

# THE CARING HEART

## *Pastor To A Generation Retires After 40 Years*

The alphabet behind Dr. William Crompton Bennett's name reads like this: A.B., B.D., M.Div., M.Th., Th.D. and D.W.

D.W.?

That's unofficial, but deserved anyhow: Doctor of Wit.

A story from the Bennett apocrypha: Back when Mutt Evans, a Jew, was mayor of Durham, Bennett, a Presbyterian, was often his sidekick. The two of them would greet groups coming to town, Evans with words of welcome, Bennett with an invocation. One day, unbeknownst to the visiting group and to most of Durham, they traded jobs: Bennett extending the mayoral welcome and Evans doing the prayer detail.

Another story: The Plumbers Association came to town. Bennett cannot resist a pun. "Oh, Thou, our Plumbers' Helper . . ." he prayed.

And so it has been, but it was not always so.

Forty years ago — which must mean there's a biblical metaphor in this time zone — a train hauled Bennett to Durham from New York and a cab hauled him from the train station to the Malbourne Hotel, even then sort of seedy.

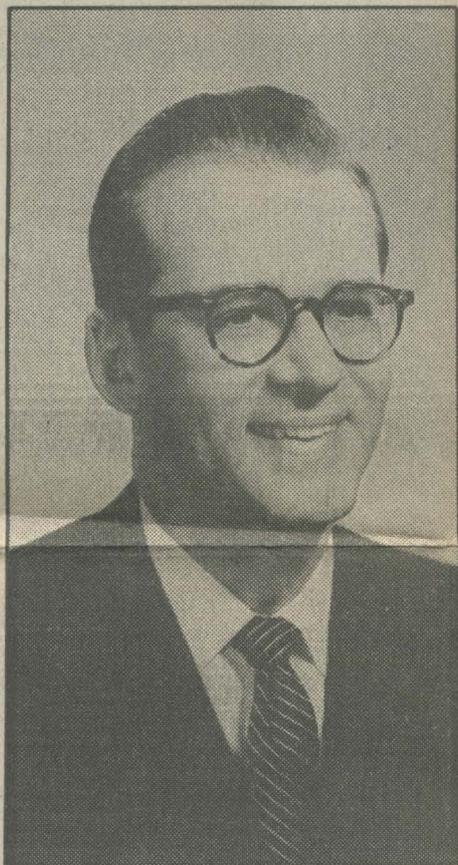
This was a tall and skinny (6-foot-3, 135-pound) scholar with a solemn disposition. He was to preside that Sunday during the World Communion Day service in Trinity Avenue Presbyterian Church, a congregation of mostly mill people.

Bennett was assuming, with some ambivalence, duties as the church's pastor.

It did not seem a marriage made in heaven, though it was. Bennett was bookish and, to hear him say it, dull. He was a man of letters and culture, more likely, he thought then, to become professor than preacher.

Besides, again in Bennett's words, Durham in 1948 was a "bumbling adolescent," lacking the graces of the arts and culture it has today.

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But if there was a sense of snobbishness in Bennett's first impressions, it soon vanished, and Dr. William Crompton Bennett is about to preside today over a World Communion Day service in Trinity Avenue that will be his finale as the church's pastor.

He is the dean of Durham's Presbyterian ministers, in fact, the dean of all the city's preachers in terms of service at a single church.

Officially, retirement begins Dec. 31, but you can start calling him emeritus now. Till Dec. 31, Bennett will be enjoying his first and only sabbatical from Trinity Avenue.

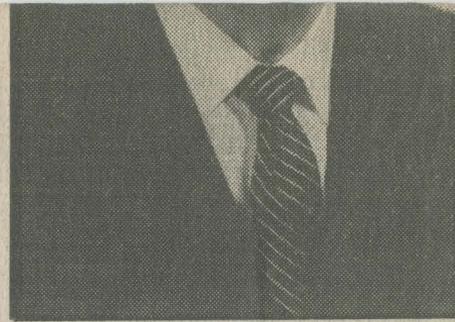
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Bennett, a bachelor, has given 40 of his 65 years (come Nov. 10) to Trinity Avenue Church, yet, even now, he seems unwilling or unable to explain why he became a preacher other than to resort to a word that looms large in his enormous mental lexicon: providence.

But providence had some earthly parents as well: Boardman Crompton Bennett and Louise Leverette Bennett, as unlikely a pair as Trinity Avenue and its young minister 40 years ago.

Father Bennett was a railroad man whose muscles were hewn by driving spikes as a teen-ager. His father claimed, says Bennett, to have acquired a high school education but the family knew better.

Mrs. Bennett, at 98 pounds then and 98 pounds today (she is 91), was physically and intellectually her husband's opposite. He was



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self-educated; she was lettered and reformed, a finishing-school, then Agnes Scott, the citadel of intellect for Southern ladies.

But Bennett's parents had a compelling unity: their love for the Presbyterian church, first in Newman, Ga., later in Columbus, Ga. Bennett's father was an elder and his mother was a soloist and Sunday school teacher.

From his father, he learned good naturedness ("He used to say his worry cells in his brain he had depleted early and never replaced"). From his mother, he learned Shakespeare, the classics, culture.

He also learned about the haves and the have-nots from the lessons of his father's toil and his mother's family wealth.

Books won his heart: Phi Beta Kappa at Emory, Walter W. Moore Fellow at Union Theological Seminary, master of theology and doctor of theology degrees from Princeton.

Biblical theology was his speciality. He never had a course in public speaking or preaching.

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Yet at 23, too young to be so multiple-degreed (he started college at 15) and maybe too young to realize the challenge of public

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the Scottish tabs and the academic degree awarded when he received his theology degree from Princeton owned by a previous Archbishop of Canterbury and given to Bennett by a friend. The portrait was damaged but not ruined. He is wearing a silver cross from Scotland.

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For a while he was lecturer, but that was ill-suited for a congregation that hungered for simple truths and a deeper joy in the Christian life.

So Bennett looked for help, and he found it in the late Dr. James Cleland, a Scotsman who was dean of Duke University Chapel and one of the most persuasive — and entertaining — preachers in America.

Cleland's style was this: Humor would enable the worshipers to lift their heads, and then their hearts were vulnerable to the arrows of truth.

Few have mastered that lesson better than Bennett. There is probably none in Durham who matches his gift for speaking — even, occasionally, for acting. In the pulpit, he has been Pilate, Judas, David as young man, middle-age and doddering — first-person sermons.

Bennett is a veritable *Bartlett's* with an encyclopedic range. You're liable to hear from T.S. Eliot, John Auden, Shakespeare, Tennessee Williams — but especially the Gospel. His is renaissance preaching, delivered in the

Elizabethan English. God is Thou. It is not all things to Bennett, it is God and all things.

He is ready to give way to a new generation, but not without a warning. "The new guys don't know I'm Thomas Wolfe," he says. "I'm not a name-dropper, but if a quote is appropriate, I'll stick it in."

There is also majesty to Bennett. No business suit for him, no tie. He comes forth in the pulpit. He comes forth in the robe from college graduation, the Scottish tabs, the stole, the silver cross around his neck. It is a dramatic — an invitation: Elizabethan Holies.

Yet this is not a preacher who condescends. Let none accuse Crompton Bennett of lacking a certain touch. It is, perhaps even more so, preaching, his genius.

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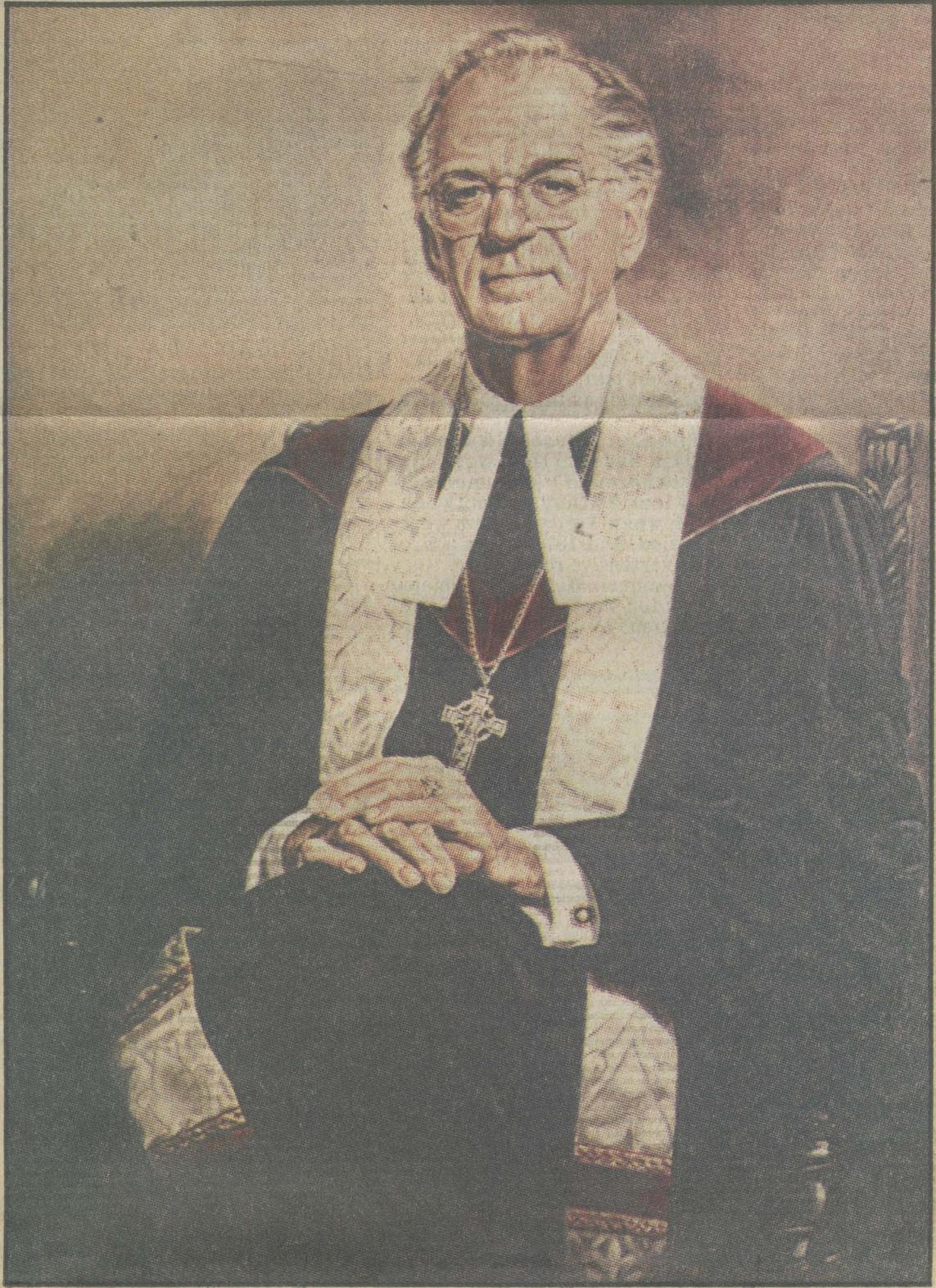
There is also majesty to Bennett's presence. No business suit for him, no plain black robe in the pulpit. He comes forth full-garbed: the robe from college graduation, the Ph.D. hood, the Scottish tabs, the stole, the large silver cross around his neck. It is imposing, priestly, dramatic — an invitation: Enter the Holy of Holies.

Yet this is not a preacher who patronizes or condescends. Let none accuse Dr. William Crompton Bennett of lacking the common touch. It is, perhaps even more than his preaching, his genius.

There have been more great Bill Bennett sermons than he would dare admit to. He squirms when someone mentions them. He delights in talking about their extinction.

Five some years ago at Trinity Avenue destroyed copies of his early sermons. "I call that my burnt offering," he says. Others he tossed into the trash can. "I call that my heaven offering."

For a few years, his sermons were taped and



John Elkins Photography Inc.

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# Caring *From 1E*

passed out to people who could not attend services, particularly shut-ins. But one day a nursing home resident complained about how he sounded on tape, so Bennett stopped taping his sermons.

A few old tapes are still in circulation. Bennett is not ill-tempered by that but one gets the impression that he hopes they will wear out soon.

Like many preachers, he has thought about writing books of sermons. But an old gardener whom he met as a young man warned him against that: "When you lies 'em down flat, you kills 'em."

Bennett also remembers an impossible assignment: to co-edit a collection of Dr. Cleland's prayers into a readable book. It never came about. "When you lies 'em down flat, you kills kills 'em," he says in quoting yet another memorable person.

Still, Bennett does intend to write some in retirement, to provide scholarship "in certain small areas . . . the meaning of the baptismal service . . . the wedding . . . their origins in old Latin dramas."

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Sometimes ham, sometimes poet, Bennett is always the biblical theologian. The Bible and its stories are the principal source of his teaching.

He is profound but simple, and if there is a theme to his preaching it is this: "God is love and we are to love one another."

He says he has been accused of being existentialist — mostly by young associates — but isn't sure what that means. Reader beware: Do not attempt to pigeonhole this man. His favorite New Testament book is the Gospel of John, a book that descends

from the heavens with its picture of God becoming man in Jesus, incarnate among his people. His favorite Old Testament book is Job, for whom God seems unbearably transcendent.

Bennett marvels at the brilliance of Calvin but would prefer the companionship of the emotional, earthy Luther.

He is not a fundamentalist, he is not a liberal, he is Bill Bennett. Asked what advice he would give to a young person considering the ministry, Bennett quoted the Scottish maiden: "Do ye best in what ye got. Trust in God. Be no afraid."

He has lived that way.

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Today, Bennett is 50 pounds heavier than he was when he started preaching at Trinity. He appears strong and athletic.

But it is no secret that he is a man who has had his physical trials. He is diabetic — no mild case, either. Three times a day he injects insulin. Four times a day he tests his blood. He watches everything he eats. He exercises.

He handles the difficulties of diabetes with sheer determination and unwavering discipline. He does not complain.

"It is like living on a three-legged stool," he says, "insulin, diet and exercise. I need all of these."

Because of his discipline in treating himself — which is not unlike the discipline he exercises in pastoring his flock — Bennett expects to uphold the family tradition. "My grandfather lived to be 100," he says, boasting — a rare occurrence — that

he has the cholesterol and triglyceride levels of a marathon runner.

But health and caring for his mother, who has lived with him since his father's death, have in recent years squeezed Bennett out of Durham's public limelight.

At one time, he was Durham's designated preacher. He has blessed more buildings probably than anyone else, the last being Blue Cross and Blue Shield on the Durham-Chapel Hill Boulevard.

When there were banquets, it was Bennett who delivered the invocations, some of which were so refreshing and poetic that they drew applause.

He was citizen-preacher, working for good causes: a leader in the campaign for the Durham County Public Library, president of the Rotary Club, president of the YMCA, a member of the executive committee of the United Fund, a member of the editorial board of the *Negro Braille Magazine*, chairman of the board of Durham Nursery Schools, a member of the executive committee of the Friends of Duke University Library. The Durham civic clubs selected him as "Man of the Year" in 1975.

He had other interests. In college he was a fencer, his only sport, and once helped the late Steed Rollins coach the Duke University fencing team.

He collects rare books. He is a water colorist and art collector.



The membership of Trinity Avenue Presbyterian Church was fewer than 300 when Dr. William Crompton Bennett presided at that World Communion Day service in October 1948.

Today, the membership is over 1,000, marking a slow, steady growth over four decades, and the sanctuary and fellowship hall will be jammed.

Bennett will not preach, but he will preside. His farewell will be simple. The focus will be on World Communion Day, the event, not the man. That's how he wants it: the beginning and the end of his ministry at Trinity Avenue the same.

Afterward, there will be a social gathering outside with refreshments and goodbyes, which may seem a contradiction. It will not be so refreshing to say so-long to the man who has baptized, buried, counseled, married and loved his flock for a generation.

There is a Quaker saying that Bennett sometimes quotes: "Hast thou a caring in thy heart?"

Boil down 40 years, say those who know, and Bennett's life and service saith aye.

**JACK ADAMS**

eyes glistened.  
Officer Cribbs 6-foot-6 canister  
squirmed. "What can I say? I  
don't understand art." Officer  
Cribbs looked around at the  
the walls. There

exploded and Myra seized the  
room.  
"Get some clothes on, you little  
showoff!"  
"Not so little, Myra." Eddie  
enjoyed that

do you think you  
"To wash . . . I can't eat danish  
like this."  
"Horse stuffings . . . get in the  
john with her, will you!"  
"She's old enough to be my



**Sexton, Pastor Tend Church Garden**

**Malachi Duke, Bill Bennett Keep Trinity Presbyterian Pretty**