

The Vintage Voice

Serving The Church Pension Fund's Family of Beneficiaries

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Three Nickels

The Rt. Rev. Walter C. Righter

Every Sunday afternoon in my elementary school years, I was sent off to Sunday school at the Presbyterian Church. My father gave me three nickels. The first time he did this he explained what I should do with the nickels. There was to be a brass bowl passed among us. One of the nickels went into the bowl. It was for the church — a brand new building. The building looked like a miniature Gothic cathedral. It was started in the late 1920s, and finished two years after the stock market crash of 1929. I was nine years old, but in my own childish way, I understood we needed to help pay for the church building. The second nickel went into a clear glass bowl. It was to provide food and clothing for the orphans who lived in the orphanage. Several times each year the orphanage choir came and sang to us. The youngsters who lived in the orphanage were, according to their ages, in many of our classes. We knew each other. In our own way we cared about each other

The third nickel was for Mr. Campbell and his missionary work. It went into a plain old brown sock. Every two years he appeared in our midst to tell us about his work. It sounded exciting. One of my favorite stories was about the time he had to wrestle a Korean bear on his way to one of the churches he served. He was a huge burley man. None of us ever doubted who won the wrestling match. Mr. Campbell's wife and my mother were school classmates in grade school and good friends from that time on. My mother was an unofficial guardian to see that my nickel for Mr. Campbell reached that plain old sock.

His stories about his work in Korea, as well as his presence gave me a face for the idea of mission work that I have never forgotten. My mother's friendship for Mrs. Campbell kept the idea alive in very personal terms. And it stayed alive throughout my whole adult life. But it surprised me by its strength in my retirement.

I retired from the active episcopate in 1989. The Rt. Rev. John S. Spong, Bishop of the Diocese of Newark asked me to join him as an assisting Bishop. The Diocese of Newark is a multi-ethnic place. One of the congregations in it, during my stay there was Korean. The metropolitan New York/New Jersey area had one hundred Korean congregations in it. Most of those congregations were Presbyterian. Bishop Spong asked me if I would be willing to attend the annual meeting of representatives of those congregations and represent him. I said I would be glad to do that. I remembered Mr. Campbell and my Sunday School experience in the Presbyterian Church.

The meeting began with a fine meal. I sat at a table with seven other people, all of Korean extraction, each person interested in each other person. We shared introductions and a few stories about backgrounds. The meeting began as we were eating dessert. The table discussion had been in English. The meeting was in Korean! I had been asked to say a few words on behalf of Bishop Spong and the Diocese of Newark. But, I could not speak Korean. When my time to speak arrived I apologized for not being able to speak in Korean, but said I had a story to tell about my early association with the Presbyterian Church in Korea. I spoke of the three nickels, of Mr. Campbell, of his stories exciting my interest in mission, of my mother's association with Mrs. Campbell. I explained that because of those early associations, I felt grateful to be able to join with so many people from Korea that evening. We all shared a commitment to God, to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and to the mission of the church, and for that reason it was delightful to be with them. When I finished there was enthusiastic applause. It was hard to tell whether the applause represented more than oriental politeness. The meeting returned to the use of Korean and was soon ended with prayers in both English and Korean.

I stood around for a while as people roamed the room and chatted informally. One of the older clergy came up to me and said, "Did you really know Campbell?" I explained that I had known him only when I was a child but continued to hear occasionally of his ministry as I grew older. Then he said, "You don't say his name correctly!" I asked how I should say it. With a slight smile showing at the corners of his mouth he said, "In Korea we called him Cambullo." So I asked him if he knew Mr. Cambullo. He grinned broadly and said, "Eighty-five percent of the people in this room (there were 300 people present) were trained in the Christian faith by him!! We came to this country after that and are grateful to him for ever." The surge of the crowd separated us so our conversation ended abruptly. Again, Mr. Campbell was responsible for giving me greater depth in my understanding of Christian mission.

Whatever goes around, comes around. Hundreds of nickels like mine had contributed to a ministry that was on the other side of the world. I had been fortunate, by a combination of luck and grace, to know that ministry in very personal terms. And here, in my retirement, in one of the complex metropolitan areas of the world that ministry begun in Korea was still vital and strong in the life and work of one hundred churches in the United States. I was reminded that the work I had done in my ministry was still alive in the people I had touched. All of us, in retirement, have left some kind of lasting effect, through the lives we have touched in Christ's name.

It was certainly worth the nickel!



Bishop Righter and his wife lived in New England for a number of years. They moved to Pittsburgh because Bishop Righter's brother and wife live there, and also because Bishop Righter had lived there himself from 1940 to 1954 and therefore felt at home. He is working on a book about strength of spirituality among the lay and ordained people of the Church.