

Preston Bradley and the Peoples Church – a history



At 941 W. Lawrence you will find the Preston Bradley Center, a huge building of five floors with two balconies and a large stage. It is home to **The Peoples Church of Chicago**, described in a 1924 news article as “one of the most largely attended liberal churches in the world.”

Peoples Church was born in the midst of theological and social controversy and has been a progressive liberal force throughout its existence. It was founded in the 1880s and had its most vibrant years beginning in 1912 under the pastoral leadership of the famed orator, the **Reverend Dr. Preston Bradley**, a behind the scenes Chicago mover and shaker with an international reputation. He was its preacher for more than fifty years, and a well-known community activist with a radio ministry of several million listeners each week.

Bradley was born in Michigan and served in Presbyterian and Congregational churches before attending Chicago’s Moody Bible Institute. There, he became disillusioned with Christian fundamentalism and adopted what he called “Christian Unitarianism,” a type of liberal religious humanism. He had a falling out with the Presbyterian Church over his view that unbaptized babies could not possibly be going to hell, and left the denomination.

After his call to the Peoples Progressive Church of Chicago (the word “progressive” was later dropped), meetings of the Church were held at the Viking Temple on Sheffield Avenue, but they were only there a month before the congregation outgrew it. The next home was the Arcola Hall on Clark Street, but they quickly outgrew that, too. In 1914 the Peoples Church rented the Wilson Avenue Theatre for Sunday services. It had an auditorium and balcony that could accommodate 900 people. In 1918 they moved again, this time to the Pantheon Theatre, a motion picture house located on Sheridan Avenue and considered one of the most beautiful auditoriums of its day. Decorated in the style of the Italian Renaissance, it was the largest movie theatre in Chicago until the construction of the nearby Uptown Theatre. (The Pantheon was eventually demolished in the 1960s.) The congregation stayed at the Pantheon for eight years before building a permanent home on Lawrence Avenue. Built in 1925 and first occupied in 1926, its building is a contemporary of the Uptown Theatre and the Aragon Ballroom, and is a contributing building to the Federal Uptown Square Historic District.

By that time, the Peoples Church had become the largest non-sectarian church in the United States, and had joined with the American Unitarian Association. This new structure was called the Uptown Temple to “emphasize its relationship to that vast and teeming area of Chicago known as Uptown.” Edgewater architect J.E.O. Pridmore was selected to design the temple. Pridmore’s notable works include the Vic, Princess, Clark, and Nortown theatres, the recently demolished Adelphi Theatre, and the strikingly beautiful Manor House on Bryn Mawr. The temple he created for the Peoples Church has, as Bradley put it, “none of the architectural trappings of bygone ecclesiastical attitudes. There is no tower, no medieval chancels and naves.” Instead, the sanctuary was “an open room, airy, warm, inviting fellowship and the breezes of fresh ideas.” Bradley chose not to have a pulpit, but instead spoke from a lectern. To one side was a bust of Abraham Lincoln, to the other a bust of the poet Ralph Waldo Emerson. Originally, above the choir, were written in gold the words of William Ellery Channing, “Live a life of faith and hope. Believe in the mighty power of truth and love.” In 1959, a mural by the artist Louis Grell was painted below this quote—an allegorical Christ greeting the crowds, dressed in 20th century rural garb.



The Peoples Church was the first church in Chicago, and one of the first in America, to regularly broadcast services. The first service was aired in 1924 over WQJ, and eventually the show moved to WLS.

Preston Bradley kept up a very demanding preaching and lecture schedule. His close friends and associates were a veritable “who’s who” of Chicago history—Jane Addams, Carl Sandberg, and John Altgeld to name but a few. But Bradley was ever and always a man of the common people. “I wanted to help people,” he wrote, “help people meet the problems of everyday life, help people to live creative, positive, happy lives.” In many ways, he was a man ahead of his time. He was suspended from Moody Bible Institute for smoking a cigar and being seen at a motion picture show, unseemly behavior for a future minister; he marched with Jane Addams to support women’s rights; and he spoke loudly and openly against the Ku Klux Klan, which in the 1920s boasted more than a million members. His thoughts on religion and sexuality must have shocked the conservatives of his day, “I am old fashioned enough to believe in virginity and chastity before marriage,” he wrote, “but I do not consider variations from that code to be sinful in the sense that God will inflict everlasting punishment... Sexual force and sexual desire are natural things.”



Dr. Bradley was president of the Chicago Public Library Board for 25 years, and a sometime advisor to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who appointed him to the commission which founded the United Nations. He was also well known on the European lecture circuit, where he shared his unconventional wisdom during many summer tours.

Bradley invited controversial speakers to share his pulpit—notable among them Clarence Darrow, who argued in favor of evolution in the infamous Tennessee “Scopes monkey trial,” and preached at Peoples four times. His friends also included Jane Addams, with whom he marched for women’s rights, Carl Sandberg, and John Altgeld. He was scriptwriter Irna Phillips’ inspiration for the soap opera *Guiding Light*, and was Chicago’s first and the nation’s longest running radio preacher. At its height of power, he was an outspoken opponent of the Ku Klux Klan, and opposed all forms of religious fundamentalism.

In his 1962 book *Along the Way*, Bradley wrote, “Our church has always been an inclusive and not an exclusive church. From the beginning the people of every race, creed, and color have been invited. We never had the problems which have arisen so recently in the matter of segregation or integration. Long before any of the organizations now working diligently on these matters had been organized our church was open as the sky.”

At its peak, Bradley’s congregation had over 4,000 members.

As is often the case in the history of Uptown, urban flight over the last fifty years caused membership to decrease dramatically, and the Peoples Church very nearly had to close its doors. Instead, it became affiliated with the United Church of Christ while still maintaining its ties to the Unitarian Universalist Association and today has a small but active congregation. The church now leases space to R.E.S.T. (Residents for Effective Shelter Transitions), the largest homeless shelter on the north side. The church runs a meals program which serves lunch four times a week to 150-200 people in need, and holds an annual Labor Day Picnic and Christmas Dinner for the homeless that each serve five to six hundred people.

“Guiding Light”

The radio ministry of Preston Bradley was the inspiration for the radio soap opera, and later daytime television show, Guiding Light. It started in Chicago in 1937 as a 15-minute radio drama. The show was created by soap opera legend Irna Phillips who wrote and created many of the first American soap operas including Another World, The Edge of Night, and As the World Turns.

At the age of 19, Irna found herself unwed and pregnant. The baby’s father wanted nothing to do with her, and she ended up giving birth to a still-born baby. Irna took great comfort in the on-air sermons of Preston Bradley, and triumphed over tragedy. She used her own life as inspiration for her soap, and created the character of Reverend Doctor John Ruthledge, minister of the Little Church of Five Points. The Rev. Ruthledge left a lamp, a “guiding light,” burning in his study as a beacon for those who needed help. The show centered around Rev. Ruthledge, his friends and family, and those who came to him for help. In 1952, with the advent of television, the cast did the same scripts for both tv and radio. Guiding Light has been around for more than 65 years, making it the longest running television show of all time.