

# Harry Theodore Morris: 1899-1946

MARTIN RIST

"**I** HAVE always contended that the Church is far more important than any member of it; and likewise, The Iliff School of Theology is far more important than any member of its staff." These words were spoken by Dr. Harry T. Morris, President of The Iliff School of Theology, from his hospital bed three days before his untimely death, which occurred on February 14. They serve to epitomize his dauntless spirit and his churchmanship far more eloquently than anything that we might say concerning him. Sick though he was, as he uttered these words he was planning how he would carry through to completion the program for the development and expansion of the School, which he, as the administrative head, had inaugurated and was responsible for. He confidently expected to be back in his office by early summer, if not sooner, working hard at his appointed task; but if this was not to be, he ardently desired that the program that was underway should be completed successfully and triumphantly, regardless of what happened to him.

He was born in Jerico Springs, Missouri, on February 23, 1899. As a young boy he knew what hard work was like, for very early in life he helped his widowed mother by selling papers, driving cows to and from pasture, and doing similar odd jobs. Always a good student, he graduated from high school before he was sixteen years old. Eager for further education, he attended the Southwest Missouri State Teachers' College in Springfield, Missouri. Despite his youth, he enlisted in the army during World War I, and received his commission as First Lieutenant by the time the Armistice was signed. It was at this Teachers' College that he met

Miss Gayle Wheeler, who became his bride in 1920. For a period of time he engaged in business, first in his native Missouri and later in Colorado.

Always devoted to the church, he decided to become a Methodist preacher even though his success in business was assured. This decision required further education which he obtained at Missouri Wesleyan University, from which he received the A. B. degree, and at The Iliff School of Theology, from which he received the B. D. degree in 1928 and the Th.D. in 1929. During his academic career he made an enviable record; in fact, he was the first student in Iliff to receive the Th. D. degree.

During his student days he served pastorates in Hudson, Colorado, Kidder, Missouri, and the Merritt Memorial Church in Denver. Before his graduation he was appointed to Holyoke, Colorado, and then in succession was a pastor in Ogden, Utah, Santa Fe, New Mexico, and El Paso, Texas. These widely separated churches were quite different in character, and provided Dr. Morris with a rich and varied experience. In the best sense of the word these pastorates were all successful, for he imparted to the members of the churches which he served part of his indomitable will, his optimistic spirit, and his Christian character.

In June, 1937, he was appointed to the Park Hill Methodist Church in Denver. Shortly before this appointment he had received a telegram from the board of trustees of a Methodist college urging him to accept the presidency of their school; but the financial problems facing this Denver church, together with its prospects for significant growth, provided a challenge which he could not resist. During his

pastorate the crippling debt was successfully refinanced, the membership increased, and the church placed upon a firm spiritual as well as temporal foundation.

It was during this period of his life that he was elected to the board of trustees of The Iliff School of Theology. He soon became a leading member of the board, and in this capacity became intimately acquainted with the various aspects of the school, its organization, its finances, its faculty and curriculum, its student body, and its perplexing problems. However, and this was typical of his whole life, he paid far greater attention to its opportunities, not merely for growth and development, but for greater service. Accordingly in June, 1942, he was the logical choice to succeed Dr. Charles E. Schofield as president.

As president he had many duties and responsibilities, which he undertook with his characteristic vigor and enthusiasm. Students will remember him as a friend and counsellor, for he truly considered himself to be their pastor, since he now had no church of his own. He presided over faculty meetings with genial good humor, ever ready to cooperate with his faculty (several of whom had been his teachers when he was a student), but at the same time ever alert to recommend new courses and new methods of instruction. It was his desire that the curriculum be well-balanced between the more academic and theoretical disciplines and the more practical and professional courses. In keeping with the liberal tradition of the School, and with his own convictions as well, he staunchly defended the principles of academic freedom and scholarly inquiry.

Further, he was always ready to present the School and its interests both locally and throughout the church at large. With his warm-hearted, dynamic personality he represented the School

in an effective manner, making it known, and known favorably, wherever he went. This might be in a country church, or a large city church; at a Lions Club dinner; a church conference, or an educational meeting, on a college campus; in a business man's office, or in a private home; but wherever it was, his main interest was to promote the School and its work.

As stated in the beginning, Dr. Morris was a churchman. As a member of the Colorado Conference he held a position of leadership, not by reason of his office, but because of his personality, character, and ability. He was elected as a delegate to both the Jurisdictional and General Conferences. He was a member of various church boards and committees, among them the Board of Ministerial Training of the Colorado Conference, the Board of Education of the Western Jurisdiction (he was chairman of this board), the Board of Publications of the Methodist Church, and the national board of the Federal Council of Churches.

However, no doubt his greatest contribution to the church is to be found in his recognition of the need, and his clear vision of the possibilities, for theological education in this vast western country. Within a radius of hundreds of miles in every direction The Iliff School of Theology is the only accredited graduate school of theology of any Protestant denomination. With this in mind, President Morris envisioned a school that would adequately serve the needs of this great territory not only for the present but also for the next generation or two, thereby providing in advance for the anticipated growth of population in this western region.

More specifically, he saw the need for the expansion of the physical properties of the School and planned for the erection of new buildings, including dormitories and a library wing. He also saw the necessity of adding new mem-

bers to the faculty,, thereby enriching the curriculum. Likewise, in the face of a serious shortage of ministerial candidates that is confronting all Protestant churches, he realized the necessity for a recruiting program that would enlist the best young men in our colleges for the Christian ministry, and also provide them with adequate scholarship aid as they pursued their theological education.

All this, of course, could not be done without greatly increased financial resources. Characteristically, therefore, he proceeded to make his vision a reality. With the approval and enthusiastic support of the board of trustees he inaugurated a campaign to raise \$500,000 for this program of expansion and development. During the last months of his life he gave himself without reserve to organizing and supervising this campaign, and in most cases raised the money in person. Despite the short period of time in which he was permitted to do this, more than \$100,000 was pledged or in hand at the time of his death, and more was in sight as a result of his efforts. It was his earnest desire, as he lay in the hospital fighting for his own life, that this program be carried through to a successful conclusion, that his vision of an adequate theological center in Denver might soon become an actuality. He, unfortunately, did not live to see this happen; however, it is most fitting that a greatly-needed dormitory for married students, which will be erected as soon as conditions permit, will bear his name as a visible memorial of his contributions to the school and to the church.

We have spoken of Dr. Morris as a churchman and an educator; it now remains to speak of him as a man. Everyone who knew him realized that he was a true and devoted Christian in his personal life, doing his best to exemplify the principles he had preached and

taught. His family—consisting of his loyal and capable wife and two charming daughters, Betty Carolyn and Nancy Jane (Mrs. Robert Gleason)—was a unit that enjoyed simple pleasures together. He had a great and sincere love for people as individuals, and was mourned by a host of friends who were attracted to his genial and wholesome personality. He also had a great love for the outdoor world, so that his hobbies consisted of the study of wild life and wild flowers. While in Utah he developed a keen interest in the Mormons, and in Santa Fe and El Paso he became vitally interested in the Spanish Americans, their history and customs, and the growing responsibility of the Protestant church for their religious nurture. During his pastorate in Santa Fe he was chaplain of the state senate. Also, at this time he explored various trails and canyons near the city, and discovered some ancient Indian pictographs on a cavern wall which had escaped the notice of trained investigators. His social life was quite full. He was a 32nd degree Mason, and among other organizations he belonged to the Lions Club. Best of all, however, he enjoyed a quiet evening at home with his family and a group of friends, or a picnic in the nearby mountains, where he liked to perform the duties of chef.

At one time in his business career he had been a funeral director. This, coupled with his experience as a pastor, led him to the firm conviction that our funerals all too often had degenerated into vulgar, pagan displays unworthy of the Christian religion. Accordingly, he had no funeral in the accepted sense of the term. His mortal remains were cremated, to be scattered on his beloved mountains later on. A simple memorial, without casket, flowers, or other display, was conducted in the chapel of the Park Hill Methodist Church which he

had served so capably as pastor, and later on a similar memorial was held in the chapel of The Iliff School of Theology, where his memory will ever be cherished.

It is fitting to conclude this memoir with the last sentence of a letter which he dictated to his faculty from the hos-

pital as he thought and planned about the future of the School: "So I say in closing, God bless The Iliff School of Theology; God make her valiant and courageous; but, above all else, may God make her effective in training shepherds of the bewildered flocks that scatter the earth."