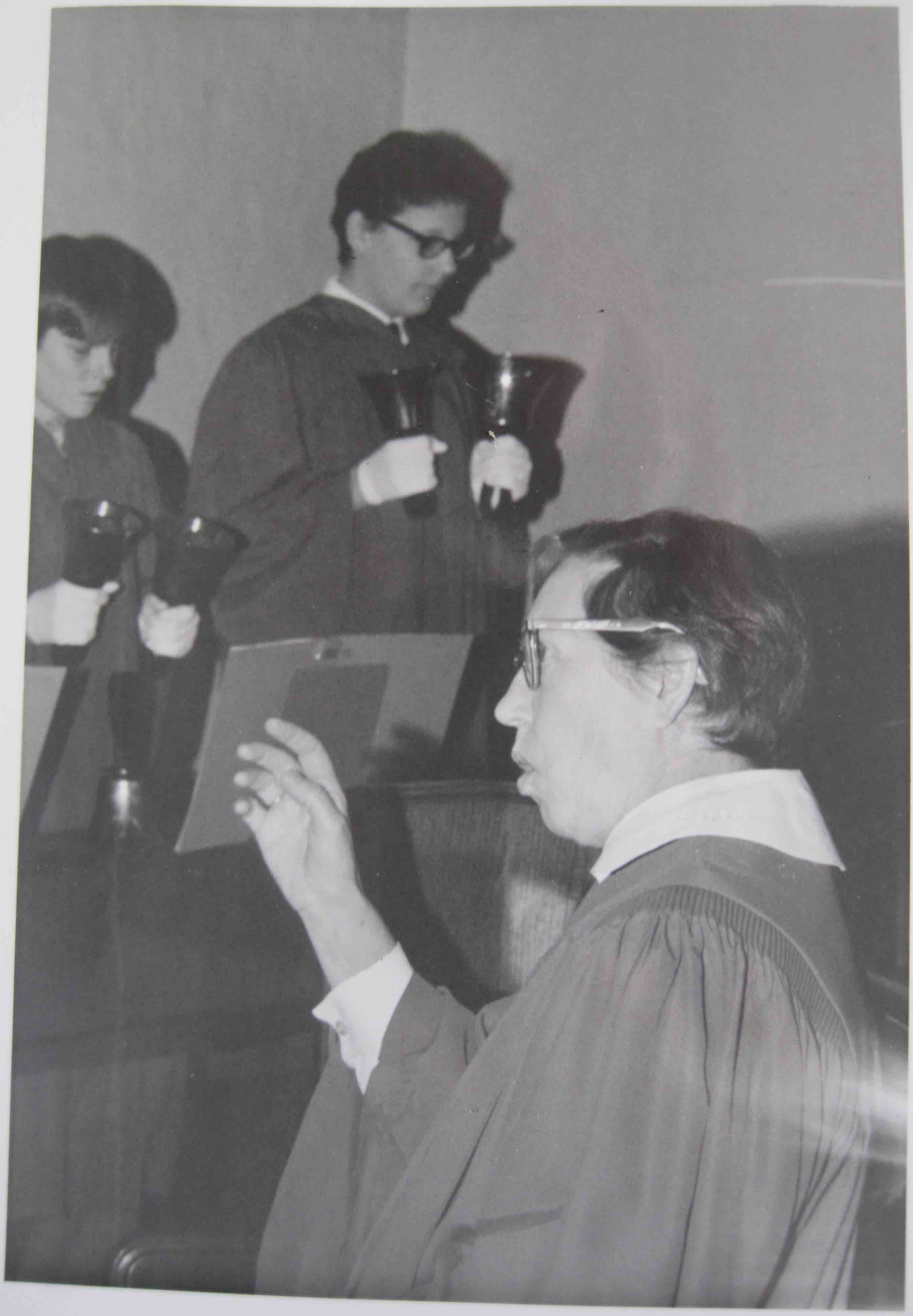

Taken by
Henry Roberts
Jan. 1971

Pilgrim Congregational Church
Royal F. Shepard, Jr.

MEMORIAL SERVICE
for
DOROTHY BRADFORD BELT, February 18, 1983

Just before she died, Dorothy wrote me a letter. She wrote of the day I arrived to take up my ministry in Duluth. "You came into the office," she said, "took one look at me and exclaimed, "Thank goodness you don't look like your picture."

The truth is that others had given me the impression that Dorothy Belt was something of a curmudgeon. Her picture in the recently published church history that was sent to me by the pulpit committee seemed to confirm that impression. There was some basis for it. Dorothy was severe at times. She was blunt in her judgments of persons and events. She never indulged in the usual displays of social dissembling. She never gushed or showed false enthusiasm.

Which is to say, of course, that she was totally genuine. You knew right away that you could trust her. Moreover, the day that I met Dorothy I was introduced to her dogs. With me a person's attitude toward dogs always has been the acid test. I suspect it was the same with Dorothy.

We all know something of Dorothy's life. At the time of her retirement less than four years ago I wrote up a little biography for the newspaper, part of which I share with you now...

"In 1950 a young woman with a Boston accent was called to serve as Director of Christian Education by Pilgrim Congregational Church, a parish named for the Pilgrims who founded Plymouth Colony. The young woman had as good a right as any to claim that heritage as her own. Dorothy Bradford Belt is a direct descendent of William Bradford, governor and historian of Plymouth Colony. Last Wednesday (May 16) the members of Pilgrim Church gathered to honor Miss Belt on her retirement after nearly twenty-nine years of service, most of it as church secretary.

"Graduated as valedictorian of her high school class, Dorothy Belt went on to major in German as Wellesley College, where she was elected to Phi Beta Kappa. After working in her father's insurance business and as secretary of her college alumni fund, she enrolled at Hartford Theological Foundation where she earned a Master's degree in Christian Education. Then in the summer of 1950 she headed west at the invitation of two churches with job openings. One was a very large and famous church in Oakland, California, the other was Pilgrim Church in Duluth. Dorothy liked the people in Duluth so well that she never got to California except as a tourist.

"A number of staff changes led to Dorothy Belt's becoming church secretary and office manager. Over a quarter century she has brought into play talents and skills rarely associated with such a role. An able musician, she organized a bell choir and substituted on the piano and church organ. The choir director frequently has called upon her to translate the text of Latin anthems and the minister has sought her linguistic assistance in phrasing foreign correspondence. She has taught adult Bible classes and twice in recent years delivered the Sunday sermon.

"Through the years Dorothy Belt has become known not only to generations of her own church people, but to many persons belonging to a variety of organizations meeting in the church building. One group with which her association has been especially close is the Matinee Musicale Society. She is also familiar, possibly more familiar than any local clergyman, to leaders of many denominations in the city. The young woman with the still Boston accent has become something more

than the secretary of Pilgrim Congregational Church. She has become a Duluth institution."

On the Sunday before Memorial Day in 1978 Dorothy gave a sermon here called, "What Is Life?" In the sermon Dorothy spoke of three elderly women she had known in Duluth and who had since died. One of them ran a boarding house where Dorothy lived when she first came to Duluth. Another was a baby-sitter. The third was Ruth Rogers, who for so many years was organist and choir director at Pilgrim Church and who shaped the lives of so many future musicians. Dorothy made the point that though all three of these women were unmarried and missed out on some opportunities afforded to others, they lived lives of great value and significance.

There was more behind that sermon than met the ear. As she became aware that her health was failing and as she approached retirement, Dorothy began to review her life. She wondered whether, to use an old expression, she had improved her opportunities. She had been an outstanding student at one of the most distinguished colleges in the country. She had done graduate work in German there with the hope of teaching on the college level. Yet she never followed through on that goal. She had completed a course in Christian Education at Hartford Theological Foundation where she earned a Master's degree. She also gained experience as a Christian Education Director in a church in Connecticut.

Thus equipped she came to Pilgrim Church. Let me say that according to Dorothy herself, it was the Pilgrim Men's Club who were most influential in bringing her here. Some leaders of the club were convinced that there was a need for further staffing in the church. For whatever reasons, possibly because of his age and his health, they felt the Senior Minister was not altogether up to his job, and in any case, the church had sustained two professional persons in the past. These men not only exerted some muscle within the church organization to obtain another staff person, but they took an immediate liking to Dorothy and did everything they could to persuade her to come to Pilgrim Church. So don't say that men cannot take an interest in the Church School or that they won't move in a woman when a man falters, and don't say that the Men's Club is only a knife and fork club. We have a great precedent here.

However, when a new minister arrived, he and others felt that the church might best be served by a second professional person who was an ordained minister. And though she had a marvelous rapport with teenagers, I suspect that Dorothy's forte was not Sunday school work. She implied as much to me. And so she faced the liklihood of having to move on when the position of secretary opened up. In that capacity she remained here for the next twenty-five years.

Now once again as Dorothy looked back she wondered what she had done with her life. She had trained and gained experience in one field only to accept another sort of job at less salary and, in the eyes of many, with lower status.

Then there was her music. She had not done as much with that as she might have wished. And, of course, she missed the experience of raising a family.

So when Dorothy preached a sermon on the theme "What Is Life?", she was asking herself, "What have I made of my life?"

I hope that we were able to persuade her that she had done great things with it. She made of her work here something that transcended titles and job descriptions. That was true even when she was bogged down in what she often felt was a rather dreary routine. But toward the end she became more free and

more creative. After her retirement she found new ways of serving the church, ways for which she had lacked the time in the past. And she began taking part in more activities in the wider community.

I told Dorothy, and I meant it, for you did not tell Dorothy things you did not mean--that she had done more for Pilgrim Church than anyone in its one hundred and twelve year history.

And she did a lot for me.

Dorothy Belt asked the question, "What is life?" She showed us.

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