

MEMORIAL SERVICE FOR KENNETH OLIVER STROH

BY THE REV. GRANT H. ODHNER

Today we remember a man who had a high sense of calling. Kenneth Oliver Stroh dated his call to be a priest to his 12th year of life, while he was up in a tree. Throughout his long life, he



was never so happy as when he was pastoring—preaching the Word, visiting the sick, representing the Lord to people. There were to be periods in his life when he was not actively serving as a priest—or not as actively as he would have liked—but pastoring was always his calling, always his goal, and the work of his heart.

To do this work one must love the Word. And Kenneth certainly did. He enjoyed reading it and talking about it. He delighted in the science of it. For example, he cared how words were translated, and enjoyed being a consultant to translators from the Swedenborg Society while he was living in Great Britain. But more importantly, he cared about the Word’s message. He had a sound grasp of its doctrine, especially as it relates to life, and he articulated that message in a clear, caring, and sensitive way. It is hard to imagine that he will not continue in this work after death. We read.: “In heaven those are concerned with church affairs who in the world loved the Word and eagerly sought in it for truths, not with honor or gain as an end, but with the uses of life both for themselves and for others. These people in heaven are in enlightenment and in the light of wisdom in the measure of their love and desire for use.— These individuals minister in

the preaching office.” (*Heaven and Hell* 393)

Immediately after being ordained in 1948, Kenneth moved to Detroit to serve as the first resident pastor of the General Church congregation there. He actually was the assistant to Norman Reuter who was living in Ohio and traveling to Detroit only every few months. For two years, Ken did the regular preaching and teaching. This was a wonderful beginning for that group—today a thriving society. Kenneth was soon called to London. He moved there with his new wife, Virginia Blair Stroh. They served there for just two years (1950-1952). This was a difficult time of illness for both Kenneth and Virginia, and they were compelled to return to the states and recoup. They moved to Bryn Athyn. For the next nineteen years he found a niche in Bryn Athyn, where the family grew and grew up here. Virginia passed into the spiritual world in 1971.

But from about 1954, he began what would be his main work: teaching religion and sometimes other things in the elementary school and serving as the primary preacher at the children’s services at the Cathedral. For eighteen years, he did the lion’s share of these services! From this very spot he introduced a large baby-boom generation to the Sunday worship of the Lord. Many will never forget Kenneth’s gentle, resonant voice beginning his talk with the word, “Children—.”

Over the great majority of these years, since 1958, Kenneth also served as the Director of Music for the Bryn Athyn Church. He also led the Bryn Athyn community orchestra. With remarkable diligence, year after year he chose music and learned scores for the Cathedral choir and the Bryn Athyn Orchestra. (It is in affectionate tribute to his service as Cathedral choir director that we are enjoying that choir today.) It was no small job to select music and learn scores in order to lead these groups effectively. Yet he quietly did this year after year—not as his main use in life, not in his own mind. Yet what pleasure this

work gave to so many people—performers and listeners alike! Over the years, he helped organize many a memorable musical event: Vivaldi's *Gloria*, Handel's *Messiah*, Mendelssohn's *Elijah*. And he gave his service to many a Glencairn Christmas sing. With remarkable patience, he worked with those enthusiastic amateurs. One professional musician who played with the Orchestra related that he did not know many professional conductors who could conduct a concerto from memory as Ken could. And on top of conducting, some here will remember him pulling a piccolo out of his pocket at the end of "Stars and Stripes Forever"—to the surprise even of members of the orchestra—to add that humorous and classy touch to the performance.

In 1976 Kenneth was asked to serve as the full-time organist for the Cathedral—to play the instrument that he had recently helped select. This was an incredible request for a 56-year-old man! It required Kenneth to learn that very difficult "king of instrument"—something he did with amazing proficiency. He did not seek or desire this job, but he took it on, and — like everything,—he accomplished it faithfully and with artistic sense.

In 1981, Ken had the opportunity to get back into full-time pastoral work. He was asked to serve as interim pastor for the Pittsburgh New Church for a year. He did this with relish, and the society there discovered one of the best-kept secrets in the General Church—a fine preacher and a lovely pastor! When that year was up he was called to the society in Colchester, England where he served happily as pastor, and ultimately as Bishop's representative to Europe, for seven more years before retirement. And it was while in England that he met and married, Janina Szymbra Stroh, who has brought great sweetness and blessing to his last twenty years.

We began this address by drawing attention to Ken's sense of

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calling. Anyone who knows Kenneth Stroh well would recognize how central this was to him as a man. He loved the use of the ministry, and it was that love and practice that formed him. He once wrote an article about “The Life of Use” where he said: “Man becomes a form of use by regeneration, and no man need be discouraged by seeming inadequacies and failures. For uses do not depend on him, despite all appearance to the contrary, since man is but an instrument by means of which the Lord performs use. In His mercy, the Lord has given man to share in this performance so that he may receive the blessings of use. But use itself is from the Lord, indeed the Lord is use. This is why there is always hope for anyone in the world who is willing to lift up his eyes unto the mountains, from whence cometh his help. For the Lord gives help gradually, patiently, to all who ask it. All men and women who live the life of use are close to the Lord and are in the interior worship of Him. For such the Lord can open the way to interior blessedness, so that they are prepared to enter into the joy of their Lord.” (New Church Life 1962, p. 18)

Like Isaiah, Kenneth had seen the glorious vision and had been touched by its holiness: “Whom shall I send? And who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I; send me” (Isaiah 6:2-8).

Today we honor a man who answered the Lord’s call to use, and was a good and faithful servant in that. And we rejoice in the thought that he is even now entering into the joy of his Lord. Amen.

Bryn Athyn Cathedral, PA. December 9, 2007

Charity 158. VII. ALL PEOPLE WHO LOOK TO THE LORD AND SHUN EVILS AS SIN, IF THEY SINCERELY, JUSTLY, AND FAITHFULLY DO THE WORK OF THEIR OFFICE AND EMPLOYMENT, BECOME A FORM OF CHARITY. All are born

that they may become charity; and they cannot become charity unless they perpetually do the good of use from affection and its delight. Therefore when people sincerely, justly, and faithfully do the work that belongs to their office or employment, from affection and its delight, they are continually in the good of use, not only to

the community or public, but also to individuals and private citizens. But this cannot be unless they look to the Lord and shun evils as sins; for—to look to the Lord and shun evils as sins is the first of charity (n. 8); and the second of charity is to do goods. And the goods that they do are goods of use, which they do every day, and which, when they are not doing, they think of doing. *There is an interior affection which inwardly remains and desires it.* Hence it

is that they are perpetually in the good of use, from morning to evening, from year to year, from their earliest age to the end of their life. Otherwise they cannot become a form, that is, a receptacle of charity. (Emphasis by Mr. Sandstrom)