Chapter 1

Alter and Mack

Little did I know on that snowless February Sunday in 1966 when I first entered The Fort what adventures lay ahead. I knew about a War in Vietnam: mealtime prayers always included the petition, “Be with the men and boys in Vietnam.” But as a White boy growing up in the Dutch-American communities of West Michigan, I knew nothing about Civil Rights; nothing about Montgomery, Birmingham, or Selma. I had never heard about that far-away place called Alabama, about Rosa Parks or Dr. Martin Luther Kings, Jr. I know nothing about a March on Washington. My innocent childhood mind was filled with dreams, but they were dreams that were far different from those of Dr. King. I was a boy dreaming of adventure. Especially the new adventure our family began three days earlier. The adventure of living in what my mother called “a nice neighborhood.” Of living in a house with a (half) bathroom on the main floor and a real family room. The adventure of exploring the metropolitan area whose map I had studied; communities with names like Lincoln Park, Allen Park, Highland Park (so many “Parks”,) five Grosse Pointes and a Grosse Isle, Hamtramck, Harper Woods and St. Clair Shores. Adventures of riding city busses and of exploring new streets on my one speed Murray bicycle. Adventure of shopping at J.L Hudson’s in downtown Detroit, the second largest department store in the world and sponsor of one of the Thanksgiving Day parades we watched at grandma’s house. Dreams of our family bundling up and attending that parade some year and of being on TV. These were the

dreams of a nine-year-old boy, centered around what life will be like in the big, exotic city of Detroit, far away, on the opposite side of Michigan's mitten from our old home in Kalamazoo.

Nor did the people who squeezed into the pews and overflow sears of The Fort that Sabbath morning know the pilgrimage we, they and I , would take together over the next eight years; pilgrimage in which their lives and mine would intersect and be influenced by historic events that would make national news; race riots, Dr. King's "Other America," the national debate about forced bussing for racial desegregation. On that Sunday, they knew nothing of these future adventures, nor did they know then that I, child of that new family in town, would one day become a "Son of the Church," a great honor given to any congregation that has one of its boys grow up to become a minister. They did not know how deeply the tensions of the next eight years would affect this child's dreams of living a rewarding life as a missionary in some faraway place like Africa, a dream that was just as spiritual to me as the dream Dr. King articulated at the end of the Walk to Freedom March in Detroit in 1963 and later on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. And they did not know on that day that this boy's dream would culminate in that mysterious, almost mystical vision that people gathered at The Fort that day believed in but couldn't quite explain. They simply referred to it as "the call," a divine injunction to enter full-time ministry as the pastor of a church.

The worshippers that gathered in The Fort knew nothing of these things as they gathered. What they did know was what they believed. They believed whole-heartedly in the Christian faith. Their faith was formed and nurtured by the teachings of the sixteenth century Protestant Reformer, John Calvin (1509-1564.) From Calvin they learned that God was Sovereign over all of life. God was the King, the Ruler of the Universe. Jesus Christ was Lord. According to Calvin, the human problem was that they have rebelled against God's authority, which was sin against

God. These worshippers believed in the need to acknowledge and to repent, which for them meant to turn away from their sin. They believed the death of Jesus Christ on the cross nearly 2,000 years earlier allowed God to grant them forgiveness. They believed that those who embraced Christ would have their sin washed away by His blood and be granted salvation or a new life. This new life was not just something they would experience someday in heaven, but also something they were to live out on a daily basis in this world. Their challenge was to now live this new life of obedience, motivated by love and gratitude for what God had done for them in Jesus Christ. Calvin's teachings were embraced by the Dutch during the Reformation and were the theological basis of the Dutch Reformed tradition. The worshippers in The Fort that Sunday morning knew who they were: Dutch, Calvinistic Christians.

They also knew that they were gathered in The Fort that Sunday morning not to dream but to gain spiritual strength and refreshment through worship. They were there to worship that Almighty, Sovereign God they believed in, using the familiar patterns and rituals that were so meaningful to their Dutch Reformed souls: singing from the blue *Psalter Hymnal* (the only hymnal approved by the denomination for use in Sunday worship) accompanied by the massive pipe organ; hearing the Ten Commandments read out of the King James Version of the Bible; confessing their sinfulness, being assured once again that forgiveness could only be found in the work of Christ on the cross; having the pastor bring their personal burdens and the burdens of the world before what they call the Throne of Grace (from which God ruled); and most importantly receiving instruction from God's Holy Word, the Bible. The service ended, as always, with the pastor raising his arms and pronouncing God's blessings on these Detroiters:

The Lord bless thee, and keep thee:

The Lord make his face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee:

The Lord lift up his countenance upon thee and give thee peace.

Amen.

To which the congregation responded by singing the doxology, a traditional and well-known song of praise:

Praise God from Whom all blessings flow,

Praise Him all people here below,

Praise Him above Ye heavenly hosts,

Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen

No one had the slightest inkling of how God would in fact not only bless them but also make them a blessing to that nine-year-old boy, and to people throughout the city, across the country, and around the world in the years to come.

Two historical events set the stage for the future drama that would be played out in and around The Fort. They are two very different stories of ethnic communities who picked up and moved in search of freedom. Two Stories drawn from the Great American Story, of which they were a part: one a small paragraph in the chapter entitled “Immigration,” tucked between the founding of the 13 Colonies and the establishment of Ellis Island; the second, a major section of the chapter entitled “The African-American Experience.”

The first is the story of The Great Trek, a nineteenth century re-enactment of the American Thanksgiving Day legend of 1620-1621. William Brewster is played by Albertus Van Raalte, a Calvinistic minister. The English Pilgrims become the *Afgescheidenen* (a Dutch word usually translated as "Separatists"). The *Mayflower* is now *The Southerner.* Plymouth Massachusetts becomes Holland, Michigan. The part of the friendly Wampanoag Indians is played by the Odawa tribe, "good" Indians who help the White settlers and ensure their success. The plot centers on a spiritual community intent on re-creating Calvin's Geneva, a community in the Promised Land of America living under God's laws. Like any good remake, "The Great Trek" includes an interesting twist in the story. In the original version, the English Puritans spend time at the beginning of their pilgrimage in the Netherlands, where they were warmly welcomed but feared cultural and spiritual danger to their children if they continued to live among the Dutch Reformed Calvinists whose crude, guttural language their children were beginning to pick up. In the 1846 remake, the Dutch Puritans spend a winter in Detroit, where they are warmly welcomed by the leaders and members of the First Presbyterian Church, the spiritual heirs of the English Pilgrims. Like the English before them, the Dutch leaders of The Great Trek were worried about the cultural and spiritual dangers they would face if they settled in the big city of Detroit (population of over 9,000 people). These farmers had already journeyed through New York City, Albany, and Buffalo, all of which har large Dutch settlements. They never for a moment considered ending their pilgrimage in Detroit, a mixed community of French and English settlers that served as the capital of the State of Michigan. Instead, after wintering in Detroit they moved across the state of Michigan and created their own settlement, which they named Holland. In 1857 these American Separatists broke away from the Reformed Church in

America with which they originally affiliated and formed the Christian Reformed Church. The Fort was on of the congregations that formed the Christian Reformed Church (CRC).

The Dutch farmers of the Great Trek intended to settle in Wisconsin, but when the political, religious and economic leaders of the young state of Michigan learned of their presence in Detroit they made a concerted effort to encourage them to settle in their state. As Judge Romeyn of Detroit wrote: “the [Dutch] would bring a most valuable class among us, if they selected our state as their destination.” The state leaders hosted Van Raalte on a trip across the state in December 1846, and met at First Presbyterian Church in Detroit on January 22, 1847, where they committed themselves in their efforts, and with money loaned to him by these leaders Van Raalte purchased 3,000 acres for $7,000 in order to establish his colony.

A mile and a half southeast of First Presbyterian Church on Fort Street was the congregation of the Second Baptist Church of Detroit, who met in a rented hall. They were also hosting new arrival to Michigan in that winter of 1846-1847. The Second Baptist Church had been established ten years earlier, in 1836, when 13 former slaves who were no longer willing to be relegated to the “nigger pews” of the First Baptist Church, who were upset about not being allowed to be baptized in the same waters as the White members, and who felt betrayed by their fellow White church members during Detroit’s first race riot, the “Blackburn Rebellion,” walked out and established a new congregation. Their current location, just a few blocks from the Detroit River separating the Untied States from British controlled Canada, became the final stop on the Underground Railroad for runaway slaves. There is no record of political figures suggesting that these newcomers “would bring a most valuable class among us, if they selected our state as their destination.” Rather the laws of they day, including the Constitution of the United States, and the

Fugitive Slave Act of 1793 required that these runaway slaves be apprehended and returned to their owners.