

William P. Shriver and the Immigrant Fellows: A Presbyterian Response to Early Twentieth-Century Immigration

One of the more adventuresome Presbyterian responses to early twentieth-century immigration was the Immigrant Fellow program (1910–14). The program sent newly graduated seminarians, preparing for work in U.S. ethnic neighborhoods, to live in regions of central and southern Europe from which the immigrants were coming. The small contingent of Immigrant Fellows proved to be a major influence in the ministries of urban presbyteries and city congregations to European immigrants.

by Richard P. Poethig

THE FIRST DECADE OF THE TWENTIETH century saw a massive influx of immigrants from central and southern Europe into the United States. The immigrant movements of the 1880s and 1890s had already alerted the leadership of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. to European immigration into U.S. cities. The earliest responses came from city congregations concerned with the impact the newcomers were having upon their neighborhoods. By the first decade of the new century the immensity of the immigration called the national church into action.

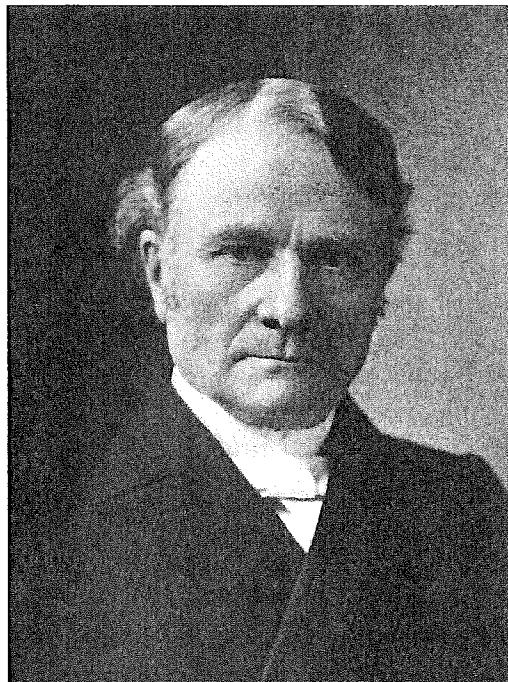
One of the more creative approaches came through a program developed under the leadership of William Shriver, Superintendent of the Department of Immigration

of the Board of Home Missions. Under Shriver's initiative, a program of scholarships was established to train newly graduated seminarians for immigrant ministries by sending them to live and learn in the countries from which the immigrants were emigrating. The Immigrant Fellowship program provided some of the early leadership of the Presbyterian Church's venture into the neighborhood house movement. This response to immigration was set in the midst of major changes taking place in the national leadership of the Board of Home Missions.

I

Evidence of change in the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.'s approach to the Eu-

Mr. Poethig, a retired Presbyterian minister (1972–82), served as an industrial minister in the Philippines (1957–72) and as director of the Institute on the Church in Urban-Industrial Society, Chicago.
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Charles L. Thompson, who headed the Board of Home Missions during the earlier crucial period of twentieth-century immigration (RG 414, Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia).

European immigration was the appointment, in 1898, of Charles L. Thompson as the new head of the Board of Home Missions.¹ Charles Thompson came to the board from an innovative pastorate at Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City. Thompson had been one of the prime movers in the "institutional church" movement, an interdenominational effort which expanded traditional ministries of congregations to serve the physical and social needs of the city's immigrant people.² Thompson backed up his larger view of the immigrant issue by his own appointments. First he appointed Charles Stelzle head of the Workingmen's Department in 1903, and then in 1910 he appointed William Shriver as head of the Department of Immigration.

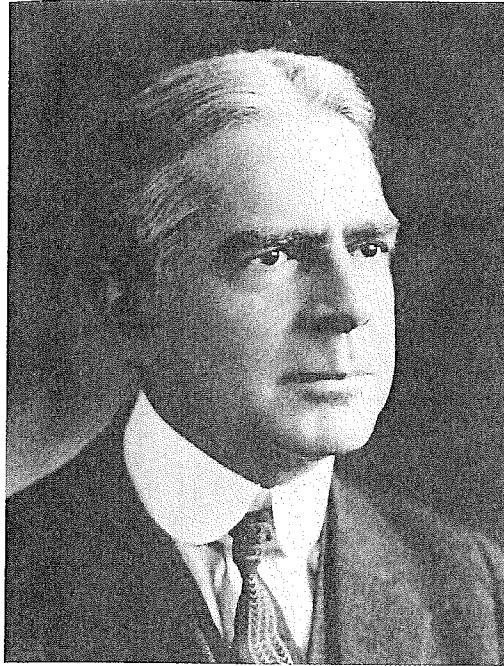
The appointment of Charles Stelzle, a specialist in work among immigrant workers, moved the immigration issue from a local congregational concern to a larger regional forum. In October 1903 the Board of Home Missions organized a conference in New York to which it called representa-

tives from those synods with the largest immigrant populations. The conference agenda was to encourage the synods to the work of evangelization among foreign populations. The Board of Home Missions was careful not to preempt the responsibility of the synods for doing the work. In carefully worded recommendations, the board laid emphasis upon its cooperation in support of ministries among immigrants initiated by presbyteries or synods.

Even with the clear call for an immigrant ministry made at the October 1903 conference, such work was slow to happen. First, by 1904 the Board of Home Missions' budget, which was to be a primary funder for efforts among immigrants, suffered a shortfall. Requests by presbyteries for support of immigrant ministries had to be turned aside. Then in 1905 the board announced, to its embarrassment, that no money could be appropriated for new work among foreigners.³ On top of this the board's search for foreign-speaking persons to carry out ministry with immigrant communities reached a standstill.

It was not until the General Assembly of 1907 that action was taken to create a special department to pursue a national program for ministries among immigrants, and to seek "some one especially qualified by birth, training and gifts to take charge of this department."⁴ After a year-long fruitless search for a person qualified to head the Department of Immigration, the Board of Home Missions finally decided in 1908 to ask Charles Stelzle to head the new department along with his work with the Department of Church and Labor. It was a natural choice, since Stelzle had grown up as a second generation German American in an immigrant community and through his work with workingmen and their unions he had developed a sound knowledge of the nature of the immigrant's work life in the United States.⁵

The work of the Department of Immigration grew phenomenally in the next two years, and by November 1910 the Board of Home Missions moved to separate the de-



William Shriver (RG 414, Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia).

partments and name William Shriver as head of the Department of Immigration.⁶ William Shriver had served as assistant to Stelzle for nine months prior to this action. Before his work with Stelzle, Shriver, a recent graduate from Union Theological Seminary in New York, had established an industrial parish among Italian immigrants in the East Harlem section of New York City.

When Shriver took up his work on 1 November 1910, he did so in a church community which still had pockets of resistance to ministry among immigrants. Despite the negative attitudes toward immigrants expressed in the conservative church press and the lingering hostility among some church members, urban Presbyterian congregations had increasingly become involved in ministries in immigrant neighborhoods.⁷ In his first annual report on the work of the Department of Immigration on 31 March 1911, Shriver could list forty centers of immigrant work under way in cooperation with twenty presbyteries. Seventeen of these centers were in the Presbytery of New York under the supervision of the presbytery's Home Missions Committee,

which Shriver chaired. By 1913, the work among immigrants had spread beyond New York and Brooklyn to Newark, Baltimore, Wilmington, Buffalo, Cleveland, Chicago, Gary, Kansas City, Indianapolis, and San Francisco.

As Shriver looked to the decade ahead, he viewed the immigrant character of New York City as symbolic of the crisis in cities across the country. In 1911, as he began his work, he saw the Presbyterian Church's future on trial in New York City: "In this congested Presbytery with population approaching three million, equal that of six western states, crowded . . . into its narrow area of one hundred and twenty square miles, Presbyterianism is on trial. Can it re-adjust itself? Can it sufficiently cope with the changed conditions?"⁸

Shriver recognized that immigration into the United States was a long-term matter. The rapid growth of the immigrant population in U.S. cities would continue. In the first decade of the century immigrant numbers had reached one million annually, and were expected to maintain that level. The nature of immigration had also changed. The largely Teutonic, Celtic, and Scandinavian immigration of the nineteenth century had waned and now nearly two-thirds of immigrants were Italian, Russian, and from ethnic groups within the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The need to minister to these peoples was crucial, since even the hold of the Roman Catholic Church on its people was uncertain.

The central question for William Shriver in developing a ministry among immigrants was one of leadership. Where was the leadership to come from? As early as 1903, the Standing Committee on Home Missions had recommended to the General Assembly that a deputation be appointed to visit Hungary for the purpose of finding suitable persons to work among Magyars in the United States. Shriver was concerned, however, that newly appointed pastors of immigrant background were not fully equipped to do the work of ministry in an

American setting. He noted in his Department of Immigration Report in 1911:

This most difficult undertaking before the Protestant Church in America today has in many cases been entrusted to sincere men, who have lacked a working understanding of the methods and polity of the Presbyterian Church, have slight appreciation of the spirit and purpose of Democracy and are without a knowledge often of the English language. That such men have failed to awaken enthusiasm and enlist support of their American friends, and have had only a limited success in organizing anything like an effective and comprehensive work is not a matter of surprise.⁹

II

Shriver's response to the problem of leadership was to create, in 1911, a program of Immigrant Fellowships. He saw the need for seminary trained pastors who would have the desire to work among the communities of new immigrants in the United States. The Immigrant Fellowship—a stipend of one thousand dollars—would be awarded to ministers for an immersion program of eighteen months to two years of study and research in those regions in Europe from which the immigrants had come. The recipients of the Immigrant Fellowship, usually recent seminary graduates, were to spend their time learning the language, absorbing the culture, the religious background and the political circumstances of the immigrants' homeland. The Immigrant Fellow was to become acquainted with the religious leadership in the places where he resided and to suggest to the department those who might study in the United States. After his training he was to return to work in a community in the United States where the immigrants had settled. The work was to be in a settlement or a neighborhood house, or an ethnic church, if one existed in the community.¹⁰

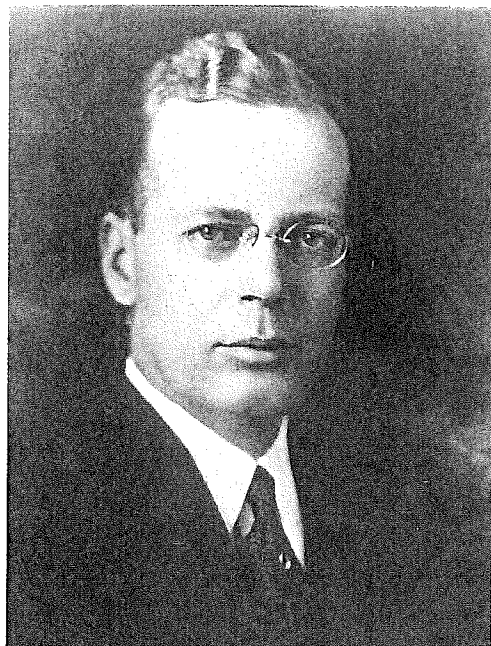
The first Immigrant Fellowships were awarded in 1911. Shriver described the earliest assignments: "Of the men first sent out, one will probably go to Austria and Russia to make a special study of the economic, social and religious life of the Poles,

their customs and traditions. A second man will go to Hungary, to mingle among the Magyars and Slovaks."¹¹ Along with learning the language and the study of culture, the prospective home missionary was to make a detailed inquiry into the immigration process which brought people to the United States. With immigration reaching 1,285,349 people in 1907, its high water mark, immigration procedure became a main focus of the Federal Immigration Commission. Shriver suggested that the Immigrant Fellows needed to acquaint themselves with issues "such as the acceleration of immigration by commercial agencies, the influence of returning immigrants, the White Slave traffic conditions at ports of embarkation."

A high priority of the Immigrant Fellows, however, was to learn the state of the work of the Protestant churches in the regions to which they were assigned. If all went well the rewards for the Immigrant Fellow would be great. "With such an intimate and familiar acquaintance with the land and life of the immigrant, and with a working knowledge of the language," Shriver suggested, "a minister engaging in the Church's work in our great city and immigrant communities in this country cannot fail to be placed at a point of splendid vantage. . . . A sympathetic understanding of the immigrant is the first thing required in any effort to minister to his needs."¹²

III

In the summer of 1912, the Board of Home Missions made its first appointments: Kenneth D. Miller and John B. Hayden, both recent graduates of Union Theological Seminary, New York. Kenneth Miller was assigned to Prague in Bohemia and John B. Hayden to Krakow in Poland. Before their departure, Shriver had made inquiries about home assignments for each of the immigrant fellows. This would provide each fellow with a community for which to prepare upon return. In the case of Kenneth Miller, Shriver had been in conversation

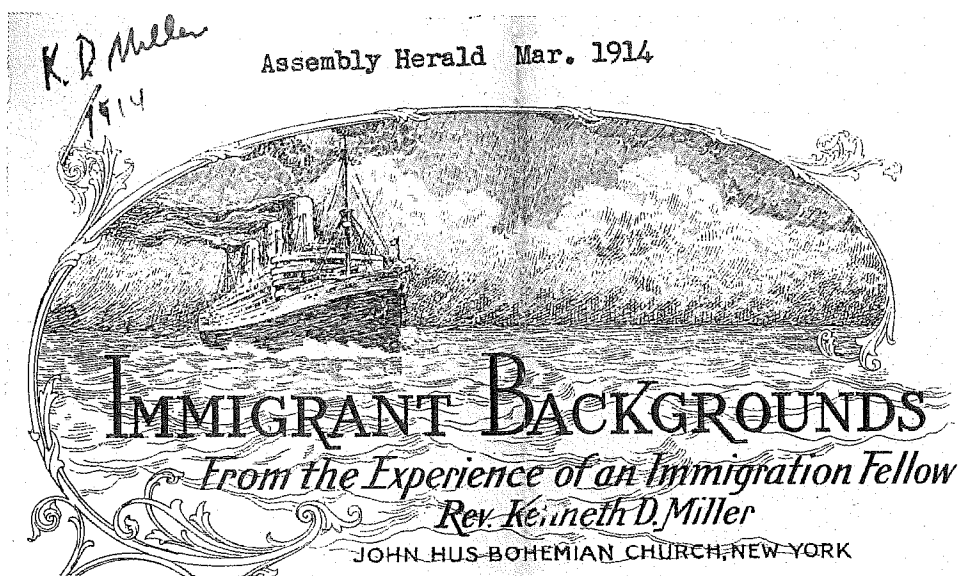


Immigrant Fellow Kenneth D. Miller (RG 414, Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia).

with Dr. Vincent Pisek, then the pastor of the Jan Hus Church of New York. Pisek had established that congregation in the midst of the Bohemian immigrant community in east side, midtown Manhattan in the 1880s.¹³ In discussion with Shriver, Pisek agreed that upon Miller's return from Europe he would be assigned to the "educa-

tional and institutional work" of Jan Hus Church. After over twenty years of ministry at Jan Hus, Pisek was planning the development of a neighborhood house to which Miller was to be assigned.¹⁴ Joel Hayden's assignment to Krakow was in preparation for work in Baltimore. Shriver had been in touch with Paul Fox, pastor of St. Paul's Polish Church. Fox had petitioned Shriver and the Department of Immigration for an associate to help with work in his Polish community of 30,000 immigrants.

Miller and Hayden arrived in Europe by late summer of 1912 and returned from their assignments in September 1913. By 1914 eight Immigrant Fellows had been sent to central Europe, the region from which the largest number of people had been emigrating to the United States. The Immigrant Fellows were assigned to districts in Poland, Bohemia, Hungary, Russia, Italy, Croatia, and Austria. The region was a political tinderbox. The unstable Austro-Hungarian Empire faced constant threat from movements for autonomy among its ethnic groups. The correspondence of the Immigrant Fellows with Shriver mirrors the political tensions they encountered firsthand. People in the communities where they took up residence were often already



From an article by Kenneth D. Miller in the *Assembly Herald*, March 1914, pp. 145-48 (RG 414, Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia).

in contact with friends and family who had emigrated to the United States. This directly affected the Immigrant Fellows' relationships with the people and the work they were sent to do.¹⁵ Their introduction to the volatile politics of Europe, fed by the ethnic struggles and the political and economic aspirations of the prospective émigrés, was crucial in the Immigrant Fellows' understanding of the communities among which they would be ministering in the United States.

IV

Kenneth Miller established himself in Prague with a Bohemian family. He immediately set about the task of learning the Czech language as well as engaging in a reading program on Bohemian history and culture. His travels took him through Bohemia, Moravia, and Slovakia, where he acquainted himself with the political and religious conditions in each place. Miller wrote extensively of the European situation, sending his articles to William Shriver for publication in U.S. newspapers.¹⁶ In Vienna he encountered the closing of a Czech school by the authorities.¹⁷ In Slovakia, the Magyar (Hungarian) police suspected him of being a Pan-Slavic agitator and cut short his presence in that region.¹⁸

During his travels in Europe Miller was approached on several occasions by those who sought support for students to study for ministry in the United States.¹⁹ In Prague, Miller was introduced to Bohemian candidates who might minister among the Czech community in the United States. He called Shriver's attention to Jan Vales (Valesh), a Bohemian pastor's son, who was studying at Baldwin University in Berea, Kentucky. He suggested pursuing Jan Vales for ministry as well as the hiring of his older brother who had studied for the ministry and was currently in Russia studying Russian.²⁰ These on-the-ground contacts by Immigrant Fellows aided Shriver in locating possible candidates for ministry among immigrant ethnic groups in U.S. cities and rural communities.



Immigrant Fellow Ralph Cummins (RG 414, Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia).

Before he left Bohemia in the late summer of 1913 Miller arranged to meet Harvey Holt and Ralph Cummins upon their arrival in Trieste. Holt and Cummins were in the second group to be appointed as Immigrant Fellows. Both were recent McCormick Seminary graduates. Holt had been assigned to Hungary and Cummins was to live in Croatia. Their work was with two disparate peoples: the Magyars, who held the upper hand in central Europe, and the Croats, who seethed under the control of the Magyars. During an eight-and-a-half-hour train ride from Fiume to Zagreb (also known as Agram) in Croatia, Miller shared with Holt and Cummins his year's experiences as an Immigrant Fellow.²¹ Miller stayed on with them in Croatia for ten days providing further background for their new venture, introducing them to people he had met, and cautioning them about the tense relations between the Croats and the Magyars.

V

Harvey Holt had been assigned to Budapest, a center of uneasiness in the threatened Austro-Hungarian empire. Before