

Minister who led church for 40 years die

By PAUL BONNER

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The Rev. Dr. William Crompton Bennett, whose wit and erudition highlighted his 40 years at Trinity Avenue Presbyterian Church and many civic events, died Wednesday. He was 77.



BENNETT

He died at The Forest at Duke of complications from pneumonia. As senior minister of Trinity Avenue Presbyterian, Dr. Bennett often graced church services and other congregation gatherings with self-deprecating humor and broad knowledge not only of the Bible, church history and theology, but also literature, art and other humanities.

Outside the church's walls, he participated in a wide range of community affairs, including lecturing part time in religious studies at Duke University. So often was he called upon to deliver public invocations at community meetings and events that he was sometimes called Durham's "citizen-preacher."

Dr. Bennett was born in Newhouse, Ga., on Nov. 10, 1923. His father worked for the Georgia Central Railroad, and his mother, a trained musician, prized culture and learning, especially in literature and the arts, which she imparted to her son.

This only child showed early promise and entered Emory University in Atlanta at age 15. He graduated from Emory in three years as a member of the Phi Beta Kappa academic honor society and went on to gain master's and doctorate degrees from Princeton Theological Seminary and complete a fellowship at Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Va.

He was ordained to the Presby-

terian ministry July 1, 1946, and served briefly at a church in Petersburg, Va., before becoming an assistant at St. Andrews Presbyterian in Wilmington. In October 1948, on World Communion Sunday, he assumed the pastorate of Trinity Avenue Presbyterian.

Tall and slender, he made a distinguished figure in the pulpit. He favored relatively formal ecclesiastical garb, complete with academic robes, stole, tippet and large pectoral cross. His sermons often incorporated quotations from great thinkers and artists of the ages. But he also was prone to refer to himself as only "a simple parson."

Under his pastorate, the congregation of Trinity Avenue Presbyterian, in Trinity Park near Duke's East Campus, roughly tripled, from about 300 to around 1,000. It also expanded its facilities and will continue to do so in a planned new building to be named after him.

Many of the church's visitors were attracted there by meeting Dr. Bennett through such civic organizations as the Rotary Club, to which he belonged for many years and served as president, and at Duke. His preaching often led them to return and make the church their home.

"He had such a knack with his sermons that everyone who heard him felt he spoke to their condition," said Ed Coman, an elder at Trinity Avenue Presbyterian and

member for more than 20 years. "He had such a personal way about him that everyone felt he was their personal friend."

Dr. Bennett often accompanied then-Mayor E.J. "Mutt" Evans in the latter's greetings and addresses to civic gatherings, especially of groups and delegations visiting Durham, as well as dedications and other ceremonies.

"He has blessed more buildings probably than anyone else" in Durham, wrote Jack Adams in an article in the Durham Morning Herald upon Dr. Bennett's retirement.

A lifelong bachelor, he pursued hobbies of rare-book and art collecting.

Besides the Rotary Club of Durham, he was a leader in a building campaign of the Durham County Public Library, president of the Durham YMCA and a member of the executive committee of the United Fund, a precursor of the United Way. He was chairman of the board of Durham Nursery Schools, a forerunner of the Durham Day Care Council. He served on the executive committee of the Friends of Duke University Library.

In 1975, Durham's civic clubs selected him Man of the Year in Durham.

In October 1988 — again on World Communion Day — Dr. Bennett retired from Trinity Avenue

Presbyterian, marking 40 years there. The church's senior minister now is the Rev. Donovan Drake.

"Trinity Avenue Presbyterian Church continues to be vibrant, growing, and owes much to Dr. Bennett's ministry of 40 years," said Rev. Drake. "He tilled the soil and sowed the seeds from which we continue to reap a good harvest for God's kingdom."

In 1998, parishioners Perry Dukie Sloan made a \$250,000 gift to Peace College in Raleigh to endow the college's Dr. William Crompton Bennett Chaplain endowed fund. Dr. Bennett also was a member of the board of trustees of Peace College and the board of advisers of Andrews Presbyterian College in Lenoir County. The Sloan family pledged a large challenge grant to Trinity Avenue Presbyterian in 1999 for a new building named after Dr. Bennett. The building will house Sunday school rooms, a fellowship hall and kitchen facilities.

A memorial service is scheduled for 2 p.m. Saturday at Trinity Avenue Presbyterian Church. Private interment in Maple Cemetery is planned.

Contributions in Dr. Bennett's memory may be made to the Trinity Avenue Presbyterian Church Building Fund, 3199 Trinity Avenue Presbyterian Church, W. Trinity Ave., Durham, NC 27704.

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