

Lubec's First Bar Mitzvah

LUBEC in the early sixties was a town ahead of its time, at least as far as we clergymen were concerned. Long before the great ecumenical movement had gained credibility elsewhere and before there was talk of the mutual concerns and responsibilities of the different religious faiths, cooperation among the churches of this remote coastal town was more than just a motto with us — it was a way of life — which could lead to some very interesting situations.

Familiar to area residents as the big white church on the hill, the Lubec Congregational church, to which I had been assigned at that time, stood overlooking the sea and could be seen for miles. In addition, two other churches stood within town lines: the Roman Catholic church, served by Father Harold Pender, and the Disciples of Christ church with its pastor, Reverend Donald Stockford. We three clergymen could invariably be seen together at various functions in the area. I attended the ice cream and strawberry social at the Roman Catholic church not only because of the free tickets graciously given to

me by the priest but also because of the friendship we shared which went beyond our calling. When my congregation held a bazaar, Father Pender and his sister were sure to stop by, both to have a good time and to help make the event a success. Likewise, the priest and I both attended church suppers arranged by the Disciples of Christ church, which stood just across from my own. There existed a feeling of unity among us that dwelled not on our doctrinal differences, but on the earthly concerns we had in common.

In Lubec, in addition to adherents of these religions there also lived one Jewish family, who owned and operated a local landmark, Unobsky's Department Store. The affable Sidney Theeman, along with his wife and son, generously supported the functions and fund-raising activities of all three churches in the community, not to mention his "clergy discount" of 10 percent whenever the three of us made purchases in his store. One warm, sunny spring day, it just so happened that we clergymen happened to meet on a downtown street corner, a not uncommon occurrence given the size of the town. While we were engaged in a somewhat spirited conversation, Sidney Theeman came out of his store and started down the street. As he passed us standing on the corner, he shook his head sadly and intoned, "No good will come of this!" Whether or not Sidney was right, there is no way to tell.

Not long afterwards, however, he dropped by one evening, which just happened to be during the Lenten season, something neither of us considered at the time. Coming right to the point, Sidney inquired whether I had studied Hebrew at the seminary. When I told him I had, he said, "I have a big favor to ask of you!" His son, Mark, he explained, was nearly twelve years old,

and would soon have to start studying for his bar mitzvah. Inasmuch as the nearest synagogue was many miles away, would I undertake to teach Mark his lessons? Remembering the many ways in which the Theemans had helped our church, I readily agreed.

From then on for a number of weeks, Mark came regularly to my parsonage. With the help of records, we studied the language of his religion, and chanted the Torah and the Haftarah. Passersby walking outside my study window must have thought it strange to see a Jewish youth in a yarmulke being taught by a Congregational minister, and to hear the verses of an ancient Hebrew ceremony being recited in the parsonage of an old Maine church. Once Mark felt sufficiently prepared, he took the examination and passed. To this day, I don't know if we Lubec clergymen were ahead of our time in launching the ecumenical movement in our remote part of the world, but, to the best of my knowledge, it is the only case in Maine of a Christian minister preparing a Jewish boy for his bar mitzvah.

—Frederick E. Turley