

ELWOOD MCQUAID
with Lorna Simcox



*Almost
There*

Almost There

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CHAPTER ONE

When You're Sure You're Lost . . .

The pastor's instructions were specific. "Take [State Route] 24 out of Vinton and travel about 20 miles until you see an Esso station on the right. That will get you into Chamblissburg. Turn right there and take the road over the mountain. I can't tell you exactly how many miles it will be until you get to Goodview. But I can tell you this: Because of the way the road twists and turns, it will seem a lot farther than it is if you were doing it in a straight line."

Then with a wry smile, he added, "Just when you're sure you're lost, you're almost there."

It wouldn't be long before we discovered the reason for his smile. The pastor was Elbert Yeatts. His base for ministry: Colonial Baptist Church in Blue Ridge, Virginia. Substantial in size and influence, it bore the distinction of being the foremost, almost-unaffiliated Baptist congregation in the region. By almost unaffiliated I mean it managed to remain independent from the ubiquitous Southern Baptist Convention to which it would belong until 1962 and whose

denominational tentacles stretched clear across the southern part of the United States.

And though unaffiliated churches boasted no formal bishop guides, ecclesiastical oversight committees, or commissions, they still honored pastors who had earned some status and respect for being faithful to the gospel, for shepherding their congregants with compassion, and for helping and counseling other churches. In addition to these attributes, Colonial's pastor possessed a keen disposition for assisting young men entering Christian service. He offered them counsel, education, and opportunities to minister throughout the area.

Thus came our invitation to become a candidate to fill the pulpit of the Goodview Baptist Church. Our futures lay gloriously ahead of us on that pleasant spring day in 1953 as we swung onto the washboard-like gravel road that would deliver us to Goodview, Virginia. For my wife, Maxine, and me, fresh out of university and eager to test my wings, the trip was high adventure.

We lived in Roanoke, Virginia, but were both from the Midwest—flat country. I came from Michigan, where some folks looked at anything South of Toledo, Ohio, as the Deep South. Maxine came from Sumner, Illinois, a small town just beyond the Wabash River near Vincennes, Indiana. In the Midwest, roads were straight. Here in Virginia, they meandered around the base of hills with sharp cutbacks and steep grades that made you keep a tight grip on the steering wheel as you negotiated one curve after another. The drive was an eye-opening, bone-rattling introduction to what was to become our new life.

Dust boiled up from under the dashboard, which made

keeping the windows closed a bad idea. At some places, the road hugged the hillside like it was hanging on for dear life. But if you were brave enough to take your eyes off it to snatch a quick glimpse of the Virginia countryside in springtime, the hollows below treated you to a spectacular view of lush green that rambled along as far as the eye could see.

Looking down from a tight turn, we spied a small cabin emitting a plume of smoke that slowly twisted its way to the sky. Maxine said it looked like a picture you would see on a calendar. It was late March, and the chilly air still warranted firing up the wood-burning heaters. Some crops poked up from the ground. But for the most part, the farming fields consisted of long rows of rust-colored soil dug up by fall plowing, flanked by pastures already turning into rich, green carpets of color. And almost as if the hand of an artist had placed them there, small herds of red Hereford cattle bent their heads to snatch early tufts of the green bounty.

Maxine, who could have been an accomplished artist had she not opted to become a pastor's wife, expressed a wish to sketch the scene to send back to relatives who made no secret about their misgivings concerning the Old Dominion. They felt the job I had been offered from a sizable church near Detroit fit the Lord's plan for our lives just fine. So when we told everyone at home we were heading south instead, we faced raised eyebrows and muted mutterings.

Our Midwestern family thought comic book characters like Snuffy Smith and Li'l Abner pretty much told the story of southern culture. They would learn soon enough they were as misinformed about life in the hills of Virginia as some of our soon-to-be neighbors were about people from "up North."

As we wound our way along the hills on the 28-mile drive from Roanoke to Goodview, I learned a little something more about Maxine: Her most serene moments were not when I was behind the wheel of a car. I liked to take in the scenery as I drove. After a quick look, I'd turn her way to make what I felt was an especially cogent observation, which invariably gave her a deep sense of obligation to direct operations from the passenger side of the front seat.

"You do the driving, and I'll do the looking," she insisted. It wasn't the first time I had heard those words, and it certainly wouldn't be the last.

The longer I drove, the more certain I was becoming that we somehow had made a wrong turn and were lost. Time was a factor, and it was beginning to look like we'd be late for the morning church service. I wanted to arrive in plenty of time to get acquainted with some of the leaders before I had to meet with the deacons that evening.

Soon my wife voiced her concerns, which echoed mine. Now we both wondered if we would make it to the church on time. "I'm beginning to think we missed a turn," she said. "I haven't seen any signs or indications that we're near a town. All I can see are barns and houses here and there, but for the most part, I'm looking at hills and trees. Maybe we should stop at one of these houses and ask somebody if we're on the right road."

Her words fell on deaf ears. For some inexplicable reason, I shared with millions of other males a deep disinclination to ask for directions. For the life of me, I can't explain why. I was fully aware it made no sense to wander around lost. Why not just stop and ask a simple question: "Where in the world am I?"

But asking a stranger for help somehow diminished my manhood, an attitude my brothers and I probably inherited from my father, who scorned all advice from passengers in our old Dodge sedan.

It turned out Pastor Yeatts was right. Our consternation disappeared as we drove around the bend. After a sharp turn on a steep hill, “downtown” Goodview suddenly popped into view. The little hamlet snuggled up to a depot and the tracks and siding of the Virginian Railway, a line transporting commerce to eastern Virginia and southern West Virginia. On the siding, neatly stacked alongside several flatcars, a row of pine cordwood waited to be loaded for the trip to a paper mill.

Across the tracks stood a country store, small post office, and a house we later learned was the stationmaster’s residence. The only other structure of appreciable size in downtown Goodview was a tomato cannery, a mainstay of local industry that served area farmers by providing a market for their abundant tomato crops.

As we rounded the turn to the left that took us to the church, we could smell the pinesap from the cordwood spicing the air. It seemed a pleasant, fitting welcome to the place we hoped might become our new home.

Goodview Baptist Church stood on a low hill commanding a spectacular view of the area. I guessed this was probably where the people stood who first named the village. A distant woods bordered rolling alfalfa fields beginning to display the rich green hues of spring. In another direction, a herd of cattle grazed near a stately farmhouse surrounded by picturesque outbuildings. It was, indeed, a very good view.

We pulled into the church driveway, parked our car, and

with anticipation and trepidation, made our way to the white clapboard building. Waiting to welcome us stood a subdued group of parishioners. We soon learned Goodview folk restrained their enthusiasm and were not given to gushing over newcomers. They preferred to hold themselves in check until they adequately evaluated the objects of their attention.

It was then that we met Jimmie Jones.