

On November 4, 1952, Dwight D. "Ike" Eisenhower was elected 34th President of the United States, serving two terms.

The Presidential Inauguration, January 20, 1953, was preceded by a prayer service at Eisenhower's church, National Presbyterian. The pastor, Rev. Dr. Edward L.R. Elson, had been a colonel in the Army chaplain corps during the war, where he and Ike became friends. Dr. Elson offered a prayer:

"Grant unto Thy servant, Dwight David Eisenhower, now and henceforth, health of body, serenity of soul, clarity of insight, soundness of judgment, a lofty moral courage, a sanctified stewardship of office, and a constant and confident faith in Thee."

Inspired, Ike went back to his room in the Presidential Suite of the Statler Hotel and wrote out a prayer of his own, with which he began his inaugural address a short time later:

"My friends, before I begin the expression of those thoughts that I deem appropriate to this moment, would you permit me the privilege of uttering a little private prayer of my own. And I ask that you bow your heads. Almighty God, as we stand here at this moment my future associates in the Executive branch



Eisenhower inauguration, January 20, 1953.

of Government join me in beseeching that Thou will make full and complete our dedication to the service of the people in this throng, and their fellow citizens everywhere.

"Give us, we pray, the power to discern clearly right from wrong, and allow all our words and actions to be governed thereby, and by the laws of this land. Especially we pray that our concern shall be for all the people regardless of station, race or calling. May cooperation be permitted and be the mutual aim of those who, under the concepts of our Constitution, hold to differing political faiths; so that all may work for the good of our beloved country and Thy glory. Amen."



From left: Mamie Eisenhower, the President, the Reverend Billy Graham, and Ike's pastor, the Reverend Dr. Edward Elson

ELEANOR ELSON HEGINBOTHAM



Ike's pastor's daughter / 1953

WHY I LIKE IKE

I was in the awkward throes of junior high when Eisenhower was inaugurated. My father, the Rev. Dr. Edward L.R. Elson, had first come to know Eisenhower during his five years as an Army Chaplain in the European theater of the war. Eisenhower had decided to join National Presbyterian (formerly Covenant-First), the Washington DC church at which my father was pastor.

The friendship between my dad and his most famous parishioner opened my life, too, to frequent opportunities to see and chat with the Eisenhowers from the time of the inauguration until just after college, when my young groom and I left for a series of Foreign Service posts. During those years many world and church leaders came to our church and sat at our dinner table, among them a very young Billy Graham, who would work with my dad and others in such projects as congressional prayer breakfasts and who would be one of those recommending that Eisenhower join National Presbyterian.

A historic event occurred before the president could become a member of our church: he had to be baptized. As my dad told me, Eisenhower did not suddenly discover "faith." He was "steeped in biblical

tradition and was brought up with daily Bible reading" and church attendance. However, the tradition of his devout River Brethren mother did not involve infant baptism. Throughout his Army career Ike attended services in non-denominational chapels. Ours was the first church he formally joined. Presbyterian membership assumes a re-affirmation of baptismal vows. Thus, ten days after his inauguration Eisenhower became the only president to be baptized while in office (by my father in a private, not public, service). In fact, a Catholic historian told my father that Eisenhower may have been the first head of state of any nation to be baptized since Clovis I, King of the Franks, in 496.

Later that day the new president stood up with other new members to become a member of National Presbyterian Church. From then on Mamie and Ike (my dad would never have called them that, respectful as he was), regularly attended services at National Presbyterian.

As a security measure and at the request of the Secret Service, the pastor's wife and four children filled out the pew. On most Saturday mornings the chief of Secret Service in the White House called my dad to advise

how large the president's party would be on Sunday and therefore how many "pew fillers" might be in order. The Eisenhowers were escorted in by the head usher and escorted out by my dad during the last hymn.

Usually, only Mamie and Ike attended, but sometimes they brought grandchildren or friends; on one bright autumn day they brought the new Queen of England, an absolutely beautiful Elizabeth with her consort Prince Philip. On that occasion we sat right behind them.

On some of those Sundays when we shared a pew, this curious teen-ager (who perhaps was not fully involved in her father's prayer) could clearly observe the clasped hands of a president who obviously *was* deeply involved.

One Sunday in January, 1954, the president was so taken by the sermon that he asked for fifty copies to mail out to friends and colleagues. "The Mastery of Moods" dealt with the twin evils of an uncontrolled temper and a tendency to criticize rather than compliment, and how the love of God can be an antidote, a healer. Eisenhower sent the sermon, presumably a relevant one, to cabinet members, selected members of Congress, and some military leaders.

As the years progressed, the president's pastor, who also served as Chaplain of the U. S. Senate for a dozen years, visited Ike in the hospital, and took part in the

president's funeral. Before that final event, however, on October 14, 1967---his 77th birthday---Eisenhower laid the cornerstone of a new home for National Presbyterian at Nebraska and Van Ness Streets.

In the windows of the Presidents' Chapel of that edifice, Eisenhower is one of six presidents depicted as exemplars of faith at work. That window shows another historic event: President Eisenhower signing the bill on June 14, 1954, inserting "under God" into the Pledge of Allegiance. Obviously my father believed that the president indeed lived *his* life "under God." ■

Eleanor Elson Heginbotham, Ph.D and her (now-retired) Foreign Service Officer husband served in Liberia, Vietnam, and Indonesia. She has recently retired from her own career of teaching, most recently as Professor of English at Concordia University Saint Paul. She continues to write scholarly articles on American writers, especially Emily Dickinson.

Readers might be interested in the wider narrative presented in Dr. Elson's autobiography, Wide Was His Parish, published in 1986.