

Remembering Jim

JANE K. SWANSON-NYSTROM

James R. Hawkinson told the stories, sang the songs, crafted the message, promoted the fellowship, and gathered the people of the Covenant Church for more than fifty years. Jim, former editor of *The Covenant Companion* and executive secretary emeritus of Covenant publications, died May 24, following heart surgery. He was eighty.

He was born July 9, 1930, in Oak Park, Illinois, to Eric and Lydia Hawkinson. His father was, at that time, pastor of the Austin Covenant Church in Chicago. When Jim was four, Eric joined the faculty of North Park Seminary, and the family moved to the north side of the city, where they became active at North Park Covenant Church. Jim received his education at North Park Junior College, Augustana College, and North Park Seminary, and continued his studies at the University of Chicago Divinity School. On June 11, 1954, he married Alyce Larson.

Ordained in 1956, Jim served as associate pastor of Redeemer Covenant Church in Chicago and as pastor of the Covenant churches in Paxton, Illinois, and Hilmar, California. Soon after arriving in Hilmar, he was asked if he would also serve as the interim editor of the *Covenanter*, the newsletter of the California Conference. The temporary position grew into a three-year commitment, and led to an invitation by then Covenant president Clarence Nelson to become the executive editor of publications for the denomination, with primary responsibility for the three peri-

odicals—the *Companion*, the *Home Altar*, and the *Covenant Quarterly*.

Jim and Alyce, and their growing family, moved back to Chicago in the fall of 1966, and he joined the staff of the Department of Publications. At age thirty-six, he quietly stepped into the role of editor—there was no announcement in the *Companion* of his arrival, no byline on his first editorial in the October 21 issue to identify its authorship—only a notation in the year-end index. For the first few years, he wrote as many as two editorials for each biweekly magazine—the *Companion* did not become a monthly magazine until 1984—and by his retirement in 1994, Jim had written more than 560 articles under the “In Conclusion” banner on the back page.

In 1970 Jim was elected executive secretary of publications, succeeding Carl Philip Anderson, and his responsibilities grew to include the church’s publishing house—Covenant Press, later changed to Covenant Publications—and Covenant Bookstore.

During Jim’s tenure, Covenant Press built up its catalog, adding more than fifty new titles that promoted Covenant authors, explored Covenant theology, provided historical context, and contributed a wealth of worship and educational resources. Jim served on two different hymnal commissions (red and blue), and guided the production of the 1981 *Book of Worship*, two separate confirmation curricula, inquirer’s class materials, and a number of song books that introduced both the works of young Covenant composers and lyricists and new



translations of early Covenant hymnody. Jim also served as chair of the Centennial Committee, guiding years of preparation for the Covenant’s celebration in Minneapolis 1985, and overseeing the work of seventeen different committees and subcommittees.

Through an aggressive promotion of the *Companion*’s Every Family Plan, he built up the magazine’s subscription to 33,600 in 1975, when membership in the denomination was 71,253. He worked hard to make the department financially self-sufficient, both to offer the church a sustainable service and to maintain editorial independence. For many years, he and Alyce led the popular Companion Tours to Europe, which helped support Covenant Publications’ bottom line.

When Jim started in 1966, his responsibilities included delivering the copy to a company that prepared each issue using hot-metal typesetting. Always keenly interested in technology, Jim kept current with developments in the industry, and invested in photographic typesetting equipment, and later began the transition to computerized publishing. He also established a print shop and copy service for Covenant Offices, and developed Covenant Press Video, which produced videos and provided recording and viewing equipment to subscribing churches.

With a theologian’s mind and a pastor’s heart, Jim was guided by a deep commitment to building community within the church. “I recognized early in the pastorate that most of our

differences in the Covenant were more personal than theological,” he said in a *Companion* interview at the time of his retirement. “My goal was to bridge these differences and get people together. The wisdom lies in the body and not in one or another of us.”

His interest in building relationship extended beyond the pages of any magazine or book. Jim often traveled to preach at local churches and speak at special events. And wherever he went, he brought stories of Covenant heritage and encouraged participation of individuals new and old to the church.

Following retirement, Jim and Alyce moved to White Bear Lake, Minnesota, where he set to work on *Glad Hearts*, a 600-paged anthology of voices from Covenant literature. He also returned to pastoral work, serving as interim pastor at several churches, and as visitation pastor at Salem Covenant Church in New Brighton, Minnesota. In recent years he discovered a new outlet for his prolific voice—his blog *Rooted Wings*.

“I can never think of Jim with anything but fondness and thanksgiving,” said John E. Phelan Jr., who was his successor at Covenant Publications. “He was the best of Pietism, a firm-hearted friend, a generous mentor, and loving spirit. Most of all, like every good Pietist, he loved Jesus. His work will endure through his many writings and his many friends. His great spirit will endure in all who loved him and were loved by him.”

Jim is survived by his wife, Alyce; five children, Judy (Bob) Stromberg, Eric (Patty), Mary (Bob) Manning, Peter (Bonnie), and Paul (Kristin); sixteen grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren. He was preceded in death by his brother, Zenos. A funeral service was held May 30 at Salem Covenant Church, and a memorial service was held June 1 at North Park Covenant Church in Chicago. The family has designated memorials for the Presidential Scholarship Fund at North Park Theological Seminary. Peace to his memory. ■

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I Stand by My Church

JAMES R. HAWKINSON

We are hearing a lot these days about the failure of the church. Some say it is doomed to die because God is dead. Others predict its demise because of its lack of “relevance” to the modern day, whatever that means. Still others see the church as a great waste of time, energy, and money—the type of thing an “intelligent” person no longer has need for in our kind of world.

Such people are not so much against the church, they are simply ignoring it. It is no longer important to them one way or the other, no longer a thing to be reckoned with. We dare no longer pretend that such voices are few and far between. One can hear them everywhere, even when there is no speech.

The silent turning away of the multitudes from real and specific commitment is its own eloquent witness to their feelings about the church and its worth. We are near enough to the roots of our own heritage as Protestants to realize, almost instinctively, the danger of closing our ears to all this. We cannot afford to be caught napping. Nor do we want to be found defending something that God himself may have rejected. There is always a danger in being oblivious to constructive criticism. God may well be speaking to us now!

Yet, because of the pressure—and perhaps at least in measure because of our own sense of inferiority—we are much too prone to lie down before it all and cry, rather hopelessly, “Well, maybe they are right; we had best be careful; maybe we’ve been too sure; after all, who are we?” Thus the corrosion grows, fed by fear—like heat shed from a fire already begun. Our mouths are stopped by the roaring flames, and we retreat to wait and hope against hope for better days. Perhaps God himself will intervene.

Soon it is no longer the church in general that is questioned—that we could stand without too much strain—but our church and our faith and our ways. Everyone has a word to add—more fuel for the fire—and each new spokesperson is sure beyond doubt that his or her word will settle the issue. Has not God himself sent them? The old church staggers, but surely

not only from crumbling mortar. We kick it and beat it and salt its wounds while the skeptics laugh in derision and unnerved friends chip away at the foundations.

Will no one stand to defend my church? Will all its friends be silent? Is criticism all we shall hear? Is no one being redeemed? Are none being nurtured? Is there death only at the heart, and not life? Where are the patriots’ voices? Where are the friends?

I will be a fool! I love the church. And I love my church. I love its institutions, though I am not unaware of their faults. I love its worship. I am revived daily by its quiet, yet constant fellowship. I love its hymns, and the word it proclaims. I treasure its celebrations of the sacraments. I honor its teachers. I salute its servants. I stand behind its leaders. I laud its achievements and I love its aspirations.

The church shall be judged, of course, and in many things found wanting. I know that, and I reserve the right to criticize the church myself. It needs to be judged, and so do I. But we have been promised that not even the gates of hell will prevail against it, because it belongs to Christ and was built from the very beginning on that foundation. It cannot be destroyed from without or within by us. We do not have the power to destroy it. The church’s parentage is divine and its foundations are secure.

If the Lord tears it down it will only be to build something greater. We must be ready for that. Yet for now, in this climate of unrest, when it suffers so much from foe and friend alike, let me raise a song to the church from the heart.

I stand gladly in its battlements. I participate joyfully in its wider ministry, and in the seeking with it of that renewal we all so sorely need. While many cry out the news of its death, let me hail its life. For I believe in the church and love it, and will stay by it with joy until the end. ■

James R. Hawkinson (1930–2011), executive secretary emeritus of publications and editor of the *Companion* from 1966 to 1994, originally wrote this article for publication in *The California Covenanter*, the newsletter of the California Conference (now Pacific Southwest Conference), of which he was the editor. It appeared in the November 25, 1965, issue. It was reprinted in *The Covenant Companion*, January 1, 1983.