

THE CALL OF THE HOLLIS STREET CHURCH

The third meeting house of the Hollis Street Unitarian Church in the South End of Boston, its 200-foot steeple towering over the city from 1810 to 1884, contained one of the most musical steeple bells of the city calling people to worship.

The Rev. Horace Holley had nurtured the congregation into prosperous conditions. The beauty of its choir was widely admired. Yet as the years passed the dominant call from that church became not the sweet notes of its bell or choir but the strident call to witness for the downtrodden, the enslaved, the homeless, and to shake the comfortable assumptions of middle-class townspeople.

The congregation in 1819 called the Rev. John Pierpont to be their settled minister. They had not realized that they had called one who would increasingly become a powerful, tireless, and sharp advocate of reform. One could not ignore his sermons, neither their soaring oratory nor their pointed call to the people to change. He demanded that slavery be faced squarely and ended, and not let the great moral issue of the time be evaded, as many squirming Unitarian churches and ministers were doing. Pierpont founded the first temperance society in the country, while some congregants stored rum in the church basement. Inevitably, Pierpont became controversial in the church, and withstood drawn-out attempts of some church leaders to get rid of him. Worn down by the great issues of the day and internal dissension, Pierpont after a twenty-six year ministry, was forced out of the pulpit. Yet like Jeremiah, he continued to come storming into the church, his white hair flowing, to elicit moral witness among those who restricted themselves to the comforting niceties of worship. It was the fate of this prophet in the wilderness that his son, James Pierpont, the composer of "Jingle Bells," would support the cause of the slave-holders in Savannah, and his grandson, John Pierpont Morgan, would become the symbol of unprincipled and unbridled monopoly capitalism.

To heal the fractured congregation, the church in 1848 called the young Rev. Thomas Starr King, then of the Universalist Church in Charlestown, Mass., to its ministry. With ringing oratory and a fine sense of humor, he healed the rifts while holding firm to the moral imperatives of the day. Where Pierpont had failed, Starr King succeeded brilliantly in restoring the health of the congregation and putting it on a prosperous and morally sound footing. Yet Starr King wore himself out in the effort, and took a leave of absence during which he took on an even tougher challenge in the Unitarian Church of San Francisco. It is not an exaggeration to say that he saved California for the Union, but died exhausted at age 40. The Hollis Street Church was packed for his memorial service.

Soon, the demographics of the neighborhood changed. The church was closed in 1884, and the building converted into a successful theater. The site has drastically changed today, yet the area remains Boston's theater district. And in nearby Boston Common, in one's mind one might still listen for the crisp music of the bell of the old Hollis Street Church and under it the cackly voice of John Pierpont crying out for people to unstop their ears and heed the call of their faith for moral witness.

Ref: Peter Tufts Richardson, *The Boston Religion: Unitarianism in its Capital City* (Rockland, Maine: Red Barn, 2003), pp. 52-60.