

Talitha J. Arnold,
Saguaro Ministry/Ministerio del Cacto (Cactus)



*It's the saguaro cacti, "giants of the desert," 50 feet high
with root spans to match, that make it to two centuries.
- Talitha Arnold*

**1. Getting to Know You/Aprendiendo a
conocer**

Name/Nombre: Talitha Jane Arnold

Antoinette Brown Award/A.B. honor:
2007

Career/Profesión: Pastoral Ministry/Ministerio
Pastoral

Birthplace/Lugar de nacimiento:
Arizona

Color of Hair/Color del cabello:
Dark blond/Rubio oscuro

Color of Eyes/Color de ojos:
Blue/Azul

Siblings/Hermanos o hermanas:
Three/Tres

Birth Order/Orden de nacimiento:
Youngest/La menor

Favorite School Subject/Asignatura favorita:
Just about everything – science,
biology, history, music/Casi todas –
ciencia, biología, historia, música

Hobbies/Pasatiempos:

4-H: from food and clothing to electricity and collecting plants and insects, lots of leadership training; camping; hiking; swimming; playing with my friends; piano; singing/Club 4-H: desde alimentación y vestimenta hasta electricidad y colección de plantas e insectos; entrenamiento en liderazgo; acampar; caminatas; nadar; jugar con mis amigos y amigas; piano; cantar

People who influenced my life/Personas que influenciaron mi vida:

Joan Forsberg, Dean (decano) at Yale; Reuben Sheares, UCC National Staff (empleado de la oficina nacional); Paul Gaston, pastor in youth (pastor de la juventud); Rabbi Fred Krinsky, professor (profesor)

2. Growing a Saguaro Church

What I try to be about in growing a church is "Saguaro Theology." The saguaro cactus – that magnificent, big cactus with armlike branches – puts out as many roots underground as growth above ground. It can grow up to 50 feet with 50-foot wide roots. It takes from 150 to 200 years to grow. Tumbleweeds grow real fast, real big. The minute they hit a dry spell, they shrivel up and blow away. A saguaro can be sixty years old and be only four feet tall. That is how things last in the desert – this is the kind of church I want to be.¹

Talitha Arnold has been growing a "Saguaro church" since 1987. In an essay titled "Brick to Brick, Sunday by Sunday," she reflected about the importance of creativity in parish ministry. Christ created new understandings of who God is and how God works in this world. To be a Christian, she said, is to be open to God's creative power:

At the heart of every ministry is the commission to create something new in this old world, be it new hope or a new community, a new building or a new possibility in someone's life. To stay open to God's creative power, to persevere, to be patient, to be willing to take risks and to fail, or succeed – these are all lessons for the work of parish ministry.

Throughout his life, Jesus let that [creative] power work through him, creating new possibilities in the lives of those who came to him for healing and hope.

For me, the central call of pastoral ministry is to build hope and build faith. . . . Along with worship leadership and pastoral care, I believe the opportunity to *build* the church—be it by building the community, building the structure, or creating new opportunities for learning or service—is one of the true joys of pastoral ministry.²

3. "Sitting made all the other activities possible."³

"The longer I stay in ministry," Talitha said, "the more grateful I am for the example of powerfully wise women who lead, counsel, advise, preach – and sometimes just sit in silence."

One such wise woman was her mother:

As a widowed parent to four children, a science teacher and a volunteer for church and 4-H, my mother had little time to sit. But when she did, we kids knew the time was sacred and did not disturb her. Sitting offered my mother a chance to catch her breath, to remember life was more than the task at hand, and to tap into some sense of peace in the midst of the maelstrom.

Talitha's father, a biology teacher, served as a Navy Lieutenant in World War II and her mother, a microbiologist from Phoenix, worked in wartime on the mass production of penicillin at Berkeley. When her father returned in 1945 after four years as a minesweeper in the Aleutian Islands, the couple did research together.

"Life went on," Talitha said, in a National Public Radio program, "but my father's life felt like occupied territory. The war had come home with him. Not in medals or heroic stories, but in nightmares, anger, and fears. Every war does. Even the ones we win."⁴

Her father's suffering from what is now called post-traumatic stress disorder led to hospitalization and then to the taking of his life. When he was hospitalized in 1953, the family moved back to Arizona. Needing to have the same work schedule as her four school children, Talitha's mother left research for teaching. She taught school for 25 years.

4. A Chat with Talitha⁵

Dee: Your father's mental illness and his death influenced your family.

Talitha: My mother and the other wives were strong, loving women, but they couldn't heal the trauma the war had inflicted on their husbands. Only now, fifty years later, have they broken the silence about that. We children didn't talk either.

As a very young person living in South Phoenix, I was active in Neighborhood Congregational Church (UCC) my mother had grown up in. It was a middle working class area. Other women also worked outside the home so the church held women's groups in the evening. My mom could be a part of that without sticking out so much as a single parent.

Dee: Single-parent families did not have the same support then.

Talitha: In 1960 when we moved to Tempe, Arizona, I was going into the second grade. My mom wanted us in a better school. She was also concerned about my older brothers going to school in a rough neighborhood.

The setting was very different at the church in Tempe. There were no single-parent families or working parents families. Mom made sure we got to church, but it never felt as welcoming a community.

Dee: What about a youth group?

Talitha: When I was going into seventh grade, my family began having some problems. In the middle 1960s, people did not talk about such family problems, especially in church. So we stopped going to church. Also, confirmation was not challenging me to do anything. I was active in 4-H though, so that gave me opportunities to grow.

Dee: How about your spiritual growth, then?

Talitha: My life was being shaped by Christian ethics and understandings in the wider culture. There was a lot going on in terms of religion, especially Christianity and Judaism, plus the Civil Rights Movement and the burgeoning Anti-War Movement.

Dee: You found people that you could look up to.
Talitha: Yes, Martin Luther King, Jr., William Sloan Coffin, Abraham Heschel – people for whom their faith made a difference in terms of what they did and what they inspired others to do. They shaped my adolescence in a profound kind of way.

In the Phoenix area at that time, Christianity already was evangelical and involved in fundamentalism. So to have other voices offering a very different understanding of what Christianity is about was important to me.

Dee: How did that make a difference?
Talitha: On a theological and pastoral level, I saw both Jesus Christ and the Hebrew Prophets as speaking out for the oppressed and for those who suffer.

The actions of the Civil Rights Movement to lessen suffering and the Prophets who spoke out against suffering gave me a different sense of God and how God worked in the world.

My mom tried to make sense of my father's illness and death. Her personal theology said "that was God's way of making us stronger and more independent." I took her words to heart, but that was a difficult theology for me. I could see that God did not want other people to suffer, but I had not yet been able to make the leap that God did not want me to suffer.

Dee: Anything else of importance in your growing up years?

Talitha: Growing up in Arizona. From the strong Hispanic Catholic influence and Native American traditions, I gained awareness that God can be experienced deeply in other faith traditions as well as my own.

God is God of many religious experiences. I am culturally and in every other way Protestant Christian and that is the language I speak, my mother tongue. It is not the only way to speak, but a valid one.

That understanding has helped me in the multi-religious, multi-new age, multi-cultural setting that Santa Fe is. Serving the church here has given me a

way of helping people to understand why it is important to put down roots in a faith tradition.

Dee: You were also an exchange student as a youth.
Talitha: I was the American Field Service Exchange Student to Greece for the summer after my junior year in high school. I lived with Greek family in central Greece.

I was introduced to the Greek Orthodox tradition. It is about as far from the "three hymns, one offertory and a sermon" kind of United Church of Christ congregation as you can get. The Greek Orthodox tradition is all liturgy and all mystery. You kiss icons, light candles, and cross yourself. It's not the rational preaching and the interpreted word that one finds in our tradition. At the same time, it's a powerful way to experience the mystery of God.

That summer was also the time that I really started to pray because I was so lonely. My Greek family did not speak English and could not understand English.

Dee: You returned home for your last year of high school.
Talitha: In the course of my senior year, Paul Gaston and I became friends. He was willing to engage me in conversation about all kinds of things. He had me read Honest to God and Paul Tillich. He was only at the church for four years, but they were four important years of my life. Paul could unite both faith and intellect. That had always been important to me. He also thought I should go to law school.

5. Coming out as a Christian

Talitha entered Pomona College as a biology major thinking she would go on to law school. She found the biology department more pre-medicine than ecology oriented. She changed to a double major in political science and religion after discovering humanities in a course from Fred Krinsky, a professor who was also a rabbi. She still thought she would go to law school:

This was the early 1970s. Nobody was going to church, at least not at Pomona College. You could go to a Hindu ashram in India, go live on a Jewish kibbutz in Israel, but if you set foot in a Protestant church, you were immediately suspect of being Campus Crusade for Christ or an evangelical.

In her last year in college, the college chaplain, who was "quite a liberal," learned about her interest in the connection between faith and political and social justice actions. "Gordon Verplank challenged me to, as I say, 'come out as a Christian,'" she said, "and not to let religious fundamentalists define what it means to be Christian."

6. Something as Crazy as Seminary

Gordon Verplank encouraged her to apply for "The Trial Year in Seminary," a seminary grant from the Rockefeller Foundation for people who would not ordinarily consider going to seminary.

"That was me," Talitha said.

She chose Yale Divinity School. "I figured if I were going to do something as crazy as seminary for a year, then I could not hedge my bets," she said.

Yale seemed the most challenging from a faith standpoint. I would really have to dig into it and wrestle with this whole Christianity thing. If I went to one seminary, I could hide out behind social justice stuff. If I went to another seminary, I could hide out behind academics. Not so at Yale.

7. "I had a slew of doubts."

"Sometimes it's hard to remember how passionately uncertain I was when I began 30 years ago," she wrote in "A Doubt and a Promise."⁶ New England proved to be more of an "overseas" exchange program than going to Greece:

I had a slew of doubts. Some people seem born to believe. For others, myself included, "faking it" has been part of the process. I wasn't sure I had the right to be in a relationship with God. I doubted that I was patient enough, loving enough, Christian enough to be a minister. But as Woody Allen says, "Eighty percent of success is showing up."

Like the disciples on the mountain, the trial year gave me the chance to show up—in worship, in class, in the life of the community. To show up in the relationship with God, the Bible, and this thing called faith.

By the end of my first year in seminary, I still had doubts about my legitimacy as a minister and a Christian. I had no doubt that I wanted to continue the journey.

Although Talitha did not feel that she belonged in seminary, she decided to finish the three-year degree but to take a year internship after her second year.

"I had no intention to go into parish ministry," she said. "I would do justice and social agency kind of work."

That internship gave her a chance to show up "in a hospital room, a youth retreat, the house where someone had just died, the pulpit." Those encounters, she said, gave her a chance to mature her faith.

"They taught me the blessing Jesus offered with his commission: 'Lo, I am with you always' (even if my fingers were crossed)."

Her intern year was a turning point for her. "Serving a local church turned on to parish ministry in ways I could never have expected," Talitha said.

She graduated from Yale in 1980. Some doubts persisted, but she had learned that living by faith was "always a process and not some kind of neatly packaged product."

She stayed in Connecticut for ten years. After seminary, she was Associate University Chaplain of Yale University on a one-year appointment, 1980-1981.

8. Connecticut Ministry

For six years, Talitha was associate minister at a highly creative and energetic church in Middletown. "I loved the church and I loved the people of First Church of Christ, Congregational," she said.

The Cambodian Refugee Resettlement Project was a large part of her work. She and an associate minister from another United Church of Christ in Middletown helped to design a pilot project for Cambodian refugee resettlement. It would be used all around New England by the Lutheran Refugee Commission. In the earlier Vietnamese resettlement of one church for one family, church people had become exhausted. Refugees were isolated from each other.

According to a resettlement plan developed by UCC minister, Rev. Peter Pond, a cluster of churches from several denominations in one community would sponsor six or seven families. Each church was primarily responsible for a family, but the churches pooled such resources for English as a Second Language, clothing and housing information.

The churches created a community among the refugees and a community of ministry among the churches. With a greater pool of resources available as well as a community, refugees were less likely to leave the small town for a big city.

"I was resolved to get that off the ground in Middletown," Talitha said. "More than 100 persons found new homes. Then I worked with other communities and in church camps. In 1983, I did some documentary work for the Immigration and Naturalization Service in Cambodian refugee camps along the Thai border."

In 1984, she spent a summer sabbatical with the Navajos of the Southwest. Whether Navajo, Hopi, Papago or other Native Americans, Talitha said, "Indian spirituality and understanding that this world is sacred and to be loved has carried through my entire ministry in Santa Fe."⁷



The third major part of her Connecticut ministry was a term on the Office of Church Life and Leadership (OCLL). "That was a wonderful opportunity," she said. "The national office was focused on congregational and leadership development at that time."

It gave her a chance to work with the Rev. Dr. Reuben Sheares, III, a much loved leader in the United Church of Christ. Early in her ministry, Reuben Sheares taught her about keeping worship a priority:

That one hour of worship will shape their lives, their faith, and their life together more than anything else you do. Keep it central. Don't take it for granted. Give it your absolute best.⁸

In addition to chairing OCLL the last two years of her term, Talitha enjoyed several summers on Lake Winnepesaukee teaching at Camp Winni. The interfaith family camp of the Northern New England School of Religious Education is located in New Hampshire.

9. "It made no practical sense to take the job."

In 1985, two weeks after the founding minister left a new church start in Santa Fe, New Mexico, Talitha interviewed for the position of pastor. However, she told the search committee that she did not think the church ready to move forward.

In 1987, the United Church of Santa Fe called again. Would she come? She was ready to leave Connecticut. She knew that she wanted to stay in parish ministry, but, she said,

It made no practical sense to take the job. I would be moving from a church with almost 700 members was started in 1653 and had a half million dollar endowment to a church of 90 members that started in 1980 and had a half million dollar debt.

If I took the job, I would have to be the one to say we had to be a real church. We have to pay off the mortgage. We have to do what we need to do to keep the church going and growing, and that was not what they would want to hear.

Talitha visited with the congregation thinking she would turn down the offer. In the course of that candidating service, however, she said, "I decided that I believe strongly in the essence of the United Church of Christ in terms of progressive, engaging Christianity, and I also do care deeply about the Southwest. I said yes."

"By the time I came to the seven-year-old church," Talitha said, "the mortgage payment had ballooned. This could be a disastrous event for a church where the town population turns over every four or five years. The same people who started the church are no longer a part of it."

The first years were difficult, but today the United Church of Santa Fe is described as "part of the progressive United Church of Christ, whose roots are in the Protestant Reformation of the 17th century, the Abolition movement of the 18th century, and the Civil Rights Movement of the 20th century."⁹

10. Desert Roots and Sounds

Part of Talitha's work at United has been to invite people to put down deep roots in the Christian tradition. For many newcomers in the Southwest, the approach to religious faith found a temptation to be a Hindu for awhile, a Buddhist for a while, then to try out the Catholics, but never to put roots down far enough in any tradition to know what its riches and its power are about.

Talitha also views as fundamental to United's ministry, the work of helping people who new to the Southwest and the desert to learn to listen to the land:

To find a home here rather than just always seeing the desert as a hostile environment or, as is traditionally seen in Christian settings, as a place of testing and trial. If you really look at the Jewish Christian scripture, the desert was home in the same way that it is for Native Americans.¹⁰

For the last several years United's youth groups and adult groups have gone down to the border to help with providing drinking water for those who cross over.

"As part of that," she said, "I also take either the kids or the adults around the Sonora Desert by Tuscon to gain a sense of the ecological and human issues around the border crossing, especially the impact of the Wall."

She invites people to experience desert spirituality and to know God as being present also in this landscape, not just the home landscapes of greener environments.

11. "Dialogue is not a departure from faith..."

Upon arriving in Santa Fe, Talitha Arnold discovered a lack of understanding of the Southwest:

People in the Southwest had been praying in this area for a very long time before the United Church of Christ showed up. Catholic churches predate New England meetinghouses. Pueblo kivas were built long before the Catholics came. The ruins of the Anasazi or "Ancient Ones" date back to the time of Christ.¹¹

She treasured the opportunity of people from differing faiths to talk together. Largely "an Anglo immigrant" community, Santa Fe is a liberal place. Still, fruitful dialogue takes a long time to develop, so Saguaro theology has made sense also with interfaith dialogue:

I've nurtured relationships with Catholic priests for the twenty-two years I have been here. Whether on the Navajo reservation or studying political science at Pomona College with Rabbi Krinsky, I have realized that it takes a very long time to cross the lines of faith, culture and ethnicity.

Early in her desert ministry, Talitha visited with the theologian Martin Marty. He told her that if one goes deep enough in any religion, one finds common ground. But, he said, you have to go deep enough.¹²

For the last two decades, United Church has been a leader in interfaith dialogue. Ever since Sept 11, Talitha had been trying to find ways of connecting with people of the Islam faith. Then a couple years ago at an interfaith service, she sat next to a gentle man who had just moved to Sante Fe from Morocco. He was helping to start a mosque. They developed a friendship that resulted in sharing a dialogue sermon at United.

In the sermon, titled "What Christians can Learn from Muslims, What Muslims Can Learn from Christians," Talitha defined interfaith dialogue as "not a departure from faith, but a legitimate means of expression and an essential tool in the quest for the common good."¹³

That dialogue led to a series of conversations. In 2009, the Sante Fe Institute on International Relations asked Talitha to develop panels of interfaith leaders from Santa Fe to meet with delegations of journalists, teachers, and Moslem clerics from Afghanistan and Pakistan.

By late June, United had hosted three panels. After a panel with Afghani and Pakistani journalists, the organizer sent Talitha this excerpt from her report to the State Department:

Assumed to be a forum for theological chit-chat, the United Church soon showed its true colors to the delight of the astonished visitors who were stuck in the belief that Christian Priests, Jewish Rabbis and Muslim Mullahs would never be good friends and even if they try to be, their mutual suspicion and ill-will would always prevent them from joining hands for a worthy cause, something like the welfare of their communities or the common good of humanity.

12. "Hope is a Muscle"

In "Hope is a Muscle: Keeping Worship Vital," the closing chapter of *Worship for Vital Congregations*, Talitha wrote, "Send them into the world as a new creation."¹⁴ Speaking about the basic sacred rhythm of worship, she said:

You've gathered them, prepared them, given them the Word, and offered a chance to respond. Hopefully, you've also given them your best. Now get them out of there. If as leaders and congregation, you've done your job, the world needs what you've been given and what you've become in that hour.¹⁵

[Hope] has to be exercised, renewed, and restored. So do our other muscles of faith and love. In the Christian church, the primary place we do that is in worship – regular, enlivening, energizing, vital worship.¹⁶

Talitha reflected:

If people experience God's abundant presence in worship, they are more likely to act with abundant faith and hope in the ministries to which we challenge them, whether it's working for justice and peace or faithfully and generously supporting the stewardship campaign. . . .



Who knows what ministries will be shaped, what sublime mysteries and deep hopes will be carved in the life of your congregation – and in your life – by the vital river of life we call worship.¹⁷

13. So What about You?

- Among Talitha Arnold's favorite scriptures is Psalm 30, especially verses 11 and 12.

At what times throughout her life do you think she reread these verses?

When would she have read them as a "Yes!" and when for comfort?

When would these words have comforted you? When would you have read them with a joyful heart?

- Read Revelations 21: 1-6, another favorite.

Why and when would these words have been a prayer for Talitha?

Make a list of the ways you see God continually making everything new for you.

- After serving her church for 22 years, Talitha wrote a book about this question: Where do people find the courage—and the persistence—to keep creating new ways of seeing the Christian faith and new spaces in which to experience it?

How would you answer that question?

Some pastors stay at a church only a few years; others serve the same church for many years. List several advantages of being pastor of a church for many years.

List some disadvantages of a long pastorate.

- Talitha said that a college chaplain urged her to "come out" as a Christian.

Tell of a time when you may have hung back in mentioning that you are a Christian for fear of being mislabeled.

Revisit about a time that you "came out" as a Christian. How did you feel about it then? How do you feel about it now?

- When she entered seminary, Talitha said she had "a slew of doubts."

Name a doubt related to your faith.

Name a doubt that you have taken up the challenge and wrestled with.

- Talitha said that living by faith "is always a process and not some kind of neatly packaged product."

What does being a person of faith mean to you?

Tell about a part of your faith where you act as if you believed but know your faith is still in process.

Are you willing to be a lifelong learner in your religious faith?

14. Church Family Project

Talitha Arnold grew a desert theology and spirituality. Invite members of your youth group or confirmation class to read Isaiah 55 then to reflect about "listen[ing], so that you may live" [v. 2] and "signs from the desert" [v. 13], that is, spiritual gifts from the area in which you live. Talk together about the truths that ring into your

awareness the presence of God and the wisdom of the Creator whether you live in the city, the country or somewhere in between.

15. Still Curious?

Read Talitha's book about what it means to worship and to be a living congregation:

- Talitha Arnold. *Worship for Vital Congregations* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2007)

Read one of Talitha's sermons. Go to Religion-Online.org. Search Talitha Arnold under Index by Authors.

- Read about her images of the Good Shepherd in "Good Shepherds."
- Read about having doubts in "A Doubt and a Promise."
- Learn how living in the desert has made a difference in her life in "The Word Made Rock."

¹ From phone interview with author on July 11, 2009.

² From "Brick to Brick, Sunday by Sunday: Creating God, Creating Still," an essay emailed Friday, July 03, 2009 to the author from Talitha Arnold.

³ From "Sit on It" in The Christian Century, October 23, 2002.

⁴ From "The Home Front," first aired on *All Things Considered* on Veterans' Day, November 11, 1998.

⁵ Phone interview.

⁶ From "A Doubt and a Promise" in Christian Century, May 17, 2005. See also Talitha Arnold, Author Index, www.religion-online.org.

⁷ Talitha Arnold, "Pilgrim in the Southwest" in The Christian Century, June 21-28, 2000, 682.

⁸ Talitha Arnold. *Worship for Vital Congregations*. The Pilgrim Press, Cleveland, 2007, 135.

⁹ See The New Mexican at http://www.thesantafenewmexican.com/Religion/Inside_Santa_Fe_s_Faith_Communities_United_Church_hosts_Muslim_Christian_Dialogue - 1/5/2008

¹⁰ Phone interview.

¹¹ From "Pilgrim in the Southwest."

¹² From "True Grit" in The Christian Century October 23 – November 5, 2004, 18.

¹³ See "United Church of Santa Fe hosts international dialogues" at Southwest Conference of the United Church of Christ, UCC web site News and Events - <http://www.southwestucc.org>.

¹⁴ *Worship*, 134.

¹⁵ *Worship*, 52.

¹⁶ *Worship*, 134.

¹⁷ *Worship*, 136-137.

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