

BACK IN TIME

In 1963: A pastor's final sermon

By **DICK SHEARER**

Revisiting history almost always turns up a surprise or two. Recently as we scoured old issues of *The Reporter* in preparation for our February 12 *Rewind 1963* program, one story popped up that drew our immediate attention.

Fifty years ago Zwingli United Church of Christ in Souderton was preparing to move into a new house of worship. Like many congregations in the North Penn Valley, the post-war population boom was forcing Zwingli to leave its home since 1887 for bigger quarters.

This was a bitter-sweet time for members who grew up with the old stone church on North Main Street. It was decided that it would be most appropriate to invite the Rev. Alfred M. Rahn to deliver the farewell sermon on Sunday, June 9, 1963.



Souderton's old Zwingli church

He was the logical choice; Pastor Rahn guided the congregation from 1918 to 1956, a rather remarkable stretch of service to a single congregation. It was an assignment the 80-year-old clergyman accepted as an honor.

The sermon he prepared was entitled "Past and Future", which he began with a retrospective of Zwingli's history:

"The church had its beginning in 1887 and it has been there for 75 years. Its door will be closed and its voice stilled today," he said.

"This is a solemn moment for us all. The living and the dead are here this morning to pay their last respects to her departure. Here in this Zwingli Church today there are some 300 of us worshipping God. I venture to think that 99 parts of this service are contributed by those whom we call the dead. Who are they?"

"Blown in here upon the winds as it were a few transient moments, what have we to do with Zwingli Church? This is a place that is full of memories.

"Most of the hands that built this place, laying brick upon brick, stone upon stone, are stiff in the grave today."

Pastor Rahn then recounted the names of the first consistory. "Your beloved dead and mine, who worshipped here are present with us today," he said.

He also recounted how the old church was an important part of his life. His first wife, Blanche, who died in 1958, and a daughter, Arlene, who passed away in 1962, were buried in the churchyard.

"It is only by the grace of God that I am here today to join with you."

At this point, Pastor Rahn launched into his sermon based on *Ezra 3:12-13*:

"...But many ... old men who have seen the first house, wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of this

house being laid ..."

He continued, "This book begins with an account of the release of the Jews from captivity in Babylon and their return to Palestine when the great Babylonian Empire fell ..."

Those were his last words. The elderly clergyman slumped over the pulpit then fell to the floor dead of a cerebral hemorrhage.

As it turned out, this was not the final service at old Zwingli church. The Rev. Alfred Rahn's funeral was held there three days later.

Join us Tuesday, February 12, 7:30 p.m., at the Lansdale Parks and Recreation Building, 7th St. and Lansdale Ave., for *Rewind 1963*. It was a year to remember – the Kennedy assassination, singer Peggy March's rise to fame, racial unrest in the South, a tragic military plane crash into a Horsham day camp, a water shortage that gripped the area, and much more.