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 Sunday
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Obituaries

Obituary: Charles P. Robshaw / Longtime pastor at East Liberty Presbyterian Church

Saturday, January 04, 2003

By Ann Rodgers-Melnick, Post-Gazette Staff Writer

The Rev. Charles P. Robshaw, a brilliant pastor who guided East Liberty Presbyterian Church through the tumultuous era when its neighborhood was all but destroyed, died Wednesday in Bloomington, Minn., at the age of 87.

Pastor of East Liberty from 1957 to 1980, he left his mark on both the congregation and the East End through a variety of innovative, ecumenical projects. The native of Northern Ireland also had a strong commitment to religious and ethnic reconciliation.

He earned a degree in commerce at Dublin's Trinity College and was a successful accountant when a friend in England invited him to a Christian conference.

A young Scottish medical missionary bound for Africa, told his audience that no one could be a Christian without asking, "Am I doing what God wants me to do with my life?"

"My father had a bright future in accounting. But he thought about that all year. And he finally came to the conclusion that ministry was the only path for him to take," said his daughter Katherine Hackney of Regent Square.

A chance meeting while at divinity school at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland, led to what was supposed to be a one-year scholarship to Princeton Theological Seminary in 1940. But World War II stranded him in the United States. He married the former Vadis Wollsey in 1942, the same year he was called to his first church in Dayton, N.J. His next call was to suburban Philadelphia, where he built a thriving church.

In 1957, the 41-year-old was chosen from more than 100

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candidates as pastor of East Liberty Presbyterian Church, which then had 2,300 members. The rolls would plummet to 1,100 by his retirement in 1980, but without his leadership the losses would likely have been far worse as the steel industry collapsed and the neighborhood suffered a disastrous redesign.

Stuart Nye Hutchison III, whose grandfather had been one of Mr. Robshaw's predecessors, was about 13 when the Robshaws arrived. "He had the ability to captivate people with his sermons. He didn't have a booming delivery. If anything, his voice was soft and modulated. He was able to pull people in and make them concentrate," Hutchison said.

He hosted discussion groups at his home that drew people from other denominations, said Charles H. Heaton, an organist and choir director during Mr. Robshaw's tenure. He was fluent in many languages, once chatting in Latin with a Catholic priest in Hungary. But he was never pompous.

"He was very quiet and self-effacing" Heaton said.

East Liberty, whose members ranged from evangelical to agnostic, was a challenging congregation. Yet Mr. Robshaw was able to move the church to accept African Americans not only as members, but also as elders and lay leaders.

Soon after his arrival, urban planners began shutting East Liberty's streets to traffic in an effort to create a pedestrian mall. It led instead to boarded up businesses and turned a former showcase neighborhood into a ghetto.

"At times the appearance of the neighborhood has resembled that of a bombed out city, where block after block has been leveled," Mr. Robshaw wrote in a 1969 essay for The Pittsburgh Press. Yet in this he saw opportunities for ministry.

He banded with other congregations to form East End Cooperative Ministry, which today continues to stabilize the neighborhood through projects as diverse as a homeless shelter and summer day camp.

Also with other churches, he helped found East Liberty Housing Inc., which obtained federal money to build low-income townhouses. At the same time, East Liberty Presbyterian Church was the driving force behind ELGAR Inc., which used volunteer labor to rehabilitate older homes for large, low-income families.

Mr. Robshaw could often be found chatting with the patrons of a soup kitchen that was the precursor of the homeless shelter the church houses today.

"By example, he convinced the congregation that part of the vital

ministry of the church was to consider the needs of the immediate community," Hutchison said.

But Mr. Robshaw was also deeply concerned with international affairs. He traveled widely in India, Hungary and pre-missile-crisis Cuba. In a speech to Pittsburgh's Public Affairs Forum in December 1960, he urged President-elect John F. Kennedy to visit Fidel Castro and try to establish a friendship.

He was best known for his devotion to Ireland. Having no desire to get caught in the partisan politics of his native land, most of his interest was expressed through Pittsburgh's Gaelic Arts Society. Under its auspices he led six tours of Ireland for Catholics and Protestants together. And he regularly stood side by side with Pittsburgh's Catholic bishop on the reviewing stand of the St. Patrick's Day Parade.

He wanted people to understand that the violence in Ireland was not religious but political. In a 1971 speech to the Public Affairs Forum he cited a long history of cooperation between Catholics and Protestants in Ulster on behalf of human rights, and he compared the political plight of Catholics there to that of African Americans in the South. He believed that governments of England, Wales, Scotland, Ulster and the Irish Republic needed to create a federation to resolve the problems of the region.

He remained active long after his 1980 retirement. The Rev. William Paul, a retired Presbyterian minister who was his neighbor until the Robshaws moved to Minnesota in 1997, played tennis with him regularly. Mr. Robshaw would often engage him in a scholarly discussion of the early church fathers.

"I was always afraid he would ask my opinion about something about which I knew nothing. He was so conversant in history and theology. He was, in my opinion, the consummate Christian scholar-pastor," Paul said. "Yet he was a truly humble man. He knew who he was, and he had a sensitivity and love for all kinds of people, both the rich and the poor, the scholarly and the not-so-scholarly."

Mr. Robshaw is survived by his wife; daughter Katherine, and daughter Sara Haber of North Oaks, Minn.; two sons, Michael of St. Paul, Minn., and Kevin of Baton Rouge, La.; one sister, Peggy, of Ireland; 10 grandchildren; and one great-grandchild.

A memorial service will be held at 1 p.m. Monday at Presbyterian Homes and Services, 9901 Penn Ave., Bloomington, Minn. A memorial service will also be held at a later date in Pittsburgh.

Memorials can be sent to the Irish Room Scholarship Fund, University of Pittsburgh Nationality Rooms Program, 1209

Cathedral of Learning, Pittsburgh 15260.

Ann Rodgers-Melnick can be reached at
arodgersmelnick@post-gazette.com or 412-263-1416.

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