

THE REVEREND ALEXANDER MITCHELL A VERY PERSONAL HISTORY

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I grew up on Atwood Street, which is on the edge of downtown Greenville. The house is still there in what was and still is a very middle class neighborhood of apartments, duplexes, and single-family dwellings. Our house was a cross between a Sears and Roebuck catalogue house and a mill village house. The two styles populated Greenville at the time. Two doors up lived The Rev. Alexander Mitchell and his family. Their house seemed much more imposing than my house because it was two stories.

To a little boy one of the most impressive things about the Mitchell's house was in the backyard there was a very deep goldfish pond, which had huge goldfish in it. The fish were a source of constant fascination to me. When I had been gone too long my mother would surmise that I had drowned in the pond. Often on those occasions I would be inside visiting with the Mitchells. Mr. Mitchell was by that time in the twilight of his life, but he was still tall and straight, his mind clear and quick, and he was still active in the church and the community. Most importantly he always had time for little boys. While I sat on his lap, he would take a clean white handkerchief out of his pocket and turn it into a rabbit with ears standing straight up. That feat seemed like a miracle to me. Upon leaving to go home he would take candy out of another pocket and give it to you. The candy always tasted vaguely like tobacco because he kept the candy and tobacco in the same pocket. Regardless, it was a wonderful treat.

Years later I was talking to my mother about these visits and the rabbits from handkerchiefs and the candy and she said, "Why it wasn't candy at all, it was Luden's cough drops." My reply was "Well if Mr. Mitchell gave it to you it was candy and you ate it gladly and willingly."

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Perhaps in a strange way it was like the bread and wine of the Eucharist becoming the body and blood of Christ - Luden's cough drops did become candy. Whatever, my relationship with Mr. Mitchell was sacramental and this larger than life man had a deep and profound influence on my life. These years were the late 1940s.

Mr. Mitchell died January 19, 1949. He had often made the statement that he wanted to die right before or right after he did a service. That was not the case, but he did die at home and that afternoon my mother and a neighbor and I stood on the sidewalk in front of my house and watched as the body was carried away. Even though it was January, I have no remembrance of being cold or sad, but I do remember feeling that a mighty presence was gone. There were of course no words to express that. Perhaps, like children that age, I only thought he was gone for a while. It is my hope to bring Mr. Mitchell back in this paper so you will feel some sense of the man.

The Reverend Alexander Robert Mitchell was born in Charleston in 1860. Our ancestors who were Anglican were all Low Church and, though he lived most of his adult life in Upstate South Carolina, he seems to have maintained a Lowcountry attitude. He would have deeply believed that the Ashley and Cooper Rivers really did meet to form the Atlantic Ocean. To be a Christian gentleman was a good thing, but to be a Christian gentleman from Charleston was the ultimate.

His heritage was English, and his father had built the first cotton compress. His mother's father was one of the large rice planters on the Waccamaw River. If cotton was king, then rice was the gold that made the king's crown. The land and marshland from Georgetown to Charleston had made the people of the area among the richest in the world. The plantations in acreage rivaled the large ranches of the American west today. The Mitchell family was of this affluence, and Mr. Mitchell's older brothers had been educated in England. Mr. Mitchell would have been born into that world except for the Civil War. Also, his father died when he was six, and times became hard for the family. He was educated at Porter Military Academy in Charleston and worked for a year after graduating. He then went to the University of the South and after that to the School of Theology at Sewanee. He was active in fraternity life and played baseball - a

sport he loved his entire life. In 1933 the University of the South awarded Mr. Mitchell an honorary doctorate for his accomplishments. In addition, there is a window in All Saints Chapel in this memory. At the tender age of 25 he was ordained a deacon and he remained active in the ministry for 62 years. He went to Columbia to be vicar of the newly formed Church Of The Good Shepherd. He met and married Harriett Couturier Thomas in 1889. She was from a mainline Episcopal family, and two of her brothers became Episcopal priests largely under the influence of "Brother Alex" as they called Mr. Mitchell. One of Harriett's brothers, Albert Sidney Thomas, became the ninth bishop of South Carolina. He wrote a history of the Episcopal Church in South Carolina.

The marriage of Mr. Mitchell to Harriett Thomas produced a family of eight - five girls and three boys. Harriett was 19 when she married and the first child Alexander Robert Mitchell, Jr. was born a little less than a year later.

In Columbia under Mr. Mitchell's leadership the Church of the Good Shepherd grew and prospered from a weak mission to a vigorous parish. Its membership increased 500% (from 28 to 600) while Mr. Mitchell was there, an impressive figure under any circumstances. While in Columbia he established St. Timothy's Church, which would become a full parish and is still in existence. Mr. Mitchell writes of St. Timothy's:

Sitting in my study one afternoon in the house I occupied on Henderson Street near Richland before the rectory of Good Shepherd was built, the thought came to me that I should start some church work in the northwestern part of the city, since there were many children who attended no Sunday School and many families who attended no church. There was a shrinking from this undertaking since my hands were quite full with the parish of the Good Shepherd to look after and the parochial school to carry on. But being compelled by the Holy Spirit to "Go Forward" and having made this undertaking a subject of earnest prayer and feeling that it was my duty as well as God's will to commence this work, I straightway went

up to that portion of the city to see where I could begin to work.

On my way I met a little boy, poorly clad, and asked if he attended any Sunday School. He said "No." Then I said, "If I start one would you like to attend?" With a twinkle in his bright eyes and a smile on his face, he said, "Yes very much." I found in my amblings an old stable which opened on Lumber Street, and I thought if I could rent it and fix it up; it would be a good place to start the mission. The thought came to me as the Master had been born in the stable and had sanctified it by his birth. I could begin work in one. But the stable could not be secured, so nothing daunting I went on and found that I had one layman of the church living in that portion of the city, Ben Milligan. He kindly offered me one room in his humble home, 12 feet by 12 feet, and there with three little children. The work began in June 1892. (From a clipping in the possession of Steve Mitchell)

In February 1900, Mr. Mitchell accepted a call to become rector of Christ Church in Greenville. Part of the agreement was that a new rectory would be built for this already large family which would become larger. The rectory built was approximately where the gym of Christ Church is today on the corner of Church and Washington Streets

Mr. Mitchell was the 14th rector of Christ Church. The congregation was somewhere around 375 communicants. That began over a century of relationships with the Mitchell family and my family, for my grandfather and great grandparents were among those communicants.

Mr. Mitchell thought of Greenville as a mission area as it had been in 1820 when the Episcopal Church had been established in the Piedmont area. Many new factories had brought great population growth to Greenville and the great majority of textile workers had never thought about entering the doors of an Episcopal Church. When Mr. Mitchell came to Greenville, it was a city of around 14,000

people, and in 1901 Christ Church would celebrate its 75th anniversary as a parish having the name of Christ Church. The congregation had started as St. James and the name had been changed to Christ Church in 1826. It would prove to be a big event. A history was compiled and that year's Diocesan Convention celebrated the event.

During Mr. Mitchell's stay at Christ Church electricity would be installed as well as telephone lines. In those early years at Christ Church tragedy struck in the Mitchell family. Harriett died at the age of 36. The youngest child, Ellison Capers, was just over a year old and three children were under the age of six. At a meeting of Christ Church Guild shortly following her death, a resolution was passed which read in part:

Resolved that in the death of Mrs. Mitchell we have lost one whose unselfish devotion to the Church and its work was always an inspiration to higher and greater effort.

Resolved that while her cheerful and punctual presence at our meetings will be greatly missed and lamented, she shall live in our hearts and memories.

Resolved that the loss of one so universally beloved is indeed a crushing dispensation. (From a clipping in the possession of Steve Mitchell)

A short article in the *Baptist Courier* says of Harriett, "She was in thorough sympathy with her husband in all his work, and won the confidence and love of all who knew her, by her beautiful devotion to her loved ones and the cause of her Redeemer." The article continues by giving sympathy to Mr. Mitchell and his "motherless" children. The article continues as a tribute to Mr. Mitchell and calls him, "broad minded and charitable, pure in life and devoted to his work and he has a large place in the hearts of the people of Greenville."

The children were taken care of by a servant named Mamie. The older children helped out with the younger ones and neighbors and parishioners did their part.

When Mr. Mitchell came to Christ Church the parish had

problems and was in debt. However, Mr. Mitchell immediately started plans for a new church. In 1900 there was no bridge across the river on Main Street and travel and transportation were difficult. The West End or Pendleton Street area was very isolated from the rest of Greenville and it was hard for people who lived in the country to get to church. When Mr. Mitchell became aware of this problem plans were made to start a mission across the river. Planning began and after consultation with the Bishop, it was agreed upon to call the new church St. Andrews. Mr. Mitchell held services for St. Andrews on Sunday nights. This was in addition to his duties at Christ Church. There was a Sunday School on Saturdays and an Industrial School or sewing school operated for the purpose of teaching the girls of the Sunday School and community to sew and make clothes for the poor.

A lot for St. Andrews was bought on the corner of Pendleton and Markley Streets for \$1,500.00 and construction was started on the church in 1904 and the building was consecrated in 1905.

Mr. Mitchell started St. James in 1903 and the third mission he started was St. Phillips. When Mr. Mitchell came to Christ Church, he proposed that a mission be started for the black Episcopal population of Greenville. This was not done until 1904 because of lack of leadership and clergy. I think this may have been the most important ministry Mr. Mitchell embarked upon. Before the Civil War the black Episcopal population was huge and they worshiped in Christ Church as well as all other Episcopal churches. After the war, services were held at night in a room in the parish house at Christ Church. There had been lots of talk about doing something about the situation. By 1900 there were few black Episcopalians left - they had died out or left the church for another religious persuasion. There were in Greenville a few black Episcopalians who were devout and loyal and wanted to be a part of the church, and Mr. Mitchell said yes to this in the best and most dignified way that he could.

One person who encouraged Mr. Mitchell was a woman named Sarah Elizabeth Priestly. Mr. Mitchell said his "saintly mother" molded his spiritual life, and he must have seen many of this mother's qualities in this saintly woman. She was an ex-slave. St. Phillips was a sensitive outreach to a population that had been virtually excluded from the church.

Along with all his church and community involvements, Mr.

Mitchell found time to start another family. On December 28, 1910 he married Mary Mazyck Lucas. He had met her in Greenwood where she was teaching school. In this relationship Mr. Mitchell can be seen as the visionary and she as the practical one. She was willing to take on the enormous responsibility of this large family and go on to have four children herself. She was a striking person and when I knew her, she had white hair which she wore piled on top on her head. She usually wore purple and the pair indeed made a memorable couple. She was quick to laugh, had a great sense of humor and a wonderful mind. She had all those attributes that make one a good teacher as well as a good friend.

She was from McClellansville and had been raised on a plantation and educated by tutors and went to Miss Smith's School in Charleston. She was from a large family of nine siblings. One sister became the second wife of South Carolina poet and writer Archibald Rutledge. When Mary married Mr. Mitchell she was 34 and he was 16 years older than she was.

To this marriage four children were born - all boys. One died when he was not quite a year old. Bobby was killed in World War II in Holland and is buried there, but a grave is marked in Christ Church cemetery. Bobby did have one child born after his death who would receive the name Alexander Robert Mitchell, the only grandchild named for Mr. Mitchell.

Steve, the only child of this marriage now living was born in Charleston and this paper would not have been possible without him. Lucas the first child born of this marriage was born on Good Friday 1912. Mrs. Mitchell told me that this was the happiest day of her life. The first Good Friday she and Mr. Mitchell were married was one of the worst days of her life. Mr. Mitchell had the tradition of fasting on Good Friday and did not speak to anyone except to do the Good Friday service. This was an Episcopal tradition foreign to her and she found it all very strange. He had not told her any of this and it is interesting that an Episcopalian from that era and Low Church background would have developed a discipline that severe. Whether or not Mr. Mitchell decided to speak the day Lucas was born, I do not know.

Mr. Mitchell left Christ Church in 1916. There have been stories that he left because of some controversy. I could find nothing to back

this up and Steve Mitchell knows of none. I think he had been at Christ Church long enough and had come to the realization that Greenville was entering a new stage of growth and change and his talent of starting new churches in the area had been done, at least for a while. Another reason he may have left was because of ill health. He did have periods of sickness in his life and I think that exhaustion must have played its part. The responsibilities of such a large family and the intense activity of his life must have taken its toll. David Tillinghast in an article in the *Greenville News* puts it more poetically, "his spirit was often stronger than his physical being."

He went to Charleston to become archdeacon of the Diocese of South Carolina. All of South Carolina was still one diocese then and most of his work centered in the coastal area. He started a church in Andrews, South Carolina. He resigned his position of archdeacon in 1920 because of illness. He had tuberculosis and spent a period of months in Asheville, North Carolina, overcoming the illness.

In 1921 he returned to Greenville to be in charge of St. Andrews and St. James. Ellen Perry, an active parishioner at St. James, urged the vestry and bishop to ask Mr. Mitchell back. Ellen Perry is responsible for the architecture of the building constructed for St. James on Buncombe Street. She had seen a church in the English countryside that she liked, and St. James was basically a copy.

Along with St. Andrews and St. James, he did services for the Church of the Good Shepherd in Greer which he had established. This was a difficult and delicate balancing act. During this second time that Mr. Mitchell lived in Greenville he reestablished Faith Memorial Chapel as a summer chapel at Cedar Mountain, North Carolina. He was active in services there. By 1930 Mr. Mitchell had been in the ministry for 45 years. In 1941 he decided to work only at St. James because the other responsibilities had become too great. He was 81 - many years past retirement. He resigned from St. James in the spring of 1947 due to ill health. His physical heart basically had given out, but his spiritual heart remained very much in tact.

He was noted for long sermons and they were read from a text. He would put the sermon in the pulpit before the service and the story is told that one Sunday Lucas and Steve slipped in and glued all the pages together. He started preaching, got ready to turn the page and there was no page to turn. The story is probably mythical, but its

sounds like something clergy kids would do. Whether or not there was a sermon that morning I do not know.

One lady on leaving church said to a friend in a loud voice clearly in earshot of Mr. Mitchell, "he is such a nice person and reads the service so well, but his sermons are just too long." That story probably is not true either, but many people had those thoughts. At St. Andrews there was a lady who sat near the back, and would rap her umbrella on the floor when the sermon had gotten too long for her and she thought should be ending. Mr. Mitchell either could not, or pretended not to, hear her. That story is true.

He did read the service well. Part of it was he had a good voice and part of it was he was absolutely sincere. At the end of a funeral a woman remarked to her husband, "He does the service so well that you envy the corpse." Her husband replied, "Well, he doesn't read it that well."

Mr. Mitchell usually wrote articles in the third person and would refer to himself as The Rev. Alexander Mitchell. He did keep a journal from time to time. His writings were humble and he always seemed to give credit to other people; and anything that met with success, the success would be given to God.

Steve Mitchell says of his father that he was ecumenical and that is doubtlessly true, for he was broad-minded. The few writings that survive are very Victorian in style and solidly Anglican. He writes in a journal about the establishing of a mission, "I desired that the gospel might be preached and the sacraments of the church administered to those who had no shepherd to look after their souls."

His evangelical zeal was to spread the gospel, but along with the spread of the gospel the doctrine of the Episcopal Church. He certainly saw the Episcopal Church as the leaven in lump. Indeed, he saw Greenville as his parish. Pastorally he reached out to anyone in need.

In the final analysis institutions mean nothing. It is not about how many churches were built or their growth in size or budget. The measure of anyone's life is or should be the quality of relationships that are formed. That is certainly where Mr. Mitchell excelled the most. Certainly part of it was he lived in a day and age when roots were deeper and community ties were stronger. In Mr. Mitchell's case a tremendous amount was due to the wives he chose. This

seems to be especially true with Mary and her personality. She seems to have had an amazing ability to blend two families. All the siblings were brothers and sisters and not half brothers and sisters. In my own experience I could never remember which child came from what marriage. The couple evoked loyalty, love and admiration because they gave it so freely. Mr. Mitchell was always willing to sacrifice for others even to the point of deprivation. It was a huge family to rear on very limited resources.

David Tillinghast in the *Greenville News* interviewed Mr. Mitchell shortly after World War II was over and Mr. Mitchell said:

I saw that sinning nations bring on these horrible wars. They have replaced dependence on God with such practices and the world has suffered accordingly. As a nation we are not grateful for our blessings. We are witnessing a great multiplying of crime of a horrible nature. We show a lack of conscience. We do not go to church. We learn to a system of materialism that detours us away from the past that includes God as our guide and dependence.

Those are amazingly modern words and theologically most sophisticated. Mr. Mitchell would have been around 86 years old when he said those words. Of course one of the horrors of war that he knew personally was that he lost a son.

Hallie Stone Maxon, a granddaughter writes of the Mitchells: "They both had scores of sons and daughters - girls and boys of all ages, sorts and conditions." Those who were a part of the Mitchell's lives were blessed to have had them in their lives.

My thanks to Steve Mitchell for his help with this paper. Again it would not have been possible without him. He is truly a Christian gentleman from Charleston. My thanks to other family members who told stories and gave their help. My thanks to Choice McCain who heard more talk about this paper than she wanted to and for her help, encouragement and checking of details.

The opening lines of "Renaissance" by Edna St. Vincent Millay seem most appropriate to Mr. Mitchell's life.

The world stands out on either side
No wider than the heart is wide;
Above the world is stretched the sky,
No higher than the soul is high.
The heart can push the sea and land
Further away on either hand;
The soul can split the sky in two.
And let the face of God shine through.
But East and West will pinch the heart
That cannot keep them pushed apart:
And he whose soul is flat - the sky will
Cave in on him by and by.

East and West never seemed to pinch Mr. Mitchell's heart and his soul was never flat.