

Robert Gifford Metters

IN JULY 1945 THE REV. H. ROBERT SMITH, D.D., FORMERLY of Grace Church, Newton, Massachusetts, accepted the position of Minister-in-Charge of Emmanuel until such time as Dr. Osgood's successor was appointed.

Bishop Sherrill was asked to approach Robert G. Metters, still a chaplain in the United States Navy, so that his availability was in question. He had been most successful with young people in the Navy and was himself young. This was thought to be a valuable psychological change. The Bishop evidently secured his release for on January 15, 1946 he became Emmanuel's youngest rector at a salary of \$8,000 plus living quarters. He asked that Dr. Smith remain as associate minister temporarily.

Born in Norwood, Massachusetts, December 12, 1912, Robert Metters was the elder son of Dr. Harold G. Metters and Faith Crowell. Left a widow when her two sons were very young, Mrs. Metters did a superb job of supporting and educating them. After public school, Bob Metters graduated from Williams College in 1934, attended Union Theological Seminary in New York City in 1935, and graduated from the General Theological Seminary in New York in 1937.

In June 1942 he married Ruth H. Tuckerman of Washington, D. C. They have two sons.

Robert Metters served as curate of St. Paul's Church in Chestnut Hill, Philadelphia, from June 1937 to November 1941 when he was commissioned a Navy chaplain. He was on duty at Naval Headquarters in Washington when the Japanese struck Pearl Harbor. Assigned to sea duty in 1942.

on the cruiser *Cleveland*, he took part in the invasion of North Africa at Casablanca, and thereafter in the South Pacific campaign, receiving a citation from the Secretary of the Navy. He had five battle stars. In 1944 he became Chaplain of the Naval Reserve Midshipmen's School at Columbia University. It was from here that the Bishop secured him for Emmanuel.

It must have been a tremendous satisfaction to so young a man to be chosen for this church, carried in the past by famous and successful clergy. Perhaps only optimism and courage would have undertaken it.

The Bishop attended the Rector's first Vestry meeting, both to welcome him and to present the subject of the "Reconstruction and Advance Fund", primarily for reconstruction work in China and the Philippines. This would mean for Emmanuel twice its annual apportionment — namely, \$25,000. The Rector would have been superhuman had he not felt a twinge of regret that this large extra donation was lost to Emmanuel's own needs so early in his ministry.

The Rector's youth and enthusiasm were a great cleansing and refreshing experience after the depressing and disillusioning events of the past year. There can be no question that he faced a stupendous task of rebuilding the dignity and sensitive beauty of our Episcopal service. The collection of a scattered congregation needed immediate attention. The Rector felt that "the first emphasis was upon deepening of a sense of belonging, the importance of the church, and participation in its life apart from personalities. With the exception of Dr. Washburn's ministry, it seems apparent that the leadership of the church from the beginning had been in the hands of distinctive individualists and that much of the loyalty of the parishioners had been associated with the personal appeal of individual rectors."

A major problem, however, was the change in the environment — now shops and rooming houses replaced the old family dwellings. This growing situation had been recognized by both Dr. Washburn and Dr. Osgood. A new program had to



The Rev. Robert Gifford Metters

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be evolved for students and working people, and a large group of elderly people.

At his first Annual Meeting in 1947, the Rector stated that after six months he was convinced that there was abundant life in the Parish shown by both money raised for the current budget, as well as the Reconstruction and Advance Fund, and by attendance at services, but that he was greatly concerned with the appalling, shabby condition of the church property — a serious detriment to the building up of a congregation.

The chancel organ alone had not been touched or cleaned in twenty-nine years — a minimum of \$1,500 was needed — and the other two organs needed repairs also. The Rector recommended a careful survey of all church property by the Property Committee and to establish a working program by which some restoration should be done each year within budget possibilities. The Committee returned a shocking report on the requirements needed to make the church presentable and properly functional. A long and expensive program loomed ahead.

Early in his ministry the Rector asked for Grover J. Oberle as organist. With his coming, Emmanuel was blessed with another gifted musician.

Emmanuelites never seem to develop the habit of participating actively in the service. The Rector suggested we “worship together”, each member taking his rightful part. “Make the hymns and canticles yours by singing them heartily — make the prayers yours by saying Amen.” Between the Rector and the organist, some progress was made.

The Rector was encouraged that his first every member canvass showed an increase over last year of nearly \$15,000 and 101 new pledges. A questionnaire had gone out with the pledge cards which revealed that in lieu of 1,000 communicants listed and reported to him at the time of his coming, there were but 375 that could be counted as communicants. This was quite a staggering blow. They were just names — not interested in Emmanuel — or had moved away long ago.

In October 1949 the Rector appointed an Executive Committee to form a Service Organization of the women of the parish with the purpose "to find a suitable responsibility for every woman in Emmanuel." By December the Women's Church Service League was underway and plans made to follow, at least in part, the Diocesan program for women's parish work. Many of the activities had been going on for many years, even back to Dr. Huntington's and Dr. Vinton's day when the latter organized the "Parish Association." The work was perhaps more integrated with an Executive Committee to direct it.

The Vestry minutes of February 17, 1949 report an innovation. It was voted that a woman member of the Church Service League "be invited to attend all meetings of the Vestry for one year, without official status but with full right to initiate comment and discuss any matter, and to report to the ladies group of the parish." Apparently she passed muster for she was formally elected to the Vestry the following year, and during the next several years four other women served on the Vestry. The problem of ways and means was at this time the main concern of the Vestry — and in these years the necessary restoration of the church was paramount; especially important because of the appalling news that the church floor was unsafe, due to deterioration of supporting beams and joists. This was the deciding factor in the sale of 11 and 13 Newbury Street for \$140,000. The Vestry was then able to approve a wide range of improvements and restoration which, when completed, put the total church property in excellent working condition.

In 1948 the Bishop again asked for a World Relief Fund, and also in 1950 another appeal for overseas relief — "One World in Christ." Of course, Emmanuel must participate generously, but these requests surely meant a deduction for Emmanuel's needs.

Mr. Metters made an especial appeal to youth. Believing them to be the future church, he early developed a young

people's group which met every other week. The Emmanuel Club for young adults, as he devised it, met for discussion on their own terms, but always against a background of the Church's faith. Though the topics were chosen largely by the group — and they ranged far afield, the meetings ended with an application to the Christian way of life.

Mr. Metters was much in demand to speak and preach at schools and colleges, including Middlesex, Groton, Lawrenceville, Milton Academy, Harvard and Williams.

His marriage counselling of young couples was in many cases a red letter day in their lives. So close did they feel towards him that many brought their children back from afar to be christened by him.

Of course every minister performs the services of Baptism, Confirmation, Marriage, Burial and calls on the sick, as did Bob Metters. Only those who were close to him knew that a great part of his time was spent with people who came to him searching for an answer to their personal problems and sorrows. As he once said — "some to talk of dying, some to talk on religion, some to consider aloud the subject of themselves — the young girl with a sense of guilt, the parent deeply concerned about her child, the man contemplating suicide." These perhaps are a part of every clergyman's ministry, but only in Dr. Worcester's day did the appointments pile up as they did for Mr. Metters. This took so much of his time that parish visiting, except on request and for the sick, was almost impossible for him. There were only twenty-four hours a day and because he had to make the choice of giving of himself and of his time to the urgent emergency need, some of his parishioners felt neglected. A thoughtful, generous person could hardly gainsay him this choice.

His awareness of the importance of religion in mental health was shown in many ways. He was President of the Massachusetts Association for Mental Health for several years, and a member of the Board of Directors of the National Association for Mental Health. For some years Emmanuel housed a Pas-

toral Counselling Center under the Rev. Rollin J. Fairbanks, D.D., with a staff of four — two Episcopalians, a Methodist and a Baptist. This was an off-shoot of the Craigie Foundation and followed Dr. Worcester's death. Also, the Rector chose for his associates the Rev. Robert Shaw and the Rev. Charles C. Howse, men interested in Mental Health as a church function, and for years held weekly Healing Services in the chapel on Wednesday mornings. As the Rector reports in the year book — "Hundreds of individuals came to these Healing Services for help — the poor in spirit, the broken hearted, the sick in body and soul, the prisoners of inhibitions and rampant appetites and uncontrolled desires. Many a grateful person has experienced through this ministry for the first time the difference in life that faith in God can make."

His communion services were memorable — beautifully and devoutly read. One older parishioner remarked, "In my many years of attending Emmanuel services, I have never experienced a more reverent or more moving communion service than that conducted by the Rector."

During Lent the Rector and the associate each gave a series of talks on subjects as the "Use of the Prayer Book" or "Personal Religion" — but also there was always an excellent course of six Lenten Lectures on Wednesday evenings, preceded by Evensong, supper and an old-fashioned Hymn-Sing. These series were well thought out with a general over-all theme such as "Religion and Mental Health," "Worship in the Church," etc., with excellent speakers. They were very well attended.

In 1948 the Vestry voted the sum of \$1200 for the work of the Women's Church Service League. This was to be a revolving fund and the women were thereafter expected to raise their own funds, — "It was the sense of the meeting that if there was any surplus income available, the Ladies Committee should have the privilege of devoting it to some specific church work." It may be of interest to know how well the women have "raised their own funds and what they have done

with the 'surplus income'."

From fifteen money raising events between 1948 and 1958 — Cooking Classes, Theatre events, Ballet, Readings, Concerts, Auctions and Fairs — The Women's Church Service League has netted \$21,236. This does not include the Parish Festival in 1954 where \$6,500 was raised, very largely by the women, of which \$1,500 was returned to the League for its annual budget. \$1,000 was added to the Diocesan quota, and the remainder went towards the new lighting in the church. Of the \$21,236 raised, \$5,127 was given to Emmanuel for specific purposes, \$3,677 to the Diocese, and the balance was used for the League program and obligations.

In May 1949 The League invited a group of women unable to attend daytime meetings to a special evening supper for the purpose of forming an evening program. This immediately "took hold" and by the following winter The Business and Professional Women's Guild was well on its way. It has proved to be an active and vigorous group, meeting once a month. Although a part of the Church Service League, it has its own officers, and sets up its own programs, projects and money raising events.

The Diocese of Massachusetts was host to the General Convention — the official legislative body of the Episcopal Church which meets every three years in a different city — from September 7 to 19, 1952. About 1500 official delegates and several thousand visitors came to Boston for this event. In 1904, the last time the General Convention met in Boston, Emmanuel, just rebuilt, was the meeting place of the House of Deputies.

Emmanuel had an important part in this convention. The Rector and an impressive number of Emmanuel members held responsible positions on the General Convention Committee, working for over a year perfecting the thousand details of the program. No parish in the Diocese provided more key leadership. Also, our Church and our Parish House, and our competent staff, with able volunteers, carried a tremendous load of services, meetings, and meals. Our hospitality was warm

and gracious, and it was enjoyed and appreciated, as was our beautiful church.

In 1950 a house was bought for the Rector and his family at 10 Chestnut Street, — so once again Emmanuel had a Rectory.

The Rector announced on July 4, 1955, the appointment of the Rev. David Siegenthaler as curate. He explained that in his duties as curate, "he will be my assistant in all phases of the work, whether administrative, educational or pastoral, rather than an associate to whom a special area of responsibility is normally assigned."

David Siegenthaler, in speaking of his curacy here, says, "Bob Metters will always be to me the gentlest of rectors. He knew when to rein raw youth and when to give it its head. He taught a great deal, and always in an unassuming and fond way." It may well be that this "way" was the answer to his great success with young people.

Mr. Metters served the community and the Diocese as actively as any past Rector of Emmanuel; he was on many important committees in both fields.

In his report to the Annual meeting, March 1956, the Rector summarized his ten years at Emmanuel. A few statistics therefrom should be of interest: 183 baptisms, 177 confirmations, 234 marriages, 226 burials, and 324 communicants added by letter of transfer. The invested funds of the church increased from \$439,693 to \$552,971. Pledges increased from \$22,046 to \$42,743; also, annual collections, a thousand dollars more, which would seem to indicate a growing congregation.

The entire church and parish house had been extensively renovated at a cost in excess of \$115,000. With this major task behind them, and the organs again in good condition at a cost of over \$3,000, the Rector and Vestry had a right to look ahead to a change in emphasis, to the advancement of the ministry of the church in the heart of a changing city.

Emmanuel parishioners were therefore stunned to learn that Mr. Metters had sent in his resignation to become effective

October 1, 1956. He had discussed this with the Bishop and the Wardens in the spring, but they had urged him, because of his great fatigue at that time, to wait until after his summer at Nantucket which in the past had renewed his vigor and enthusiasm; but his decision did not waver.

Bob Metters was not a great preacher; his was not really a pastoral ministry, but rather as he himself had said, "The ministry of Emmanuel is especially a ministry to the individual in need." And here he excelled enormously. So there were hosts of grateful people who lamented his departure and who will miss his compassionate understanding for years to come. The members of the Church Service League will also miss him, for, under no rectorship, did the women of the Parish receive warmer or more appreciative recognition of their love and endeavors in behalf of Emmanuel.

Mr. Metters is now Headmaster of St. George's School for boys in Spokane, Washington, where he is extremely happy and successful.