

## **Bernice Buehler, Prayer in Action/Oración en Acción**



### 1. Getting to Know Bernice/Aprendiendo a conocer a Bernice

Name /Nombre: Bernice A. Buehler

Award Date/A.B. honor: 1983

Life Dates/Fechas de vida: June (junio) 8, 1904–February  
(febrero) 26, 2005

Where Born/Lugar de nacimiento:  
Stone Creek, Ohio

Hair Color/Color de cabello:  
Brown (curly and short)/Marrón  
(rizado y corto)

Color of Eyes/Color de ojos:  
Brown/Marrón

Siblings/Hermanos o hermanas:  
Two brothers/Dos hermanos

Birth Order/Orden de nacimiento:  
Middle/Segunda

Favorite School Subject/Asignatura favorita:  
Literature and reading/Literatura  
y lectura

Hobbies/Pasatiempos: Among her many hobbies,  
gardening, collecting of things  
that would help her remember  
trips/Entre sus multiples

pasatiempos estaban la jardinería  
y la colección de artículos que le  
ayudaban a recordar sus viajes

People She Admired/Personas que ella admiró:

The world was her family/El  
mundo fue su familia; Martin  
Luther King, Jr., Nelson Mandela

Poem of our Lives<sup>1</sup>

Life is a Mystery, a Miracle.  
Breath of the Universe becomes our Breath.  
We live and move and have our being.  
Love is the Mystery.

## 2. One Hundred Years

In her 97th year of life, three years before her death and to her delight, the Reverend Dr. Bernice A. Buehler performed the wedding ceremony for a member of one of her several adopted families. Daniel Lebold had known "Aunt B" all of his life and wanted her to officiate at his wedding. The wedding was held at the assisted living facility where Bernice lived.

**Remembering, #1: Bernice was a woman ahead of her time.<sup>2</sup>**

She became a minister when few women even thought of doing that. She was active in the causes for peace and justice when many were afraid to speak out.

*Jenner Krause Hommerding*

Bernice was born in 1904 in Stone Creek, Ohio. Her parents, John and Lydia Buehler, eventually moved the family to Port Washington, where Bernice's father was a superintendent at a brick plant.

In **1922** Bernice graduated from Port Washington High School, then a three-year high school. Because she wanted to go to college, she moved to New Philadelphia to attend a fourth year of high school. She attended normal school, an early college for teachers, for the required year. Her first teaching assignment was at Beaverdam, a one-room school near Roswell, Ohio. Later, she taught first grade for two years at New Philadelphia.

**Remembering, #2: I will remember my cousin as a typical Pfeiffer female – feisty and loving.**

Bernice was one of several Buehler children who lived with my mother and dad in New Philadelphia to complete high school when the family was still in Port Washington.

The best view I have of her perseverance and firmness of will was her telling about a canoe trip on the Tuscarawas River when she was about 75 years old. Seems that her canoe overturned. She was left clinging to some logs and other debris in the middle of the stream and was in considerable discomfort. She related that she kept saying to herself, "Now Bernice, you dare not faint." And, of course, she didn't.

She graduated from the College of Wooster. She was employed as a religious education teacher by the Wooster City Schools -- that, of course, was when such curriculum was possible. *Cousin Gene Neff*

3. Boston University

Bernice always wanted to work in the church. That led her to Boston University to attend the School of Religious Education. It was a new school created to develop religious education for churches. Soon after graduation, she began innovative religious education in the public schools north of Buffalo at Tonawanda, New York.

**Remembering, #3: These three saw their calling, their life's vocation, to work within the church as creative educators.**

Bernie, as we knew her, entered my parent's lives at Boston University. Each of them had traveled far from home to go to BU. BU offered the only available bachelor's degree in religious education.

The class of **1929** was dominated by these three:

Class President: Hamlin G. Tobey (my father)  
Class Vice-President: Bernice A. Buehler  
Class Secretary: Katherene L. McLandress (my mother).

In the 1950s, the class of 1929 became leaders throughout the country in the emerging professional organization of Directors of Religious Education.

During their senior year, Bernie and my mom were roommates, sharing their suite in Beacon Hill with three other women. Their relationship of support and caring was so strong that the five women kept alive a round robin letter for more than sixty years.

In the spring of 1976, I was invited by the faculty of Eden Theological Seminary to teach an intensive workshop. I told the seminary not to worry about compensation; I was giving my time in honor of their former faculty member. It became known as the Bernice A. Buehler workshop.

When I arrived, imagine my surprise when I saw Bernie sitting in their midst. For three days she was a full participant. She had to leave early in order to get home to Ohio for Sunday services. As she stood up to leave, the middle class gave her a standing ovation.

In early June 1987, I stayed several days with her in Dover. We attended a peace rally, I spent a couple days doing home repairs for Bernie (re-hung a door, electrical wiring, etc.) And, of course, we ate at Buehler's.

*Robert G. Tobey*

#### 4. Yale Divinity School

While attending a seminar, Bernice was approached by a professor at Yale Divinity School. Would she have interest in coming to New Haven, Connecticut to attend Yale? She would, and in **1935** she was among the first three women at Yale to be awarded a Bachelor of Divinity degree.

**Remembering, #4:** My sister Susan and I were like daughters to Auntie B, as we knew her. She was our mom's roommate in graduate school at Yale and became our aunt by choice through all our growing years. She was grandma to our children after our mom died.

*Elsa (Pflug) Abele*

After graduation from seminary, Bernice served as Director of Religious Education at the Church of the Redeemer, a Congregational church in New Haven. She then returned to Wooster where she served as director of Week Day Church School classes.

#### 5. National Director of Children's Work

In the **1940s and 1950s**, Bernice was National Director of Children's Work and Publication for the Evangelical and Reformed Church. "I am

interested in young people, and especially liked working with young black children," she told Barb Limbacher of the TimesReporter in a 2002 interview.<sup>3</sup> "It was my job to develop children's work in churches all over the United States."



**Remembering, #5: I think she tested all her ideas on Christian education for children on us. We thrived on it – and on her attention.**

In 1940 I was a 10-year-old boy living in Upper Darby, Pennsylvania. My father was the Director of Christian Education for the E&R church when Bernice became a colleague. She quickly became Aunt Bernice for me and my brother Ted. She was in our house frequently, almost as a family member. *Richard C. (Dick) Braun*

**Remembering, #6: Bernice had the ability to convey an idea to you and to empower you to go and work it out rather than doing it herself.**

She presented people with a problem or a situation and then encouraged them to give their best to it. She was a gung-ho go-getter in terms of fighting for the rights of children and for their respect. She took an important role in setting forth needs and concerns of children. She was a power house in educational resources.

She had the ability to size up a person and offer the challenge of a task. When I went on staff, my wife and I moved to the Philadelphia area. In an instant, Bernice recognized my wife's experience in writing and education. Giving Norma immediate engagement in a new city, she assigned her the task of editing the kindergarten children's portfolio.

*Robert E. Koenig*

Bernie created a useful leadership device, a national cabinet of children's workers. She set up workshops across the country to train people to be children's workers. Each synod was invited to send a representative who could return to the regional group and share insights into the education of children in the church.

"I represented California Conference at that time," said 85-year-old Allen Kroehler in a phone interview.<sup>4</sup> "Bernice would assemble everybody once a year at the conference center in Pottstown, Pennsylvania."

She also was a part of the counseling groups that worked with writers of the new curriculum. She lived and represented passionate belief in the gospel, in diversity and in accepting all persons. She was articulate and focused but could have a good time, too. She was involved in significant ways in working for peace and reduction of poverty and a good life for everyone.

In Philadelphia, Bernice was active in Fellowship House,<sup>5</sup> a unique multi-racial, multi-faith group of people who support differences. She would bring to our cabinet meetings some of that learning – the fellowship of reconciliation, anything that would promote peace.

After she retired as national director, Allen Kroehler succeeded her. He said, "I was a beneficiary of the work she had done and her contributions."

Eventually, Bernice began to travel. She represented the United Church of Christ and the National Council of Religious Education at the World Council of Religious Education in England. She attended religious seminars in Toronto and visited major missionary centers in Egypt, India, Japan and the Philippines before returning home.

**Remembering, #7: Through her effort, the educational work for children did well. I admired her deep faith, her caring for others, her pioneering in ministry, her stands for justice and peace, and her feistiness.**

While Bernice Buehler was training teachers and pastors for ministry with children, I was hired as Editor of YOUTH Magazine. When I was introduced in 1950 to the national staff in Philadelphia, she told about her being my babysitter when I was an infant and my father was pastor of the Evangelical Church in Port Washington, Ohio. Then, with a smile in her eyes, she said, "This is what happens when you have effective children's work."

When my wife and I visited her shortly after her 100th birthday, Bernice said quietly to us, "I've lived a hundred years and that's long enough."

*Herman C. Ahrens, Jr.*

## 6. Pioneer Larger Parish

Bernice developed a new form of team ministry with the other pastors in six churches in rural Pioneer Larger Parish. With some assistance from the national church, the parish in southeastern Ohio had been put together in 1953. It has a vital ministry yet today.

She was intrigued by the possibilities of these smaller churches "out in the middle of nowhere." She also believed that persons who were in administrative positions should find opportunity to work in the local church.

Keene Lebold, who began his ministry in Pioneer, said, "I appreciated Bernice's leadership. We suggested that she could join us in the larger parish and we could work together. She came to Pioneer Larger Parish after it had been in operation for about six years. She asked me to be the person to ordain her in St. John's Church in Monroe County."<sup>6</sup>

One person on the staff worked with the young adults, another with the youth. Bernice was interested in working with children. The churches held day camps at an area she had near St. John's church. They invited the Board of National Missions at that time to hold its regional meeting in Pioneer Parish. Working together, the churches were able to get resources for the whole group. They shared a common newsletter. Every year they had an event that brought the parish churches together.

"We put together a rural development committee for the county," Keene Lebold said. "It grew out of the church and helped to bring into industrialization into the county along the Ohio River. The youth planted 30,000 pine trees in one day."

**Remembering, #8: "Bernice was a visionary and very well educated."**

When I served in Ohio, she was serving as a pastor in the Pioneer Larger Parish. Though in a small church, she challenged them to the vision of the larger church at home and abroad.

*Clip (Clarence) Higgins*

**Remembering, #9: "Her ideas and enthusiasm gave new life to Pioneer Larger Parish."**

We were co-directors of a camp at Dunkirk which was memorable. Ruth and I were with Bernice at the Purdue Christian Education Conferences at West Lafayette, Indiana, and at Lakeside.

Even when we visited her years later in Dover at Park Village, she challenged me. I still can hear her say, "George, what do you think of the president?" Then would follow her encouragement to get involved. I will always appreciate her personal concern and energy for a better world.

*George Varns*



7. "I didn't want to be called Reverend, so we agreed on 'Miss B.'"

Female pastors were uncommon in the 1950s. Bernice was just the 126th woman to be ordained in the then Evangelical and Reformed church. She was ordained in **1958** and became the pastor at St. John's United Church of Christ.

"I spent ten wonderful years at the church and am still in contact with members at the Powhatan church," she told the TimesReporter interviewer. "When I was approached about taking the church, I told the search committee that I like to do things differently. They bought the challenge. I also became the first woman pastor in the merged denomination."

**Remembering, #10: Miss B took us to her family cabin on Atwood Lake.**

Sometimes we stayed for a week during the summer – probably not a way most adults would like to spend their vacation – watching over a bunch of kids.

Some of us couldn't swim or drive the family boat skillfully, yet she put up with us anyhow. She loved us and was willing to give us her time and help when we needed it.

I was ten when Miss B came to St. John's UCC. She confirmed me. She was the minister of our church, but to us kids she was more than that. She became our friend.

She started a junior high youth choir and a junior high youth fellowship group. This was in addition to her senior high group. My best pre-teen and teen memories came from that youth group. About fifteen of us met once a week. Miss B never lost patience with us. She was never cross with us and yet we behaved. *Marilyn (Gasser) Richenbach*

8. Eden Seminary Laboratory Preschool

Bernice enjoyed working with teachers and pastors of children's programs. In **1966**, she was called to direct an experimental nursery school program at Eden Theological Seminary. Later when she retired, she was awarded an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree.

**Remembering, #11: Bernice and I had a long conversation before she accepted her honorary doctor's degree from Eden Theological Seminary. She did not feel worthy – but others knew better.**

I went to Children's Workers' Training sessions and worked as her assistant in teacher training – at Heidelberg and Juanita Colleges and at several camping facilities. When we moved to Webster Groves, Missouri, to become pastor at Evangelical U.C.C., she came to the parsonage to help us unpack.



She had already established the Eden Laboratory Preschool which was housed on the ground floor of Evangelical Church. Thus, she was a member of the church that I served. What a joy to have her with us in worship and church programming.

She took hold of the meaning of the Gospel and inserted it into every aspect of her life and the life of the children as she worked for her faith.

*Dan Horn*

**Remembering, #12: Everyone knows well her love and concern for children. How about trust?**

When our son Dan was 4 years old, our family helped her settle into her apartment at Eden Seminary. Dan was opening boxes and unwrapping things with the rest of us until I noticed he was into precious and breakable mementos from her world collection. I stopped him. Bernice looked over and said, "Let him open them. He won't break anything."

She listened to children, too. She took us to supper and allowed the children to order anything they wanted. Susan ordered the pancakes with strawberries and whipped cream and then didn't want to eat it. I told her quietly that she had to eat it, we were BB's guests.

From across the table, Bernice said, "Let me taste it." We passed the plate over. She tasted it and said, "Why, these strawberries are spoiled!"

She always trusted children and tried to see the world through their eyes. She taught us to do that, too. She learned from children and was not shy about letting us know that children sometimes are the best teachers.

On another occasion, a group of adults was observing in the Eden Lab School. When a little girl burst into the classroom from the hallway where she was following another group of children, the girl stumbled and fell.

Bernice said kindly, "Oh, should you be in here?" and made to lead her back to her group. Another little girl in BB's class rushed over to the one who fell and said, "Are you hurt?"

BB immediately turned to the adult group and said, "This child had more concern for the person than I did. I was too concerned for the teaching situation. I should have asked first, 'Are you hurt?'"

*Joan Lebold*

**Remembering, #13: Miss B supported my growth all through my time at Eden Lab.**

For her 100th birthday I wrote Miss B, reminding her about how it happened that I was hired as a teacher at Eden Laboratory Preschool. As potentially the first Jewish teacher at Eden Lab, the board asked for a meeting with me, and although I was a little nervous, Miss B was there supporting me throughout the meeting. I later became a college instructor in child development, writer and publisher, and it all began at Eden Lab School.

*Betty Farber*

9. Later Ministry

After retiring from Eden Laboratory School in **1971**, Bernice returned to Dover in her native Tuscarawas County. She continued to be an active minister within and to the church; however failing eyesight gradually reduced her activity. Among the churches she served as an interim minister was St. John's in Dover, Ohio. She also was an active member of several committees, including the Tuscarawas County Council for Church and Community and the Ohio Conference Commission on Women.

**Remembering, #14: You know how persuasive she could be!**

During my time as a teacher in Dover High School, Bernice recruited me to be the demonstration teacher for a number of her "how to teach" workshops around the country.

On one occasion, she was desperate at the last minute for someone to teach at a workshop held at Cedar Crest College. When I hesitated, she said, "We'll just say you are on the faculty of the Dover School System and people will ASSUME that you are a kindergarten teacher and not a speech teacher."

As it turned out, the class went well. I never worked harder nor had a more positive teaching experience.

*Maxine Schnitzer Ferris*

**Remembering, #15: Bernice was brilliant at getting you to say yes (usually for a volunteer project) when you meant to say no.**

I admired her passion for peace and justice and the depth of her intelligence. Her energy and positive personality made you want to be around her.

Our nuclear freeze group often met at her house on Walnut Avenue to write letters to legislators, assemble newsletters and learn more about the issues.

In 1983, I became unemployed. I was 23 and embarrassed that I was not working, yet too proud to move back home. She offered to have me come do some spring clean-up.

Around noon, she invited me in for lunch. We spent the next few hours talking about world issues, local issues, my dreams and experiences. She was humble and compassionate in all she did. I was so impressed with her energy, intellect and kindness.

Bernice gave me many gifts that day. She became a role model in many ways – the depth of her convictions, her sense of peace and justice, and her lifelong ministry which touched so many people in so many ways. I managed to finish college and law school. I became a lawyer.

*Judith Dzigiel*

Bernice Buehler considered herself an activist. She was a strong advocate for peace, women and children.

**Remembering, #16: In the context of collective social energy, we each matter most. Bernice Buehler taught me that.**

With her positive intellect and subtle, strong demeanor, she devoted her life to ideas and actions belying a more just world. I am glad to have known her wonderful and boundless energy, her unique perspectives.

I met Reverend Bernice Buehler in **1982** at a meeting about global nuclear weapons proliferation. Meeting her significantly changed my life for the next three years and will continue to influence my philosophy and understanding of life and our political world.

Bernice and Father Ed Keck led our public education project about these issues. Bernice and several of us went to Washington D.C. for a three-day, nationally organized effort to educate ourselves and to lobby our national representatives about the issue. I learned then that one person in America has a voice in government policy. Collectively, our voices do make a difference. Through our formal actions and friendly conversations, we tweak social change and move the direction of the behemoth of human progress, however slightly.

We felt that we were all helping to drive the national dialogue, which became known as the Nuclear Freeze Movement. Out of the movement, we formed the Tuscarawas County Nuclear Freeze Group. We continued to expand the group's interest in other issues of peace and justice. The group later became known as Citizens for Global Understanding.

In August of **1983**, we drove again to Washington D.C. to join in the 20th anniversary of Martin Luther King's March on Washington for Jobs, Freedom, and Justice. Bernice talked about her memories of twenty years before. We felt we were actually nudging the country toward a better understanding of ourselves and of our place in the world!

Throughout the 1980s, we talked about how we felt we were experiencing The Hundredth Monkey(s)<sup>7</sup> moments; that if we kept speaking out on issues that others also strongly

supported, the ideas would take root. It was our type of prayer in action.

During those efforts to organize, Bernice helped me to connect in ways which were some of the most socially religious moments I've known.

*Brian Enck*

**Remembering, #17: Bernice was one of these thinkers in the future.**

She was constantly finding resources. She was a committed pacifist. Every time Joan and I were with her, the conversation was on the cutting edge of the biblical faith. The content of today's conversations is where she was twenty years ago.

Even in her 90s and until 100, she was deeply involved in what happening in government. Although we may not have seen her in six months, if she was listening to C-Span when we visited she would say, Just a moment, I want to finish hearing this.

*Keene Lebold*

**Remembering, #18: Bernice spoke often of the St. John's Powhatan women whom she took on a trip to New York City.**

Some women had hardly been out of the county. To me that trip was yet another demonstration of her willingness to open others' eyes, providing new experiences.

One late birthday, we were asked to celebrate on a pontoon boat at the lake. Bernice was having some difficulty getting around and her sight was failing markedly. We were handed bag lunches and celebrated her birthday out on the lake, sharing ideas and perspectives, from near and far-flung places. It was an occasion so quintessentially Bernice!

*Karen Frank*

**Remembering, #19: "Bernice was always out there breaking new ground."**

Her keen mind and broad interests were both challenging and inspirational. Well after her eyesight was all but gone, she would still request of us suggestions for "some worthwhile contemporary theology" which she might have

read to her. Hers was a never-ending search for wisdom and truth and a genuine commitment to faithfulness.

*Cliff and Wilma Gormer*

## 10. So What About You?

- Look again at the various ways in which Bernice Buehler influenced others.

**What would you list among her strengths?**

**What would you say was her most important gift? Why?**

**What are your strengths?**

**What do you consider your greatest strength?**

- Bernice Buehler was a visionary. In the King James Version of the Bible, Proverbs 29:18 reads: "Where there is no vision, the people perish; but he that keepeth the law, happy is he." The later Messenger paraphrase says: "If people can't see what God is doing, they stumble all over themselves; but when they attend to what he reveals, they are most blessed."

**What do you think it means to be a person of vision?**

**How did Bernice Buehler show that she was a woman of vision?**

**In what ways do you think beyond today?**

- Bernice saw her calling as a creative educator.

**How would you define a creative educator?**

**List several ways that Bernice lived out her calling.**

**Which do you think was more important for her, ideas or action? Why?**

**Who do you think were of greater importance to her, people in general or particular people? Why?**

- The Hundredth Monkey, an important book for Bernice Buehler, was based on the theory that when enough people share an idea in any given population, at some moment in time their collective

understanding of that idea pervades the rest of the population. The idea becomes an idea whose "time has come" and "takes root."

**Name several ideas, whose time has come, that you see are finally taking root.**

**Suggest an idea of today that you think should be an idea whose time has come. Why do you think so?**

**In the poem she wrote at the late in her life, Bernice said, "Love is the miracle." What does that have to do with justice and world peace? Why do you think the hundredth monkey has not yet found world peace?**

**What issues do you think Bernice might be addressing if she were a young pastor and educator today?**

**What clues did Bernice Buehler's admirers give you about how she saw the role of the church in society?**

**How do you see the church's role in society?**

## 11. Church Family Project

Is there a person(s) in your church or in your community who has lived 100 years or more and who would enjoy a conversation about those years? If so, invite someone (or go yourself) to visit with that person about 100 years of life. Video tape the conversation and share it with a group in your church.

Beforehand and with others in your church group, make a list of what you want to visit about. Write a story about the person you visit and share it with your conference newsletter or town newspaper.

## 12. Still Curious?

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[free]

Certification for Church Educators [free]

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God Speaks, Women Respond

About Justice Issues:

[Call 866-822-8224, ext. 3827; check at UCC Resources on [www.ucc.org](http://www.ucc.org);  
or [www.ucc.org/justice/advocacy/resources/jwm-bible-studies](http://www.ucc.org/justice/advocacy/resources/jwm-bible-studies).]

Bible Study – Another World is Possible [free]

Bible Study – Doing Justice [free]

One Day Everything Changed: The Story of Annie, a Refugee Girl

The Uprooted Game

Keyes, Ken., Jr. The Hundredth Monkey. Vision Books, 1982.

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<sup>1</sup> Signed – Author, Bernice Buehler, fondly known as Auntie B. Grand age of 99 and 10/12ths.

<sup>2</sup> Excerpts from memorial notes are shared with the kind permission of Bernice Buehler's nephew, Trevor Buehler.

<sup>3</sup> Barb Limbacher. "Church Work was a Goal for Bernice Buehler." TimesReporter. February 4, 2002, Page D-2

<sup>4</sup> Phone conversation, April 20, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Learn more about Fellowship House at <http://mediafellowshiphouse.org/>.

<sup>6</sup> Phone conversation, April 20, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> A book written by Ken Keyes, Jr., Vision Books, 1982.



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Dallas (Dee) A. Brauninger. *Antoinette Brown Women: Finding Voice*, February, 2009