

A Senior Recipe for Happiness



Newton Cunningham with Mrs. Petronella Fitzgerald

“It’s time for the sermon,” the Heritage Hall aide shouted into the ear of Mrs. Petronella Fitzgerald, who at 103 years of age is almost totally deaf.

Newton Cunningham had arrived with his tape of last Sunday’s sermon from the Blackstone Presbyterian Church. Fresh Flowers were moved from the table and the player

was plugged in. It felt like Sunday morning in Mrs. Fitzgerald’s room.

“Mrs. Fitzgerald doesn’t have a tape player so I play it for her,” Cunningham explained when asked if he played the sermon for each of the nine shut-ins to whom he carries the message each week. He laughed and said he’d certainly get the message if he had to do that!

“Sometimes she goes to sleep, and sometimes she doesn’t,” he said before starting the tape. The fact that she couldn’t hear the sermon didn’t seem to bother Cunningham. The real message was not in the tape, but in his being there, like clockwork, every Tuesday for the past five years.

“You’d be surprised how they look forward to it,” he said. “And they are not all Presbyterians, either. I have one Baptist!” Cunningham valued his ability to cross denominational lines.

When asked what name his little ministry had, he thought for a minute—he hadn’t thought of naming it. Then he grinned with a devilish twinkle: “Maybe I’ll call it ‘The Sermon in Bed.’”

At 80 years of age, Cunningham is still investing his time in his church, which he started doing 18 years ago when he retired.

“The way I got into serving the church was that I had to do something useful. I had been a member of the church for 42 years. I was a deacon for 12 years, an elder for 39 years, and Clerk of the Session for 6 years.” Cunningham has done just about everything in the church except deliver the sermon—and now he’s doing that!

Cunningham must have learned about giving his time to the church from his parents. “My father kept the session book for 50 years, and my mother played the organ

for 50 years,” And his wife, Carleton, was choir director and organist for more than 30 years.

In Cunningham’s mind, giving his time to the church was a natural thing to do. And you don’t have to look at his smile to know if his investment isn’t worth it. You give your time where the dividend is greatest, Cunningham says.