

SERVANT LEADERS AT FIRST UNITED METHODIST

BY HANNA SCHOCK & ANDREA WHITEHEAD

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But among you it will be different. Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant.

(Matthew 20:26)

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Any story of First Methodist Birmingham would be incomplete without mentioning some of the male leaders of this church over the last 50 years. **Ted Cramer, Walter Baker, Frank Dominick, Ralph Bates,** and **Fletcher Thorington** were all servants to this church, and we are deeply indebted to their service.

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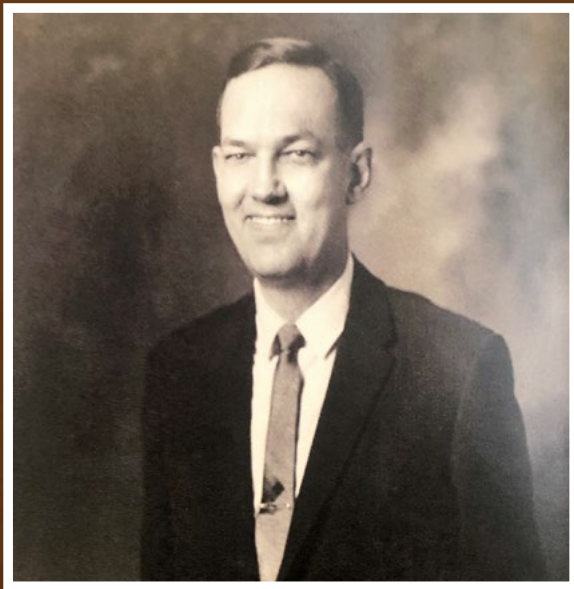
The writer of the book of Matthew had **Ted Cramer** in mind when writing the above scripture. Ted could solve any building problems, not by delegating but by addressing them himself. If the HVAC wasn't cooling adequately before a wedding, Ted was on site to handle it. If broken windows were beyond repair,

Ted replaced the entire frame. He kept the parsonages in repair, installing ceiling fans and adding door locks. Every Advent season he, along with a team he assembled, decorated the Christmas tree and hung the multiple wreaths. Ted was also licensed to preach and often filled in for our ministers in serving communion and visiting the sick. Ted kept a prayer list of names in his shirt pocket and daily spoke them aloud. There was no job too small for Ted!

Walter Baker joined First Methodist in the late 1940s and began helping as a youth counselor. He held every leadership role there was such as Sunday School Superintendent, Finance Committee chair, and Administrative Board chair. He got to know every young family that joined the church and directed them to areas he knew were in need of talent. Walter was one of the founders of the Wednesday Noonday series. He sought out speakers from the business community and other religious and political leaders. That series brought in hundreds of visitors to our church on a weekly basis. His vision helped propel the church's progress over several decades.



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Frank Dominick kept a much lower profile, but his personal ethics and words carried great weight in setting policy among the entire congregation. While helping raise seven children, Frank taught Sunday school, tutored adults to read in his law office, was active in the Civil Rights movement, delivered the Upper Room publication to Fair Haven Retirement Center, and rang the bell for the Salvation Army

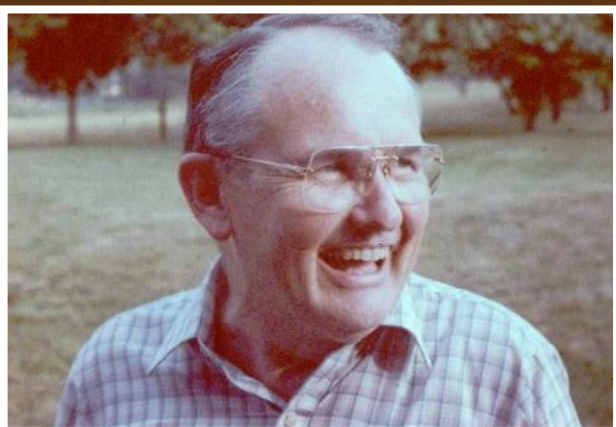
kettle. His daughter Ann remembers Frank arranging for Martin Luther King, Jr. to be released early from the Birmingham Jail to avoid the press and a possible riot. He did all this while helping fellow congregants in legal matters like buying a first house or adopting a child from another country. One might ask him why so busy? His answer to his children, who often accompanied him, was always the same, "It's the right thing to do." Truly his work was for a more inclusive society.



Ralph Bates was a consensus builder. He became our senior minister in 1978 and stayed until his retirement in 1991. He is credited for holding a group of diverse thinkers together in a fragile peace. Ralph worked with everyone, gently nudging us as a congregation to open our hearts and minds to a future of inclusion. Because of his counselor's training, he saw ways to move even the most reluctant parishioner forward regard-

ing race. His style was to encourage and trust the talents of those in charge. What a gift of preaching and ministry he brought to this church! During his sermons one could look around and see congregants taking notes on the important points he was making. He regularly quoted Carl Jung, Reinhold Niebuhr, Viktor Frankl, Paul Tillich, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Upon Ralph's death, Mary Ann, Ralph's wife, gave his scholarly sermons to a young ministerial student in hopes of helping that young man find the love of learning that Ralph had. Ralph made visiting those in need a priority. He and Executive Minister Fletcher Thorington spent countless hours visiting the sick in the hospital, at home, and on the phone showing how much he valued his members' lives. Most of all, Ralph loved and respected people. Whenever he saw a new face in the Sanctuary, he chased them into the parking lot to welcome them.

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We are most fortunate to count **Fletcher Thorington** among our members today. Fletcher joined the staff at First Methodist in 1961 as a Youth Director. He quickly rose to oversee all the facilities and financial matters, and then became our Executive Minister in 1978 until his retirement in 1990.

Because of this long tenure within the Methodist church, Fletcher's knowledge of the organizational structure and knowing how all the parts could work together to achieve a greater goal was exceptional. His steady hand, encouragement, and advice were invaluable in helping launch the high quality, child focused Early Learning Center in 1989. It has served the downtown community for over thirty years with its NAEYC accreditation. Once during a staff devotional, Fletcher used the analogy of a pencil as a way of thinking about life and our place in God's kingdom. It is forever needing to be kept sharp and has an eraser for mistakes. The partnership that Fletcher had with **Ralph Bates** made our church a friendly place to visit and belong. To this day Fletcher is counted among our most beloved tour guides into the Sanctuary attic. Fletcher's interactions with members involve kindness and consistent problem-solving. One of Fletcher's greatest strengths is his dry sense of humor. One never expects this talent from such a quiet, humble man. He always brings a smile to our faces just by being a true servant of God.

Those of us who have been members at First Methodist for decades are grateful for the dedication of these men and their vision for maintaining this church on the corner in an ever-changing world. Their faith in God called these leaders to deliberately move our church toward inclusion and social action.

STORIES FROM

150



YEARS

Please join our story collecting project! If you know a member with a great story or if you can help collect and write our stories, please reach out to Betsy McGuire at betsyhunter@gmail.com. On Sept 11 there will be a grand story collecting event after church in the dining room. Please come!