

**Ruth Marilyn Brandon,  
Embracing God's Justice Agenda/  
Abrazando la agenda de Dios para la justicia**

*God values people more than things, justice more than order, forgiveness and love more than vindictiveness or power./Dios valora más a las personas que a las cosas; a la justicia más que al orden; al perdón y al amor más que a la venganza o al poder.*



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

Name/Nombre:	Ruth M. Brandon
A.B. Recipient/A.B. honor:	2005
Career/Profesión:	Pastor and Teacher
Color of Hair/Color de pelo:	Dark Brown/ Marrón oscuro
Color of Eyes/Color de ojos:	Hazel/Color de la avellana
Brothers or sisters /Hermanos o hermanas:	Two Brothers/Dos hermanos
Birth Order/Orden de nacimiento:	Youngest/La tercera
Favorite Class/Asignatura favorita:	All of them/Todas
Hobbies/Pasatiempos:	Anything with music/Todo lo que esté relacionado con la música
Mentors:/Mentores	Mother, Grandfather, Rev. Morris Pike/Mi madre, mi abuelo, el Rvdo. Morris Pike

## The Reunion<sup>1</sup>

Come with me and delve within.  
Come and know the me I am.  
Bring eyes of wonder - ears unstopped,  
For I am legion. I am one.

The first you'll see - the marching ones,  
The ones with lists, they organize,  
they plan, they plot, they tell us how.  
And they are welcome!

For without them:

anarchy, disorder,  
no communion, no reunion.

The marching ones are me - but not the whole.

The soft ones - giving, giving,  
loving, loving,  
helping, helping;  
They last longest, go the deepest,  
Make all welcome, warm, secure,

But without them:

No connection, no affection,  
Irritation, alienation.

The soft ones - they are me - but not the whole.

Dancing, laughing, singing, joking,  
artists, players, storytellers,  
Energy and smiles and meaning,  
Beauty, priceless memories and dreaming.  
Who I am and whose;

Why I am; the joy of life!

Without them:

no communion, no connection,  
living death, no resurrection.

The creative ones are me - but not the whole.

Word makers craft the thoughtful frame,  
find God, the world, and you,  
reach up and out and in - beyond;  
with words and phrase communicate,  
analyze, extemporize,  
explanation, interpretation,  
strings of phrases,  
hungers, praises.

Welcome them.

Without them:

wonders only, fears, and joys,  
no understanding,  
comprehending,  
no "ahas," just child unending!  
Wordcrafters, thinkers - also me –  
but not the whole.  
Thinker, doer, creator, lover:  
In my inner space, reunion.  
Find communion, integration,  
beauty forged  
and celebration.  
I am legion. I am one.  
Come and know me!  
Will you come?

**2. "The work has to feel like God needs me to be there."<sup>2</sup>**

"I am, I believe, exemplary of how God can take an ordinary, shy woman raised in a single parent family and use her outrageously and to the limit," Ruth Brandon said when she accepted the Antoinette Brown Award:

I have done what God put in front of me to do as well as I could. I was willing to accept jobs because they needed doing, even if they were short term or without secure funding. Home has to be where I am. Friends have to be whomever I am with. But the work has to be something worth doing; that in itself gives meaning to ministry.



I have never seen ministry as following a career path. I have not set concrete goals that I must achieve in order to be a success. For me, ministry is possible only as responsiveness to the moving of God among the people, and a willingness to be used by God, often in surprising ways. Therefore my ministry has been diverse. God has given me many marvelous opportunities, very little security, but an abundance of blessing.

"This is the essence of my mother," Samuel Minter said, reflecting about visiting her in Mozambique.<sup>3</sup> From 1990 through 1993, she taught ethics and other subjects at Ricatla United Seminary in Maputo:



Ruth and son Sam Minter

My mother makes herself an integral part of the communities to which she is brought. Her deep faith grounds her, gives her strength, drives her ministries and moves her to fulfill the missions put in front of her – even when they are extremely difficult.

Rather than shy away from the difficult things, she has over her life embraced them and thrived among them – needing to help those who needed help, needing to comfort and support those who needed comfort and support, needing to help in the struggle for justice wherever it occurs and, above all, her deep love and commitment to the community she becomes a part of both at home and abroad.

### **3. Traditions**

Ruth Brandon's family tradition on both sides came from the smallest predecessor denomination of the United Church of Christ. Her father, uncle and grandfather were all ministers in the Christian Churches.

Her father's family came out of the mid-western Ohio branch of the three groups that united to form the Christian Churches. They had founded themselves near the same time in the nineteenth century during a major religious restoration period. The mid-western Ohio group was from Barton Warren Stone (1774-1882)<sup>4</sup> and the Kentucky Cane Ridge revivals in breakaway from the Presbyterians.

Ruth's mother came from the second branch, the New England Christians, who withdrew from the Baptists. Also wanting a "free church" that would be unhindered by denominational creeds and structures, Abner Jones (1772-1841) and Elias Smith (1769-1846) had led the way.<sup>5</sup>

"When I was living in North Carolina," Ruth said, "I attended the church that to this day cares for the O'Kelly Chapel, a historic place."

The O'Kelly Christian Churches were in the south. Perhaps the best known of the three branches, it was formed near Durham, North Carolina by James O'Kelly (1738-1826).<sup>6</sup> The southern convention broke from the Methodists.

With each local church retaining autonomy, the three branches would shape a new denomination. They never thought of themselves as "one" church, Ruth said, but as a voluntary association of churches.<sup>7</sup> In 1931, they merged with the Congregational Church to form the Congregational Christian Church. In 1957, this denomination merged with the Evangelical and Reformed Church to establish the United Church of Christ.

According to John F. Burnett in Early Women of the Christian Church: Heroines All,<sup>8</sup> the Christian Churches followed a simple faith:

The Lord Jesus Christ as the head of the church  
Christian our only name  
The Bible our rule of faith and practice

Individual interpretation of the Scriptures, the right and duty of all  
Christian character the test of fellowship  
The union of all the followers of Christ, to the end that the world  
may believe.

#### **4. "Women have always been engaged in ministry, and God knows that."**

"Being a woman has never been an issue for me," Ruth said. "I was shy when young, but I could never remember feeling incompetent. That a woman could do whatever was needed was something I knew from childhood."

Ruth was delighted to discover that her spiritual roots included women preachers. Two licensed preachers were Nancy Gove Cram and Abigail Roberts. They led churches and were evangelists. They were licensed but not ordained as ministers. It was a custom in the early days of the church to refer to women evangelists as "Female Laborers."<sup>9</sup>

The first woman ordained by the Christian Churches by the authority of a conference or local organization was Melissa Garrett Terrell.<sup>10</sup> She was ordained in 1867, fourteen years after Antoinette Brown.

From the days of the James O'Kelly Movement,<sup>11</sup> "women had been licensed to preach by the Christian Church, and also ordained to eldership in the Church. ... And that, too, with a minimum of adverse opinion," Burnett wrote in the introduction. "Woman has been well styled: 'Heaven's best, last gift.'"

"God has called women as worthy," Ruth Brandon said, "whether or not it was clearly written into scripture or historical text. "To do justice and love kindness and walk humbly with God and to love God and neighbor are the anchors for us as we live out our discipleship today, just as they were the anchors for the women who came before us."

#### **5. "Sometimes I think I was raised by God."**

"Unlike most people," Ruth said, "I have no memory of a time when I ever doubted or questioned God. I am in touch with a God who loves us and gets involved with our lives, who calls, challenges and leads us."

Ruth's two brothers were already in school at the time of her birth. She and an adopted cousin were the only girls in a family where all the cousins were boys.

"Was I special or what!?!" she said. "I think my family did treat me as a gift from God. From infancy when my mother carried me to church in a basket, I was always in church."

Six months before her birth, Ruth's father died while serving a church in Ohio. Her mother, trained as a nurse, was left to raise the three children. People in the national structures of the Congregational Christian Church helped them move to northern Vermont where a job as town and school nurse was available.

There, for several years the Veterans of the Cross Fund was important to her family. One Christmas the three children were pictured in the annual promotion as children of a pastor who died tragically young and for whom the church still felt responsibility:

Now if God raised me, God used the church to help. In the beginning, the church was critically important to insuring our survival. Because of the national publicity, a grower in California decided to send us fruit regularly. It was a "gift from heaven" according to my mother who described us as being poor in those years.

Yet I never felt poor. A lesson I remember very well from school years, whether applied to us or to others, was, "It is no crime to be poor." Rather the question always was how to do our best with what God had given us.

## **6. "Am I in touch, God?"**

In ministry Ruth has found the relevant question to be not whether one can academically describe God or analyze the stories of Jesus:

Rather, the question, still today, is whether I am in touch with God enough myself to be able to mediate and facilitate so that other folks also will come into God's presence and grow as faithful people.

From earliest years Ruth knew the love of God through a loving family and loving people at church. "God was family and church was a second home," she said.

As she became a thinker and questioner in her junior high years, she reached an age where she needed to be needed, respected and given responsibility. Her small town Vermont church, served by a retired pastor and his wife, nurtured these needs. She was involved as a choir member, Sunday school pianist and teacher, and youth member of the church council.

Of special importance was the youth group. Ruth progressed through the local and state offices in the Pilgrim Fellowship until she was president of the Vermont Pilgrim Fellowship. That provided the door to attending a national youth meeting about the time the United Church of Christ came into being.

"Youth meetings and youth camps were formative and transformative," Ruth said. "There I grew steadily in faith and commitment and knew that the church and God's presence went far beyond my local experience."

## **7. "Faithful living is both a good choice and it is fun."**

When Ruth was about fourteen, she began to find meaning in her minister's sermons:

I was baptized and joined the church. I started taking communion, all my decision, for my family came out of the Christian part of Congregational Christian. Babies were dedicated and baptism was later when the child could choose. I preached my first sermon on a Youth Sunday when I was a high school senior. The text was 'Lord, Help my Unbelief.'

At that time, the Reverend Morris Pike was the Vermont Conference staff person who worked with the state Pilgrim Fellowship and camps. He also trained college youth as summer traveling Vacation School workers.

"Morris Pike was very much a mentor for me through not only high school but also early college years," Ruth said. "He facilitated the deepening of my faith. He broadened my practice of living out my Christianity."

## **8. Beyond the "God loves me"**

From childhood, concerns with peace and justice and with moral living have been part of Ruth's environment. Members of her family were active pacifists, prohibitionists and were involved with justice issues as she was growing up:

My uncle showed me the places in his Topsfield, Massachusetts parsonage where there were secret panels and hidden spaces where runaway slaves had been kept safe a century earlier. The role of church people in abolition and the underground railway and in peace issues over the years was normative for me. Peace issues – that is how Christians live out our faith.

From her grandfather, Ruth learned what she later discovered was an ethnic national anthem of the black community. Long before the 1960s, she already was joyfully singing, "Lift Every Voice and Sing," in Vermont where she had not yet met a black person.

Letters and occasional visits from family friends who were in mission work in Angola deepened her sense of the worldwide presence of God. She grew beyond the simple "God loves me" to "God cares about all people. How we treat each other and how we care will help God make this a better world."

## **9. Birth of a Marching One**

In the 1960s, Ruth studied at Oberlin College. She earned a Bachelor of Arts in 1963. Focusing on Church and Community, she received a Master of Divinity degree in 1966 at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. She earned a Master of Sacred Theology at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis in 1984.

She was ordained in 1973 while serving as executive director of Campus YWCA at the University of Wisconsin. Her involvement with anti-apartheid efforts had begun as a leader in Ohio United Campus Christian Fellowship and in the campus YM-YWCA at Oberlin:

I actively related to on-campus activity in solidarity with the civil rights struggle. I did not have money to be able to skip taking jobs so as to spend school vacations in the south or go to national lobbying days or big conferences, but I listened to other '60s persons who did.

In seminary, the same sense of call drew her to help found and run Student Interracial Ministry. The organization placed seminary students from all over the country in summer jobs - black students in white churches and white students in black churches - an activity that, she said, seemed helpful and appropriate at the time.

## **10. "Living inside the black community in the south during the civil rights period changed my life."**

Ruth herself spent two summers living and working in black communities in the south. One summer she was an associate to a black Congregational pastor in Raleigh, North Carolina. Later, she served in another capacity through Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) activity in Southwest Georgia:

Mostly, I learned and grew. Many qualities that "society" defined as of value in people were proved irrelevant. Some folks with little

education knew very well what was good for their lives and the lives of their children. They were beautiful people, faith-filled and courageous.

They gave of themselves far beyond what seemed humanly possible. They were hospitable people who dared to risk many kinds of new behaviors. They let us white folks live and eat in their homes and join them in their struggle, even though such "mixing" could bring them to the attention of local authorities and could be dangerous.

Until college and civil rights introduced Ruth to black people, they had not existed in her life. After living inside the black community in the south, she learned the realities that inspired the deep faith of "Lift Every Voice and Sing." Freedom songs became part of her identity and culture:

Thereafter, I understood better both the enriching diversity of God's people and the discrimination, the inequalities and the poverty faced by a large segment of our own country. I knew God wanted us to do better than that. Clearly, God cares when there are oppressed peoples and calls us to be involved on the side of justice.

Who you were, she said, and what your life experience was could make it very easy, or very hard, to see and embrace God's justice agenda. Yet, over and over, it was clear to her that God works through people:

God was able to break through blindness and hardness of heart and carve new life-giving possibilities out of situations that seemed as solid and unmovable as granite. God depends on people of faith to get involved and work to right what is wrong and create a better society for all.

## **11. "We evacuated every night, returning every day."**

From 1990 to 1993, Ruth pastored a new church start in the Capitol City of Mozambique while teaching at Ricatla United Seminary. Earlier, from 1966 to 1969 and 1973-1976, she had written curricula in Portuguese and taught middle school. She also trained elementary teachers. She taught Mozambicans at the FRELIMO<sup>12</sup> Secondary School in three towns in Tanzania and Mozambique.



In Mozambique's United Congregational Church of Southern Africa, while teaching seminary, she again found herself in the midst of people who became her friends. The people had nothing - except each other and God, as known through Jesus Christ. They could not expect all their children to live to adulthood:



Ruth with Luisa Paulina

Everyone I knew had personal experience of atrocities and war, running from an attack, watching houses or buses burn, sleeping in holes in the bush to keep their family camouflaged at night, violent deaths of friends and relatives.

The seminary where I taught was in the war zone. For the first time in my life, I had to come face to face with the living reality of evil, a palpable fearsome force that was very present and could not be avoided or ignored. In such a place, God's presence also became palpable and awesomely strong and life-giving.

Ruth speaks of the last three of the eight years that she worked in Mozambique as a time of learning that "Jesus really matters."

African cultures, she said, have known a creator God before Christianity. But Christianity brought Jesus. Just as Jesus cared for marginal people he encountered, they realized that God is close to each of us, cares and reaches out with healing love and comfort. The African sense of God before Jesus was of a fearsome demanding God constantly in need of being placated. Jesus drew them toward God's gentleness:

My Mozambican neighbors and friends had learned to cherish every moment of every day, thanking God for each one. The new day dawned and they opened their eyes and knew they were alive. Beauty came in small things such as shared water or firewood or cassava root.

They expressed with profound and unshakable clarity that without God at their side, they would not find that extra strength and courage needed to go on. God and the relationship to God were deeply important - for this sustained when nothing else did.

In their faith journey, God spoke to them right where they were in their need to survive until things got better. When the daily physical hunger, and the daily need to be safe from gunfire, and the daily need to walk miles and miles to secure basic necessities became less, then there would be energy for more:

Mozambicans, most of them with minimal formal education if any, became my faith mentors, with that deep truth that however much we embrace God's social agenda, or justice agenda, what matters most and is the source of all possibility is the under girding relationship to God.

## **12. "Vision for community rather than just our individual lives is scarce."**

Several denominations for which Ruth had done speaking and writing during and after assignments supported her mission assignments. In the 1970s, she wrote extensively as a founder of the African News Service, a project that had United Church of Christ support at its founding. She also wrote numerous articles and edited conference and denominational material related to justice, refugee and global concerns.

Her ecumenical work included serving as Church World Service Refugee Resettlement Coordinator for the state of North Carolina through the North Carolina Council of Churches (1980-1983). For two of those years, she served in a governor-appointed position as chair of the state's Refugee Advisory Committee for the Department of Human Services.

Reflecting on her learning from mentors in Mozambique, she said that fear and crisis are also true in North America:

Here also people are in crisis - facing what feel like life-destroying possibilities. Fear is on the rise here also, distorting our response to life and to other people. Vision for community rather than just our individual lives is scarce. Here in this country, we really need today the vision and sense of God's priorities that we can discover through Jesus - but we also need the reality of God's love enveloping us, God's gracious healing power enabling us to stand up to evil when we see it, and to live in affirmation of life, despite even the worst of physical, mental, social or other conditions.

## **13. Wherever Needed**

In 1994, Ruth returned to this country to serve as conference staff, interim senior pastor or supply pastor to several churches – wherever needed. She has served as vice-chair of the United Church of Christ Wider Church Ministries Board. From 1997 through 2006, she served as pastor to United Church of Christ, Second Congregational in Westfield, Massachusetts. After becoming Associate Conference Minister in Ohio in 2006, she also taught sixteen hours of Ethics and Mission at the Southwest Ohio-Northern Kentucky Association (SONKA) Lay School and co-taught United Church of Christ History and Polity at a nearby Methodist seminary.



## 14. So What about You?

- Ruth Brandon has had "work worth doing" at all levels of the church.

**Name those areas of the church and how you think each work experience might have been valuable to Ruth in doing another job.**

**In what ways do you need to set specific goals? In what ways can you "let things happen" within a broader or general life goal?**

- Ruth defines ministry as "responsiveness to the moving of God among the people and a willingness to be used by God."

**How do you define ministry?**

**Where have you seen yourself embracing the difficult things?**

**Are you in touch with God? Enough to help shape your life? Enough to make a difference in the lives of others?**

- For Ruth, several sections of the Bible are important. Among them is Luke 9:18-20.

**Read this passage from the Petersen paraphrase, The Messenger. What are you saying about Jesus? About God?**

- Ruth has seen people with nothing in Africa and in poor communities of the southern United States who live their faith and serve God and help their communities with great integrity. "They found a way where none was obvious. They did not consider giving up," she said in an association newsletter to her people. "I do not expect you to give up either."<sup>13</sup>

**How are you living your faith?**

**Make a comment about this statement: If God needs me to be about a task, I can find a way, if I am willing to think beyond the obvious.**

**Think about something upon which you would not consider giving up.**

- Ruth's poem, "The Reunion," reminds us of how complex we are. We have many strengths and many choices as to how to use this bounty from a generous God.

**Write a poem about yourself, your strengths and choices.**

## **15. Church Family Project**

- With your pastor or youth group leader, arrange a series of Sundays for youth group members to read the Weekly Prayer in worship. (Download from [ucc.org](http://ucc.org) at Change the World. Click on Weekly Prayer on the Global Ministries home page.)
- Check the list of Global Church Partnerships on the Global Ministries page to learn what part of the world your conference or region is partnering. With your pastor or the mission person in your church, find out what missionaries will visit your area. Make plans for a missionary visit to your congregation.

## **16. Still Curious?**

- Read about the history of the Christian Churches at <http://www.ucc.org/about-us/short-course/the-christian-church.html>.
- At <http://globalministries.org/Africa/countries/Mozambique/>, learn what is happening today at Ricatla United Seminary, United Congregational Church of Mozambique, and the United Church of Christ in Mozambique. Click on and read related stories.
- At [ucc.org/volunteer/](http://ucc.org/volunteer/), click on Companion Communities then go to Young Adult Service Communities. Go back then click on Volunteer Ministries News to read newsletter events for youth volunteers.

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<sup>1</sup> By Ruth Brandon. July 1997

<sup>2</sup> Ruth M. Brandon. Acceptance Speech at General Synod, 2005.

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<sup>3</sup> Samuel Mentor in the introduction of his mother at General Synod, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> From <http://www.therestorationmovement.com/stone.bw.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> From [http://www.christianchronicles.com/History2/new\\_england\\_christians.html](http://www.christianchronicles.com/History2/new_england_christians.html).

<sup>6</sup> From "James O'Kelly of Durham, North Carolina" at <http://www.therestorationmovement.com/okellyjames.htm>.

<sup>7</sup> Read about the Christian Churches at <http://www.ucc.org/about-us/short-course/the-christian-church.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Booklet Six (Dayton, Ohio: Christian Publishing Association, no date). Find also at <http://www.mun.ca/rels/restmove/texts/burnett/ewcc/EWCC.HTM>.

<sup>9</sup> In addition to J. F. Burnett's stories, read more in Barbara Brown Zikmund, "Abigail Roberts: 'Female Laborer' in Christian Churches," *Historical Intelligencer* 2 (1982): 3-10 and "Portraits of American Women in Religion: Abigail Roberts (1791-1841)" in [www.Librarycompany.org/women/portraits\\_religion/roberts.htm](http://www.Librarycompany.org/women/portraits_religion/roberts.htm).

<sup>10</sup> See <http://www.ohiohistorycentral.org/alphabet.php>.

<sup>11</sup> Read about the Rev. James O'Kelly and the Christian Church in the South – Restoration Movement at <http://www.piney.com/RmOKXVII.html>.

<sup>12</sup> FRELIMO is the Liberation Front of Mozambique.

<sup>13</sup> From "Discussion Starters." Friday, February 6, 2009 at [www.sonkaucc.org/](http://www.sonkaucc.org/).

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Dallas (Dee) A. Brauning. *Antoinette Brown Women: Finding Voice*, January, 2009