

Julie Peeples
Pastor to the Community/
Pastora para la Comunidad



1. Getting to Know Julie/Aprendiendo a conocer a Julie

Name/Nombre:	Julie Peeples
A.B. Recipient/A.B. honor:	2009
Career/Profesión:	Minister/Ministra
Color of Hair/Color de cabello:	Brown/Marrón
Color of Eyes/Color de ojos:	Brown/Marrón
Siblings/Hermanos y hermanas:	Four brothers, one Sister/Cuatro hermanos y una hermana
Birth Order/Orden de nacimiento:	Fourth/Cuarta
Favorite Class/Asignatura favorita:	Social studies/current events/Estudios Sociales/eventos actuales
Hobbies/Pasatiempos:	Softball, music/Sófbol, música
Mentors during high school years/Mentores durante los años de escuela superior:	Several Roman Catholic Nuns; a

high school teacher
/Varias monjas de
la Iglesia Católica
Romana; un
maestro de la
escuela superior

"No one can help anyone without becoming involved
.... to give your life for others."¹

2. A Chat with Julie Peeples²

Dee: Julie, yours has been a journey of becoming open to God's continually being up to something in your life. Please tell us about that.

Julie: Clearly throughout my late high school and early college years I thought I had it mapped out: I will never get married and have children. I will be Catholic all my life. I will live in the South all my life. The Catholic Church will change and I will be a priest.

I had very few people I confided that in. They tried to convince me to become a nun and not hold out any hope for change. It did not matter that the church did not ordain women. I believed the time would come. For awhile I was very serious about that while hoping it would be a temporary way station on the way to priesthood.

Within a few a years none of those things were accurate. God had better plans and directions than anything I could imagine. I was married, had children, was not Catholic, and was not living in the South. I was on my way to becoming a Protestant minister.

Dee: And in the meantime?

Julie: In 1975, I went to college. At Furman University, I majored in music and religion. Greenville, South Carolina was a beautiful place, and Furman was a beautiful school.

Dee: You were still Catholic at a Southern Baptist college.

Julie: I stayed closely tied to the Catholic Church. Furman was my first big exposure to other faiths.

Many Baptist students wanted to save my soul. At Furman, I learned about the Protestant idea of the priesthood of all believers. I found professors and chaplains who were far more accepting of me and encouraging my calling than anyone else had ever been. That planted a seed that there is another way. It was a way that seemed to me to have integrity.

Dee: Did you go directly to seminary?

Julie: My first year out of college I taught in a Catholic school. For awhile I lived in a convent.

While serving as campus minister, Julie learned from students who came to her for counseling that her supervisor was involved in inappropriate sexual activity. When she approached the administration, she found a hierarchy of priests who knew that problems existed but, they said, no one else had come forward.

Dee: It was your word against the priest's.

Julie: It was my word against the priest's. And in the end, only his voice had authority. So I left. I realized then that if I stayed in the Catholic Church, I would never heal. I would never get better and I would be abusing myself. My eyes were wide open. After that I pretty much ran away to seminary.

Dee: You chose the oldest graduate seminary in the country. Andover Newton Theological School was started by the Congregationalists.

Julie: Yes - based on the suggestions of a trusted religion professor. I had looked into a Catholic Seminary, but at Andover Newton, I would be able to take classes from any of the eight other seminaries in the Boston consortium.

3. The Frontier

With the priesthood still calling to her, Julie enrolled at Andover Newton. She identified with the United Church of Christ emphasis on social justice. That the UCC envisioned Jesus as healer and reconciler made sense to her.

For a time, she worked with homeless women in Boston. After seminary, she also served as a Minister of Christian Education and Family Life in a large UCC church near Boston.

While at seminary, in addition to meeting her future husband, she had found a heartening environment. "I met other Catholic women who shared similar hopes," she said.

Among these women was Maria Harris. She was the Christian Education professor at the time. Maria Harris would be a strong influence on Julie's theology and life work.

At her funeral mass in 2005, Gabriel Moran, said of his wife and colleague:

Everyone loved Maria. Perhaps that was the genius of her influence. A passionate advocate of those causes that are grouped under social justice, she did not alienate those who could not go along with this agenda.³

"We [women] all encouraged one another," Julie said. "We kept one another going. I still held onto my hope that change in the Catholic Church was going to happen. Now they are letting the Anglicans in first. Then will come allowing priests to marry. Women as priest will be the last door to open."

After seminary she finally made the difficult choice to leave the Catholic Church:

Leaving the Catholic Church is different when one has been raised Catholic. It is an entire culture and heritage. My biggest hurdle was to accept that I was not leaving God. God was Catholic, we had been taught. Everyone who was not Catholic was wandering around elsewhere somewhere.

4. Wounded Healer

Julie has made a career of helping when other people feel their story has not been heard:

I wonder at times about the recurring theme in my life, ending up dealing with these situations where people are harassed and mistreated – being in the middle. I was the middle child in a large family, the

one trying to bring peace. Women are so honed into relationships. Integrity does not mean that I do not have strong feelings but that I offer them in a way that others do not feel attacked.

Years later, a Greensboro, South Carolina news article, "The Wounded Healer," would confirm that, portraying Julie as "an introvert in an extrovert's job":

Friends and church members are struck by the quiet power that sweeps over their shy leader in times of counseling and healing. It is, they say, an almost invisible transformation. She rises above her human, earthly fears and steps into the spiritual realm of who she is. It is almost as if she pulls back the black veil and you see the heart of Julie Peeples.⁴

5. The Return to the South

The integrity of Julie Peeples continued to reveal itself in her work with Habitat for Humanity. She and her husband had been impressed with the organization. She also wanted to return to the South. She had grown up in Charlestown, South Carolina.

When Julie Peeples and Paul Davis heard about a position opening at Habitat for Humanity International at Habitat headquarters in Americus, Georgia, the couple applied. They said they would be willing to split the position or for one to receive it. They were both hired.

As chaplains they would offer pastoral care for a Habitat staff of 300 people. They were part of a management team of five or six people. Part of their job was to do exit interviews of staff, volunteers, and all different categories of workers.

In time, they found a pattern in the interviews. They became aware, especially from young women, that part of their leaving was inappropriate suggestion. They were in a work environment in which they felt unsafe. The troubling person was their hero.

"We had to go confront the executive director," Julie said. On the way to do so, they visited with his second in command. He warned them that those who had confronted the administrator before had been fired. After a time, the board of directors did remove him to an Atlanta office for a

year. However, when he returned to Americus, he fired all who had appeared to be on the side of the injured women. Julie and Paul were among those thirty to forty people.

“We had been very naive and had tried to play nice,” she said. “We purposely had not gone to press, all agreeing to mediation set up through the Mennonite Church. They finally concluded that something had gone terribly wrong here.”

The administrator stayed at Amicus several more years until another woman leveled serious charges. The couple was called in to reach out and pastor to her, which they did. In time, the administrator was fired.⁵

Healing took a long time. They met together for prayer regularly. They tried to support one another. There was strong sense of community, but enough was enough:

During the last year of our time in Americus, I was pregnant with our second child and had her and somehow came to the realization that if I were to carry all of this anger and hurt inside me this will hurt the child within me. I cannot allow me to let this tear me about and hurt my children. I started to separate from it.

We were without work. We were hurting and broken. As soon as I walked on the grounds of the church in Greensboro, I felt, this is it, where we are supposed to be. God, you must at least show me the next step.

6. The Greensboro Years

Two months after losing her job in Georgia, Julie interviewed for a part-time Christian education position in Greensboro, North Carolina. It was a United Church of Christ. They asked her instead to become an interim minister. Irwin Smallwood, a member of her congregation, said:

Genuine. She won over the congregation with her openness, and plain-spoken-ness, without taking sides, her sense of humor. The church had been in decline for four years. Her consistent message was talk to each other not about each other.

Later, upon nominating her for the Antoinette Brown Award, he would express gratitude that “the United Church of Christ opened its arms to this daughter of the Roman Catholic church.” In return, he said, “the UCC gained a brilliant woman who has spent her life opening these same doors to countless others.”

Bringing along her Catholic gift of healing and reconciliation, Julie began her service as intentional interim minister of Greensboro Congregational United Church of Christ in September 1991. For eighteen months, pastor and congregation worked hard together.

“We all recognized we were all in need,” Julie said. “They were willing to do the hard work of looking at all of that.”

The church began to ask if she couldn’t “just stay.” For a long time, Julie declined. Then the church sent to her two church leaders of utmost integrity, she said, to talk separately with her.

The first one took her aside, “This may be the time that God is calling you to commit to the long haul.”

The other, a clergy person, referred to the understanding that interim pastors are not to accept a call to the same church. He coached her, “Sometimes we have to put our principles aside and do the right thing. Besides, it also will help increase changes for women in Southern Conference and especially in Western Association.”⁶

They designed a process of talking to everyone in the church about her possible candidacy. After considerable talking and with a strong consensus, she agreed. In 1994, she became Senior Pastor. Her husband would become Minister of Christian Education.

7. Community Pastor

The large church was founded in 1900 as part of the old Christian Church, which dates back to 1794. Julie found only a thin line between her ministry at Congregational UCC and within the community of Greensboro.

“It was clear,” she said, “that this church had a long history of involvement in the community. So I started showing up for everything that seemed to matter.”

She took as mentor a man who had been moderator of the church and also chaired the school board. He was a revered community leader. After he and another church member died several years later in a car accident, Julie said she felt almost as if he were nudging her to get out more and take more risks.

Tragedy struck the congregation again in 2008 when their beloved Director of Music and her husband were killed by an impaired driver.

Again showing her strength of character, she shared in a sermon the letter she had written to the driver of the car at the time he began to serve out his sentence.

Here is a piece of that letter:

We are not a perfect church, Mr. H...., and there are no perfect people here. But like that early church of long ago, we work pretty hard to live our faith, to love one another, to be steadfast in hope.

And as imperfect as we are, we are living messages. Not of holiness or great wisdom or super-charged Christian faith. We are living messages of what grace looks like, of forgiveness that is offered and forgiveness received, of love that feels its wounds deeply yet goes on trusting that love in the only way that matters.

We are a people who know the healing that comes through the most broken and hurting places. And we have come to know – in utter astonishment – that there is no person, no hurt and broken place, no past or present or future that lies outside the realm of God's love and grace.

No one – not you, not me, not whoever in your past may have wounded you – no one can wander so far that God cannot reach. God gives up on no one.

And so my invitation: Let this tragedy, let the families, let this faith community be for you a living message: that God is yet at work in your life. God is at work in the deepest parts of your soul, in the darkest corners of your being, in the seed of goodness God planted in you long ago.⁷

After her mentor's death, people began to associate her with him.

"I did not have his gifts," Julie said, "but I was trying to carry on. He had been a true consensus builder. He had a heart for minority issues and justice issues. He once had counseled me that if everybody was happy with me then I was not doing my job."

She realized that there were no major conflicts at the church. "I am in a fairly safe position," she said. "I have this credit built up. Now, Julie Peeples, use it."

Two or three years after his death, she observed that the sexuality issue was coming to an area nearby. She knew there were gays in Greensboro who did not feel safe coming out.

"It kept eating at me," she said. "Why not start this discussion now while it is not about the personalities?"

The church started out slowly. They went through *Created in God's Image*⁸ (the Morrisons' human sexuality study for adults) and some Bible studies.

Then an elderly couple in the group talked about their son's coming out. Soon they were considering the Open and Affirming (ONA) process. The people said, Let's do our own process. They wanted to get away from the usual panels and votes and resentments, she said.

We really tried to build a sense of understanding. In the long run it was the right way for us to go.

I held several rounds of what my husband lovingly calls, 'Sex with the Pastor.' Eventually, people finally could share their stories and ask all of the questions they were too unsafe or embarrassed to ask in public. We went round after round.

When she held the first co-union ceremony, she began to receive threats from fundamentalist churches.

However, I lost only three members. I love these two guys. They are such an important part of this church. How could I not give my blessing?

It resulted in spiritual blessing that none of us had known. We have the sense that there is nothing that

we cannot talk about in this church. It brought so much joy for gay and lesbians having a church home. It has made a tremendous difference in the life of the church.

She has extended human sexuality leadership to her conference. She has served on the conference task force for dialogue on human sexuality.

She also reached into the community. GSAFE, (Gay Straight Advocates for Education), is an advocacy organization in Greensboro for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and persons who are questioning. GSAFE published a list of safe churches where all would feel comfortable worshipping. Her church is on that list:

Greensboro Congregational UCC is open and welcoming to all who would join us for worship, education, service, and community. We are an active part of the United Church of Christ, and like our wider denomination, we believe that all are children of God and are to be welcomed at all levels of church involvement regardless of age, background, race, ethnicity, gender identity, orientation or class. - Rev. Julie Peeples, Pastor⁹

In her community, she has served on the county Mental Health Board, the city's Family Life Council, the black and white clergy dialogue as well as carrying a strong commitment to her area's interfaith dialogue. She continues to make opportunities for dialogue through area conferences and workshops. She continues to speak out at town hall meetings and council meetings.

Wherever she can, she opens the opportunity to transform hostility into hospitality. At a recent commission meeting, she addressed immigration and the local police, and a resolution:

“There are children going to bed tonight in total fear – fear that their parents are going to be torn away from them, fear of what will happen down the road, fear that they will not be able to go to school.... There are adult men and women, hard-working, taxpaying men and women in this community who are becoming increasingly fearful of going to the grocery store. They're in a fear of being in a car, [getting] pulled

over, profiled, targeted. I think this kind of fear is unconscionable in a community such as ours. I want you to understand that more people of faith are beginning to stand up and say, ‘No, not in our community.’”¹⁰

8. Making Space for God

Dee: Julie, what words would you have for young women considering ministry?

Julie: I keep meeting younger women ministers looking for a mentor. I love talking to them and am amazed that they are so much smarter. All I’m wanting for them is to trust that if they sense that call, even though they may be trying to do things in a different way than others before them, they need to trust that – there is a reason why – to trust that voice.

Some of the best stuff comes out of the toughest experiences. I waited five years before ordination after seminary. Did I want that kind of authority that male pastors had been assuming? I decided that authority does not have to be that way. I can claim it for myself and let it come through my own voice.

If I have learned nothing else, it's to not assume I know the course my life will take. There's a reason God called me to this time and place. God wasn't asking me to fit into the mold of the traditional minister. God was asking me to minister from who I am – fears and shortcomings and all.

Dee: Julie, how do you keep that sense of perspective?

Julie: I have learned to begin the study of a situation by asking myself this question: *What is missing that I am called of God to make present?* I'm not trying to bring God to people, I'm trying to surface what I know is already there.

Dee: Both issues and persons one-to-one.

Julie: In any situation when I can get to a point with persons that they are willing to tell me what their deepest fear is and I am willing to acknowledge my fears, then there is a place where there can be some healing.

Dee: That, as you have said, is when you have made some space for God.

Julie: I have made space for God. That is often when someone will share what they have not been able to speak before. They will need my reassurance so they will know they are not alone.

9. So What About You?

- Julie Peeples is a person of integrity.

Look up “integrity” in the dictionary and a thesaurus.

List several instances in Julie’s story where you see her being a person of integrity.

When was it easy?

When did it cost her?

Name some differences that being a person of integrity would make in any career.

In what ways have you discovered that you are a person of integrity?

- From early in Julie’s life she had a sense of standing up for others. She did the right thing even when she ended up hurting and broken.

How did her birth order in her family make a difference in how she relates to people?

Where is your birth order in your family?

How does that influence how you relate to people?

Is it worth it for you to stand up for someone when you might get hurt yourself? Why and why not?

- When Julie wrote the letter to the man in prison, she said we (churches and people) are to be “living messages of what grace looks like.”

What do you think she meant by a living message?

**What do you think grace looks like?
How are you, or would you want to be a
living message?
How would you define being a disciple of
Christ?**

- Where is God in your life?

**What do you think making space for God
means?**

**Where and when do you make space for
God in your relationships?**

**In what situations might you ask, What
is missing that I am called of God to
make present?**

10. Church Family Activity

Invite several career people in your church to sit in on a youth group or other gathering. Talk together about what, if anything, they had to give up in order to follow their career. Talk about how following, or not following, their principles has influenced their work and relationships. Ask how they have been living messages and how that has changed them.

11. Still Curious?

- Read Henri J. M. Nouwen. *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society*.
- Go exploring on our faith group's website, www.ucc.org. Open the CHANGE THE WORLD menu to learn about the various social and justice issues that we are involved in. Check out opportunities for young adults to be involved.

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¹ Henri J. M. Nouwen. *The Wounded Healer*. Garden City, NY: Image Books, a Division of Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1979, p 73

² Phone conversation on Friday, October 30, 2009

³ As quoted by Joanmarie Smith in *Religious Education*, Summer, 2005

⁴ Donald W. Patterson, Staff Writer, *Greensboro New and Record*, Sunday, January 25, 1998, p. D1

⁵ Refer to Questions Follow Fuller's Firing from Habitat for Humanity by Jim Jewell. Posted in Christianity Today, February (Web-only), 2005

⁶ As quoted by Tim Kershner in a June 30, 2009 article, "Churchwomen honored with Antoinette Brown Award," written for the United Church News.

⁷ "Living Messages," October 19, 2008

⁸ Morrison, Eleanor S. and Melanie Morrison. Created in God's Image. United Church Board for Homeland Ministries, 1993

⁹ www.gsafe.org/index.php?page=99§ion=5

¹⁰ Quoted by Jordan Green in "Commision stands against 287(g): Greensboro Human Relations Commision Says 'No'" – from [www.yesweekly.com/article-6251-commission-stands-against-287\(g\).html](http://www.yesweekly.com/article-6251-commission-stands-against-287(g).html) – May 13, 2009

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