

**Bad Apples on a Fruitful Tree: Decline and Disorder in a  
Presbyterian Church**

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## **Bad Apples on a Fruitful Tree: Decline and Disorder in a Presbyterian Church**

### **Abstract**

This paper examines the destructive relationship between one man and a Presbyterian congregation over the course of 41 years. The man was a member, an employee, and a ruling elder of the congregation. This paper 1) details the history of events by collating oral accounts with documentary evidence, and 2) draws conclusions about disorder in the church leadership which allowed the destructive relationship to persist.

### **Sordid History in a Lovely Church**

Phone tapping, anonymous poison-pen letters, homosexual contact with minors: these all were accusations in what is perhaps the most sordid episode in the history of Huntingdon Valley Presbyterian Church (HVPC), an historic congregation in Huntingdon Valley, Pennsylvania. It is hard to know all the collateral damage done, but certainly we can point to the bolting of a newly-arrived Pastor after less than a year, and the departure of the beloved organist who had served the congregation for more than 55 years. David Clayton, an elder who at the time served on the Session, the church's governing board, described the entire episode as "the beginning of the end of our congregation."<sup>1</sup>

While trouble had been brewing for a while, what finally got the local police involved was a number of malicious anonymous letters sent to HVPC members and parents of students at Valley Christian School (VCS), the elementary school operated by the church inside the church buildings. An investigation quickly led to

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with David Clayton, September 2, 2022.

the confession of Edwin Harry “Ebby” Flack (1943-2020), a fourth-generation member of the church, choir director, elder, and son of the beloved church organist. No charges were brought, but the church was shaken, old family connections were uprooted, and lawyers were paid to mop up the details.

In 2005, I was installed as the twenty-third pastor of HVPC. Founded in an out of the way farming village on the eve of the American Civil War, a century later the village church boomed as surrounding farmland gave way to suburban housing developments. The numeric pinnacle of the church was achieved in 1967 when the congregation boasted nearly 800 members. By the time I arrived fresh out of seminary, the church had subsided to 185 faithful and somewhat battered souls. Many older members, who recalled the glory days of the church, were eager to explain to me why the congregation was a shadow of what it once had been. In whispered and confidential tones, the name of Ebby came up again and again, though two decades had passed since he left the church.

Now, nearly 40 years after this episode came to a close, the time may be right to exhume the story of Ebby Flack and recount his rise and fall at Huntingdon Valley Presbyterian Church. But one might ask, “Why dig up and rehash old scandals at this point?” Perhaps the best answer was given by American novelist William Faulkner who observed, “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.” Particularly in a close-knit community and church.

The primary goal of a well-written history is to make sense of the past and give a rational and ordered account of how we got where we are. When momentous events occur in our lives, we naturally want to understand why they happened and what those events mean; we remain unsettled until we do. That is why we tell and retell old stories, like a dog gnawing his bone, looking for the marrow of meaning and sense. The historian’s work is not a nostalgic backward gaze; it is, rather, a documented reconstruction of past events, with an eye to

finding meaning in the causal links among those events.

Though salacious and seedy, the story of Ebby Flack is an appropriate part of a written history of Huntingdon Valley Presbyterian Church not simply because these things happened and certainly not because the events were scandalous. This story has a rightful place in a history of the church 1) because it had, and continues to have, real consequences, 2) because these events exposed a problematic dynamic in the church, a dynamic not uncommon in other churches, and 3) because the whispered repletion of the story 40 years later says the matter has not yet been made sense of nor fully laid to rest.

The historian's task in this case, however, is complicated because eyewitness reports, while agreeing among themselves, diverge wildly from written church records. Presbyterian churches keep scrupulous records but at times they are sanitized, perhaps out of a concern for confidentiality, but often in a misguided attempt to whitewash the reality of church life. The existing documentary evidence of Ebby's actions is scanty though suggestive. Oral accounts from many individuals who were firsthand witnesses, however, are vivid, but the sequence of events in those accounts tends to be jumbled or vague.

Like most human stories, the story of Ebby Flack a complicated mixture of good and bad, of virtue and vice. On the upside, Ebby served the congregation well and in many ways, as a staff person for 19 years, and as an elder for 13 years. "I don't know what we would have done without him," Deacon Joan Clover commented four decades after his departure. "He kept everything running. He was here all the time." Ellen Bodenheimer, who worked for many years as the Valley Christian School secretary, seemed to think Ebby could do anything. "He was extremely talented in so many things," she recalled. "He would cook unbelievable meals for church events. He had tremendous musical talents." Elder Dave Clayton remembered Ebby fondly and appreciated what a fine musician he

was and how much Ebby taught him as a singer. He also was grateful for the attention Ebby showed him during a time when he was confined at home recovering from a serious injury. “He installed a special phone system in my house so I could call from my bedroom to other parts of the house,” Clayton recalled. Many remember his ambitious choral programs, with massed choirs singing sections of Handel’s oratorio “Messiah” during the Christmas and Lenten seasons. Others testify he had the voice of an angel. “It would bring tears to your eyes, to hear him sing,” remembered Pat Sarajian.

In the usual retelling of Ebby’s story, however, his years in the church are regrettably reduced to a few sordid images: Ebby the grown man living in the church basement, his large hairy dogs have the run of the buildings; Ebby the closeted gay man giving unwanted attention to boys and teenagers on church property; Ebby the obsessive controller listening in on private phone calls at the church and school; Ebby the disgruntled former employee sending hateful anonymous letters to the church and school. The difficult work of this history is collating and organizing the vivid but chronologically vague reports of Ebby’s behavior with the scanty but clear reports of church and public records.

While some would prefer to draw a discrete curtain over this chapter in our church’s history and might question the wisdom of bringing it to light again, it is right to tell this story, not because it is titillating, but because this sort of episode is all too common in churches. This written history of the unfortunate events is not scandalmongering, but rather is a sober study in church dynamics. There always will be “Ebbys” and understanding the events at HVPC can help churches solve “their “Ebby” problems sooner and with less damage. It is also important to see that Ebby alone is not to blame. The leadership of the church permitted an environment that made Ebby’s misdeeds possible and only fresh leadership brought them to an end. Certainly, Ebby bears moral responsibility for his actions,

but they were made possible by more a general disorder in the church body. This chapter is as much about a scion of an old church family going off the rails as it is about the church that let it happen.

### **Deep Roots in the Church and Community**

Ebby's roots in Huntingdon Valley and at HVPC were deep and broad. His father's parents and grandparents lived in the village and joined the church in the nineteenth century. Ebby himself was a fourth-generation member and an uncle to a large fifth generation brood at the church. Before the founding of HVPC, Ebby's forebearers were members of Abington Presbyterian Church, the grander colonial-era congregation four miles to the west which claims to be the mother church of HVPC.<sup>2</sup>

It was his great-grandparents Edwin B. Walton (1858-1931) and Amabel Walton (1860-1939) who first joined the church in 1894. Two years later, their older daughter, Ebby's great-aunt Mabel Walton (1882-1944), also joined. In 1900, Ebby's paternal grandmother, Sarah Edna Walton (1884-1966), became members. While a lack of sons erased the Walton name from the local phone directory, most who drive to HVPC arrive by way of Walton Road, at the bottom of the church parking lot.

Prior to the post-World War II suburban housing boom, Huntingdon Valley was a small but prosperous farming community consisting of a few streets and a few dozen houses, most ranged along Huntingdon Pike, the private toll road on which the church was built, connecting the farming community with Philadelphia

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<sup>2</sup> Ebby's father's mother's mother's father was a member of Abington Presbyterian Church (ABC). While ABC contributed founding members to the new church, it was a work of longstanding involving the cooperation of a Baptist and Reformed church as well. Rather than a daughter church birthed by ABC, the infant HVPC might better be characterized as a community church that happened to find a berth in the Presbyterian denomination, of which ABC was the near neighbor.

to the south, and Red Lion Road, which teed at Huntingdon Pike and connected with another toll road radiating from Philadelphia. During that time, the community had four churches. HVPC was the first, being organized in 1860 by a local doctor, the mill owners, shopkeepers, and farmers who owned productive holdings. In 1892, a Methodist Episcopal church was built on the other main road in town, which was soon joined by a Baptist church, built by a disgruntled member of HVPC who preferred dunking to sprinkling. In the early twentieth century, the small African American community in the village organized their own Baptist church.

Ebby's family was embedded not only in HVPC, but also in the surrounding community. When the township got its first police officer in 1937, Ebby's uncle George Flack was the man with the badge.<sup>3</sup> Around the same time, Ebby's father, Edwin Berrill Flack (1914-1985), was the chief of the Huntingdon Valley volunteer fire company.<sup>4</sup> As Ebby's maiden great-aunt Mabel Walton lay on her deathbed in 1944, it was HVPC member Dr. Katherine Briegel Vanderbilt who attended her. In the span between the Civil War and the Second World War, HVPC was filled by the outstanding citizens of the prosperous village. Church and village were intertwined and Ebby's family was well-connected in both. By the time of his departure from the church in 1985, more than 20 of Ebby's relatives were part of the HVPC story.

While Ebby's father's family was deeply embedded in the community, Ebby's mother, Beverly "Bev" Horlacher (1917-2005), who would go on to serve as church organist for more than 55 years, was a relative newcomer of more

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<sup>3</sup> This happened in 1937. At the time, Lower Moreland Township was served by the Bryn Athyn police department. Flack was the first police officer, and his primary responsibility was to act as a crossing guard for children coming to the school across the busy Red Lion Road. He graduated from the Bucks County Police Academy.

<sup>4</sup> Huntingdon Valley is served by a volunteer fire department and the chief is an unpaid position elected by the members of the fire company.



modest lineage. She joined HVPC in June 1929, at the age of 12. An only child, Bev lived with her parents on Huntingdon Pike, a short walk from the church. Her father was a grinder at a ball-bearing factory; her mother was born in Ireland.

### **The Long Revival**

Ebby's father and mother became members of HVPC during the most remarkable revival in its history. In March 1929, Luther Craig Long, newly graduated from Princeton Theological Seminary, arrived to take the pulpit in his first church. His final year at Princeton was a crisis point in the so-called Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy within the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (PCUSA), the oldest and largest Presbyterian group in the United States. The theological controversy raged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Fundamentalist held to traditional teachings of Christianity based on a literal reading of the Bible, while the Modernists sought to update those teachings in light of advances in the natural sciences and a new method of understanding scripture known as the historical-critical method. While the Fundamentalists believed the Bible is the inerrant Word of God, and accepted its accounts of supernatural miracles at face value, the Modernists understood the Bible to be an anthology of human documents whose miracle stories must be reinterpreted in light of modern science and psychology.

The leader of the Fundamentalist camp in the PCUSA was the Rev. Dr. J. Gresham Machen (1881-1937) who taught Greek and New Testament at Princeton Seminary from 1906 to 1929. At the end of the 1928-1929 academic year, he and four other Princeton instructors were ousted from the seminary and regrouped in Philadelphia to form the rival Westminster Theological Seminary. Long enjoyed a warm and enduring relationship with Machen. The older man was a surrogate father for Long, who had lost his own father within a month of graduating from

high school. For three years under the force of Machen's tutelage, in the midst of the titanic struggle for the heart and soul of the Presbyterian church, Long formed his understanding of the gospel and the mission of the church.

A few months after Long was installed at HVPC, Machen officiated at his wedding in the chapel at Princeton Theological Seminary. That occasion was Machen's Princeton swan song, his final sermon at the school he served for 23 years, the institution which had been the bulwark of Presbyterian conservative orthodoxy for more than a century. After Long left HVPC, he pastored First Presbyterian Church in New Haven, Connecticut, but in 1933 was expelled from that pulpit for preaching fundamentalism. Part of the congregation left with him to organize Calvin Presbyterian Church, which in 1936 became one of the original churches in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC), a new denomination formed by Machen and his associates when they were finally defrocked and expelled from the mainline PCUSA. Machen preached at the dedication of Calvin Presbyterian Church's new sanctuary. And when Machen died a year later, Long was twice bereft of a father.

When Long arrived at HVPC, fresh from Princeton Seminary, he hit the church and the village like a cyclone. He started bible studies for young adults. He reorganized the Sunday School. He pushed the church to install its first pipe organ. He inaugurated the Daily Vacation Bible School.<sup>5</sup> In just twelve months, membership in the sleepy village church increased more than 50 percent, totals rising from 129 to 197. While there were 11 former members restored to the church and nine received from other churches, fully 48 new believers were baptized into that fellowship in just one year. The Long revival produced the largest annual membership gain, as a percentage, in the history of the church. In

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<sup>5</sup> HVPC 120<sup>th</sup> anniversary booklet.

terms of numbers of believer baptisms in one year, it far outstripped anything the church has seen before or after, even when the church was much larger and the surrounding community was much more populous. Included in the Long revival were two teenagers: Beverly Horlacher and Edwin Berrill Flack, Ebby's mother and father.

Bev Horlacher was born in Philadelphia but soon moved to Huntingdon Valley. At the age of six, she began to study the piano with her father and at nine she began to take lessons from HVPC member Margaret Josephine Fater, née Skinner (1897-1932), who played the instrument at the church. Three years later, Bev was received as a member of HVPC on June 2, 1929. Her future husband, Edwin Berrill Flack, was born into the village and the church, the son, and grandson of HVPC members. Curiously, Edwin was not baptized as an infant, though that is the Presbyterian custom. Three months after Bev joined HVPC, Edwin also joined, making his profession of faith and being baptized with 10 other people on September 1, 1929.

In May 1932, at the age of 13, Bev was hired by HVPC as organist to operate the church's new instrument, replacing her piano teacher who would die that same year of acute alcoholism at the age of 34. Two years later, in 1934, her father Harry Horlacher (1895-1975) joined the church. Bev lived at home with her parents on Huntingdon Pike, just a short walk from the church. Once out of high school, she earned her living as a music teacher and continued her musical studies at the Philadelphia Conservatory of Music, earning her bachelor's degree in 1939. The following year, at the age of 23, she married Edwin and settled down to live on Anne Street, within view of the church. In 1943, the Flack's first child, Ebby, was born. He was followed by a sister Beverly and a brother Brian.

### **Ebby's Life in the Church**

The first half of Ebby's life is the story of an ever-deepening involvement and entrenchment in the life of HVPC: baptized as an infant, confirmed at 12, hired as choir director at 22, ordained an elder at 26, hired as facilities manager at 35, appointed to the Valley Christian School board, and finally resigning from all his HVPC and VCS positions at 41.

The story begins just two days after he was born, when on Sunday, November 7, 1943, Ebby was baptized by the Rev. Dr. Alfred Levis Taxis (1887-1961), HVPC's pastor at that time.<sup>6</sup> In 1956, at the age of 12, Ebby joined the church in the customary way as part of a confirmation class with 23 other young people, including his cousin Harry James Flack (1943- ). We have no record of Ebby at the church as a young person, but we know from newspaper accounts and yearbooks that Ebby was active in choral music during his time at Lower Moreland High School, singing with the school's acapella choir.<sup>7</sup> As the church and the village were intertwined, so was the church and local school. Ebby's classmates included many children from HVPC. School board members and high school teachers also were leading members of the church. After graduating from Lower Moreland High School in 1961, Ebby entered West Chester State College (now West Chester University) and graduate four years later with a degree in music direction.

**Choir Director.** At the age of 22, with a bachelor's degree in hand, Ebby returned home and was hired as the HVPC choir director, working side-by-side with his mother, who had been the church organist for 32 years at that point. Ebby

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<sup>6</sup> The record of Ebby's baptism is odd. First, it is very unusual to baptize a babe two days old. Presbyterians do baptize babies, but there is never a rush, even if there is a danger of the child dying. Second, his baptism was not recorded in the normal sequence in the HVPC register. It was added later, squeezed between two existing entries, with the remark, "Info gotten from baptismal certificate." This issue was made by Ruth Blair, who was not clerk of session until years after Ebby's birth.

<sup>7</sup> Curiously, Barbara Fesmire was the accompanist for the LMHS acapella choir. She would later be the organist at HVPC. Both Ebby and his cousin Jimmy were in the choir.

filled a position vacated by the resignation of Jerome Brandt. While not members of HVPC, the Brandts also were local people and since 2010, Jerome Brandt and his wife Rachel have lived in a house adjacent to the HVPC property. Within five months of being hired, Ebby's salary was raised, and he was earning more than his mother, though not an amount that would constitute a full-time job.

From the beginning, Flack's choral program was ambitious. After his first Easter season in 1966, HVPC Session minutes note that "the music is moving along quite well, and the young people are enthusiastic about the choir leader." Later that year, during the Christmas season, Ebby began what became a tradition until he left in 1984: concert performances of portions of Handel's oratorio *Messiah* with large community choirs. The full oratorio, which takes more than two hours to perform, contains 16 scenes, beginning with the birth of Jesus, moving on to his ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension, and coming to a climax in his final glorification in heaven. Ebby conducted scenes connected with the birth of Jesus during the Christmas season and scenes connected with the death and resurrection of Jesus in the Easter season. Singers came from HVPC and other area churches. The choir was supported by paid guest soloists, with Ebby's mother on the organ console, and Ebby conducting. In the first year, there were 50 voices supported by three guest soloists in the HVPC performance. The chancel must have been tightly packed to accommodate so many musicians.

Ebby's work history outside of HVPC is harder to reconstruct. His 2020 obituary says he worked as a choral music instructor in the Philadelphia school system and that "one of his proudest moments" was being involved in an interschool choral event with more than 3000 "during his tenure at Bartram High School." That memorable event likely was the 1976 annual gospel high school

choir festival.<sup>8</sup> Elder George Hindley recalled that Ebby taught for a time in the Norristown, Pa., schools. Elder John Stiles said Ebby returned to his alma mater, Lower Moreland High School, for a brief teaching stint, and that he also worked for the telephone company.

**Elder.** Though many admired Ebby's musical gifts, by 1969, a power struggle emerged in the HVPC choir, confirming the truism that choirs are the seedbeds of revolt in every church. In September 1969, Ebby threw down his gauntlet and announced to the HVPC Session that he would resign "should the group that is troubling us so much succeed in their goal." We do not know who was in the insurgent group nor what goal they hoped to gain. But evidently Ebby won the battle, and his power was further consolidated when, one month later, he was elected as an elder at the tender age of 26. Ebby may have been youngest elder in the church's history up to that point, but his election is not surprising, for the Flack family was well known to the church and Ebby was raised in the congregation. His aunt Anna Mae Flack was serving on the Session the year Ebby was hired as choir director.

Ebby served as an elder at HVPC for two back-to-back three-year terms, from 1970 through 1975. During Ebby's second three-year term, he was joined on the Session by his younger brother, Brian Flack (1949- ). And then after a one-year hiatus required by Presbyterian polity, Ebby was elected for a third and fourth three-year terms, for the years 1977 through 1982. After again laying off for a year, in 1983 he was elected for a fifth three-year term, a term he would not compete.

**Expanding Power.** Hired as choir director in 1965, elected an elder in 1970, and then hired as facilities manager in 1978, Ebby began to draw into his

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<sup>8</sup> "Gospel Concert Honored Choirs' Kids." *Philadelphia Daily News*, March 26, 1976, p. 10.

hands more and more strings of power within the church through his staff positions and the Session committees which govern the church. The litany is daunting but worth reciting.

In 1976, Ebby was appointed to the Music Committee and the Ad Hoc Committee to Re-Establish Evening Services. In 1977, he joined the Special Inquiry Committee which explored the possibility of building a new church campus. That same year Ebby became the chairman of the large Christian Education Committee which oversaw the entire Sunday school program as well as Valley Christian School, founded just three years earlier. In 1978 he was on the Benevolence Committee and was named its treasurer. In 1980, Ebby was appointed to the powerful Budget Committee. In 1981, he joined the Stewardship Committee. That same year Ebby was appointed to the Pastoral Care Committee and became the chairman of the Mission Board with its very large budget. In 1982, he joined the Manse Committee, and was appointed to the Valley Christian School board. That same year, the Session granted that Ebby “be empowered to carry on all banking and insurance business as required to perform [his] duties,” as facilities manager. And, finally, in 1983, Ebby was appointed to the Worship Committee.

Along the way, Ebby installed and operated his own proprietary phone system throughout the church and school and leased and operated the computers used to handle the payroll system – two electronic systems that provided Ebby with unusual access to private information. Ebby’s 2020 obituary mentions his “lifelong obsession with antique phone equipment.” In 1976, Ebby proposed replacing the existing Bell Telephone equipment with his own system, offering to donate all the equipment and labor for his quasi-legal internal phone system. The Session happily accepted. “A vote of gratitude was unanimous!” we read in

Session records.<sup>9</sup> In time, there were phones throughout the church buildings. There was even a phone secreted next to the pastor's throne-like chair in the chancel. And Ebby, as creator and master of the system, was able to listen in on all the calls.

“He got extremely powerful,” Elder David Clayton observed. “Ebby was running the church, not the Session. He volunteered, and they said, “Oh sure!” He volunteered, volunteered, volunteered until pretty soon he was doing everything. There was no doubt about that. And he was good at what he did.”<sup>10</sup> In 1981, the church printed a booklet marking its 120th anniversary. That booklet contains a chronology of the church showing “historical highlights” from 1861 to 1980. In that chronology, individual names are mentioned only four times and each time the name is Flack: the 1932 appointment of Bev Flack as organist, the 1965 appointment of Ebby Flack as choir director, the 1972 fortieth anniversary of Bev Flack as organist, and the 1978 appointment of Ebby Flack as facilities manager. From this booklet one might reasonably conclude HVPC had become the private fiefdom of the Flack family.

In 1974, a group of women led by Pastor Groff's wife, organized a preschool at HVPC and soon from humble beginnings, Valley Christian School grew to into an elementary school attracting around 120 students from the surrounding communities. As VCS grew and began to occupy more and more areas within the church buildings, turf battles began to emerge as school and church came into unavoidable conflicts over space. One perennial point of friction between the church and the school were the sextons who provided cleaning and handyman services to the church and school. As the caretakers of the buildings, the sextons were uncomfortably caught between the conflicting demands of the two. In 1978,

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<sup>9</sup> HVPC Session Minutes, September 21, 1976.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with David Clayton, September 1, 2022.



the senior sexton who served the church for many years decided it was time to retire and Ebby saw a fresh opportunity.

**Facilities Manager.** Thirty-five years old, unmarried, with no place of his own, and, at that time, only a part-time job as HVPC choir director, Ebby announced he wanted to “accept the forthcoming position as church sexton, as a full-time ministry to the Lord.”<sup>11</sup> The Session happily accepted his offer even as they recognized their own beneficence toward this son of the congregation who somehow failed to fully launch in life. “As a church family, we will endeavor to help as much as possible,” the Session said during Ebby’s first month as in his new job.<sup>12</sup> His starting salary was \$12,000 per year, plus health and retirement benefits. Combined with his position as choir director, his HVPC salary was above the \$15,060 median household income in the United States that year.

While Ebby was hired to replace a retiring sexton, he had grander visions of the position. When he assumed his duties in December 1978, he took the title of facilities manager and was responsible for all the buildings and grounds of the church and school. Ebby dived into these new responsibilities with the same vigor that he brought to his work as choir director and elder. Previous sextons were janitors reporting to the pastor and the Administration Board, a committee of the Session, but Ebby transformed himself into an executive, managing a staff of teenage boys who did the cleaning while Ebby busied himself with producing impressive and ambitious monthly reports to Session. Pastor Groff made it official and said that Ebby “may act as a paid executive to the Administration Board.”

His first week on the job, Ebby sent to the Session his memo: “The First Group of Ten Improvements to be Started Immediately.”<sup>13</sup> He also replaced his

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<sup>11</sup> HVPC Session Minutes, November 5, 1978.

<sup>12</sup> HVPC Session Minutes, December 19, 1978.

<sup>13</sup> HVPC Session Minutes, December 1, 1978.

one employee, the part-time custodial assistant Doug Nolan, a teenage member of the church. In spite of the setback, Nolan later would serve the church for many years as an elder. The following month came the first of Ebby's month Facilities Manager Reports which including a "Second Group of Ten Building Improvements."<sup>14</sup> To all of Ebby's efforts and initiative, the Session responded with effusive praise: "A special indication of thanks was proffered to E. Flack for his upgrading of the facilities," we read in October 1979.<sup>15</sup> "A vote of thanks for Facilities chairman E. Flack" was moved by Elder Robert Derby in January 1980.

### **Emerging Signs of Disorder**

In my 17 years at HVPC, I have heard many stories about Ebby, but the one that came up first and has been most often repeated is that Ebby lived in the church with his two large dogs. Why a grown man with two dogs would want to live inside the church, when his parents lived only 100 yards away, is a question worth asking. And why the church would tolerate such an arrangement should be asked as well. Joan Clover told me about bringing a carful of pies to church for some function. When she opened the kitchen door, the two dogs came bounding onto the scene and the pies were ruined. When I questioned her more closely about exactly where in the church buildings he lived and for how long, details were hard to recall. It just seemed as if he had always been there and was that his presence was throughout the buildings. Ellen Bodenheimer says he used the commercial kitchen, which was used by both the church and the school, as his own. Elder Jay Sarajian says he lived in the basement, between the boiler room and the vault, a space never intended for human habitation. Joan Clover recalled he kept a cot in the close of the church lounge.

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<sup>14</sup> HVPC Session Minutes, January 16, 1979.

<sup>15</sup> HVPC Session Minutes, October 7, 1979.

In August 1980, Ebby asked the Session if he could live in the apartment of the Marji Small Youth House, a freestanding house owned by the church adjoining the main church property. The apartment had been used in the past as a perquisite for the church youth worker. The Session acceded to Ebby's request, granting him use of the apartment, "with no changes in salary, duties, or benefits."<sup>16</sup>

After stories about living in the church with his dogs, the second most frequent category of stories about Ebby concern his homosexuality. In 2015, when Florida legalized same-sex marriage, Ebby, who was living in Key West at the time, took advantage of the change in the law and married a man who had been his partner for a number of years. But in the 1970s and 1980s, homosexual behavior was largely hidden from public view. As the Presbyterian denomination that HVPC was a member of began to consider liberalizing its view of homosexuality, HVPC repeatedly went on record opposing any such change. As early as 1965, HVPC Session records show opposition to treating homosexuality as anything but a sin. In 1976, while Ebby was serving as an elder, the ruling body of the church drafted a resolution opposing the ordination of homosexuals.<sup>17</sup>

Ebby was hired as facilities manager partly out of a desire to help a 35-year-old single man who needed the job. But Ebby's homosexual behavior may have caused his unemployment. An HVPC Elder who had a relative serving on the Lower Moreland School Board told me that Ebby was working for the high school but had been asked to resign after Ebby made unwelcomed advances on students and "kept hanging out in the boys' gym and weight room."

Thinking back to those days, Ellen Bodenheim said, "We did not know he was gay. He had all those teenage boys who helped with the work, but we never had any hint of him being gay." To the innocent, perhaps, all appears innocent.

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<sup>16</sup> HVPC Session Minutes, August 17, 1980.

<sup>17</sup> HVPC Session Minutes, June 15, 1976.

But Bodenheimer went on to say, “I remember the one VCS mother saying to me when Ebby went through the Boyer, one of the mothers said, “Ebby and those boys, I just don’t like it.”” Former HVPC Elder John Stiles recalled, “Lots of times you’d walk into Ebby’s office, which was air conditioned, and these guys would be hanging out with him, having a soda and watching movies.” In 1981, Ebby asked Session for permission to hire a boy from outside the church as a helper because he could no longer find anyone “suitable or interested within the church.” It may be that Ebby reputation in the church was known but unspoken.

A facility manager with a cadre of teenage boys working for him could seem innocent. But eyebrows finally were raised when too many hours were charged to the budget and not enough work got done. Elder Bob Derby raised the issue of the excess staff hours at a congregational meeting, perhaps because he understood that more than work may have been going on. John Stiles, who attended that meeting, recalls one innocent older lady sitting behind him saying, “I always thought Bob Derby was such a nice man! Why is he attacking Ebby?”

Ebby presented the church with a vexing combination of omnibus service, which the lax leadership gratefully received, and unsavory violations of all decent boundaries, which the innocent failed to see and the knowing dared not challenge. His ongoing presence was part symptom and part cause of a deepening malaise in the congregation and in a souring relationship between the church and its largest mission, Valley Christian School. Remembering those times, Elder John Stiles reflected, “I think the church put up with a lot. Ebby ingratiated himself with many in the church, particularly the older ladies. To kick him out would almost split the church.” What to do about Ebby became a hot topic at VCS. Ellen Bodenheimer recalled a conversation with Sue Lind, the school’s co-administrator. “I said to her; “Where do you think the church stands? If they took a vote to get rid of Ebby?” “I have no idea,” Sue said.”

## **Aborted Pastorate of Stephen Kellough**

Ebby was hired as choir director in 1965, two years before HVPC reached its pinnacle of membership during the pastorate of Leonard Clayton. During Clayton's tenure, which ran from 1953 until 1970, the church more than doubled in size as the farms surrounding the village became a suburban developments in the post-World War II housing boom. The numeric growth of the church consisted almost entirely of individuals and families transferring their membership from churches in Philadelphia, as they moved from city to suburbs. The post-war baby boom brought the next generation into the church. From its peak of 797 members in 1967, church membership slipped about 11 percent during Clayton's final three years.

Clayton was followed by Bill Groff, who served the church from 1971 until 1981. The distinctives of Groff's pastorate were the 1974 launching of Valley Christian School, a venture fraught with possibility and risks, and the arrival of some Pentecostal fire as HVPC took part in the Charismatic Movement sweeping the nation. Traditional Presbyterian orthodoxy, laid out in the 1641 Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF), holds that the extraordinary gifts of the Holy Spirit seen in the New Testament were given to confirm the verbal testimony of the apostles and that they ceased once the canon of Christian scripture was complete. Prophetic utterances, faith healings, speaking in unknown tongues, and other miracles, which figure so largely in the Acts of the Apostles, disappear after the last words of the New Testament were committed to writing because once the church had the written Word of God it no longer required extraordinary signs to confirm the verbal teaching of the church. Such is the argument of the WCF, a position known as cessationism. The so-called Charismatic Movement, which began in the early 20th century among Christians in the Wesleyan Methodist tradition, spread throughout the country and in the 1960s and 1970s was felt in

diverse denominations, both Roman Catholic and Protestant. Those who wanted the full Pentecostal experience joined congregations in the burgeoning charismatic denominations, such as the Church of God in Christ or the Assemblies of God. Others remained chose to remain in their traditional denominational churches but enjoyed a charismatic supplement to their legacy worship. Pentecostal fire seemed to touch down willy-nilly, like the funnel cloud of a tornado. In Huntingdon Valley in the 1970s, HVPC and the Methodist church a mile to the north were swept by the Holy Spirit. The neighboring Baptist and Lutheran congregations, however, were unscathed.

While the Charismatic Movement deepened the religious experience of many and added some fervor to worship at HVPC, it also gave rise to a growing divide in the congregation. In the main, charismatic displays at HVPC were restricted to an informal evening service which was viewed by most as supplemental to the “real” worship service on Sunday morning. Those involved in the movement also recall fondly attending charismatic evening services at other churches within driving distance.

The Pentecostal fire at HVPC was not an all-consuming fire, nor did it stem the downward trend in membership that began in the final years of Clayton’s pastorate. During Groff’s 10-year pastorate, membership sagging another 30 percent to 514, with 187 on the rolls identified as “inactive.” Though the church still had more than 327 active members, a feeling of anxiety about its flagging fortunes pervaded the church. With loss of membership came loss of status, a particular blow to a those who valued the preeminence the church enjoyed in the closeknit community since its founding. During the boom years of the late 1950s and early 1960s, HVPC was the “in” church. But it was soon overshadowed by the upstart Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, founded in 1956 by Ernest Gerhart “Ernie” Schmidt, an admirer of Norman Vincent Peale and Robert Schuller. A restless

entrepreneur driven by a need for his father's approval, the second-generation Lutheran pastor started his church fresh out of seminary in the Huntingdon Valley firehouse. By 1974 it had exploded to nearly 3,000 members in a modern campus on 12 acres less than a mile south of HVPC on Huntingdon Pike. By the time Ernie retired, the church grew to 4,000 members "through a ministry approach that focused on the joy of Christianity," according to the obituary written by his family. In contrast to the dour Calvinism of HVPC, Schmidt's "messages were short on guilt and judgment, and long on acceptance."<sup>18</sup>

In January 1981, just shy of his tenth anniversary at HVPC, Pastor Groff announced he had accepted a call to First Presbyterian Church of Tacoma, Washington. Sixteen months later, in May 1982, Stephen Kellough, a 34-year-old graduate of Dallas Theological Seminary was installed as the pastor of HVPC. For the previous five years, he had tended a Presbyterian flock in rural Forreston, Illinois. Within nine months of arriving in Huntingdon Valley, however, Pastor Kellough signaled his desire to leave.

The common explanation given for Kellough throwing in the towel so soon was that in a clash with Ebby, Kellough asked the Session to back him up, but was left unsupported. When the Session was forced to choose between the deeply embedded homegrown elder-choir director-facilities manager and the newly-arrived greenhorn from the Midwest, the Session chose the man they knew. And maybe they did the young pastor a favor. Kellough returned to serve the church he left in Illinois for another six years. He went on to a distinguished 25-year career as the longest-serving chaplain at Wheaton College.

In a 2022 email exchange with Kellough, the former HVPC pastor made no reference to Ebby but said he was attracted to HVPC because the church was

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<sup>18</sup> <https://www.legacy.com/us/obituaries/inquirer/name/ernst-schmidt-obituary?id=9484081>, accessed September 7, 2022.

involved with the Presbyterian Lay Committee (PLC), a conservative renewal organization within the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America denomination.<sup>19</sup> The PLC was deeply concerned about the leftward theological drift in the mainline denomination and spent years in the fight against the ordination of homosexuals.

When Pastor Kellough arrived in Huntingdon Valley, HVPC had no manse and so the church bought a house in the neighborhood and asked the township for an exemption to local property taxes. That request was denied and without asking the pastor or the Session, Ebby dashed off a letter to the township which placed the church in an embarrassing situation.

At the February 1983 meeting of Session – Ebby was not serving on the Session during that year – the governing body of the church gave Ebby a formal rebuke to register “their disapproval of his action,” and ordered him “not to communicate church matters publicly without prior clearance of the pastor of and the Session.” An ad hoc committee consisting of the pastor, the clerk of Session, and one other elder was formed to “prepare, present, and discuss this communication with Mr. Flack.”<sup>20</sup> At the following month’s Session meeting, the elders approved a motion stating what should have been obvious from the outset, that “the Facilities Manager is accountable to the Session through the Pastor, and in the absence of the Pastor, to the Administration Board.”<sup>21</sup> It seems that Ebby’s unbounded exercise of power finally crossed a line that even the indebted Session could not tolerate.

Ebby, however, was not daunted by this rebuke. In short order, Kellough

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<sup>19</sup> From 1958 to 1983, the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (UPCUSA) was the largest Presbyterian denomination in the United States. In 1983 it merged with the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS) to form the Presbyterian Church USA (PCUSA), which remains the largest Presbyterian body in the United States.

<sup>20</sup> HVPC Session Minutes, February 15, 1983.

<sup>21</sup> HVPC Session Minutes, March 15, 1983.



left and Ebby continued to rule the roost as choir director and facilities manager, running an impressive array of committees when on Session, and bombarding Session with his lengthy memos when he was not. Amazingly, at the October 1983 congregational meeting, Ebby was nominated and elected for a fifth term on the Session, having laid off for one year after two back-to-back terms.<sup>22</sup>

### **Valley Christian School**

VCS was launched by HVPC in 1974 and was nurtured by the mothers of the church who sent their kids to its programs. Because the school is housed within the church buildings, the school and its staff were brought into contact with Ebby on a daily basis. According to Ellen Bodenheimer, relations between Ebby and the school were friendly at first but soured for some unexplained reason. “He had it in for the school. I don’t know what happened,” Ellen Bodenheimer said.

Ebby expectation of total control of “his” buildings, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the reality of their occupation five days a week by more than a hundred students and all the hectic messy work of school life, created the conditions for inevitable conflict. “He was really giving us a hard time,” Bodenheim recalled. “You couldn’t move a chair from one room to the next without his permission. He became very hard to live with.”

At times the conflict rose from grating annoyance to open abuse. One year, the VCS Parent Teacher Fellowship (PTF) organized a fundraising Strawberry Festival. As the weather looked threatening, Bodenheim asked Ebby about moving the activity from the parking lot into the Boyer Auditorium, the church’s large all-purpose gymnasium and lunchroom. When the time came, so did the showers, and the mothers of the PTF moved their wares into the Boyer and began to sell their

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<sup>22</sup> HVPC Session Minutes, October 27, 1983.

strawberry edibles to members of the school family and surrounding community who sat at tables, enjoying their treats. “Ebby came in screaming at me,” Bodenheimer said. “In front of all these people, we had parents, all kinds of people in there. He was furious that we were in the building. I heard that he wrote me up. I didn’t know you had to have permission to use the Boyer in writing.”

Whatever its origin, Ebby’s increasing ill-will toward VCS became a reign of terror, and he seemed to look for chances to undermine and malign the school. In its early years, two women, Sue Lind and Lutie Lute, were co-administrators of VCS. Lind was a member of HVPC but Lute, who was divorced, was not. On two occasions, Ebby sent letters to VCS families suggesting that Lute, as a divorced woman, was not fit to run a Christian school.

Ebby apparently put his custom-made phone system to work in his cause. “People couldn’t figure out why Ebby knew about private conversations all the time,” Elder John Stiles recalled. It seems Ebby was listening in. Bodenheimer said, “What we had been living with, it was awful. We would go outside to have a conversation. We thought the place was bugged. We’d say, ‘I’ll call you when I get home.’”

There were suspicions of mail tampering and theft as well. When an envelope filled with cash and orders for the PTF hoagie sale went missing, Ebby was suspected. When information packets prepared for prospective families were placed in the outgoing mail bin but never reached their intended recipients, Ebby was suspected.

While the church lore says it was conflict with Ebby that prompted Kellough to leave HVPC in less than a year, the official record is more veiled or perhaps camouflaged. At a special meeting of the Session just two weeks after Ebby’s rebuke, Kellough outlined differences he had with church leadership regarding the Charismatic Movement which began at HVPC during the pastorate of Bill Groff.

Kellough said that while matters concerning tongues, prophesy, and healing are non-essential in the greater church, they are essential in the local church and church leadership should be of one mind regarding these issues. At that meeting, Kellough asked if it were in the best interest of HVPC for him to remain in the pulpit. No action was taken at that meeting, but a week later another special meeting of the Session was called and Kellough responded to the Session's request that he remain as pastor by saying "that he had not found the people of the church to be of a teachable spirit, able to move in his direction." He pointedly insisted "that there were no other matters at stake" and announced his final decision was to return to the church he had left in Illinois.<sup>23</sup> Session records say nothing about Ebby in connection with Kellough's departure. At the congregational meeting voting to accept Kellough's resignation, Elder Tom Taylor closed the deliberations with an appeal to the congregation "that there be no speculation of grievances concerning the pastor's resignation."<sup>24</sup> And so a veil of secrecy was drawn over a festering problem.

### **New Sheriff in Town Puts an End to Ebby Flack**

After Kellough resigned and before his successor was named, HVPC chose not to call an interim pastor, against the advice of the Presbytery of Philadelphia, the regional governing body of the church. Following the resignation of a pastor, the normal process in Presbyterian churches is for the Session to call an interim pastor to guide the church during the months while the church searches for their new pastors. Interim pastors typically are well-experienced retired pastors with special training for managing these transitional periods. The preach, moderate the Session, and serve as the head of staff. Among their jobs is the uncomfortable

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<sup>23</sup> HVPC Session Minutes, March 9, 1983.

<sup>24</sup> HVPC Session Minutes, March 27, 1983.

work of taking a hard look at what is going on inside the church, making necessary changes, and even firing staff, if needed, so the new pastor can start his work with a clean slate. HVPC did not call an interim pastor but instead relied upon guest preachers to fill the pulpit while the church's Pastor Nominating Committee searched for a new leader. The result was a leadership vacuum, with no functional head of staff.

Perhaps this decision was motivated by a desire to save money – week-to-week preachers cost a fraction of an interim pastor's salary. But it may also have been the result of a desire to maintain the status quo without what would have seemed like meddlesome interference from the Presbytery or an empowered interim pastor.

Whatever the reasons, Ebby used the power vacuum to expand his own influence. Ellen Bodenheimer remembered that during the interim period, while the church had no pastor, Ebby himself wrote the "pastor's letter" that periodically would be issued by the church office.

In February 1984, William Matthew Elliot, Jr. (1930-2020) was installed as the twenty-first pastor HVPC. He was a seasoned 54-year-old pastor, originally from the Philadelphia suburbs, with 18 years of pastoral experience in four churches under his belt. It did not take Elliott long to see what was going on with Ebby and he quickly put an end to it. "Elliott was a tough guy," Elder John Stiles observed. "He was nice when he was nice and tough when he was tough. Elliott saw that Ebby needed to go, so basically it came down to him or me." This time Ebby met his match.

There is no indication in church records of the new pastor butting heads with Ebby. But the open secret of Ebby's homosexuality, his over-involvement in the management of the church, his dogs roaming the church building, and his regular clashes with the staff of Valley Christian School would have been hard to miss.

Knowing that the new pastor was onto him, Ebby looked for grounds to attack him. “The rumor was that Ebby went up to New York (where Elliott’s previous congregation was located) to get dirt on him,” Stiles said.

Soon after Pastor Elliott arrived at HVPC, conflict between Ebby and the pastor came to head. In May 1984, just three months after Pastor Elliot arrived, Ebby announced a leave of absence. Church records do not contain his letter to the session, so we don’t know what reasons were given. Two months later, however, Ebby tendered his resignation, quitting as both facilities manager and as choir director. Again, we don’t have his letter of resignation in church records, so we don’t know what reasons were given. We can, however, reasonably conclude his resignation after 19 years on the HVPC staff was produced by a showdown with Pastor Elliot. At the meeting Ebby’s letter of resignation was read, the Session also “unanimously pledged its unconditional support to Pastor Elliott in his continuing ministry in our church.”<sup>25</sup> While the Session previously left Pastor Kellough unsupported and in the lurch, this time the church’s governing body saw it needed to have the moral courage to confront their homegrown demon.

But the story did not end there.

Ebby’s obsession with VCS did not allow him to let go of his conflicts with the school. At the October 16, 1984 meeting of Session, Pastor Elliott distributed a memo from the now-resigned Ebby containing a list of 54 questions he demanded the school board answer at the VCS open house scheduled for later in the week. Unfortunately, the list of 54 questions has not been preserved in church records, but Elder George Hindley remembers the meeting well. “Everyone showed up except Ebby,” Hindley recalled. “Elder Bob Derby, head of the School Board, chaired the meeting and went carefully down the list of questions. A bunch of the

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<sup>25</sup> HVPC Session Minutes, July 31, 1983.

questions were based on the cost of the school to the church. Derby went through all of the questions, even though some in the room thought it was unnecessary, but he insisted that the matter would be dealt with and put to bed.”

### **An Ugly Denouement**

In spite of all that had transpired, Huntingdon Valley Presbyterian Church was gracious to a fault. A month after he resigned, Ebby changed his mind and said he wanted the stay on as choir director. The Session agreed. But then he resigned again, giving up all his posts in the church. Ebby asked to be paid for equipment had “donated” to the church: a computer, his vaunted phone system. The Session agreed. He asked to be paid for “improvements” he made in the apartment he occupied. The Session agreed. Having pity on the man who had derailed his own life, the church even paid for him to receive counseling at the Northeast Career Center in Princeton, N. J. I was told he did not go.

And still the Session was gracious, deciding to honor Ebby for his long years of service at the annual congregational dinner in December. A special letter of commendation was to be read and a cash gift, solicited from the congregation, was to be presented. By year’s end, Ebby’s private phone system was removed and replaced by secure lines from Ma Bell. The church simply wanted to move on and leave this episode behind. But Ebby had a parting shot up his sleeve.

A special joint meeting of HVPC Session and the VCS board was held on Thursday, January 3, 1985. The meeting had been called at the previous Session meeting, on December, 18, 1984, because of a \$8,500 deficit at VCS.<sup>26</sup> “During the meeting, it was stated and restated that due to the delicacy of the matters discussed nothing of the evening’s discussion was to be shared with anyone not in

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<sup>26</sup> HVPC Session Minutes, 1976-1984, p. 553.

attendance.”<sup>27</sup> The day after the joint meeting, however, Bob Derby received an anonymous letter referencing things said at that closed meeting. Another unsigned letter was sent to VCS parents also divulging the contents of the secret meeting. Pastor Elliott characterized the letters as “of a malicious nature” and of “obvious destructive intent” and indicated “certain actions have been initiated.” Those actions were a police investigation.

At the January 15, 1985, meeting of the Session, Detective Carl Molt of the Huntingdon Valley Police Department brought a report. In the first draft of the Session minutes, we read:

Carl presented the status of the investigation concerning several anonymous letters related to HVPC matters. He identified a member of the church and former staff person, E. H. Flack who admitted writing 4 anonymous letters, and further indicated the actions taken and options available such as psychiatric evaluation/surveillance, fines, etc.

In a pulling of a veil of secrecy over the truth, the Session minutes later were amended to read:

Mr. Moulton presented the status of the investigation concerning several letters directly related to Huntingdon Valley Presbyterian Church and Valley Christian School. On the advice of legal counsel, the only additional information being recorded in the official minutes of the Session is that a person has admitted to the authorship of these letters.

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<sup>27</sup> Letter from Pastor Elliott to the Session, dated January 10, 1985, and retained in the Session minutes book.

At this time the police department is handing the case.”

Driven by spite, Ebby sent those letters to damage Valley Christian School and to sour its relationship with Huntingdon Valley Presbyterian Church. But he did not act alone. Ebby was not present at the meeting whose information he disclosed, but Tedd Didden, both an elder and the church pianist, was. The relationship between Tedd and Ebby is open to interpretation. According to Elder John Stiles, “they were thick as thieves.” After Ebby left the church, he and Tedd remained friends and performed music together. With Ebby’s resignation, Tedd was named his successor, not surprising in light of his previous involvement in the HVPC music program. In the Session minutes of January 15, 1985, we read:

The pastor explained that Elder Tedd Didden had violated the stated confidentiality of the January 3, Special Session/School Board meeting by passing on information to E. H. Flack – with serious consequences. Elder Didden indicated that the information was given to Ebby only out of friendship. He then assured the Session that no further breach of confidentiality would occur and that as a result of the serious consequences he had changed his outlook toward Ebby and will not permit their relationship to compromise Session confidentiality.

While the Session was willing to forgive and forget Ebby’s many misdeeds, his direct attack on the church and school sealed his fate. At the January 1985 meeting, the Session also voted to “the return of funds contributed for E. H. Flack to the senders with an explanatory letter.” Further, the Session also voted to tell the congregation about what was happening prior to the January 24, 1985



congregational meeting. Curiously, minutes of that meeting are missing from the HVPC archives. The following month, Tedd Didden resigned as an elder. At the May 1985 Session meeting, Tedd Didden, already on staff as pianist, was elected Music Director at \$5,500 per year. He remained in that position for years.

The next-to-last matter to wrap up was a computer lease that Ebby signed without Session approval. That matter was turned over to lawyers in May 1985. In November 1990, Ebby was struck from the HVPC membership roll.

Remarkably, Ebby's mother remained at HVPC after her son's disgraceful departure. There even was an organ fund named in her honor for the expansion of the instrument she had so long played. Finally, in 1987, in her 56th year as HVPC organist, she left to become the organist at St. Mark's Reformed Episcopal Church, in nearby Rydal, Pa. Her son joined her there as the choir director and their special friend Tedd Didden was featured there in special performances of the Messiah.

When Bev Flack died in 2005, funeral arrangements were handled by John Stiles, whose funeral home is three doors north of HVPC. She had spent her life playing the organ in the church and had played the organ for hundreds of funerals at Huntingdon Valley Presbyterian Church. But when her time came to be laid to rest, her service was strictly private, not held in the church, and without the benefit of an organ. Her son Ebby was not present.

## **Lessons Learned**

The story of Ebby Flack was widely known to all who were part of HVPC during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. I have heard bits and pieces from dozens of people in the church and community. The story, however, has never been properly told, laid out from beginning to end, checked against documented evidence. When Ebby is spoken of, it is mostly in haste and mortification. Those who had access to a fuller understanding of what transpired have been no more forthcoming than

those who were onlookers. A veil of silence has been draped over the nearly two-decade long chapter, perhaps out of respect for Ebby's mother, but perhaps also to shield the church for embarrassment.

The veiling of information in Session records has made the historian's task far more difficult. What possible purpose this coverup might have been thought to serve is hard to imagine. While Ebby is morally responsible for his actions, it is also clear the weakened leadership of the church and two decades of decline gave room for his misbehavior. His moral failings as a closeted homosexual never were confronted by the church, in spite of the fact the church was so vocal on this issue within the denomination.

Ebby's ever-expanding power was unchecked by weak leaders content to have him do the work they would rather not do themselves. When his desire for control led him into conflict with others, the church tolerated his behavior. When a new leader arrived, surprised by the entrenched status quo of a church run by its glorified janitor, he bolted, lacking an appetite for the fight. It was Pastor Elliott, a seasoned pastor, who finally took decisively action leading to Ebby's departure.

The leadership lessons are abundant: leaders cannot cede responsibility to willing volunteers. The moral lessons are clear too: tolerating sin does not make it go away. But perhaps the spiritual lesson is most pointed: no power in hell will prevail against the church. The final word in this sad tale go to the VCS employee who suffered so much at Ebby's hand. Ellen Bodenheimer recalls, "Sue Lind and I were praying that we could at least get along with Ebby. And then one day he was gone! Whenever I think of the passage in the Bible that says God can do far more than we ask or imagine, I think of God getting rid of Ebby Flack."