

**Beatrice Weaver McConnell,
First Ordained Woman in the Evangelical
and Reformed Church/Primera mujer
ordenada en la iglesia Evangélica y
Reformada**

1. Getting to Know You/Aprendiendo a conocerte

Name/Nombre: Beatrice Weaver McConnell

A.B. Recipient/A.B. honor: 1985

Career/Carrera: Parish Minister/
Ministra feligrés

Color of my hair/Color de pelo: Dark Brown/
Café oscuro

Color of my eyes/Color de ojos: Brown/Café

Brothers and Sisters/Hermanos y hermanas:
Two sisters/
Dos hermanas

Order of birth/Orden de nacimiento:
Youngest/Tercera

Favorite school subject/Asignatura escolar favorita:
Literature and
languages/Literatura y lenguages

Hobbies/Pasatiempos: Embroider, knit, crochet, write
Stories/Bordar, tejer, croché,
escribir historias

My heroes/Mis heroes: Abraham Lincoln, Franklin
Delano Roosevelt, Rev. Dr. James
Wagner¹



¹ James E. Wagner (Evangelical and Reformed) and Fred Hoskins (Congregational Christian) shared the first joint national leadership of the UCC in 1957.

2. *Don't go into the ministry unless you simply can't stay out of it.*²

Beatrice Weaver (McConnell) spoke these words to a college student who came to her filled with questions about entering the ministry. Beatrice was the first woman ordained to full ministry in the then ten-year-old union between her Reformed Church and the Evangelical Synod. She said:

As you pursue the next years of study, think it over very often, very carefully, and very prayerfully, and when the time comes for you to make a mature decision, don't go into the ministry unless you simply can't stay out of it. If God can use even the "wrath of man to praise him," I suppose [God] might even accept the preaching of a woman! (34)

3. *A woman must be able to show what she can do.*

I do not believe that it is an impossibility, neither do I believe that it is a vague improbability that an Evangelical and Reformed Church might call a single woman by herself.

Neither do I believe that standing and arguing for the "emancipation" of women in the church will produce any better results than the same procedure has produced results in the realm of racial prejudice.

[A woman] must display her abilities and possibilities ... as a matter of her own integrity. If she knows the call to be genuine, she must exercise the powers and abilities God has given her (34).

² Beatrice M. Weaver [McConnell]. "The Role of the Ordained Woman in the Church." A paper read at the Spiritual Conference, Cedar Crest College, Allentown, PA, July 29, 1954 and published in *Bulletin: Theological Seminary of the Evangelical and Reformed Church in Lancaster, PA*. October, 1954. Volume XXV, Number 4. 21-34

4. Ponder Points

During the pondering hours of her youth, Beatrice Weaver's thoughts turned to two Bible passages:

I always wanted someone to explain why Jesus said Mary had chosen the better part by listening to him instead of worrying about fixing lunch, as Martha did.

I wished someone would use that passage (Luke 10:36-42) to explain the order of who should be available to preach and who shouldn't! Opponents of women in the pulpit never use Mary. They go to Paul to mention that women are told to be quiet (1 Corinthians 14:29-39).

Psalm 118:24 also has been a meaningful passage throughout Beatrice's life:

This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

This passage strikes me as important. It is a constant reminder of the time we have to do something worthwhile and to go after something and interpret it for people.

5. High School Snapshots³

- We did a play to benefit the biology club.
- The biology club came out to our farm for a picnic and then saw the aurora borealis.
- I played viola in the high school orchestra, in a string quartet in the high school symphony and in the Lehigh Valley Symphony.
- In 1933, we took a two-week of trip to the Chicago World Fair. Another time, we visited the Ocean Grove seashore.
- My father was a good, kind man. He was respected in the community and as a church elder.
- I looked up to my mother and my maternal grandmother. My grandmother taught me to write and how to do handwork. I made many things for my older sister. She was the only one with a hope chest.
- From snap dragons to portulaca, I always made a garden.
- "Read, read anything – biography, history, novels, anything! Educate yourself by reading." That's what my uncle told me. I listened to him.

³ Phone interview with author on January 3, 2007

6. *I grew discontent with the confining, impersonal attitude of the chemistry laboratory.*



During the early 1940s, Beatrice studied chemistry at Ursinus College in Collegeville, Pennsylvania. The last year of World War II she worked as a chemist in Wilmington, Delaware. She felt, however, a growing conviction that “the realm of the church” presented to her a richer area of service.

Dr. Pierce Beaver, a Lancaster Theological Seminary professor, encouraged her to study at Lancaster. When she learned about a special scholarship for Ursinus graduates, she applied. On November 8, 1945, at the age of 22, Beatrice began seminary studies. She

intended to take only one year of theology. Later, she might study for the mission field.

Instead, she became the first woman to graduate from the seminary with a Bachelor of Divinity degree. Fifty years later, the seminary honored her with the distinguished Founder's Cross for her promotion of theological education.

7. *“Don’t tell people that you are going to preach – why, they’ll think it is queer” (28).*

The first real opposition that Beatrice met as a theological student was her family. “Especially were some of the feminine members certain that I had taken complete leave of my senses,” she said.

“What shall I tell my friends when they ask me what you are preparing for?” a family member asked. “I can’t tell them you are going to be a minister. That sounds funny” (28).

Another said, “Why do you take it upon yourself to listen to all those people’s woes and all that sad stuff? Why don’t you get married and be happy?”

“I thought it was, be happy and then get married,” Beatrice had answered. “I am extremely happy in the ministry.”

It would be two years before she was accepted into the family again. By then, she had been ordained and had preached her first sermon at her home church. Much to her relief, however, that sermon was presented in her family's absence.

After hearing her preach, friends who reported to her mother were complimentary. Beatrice said, "I shall never forget my mother's reply: 'Why, of course. If a woman has something to say, why shouldn't she preach?'"

8. Saint Paul's Evangelical and Reformed Church

Her seminary scholarship had come from Saint Paul's Evangelical and Reformed Church in Lancaster. In return for this gift, Beatrice agreed to make hospital visits and to meet weekly with the pastor, Dr. Titus Alspach.

She also taught the Zwingli Bible Class. This gathering of "older, very church-minded ladies" became important for her future:

The first thing I did in my senior year (of seminary) was to teach a Bible class of women between the ages of 60 and 80. If ever there were a right place and time to be, it was among those 137 women. They took to me. They promoted my ministry and moved it along (28).

9. Ordained: June 13, 1948

The ordination of Beatrice Weaver (McConnell) came about in a quiet way. In 2008 at the age of 84, she will celebrate her sixtieth year of ministry.

One day in January, 1948, the senior pastor of Saint Paul's asked Beatrice to preach. Through his willingness and his advocacy, the church council voted to call her after she had completed seminary and had obtained a ministerial license. Later she learned that the opinions of that Bible class also had borne "no small influence upon their decisions" (28).

Toward the end of the Easter season, the pastor again approached her. The church membership of 1500 and the Sunday school of 1100 were too great for one minister. Might she be interested in ordination? She was. He offered her the position of assistant pastor. She accepted and remained at Saint Paul's for the next six and a half years.

10. ***“It was hardly a stampede.”***

“The ordination of a woman to the ministry in the Evangelical and Reformed Church was the beginning (hardly a stampede) of the ordination of a few women,” said Marilyn Hedges-Hiller in “A Trickle of Ordained Women.”⁴

From 1948 to 1957, Hedges-Hiller said, sixteen women were ordained in the Evangelical and Reformed Church. Throughout denominations, a small yet steady trickle of ordained women followed, she said.

Since the ordination of Antoinette Brown (Black) in 1853, women in the Congregational Churches have been ordained. Not until 1956, however, did the Methodists and the Presbyterians vote full clergy status to women. Hedges-Hiller viewed the strategy of “silent interpenetration [as] a slow means of bringing about change.”

Barbara Brown Zikmund noted in “Women's Ministries within the United Church of Christ” that women’s ministries were respected as early as 1889 in the German Evangelical tradition.⁵ Deaconess “sisters” were consecrated but not ordained to full ministry of word and sacrament.

In “The Role of the Ordained Woman in the Church,” McConnell reported that “many denominations have concluded that there is no barrier, theological or traditional, that should keep them from being admitted to the privilege of complete and equal service within the church” (21-22).

She expressed concern about the loss of large numbers of capable women from the church to secular institutions and organizations who recognized their worth. Only a quarter of ordained women served as ministers of their own churches.

⁴ Marilyn Hedges-Hiller. “A Trickle of Ordained Women.” *BULLETIN of the Congregational Library* (14 Beacon Street, Boston). Double issue. Winter/summer 2000, 4-16

⁵ Barbara Brown Zikmund. “Women's Ministries within the United Church of Christ” in Catherine Wessinger. *Religious Institutions and Women's Leadership: New Roles Inside the Mainstream* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1996

She told about several strong, competent women who strengthened small churches. They were called to churches in small towns or in rural areas that either could not afford a man or he left soon for a larger parish.

The 1949 census record showed a count of 238 ordained women in the Disciples of Christ and 233 in the Congregational Christian Churches. While the Methodist Church had the largest number of women in ministry, the number was lost. Seventy-eight Church of the Brethren sisters were licensed to preach. The Northern Baptists had ordained thirty-eight women. Beatrice was the one ordained woman reported by the Evangelical and Reformed Church (25).

According to Beatrice McConnell, Miss (Ruth) Ann Blasberg was ordained next in 1949. Mrs. Philip Williams, Mrs. Carolyn Kissinger, Miss Evelyn C. McGill, Miss Johanna Stoetker, Mrs. Robert (Olga) Klepper and Miss Mary Lou Bischmann followed (26).

11. Any sensible woman knows that she will be faced with prejudice, spoken or unexpressed.

At the time of her ordination, the ordination of women was a non-issue, she said. "The only ferment was in the minds of those women who wanted to be ordained," she said. "The church's expectations about the non-ordination of women ministers were neither written nor spoken about" (29).

She added:

A woman can either feel persecuted and sorry for herself, create an issue of it, and argue against, or in genuine Christian fashion she can work all the more diligently for the Kingdom in silent and unruffled dignity. There are some things one simply must take (33).

12. No Vigorous Protest

Beatrice found "no vigorous protest" within her denomination. A note in the church's national magazine, *The Messenger*, had announced the event. Only brief public discussion followed.

The writer of one letter, "To Be Seen, Not Heard," had attended school (six decades earlier) with all male teachers. The students learned, he said, because they feared punishment. "Now," he said, "the Sunday school teachers are girls and women. What do children

know? ... God says: 'Let your women keep silence in the churches'" (1 Corinthians 14:29-39).⁶

"It seems to me," a woman responded, "that lessons learned in fear of punishment would be of little value, certainly rather contrary to the principles of Christ's teachings"

Hedges-Hiller reported that Reinhold Niebuhr wrote a later article in *The Messenger*. Niebuhr was a member of the Evangelical and Reformed Church. He would become one of Beatrice's professors at Union Theological Seminary.

The theologian said that "the religious community was 'much tardier than the secular community in granting equal rights to women.'"⁷

European women were more interested in ordination than American women. The position of women in the American church was still inferior.

13. *Co-Pastor*

Titus Alspach took care to emphasize that Beatrice was at Saint Paul's "not in the capacity of a parish worker or a director of religious education but as a full-fledged pastor" (29).

Beatrice soon observed that "constructive work can be done by a woman minister for women" (30). She saw that women excel in "the large area of counseling with families with domestic problems" as well as among the home-bound and the aged. An almost even number of men and women sought her counsel (32).

For the first two years, her title was assistant pastor. Then, with the same calm as her ordination had come about, her title changed:

One day a year or so after I came there, Dr. Alspach came into the office with a bulletin. He had written *co-pastor*. The secretary asked if he wanted her to print that. Dr. Alspach said, "Yes, the other - senior pastor and assistant - sounds so subservient."

⁶"A Trickle of Ordained Women"

⁷ From Reinhold Niebuhr's report on discussion at the World Council of Churches in Amsterdam about the place of women in the church, as discussed and quoted by Marilyn Hedges-Hiller in "A Trickle of Ordained Women."

The co-pastors presented an interesting team, Beatrice said. She was 24. Her colleague was 65. His pulpit attire was as nontraditional as his form of worship. He wore a cut-away, robin-tail coat and a stiff-front shirt with a wing-tipped collar. His grey satin tie was tied in the Oxford style. His trousers were striped.

“He was four or five inches shorter than I, and round. I would come in behind him,” she said. “I was a tall woman at five foot eight and a half. I wore just a simple Geneva gown and a white blouse with a soft white bow at the top and then my stole. I never thought of wearing a (clerical) collar.”

14. *Farthest from my mind then, as now, was the intention of leading a feminist movement for the so-called ‘emancipation of women’ in the church (27).*

“Now” was her presentation on July 29, 1954, of a major paper, “The Role of the Ordained Woman in the Church,” to more than two hundred other Reformed clergy. They had gathered for a Spiritual Conference at Cedar Crest College in Allentown, Pennsylvania. Three months’ later, the paper was published in the Lancaster Seminary *Bulletin*.⁸

Beatrice considers this presentation her single most significant contribution to church and society. “I wanted the paper to be as clear as I could make it.”⁹

“Where women have been serving,” she told her male colleagues, “traditional prejudice has been diminishing” (21).

In the paper, she reviewed the changing stage for the position of women in the first half of the twentieth century. Among those changes were women’s right to vote, their important contributing role throughout the two World Wars and emphasis on equal education. These changes challenged women to grow and to develop their talents. Competent women now had opportunity to make a useful contribution to society.

This “radical shift in the sociological trend,” she said, “has impelled large areas of the church to rethink their status on the status and service of women” (21).

⁸ “The Role of the Ordained Woman in the Church,” pp 21-34

⁹Phone interview with author on Wednesday, March 28, 2007

She outlined the functions, experiences and observations of women worldwide who were ordained ministers. Then she described her own entry into the ministry, ordination, the nature of her duties, how she was accepted, the problems she met and her observations about the future opportunity for ordained women.

15. *The Response?*

Her colleagues were “gracious” in response to her paper. Many had gotten to know her by the time she presented the paper. “We had many a good laugh,” she said, “over some of the strangest questions. ‘Do you have geraniums in all windows in the Sunday school rooms?’ They were at that stage where they did not know quite what to say.”

A woman would become known as a young people's minister, a specialist in women's work or a preacher of children's sermons. In reality, she said her “hope was always for a complete ministry.”

Among colleagues, Beatrice felt acceptance. “When I have met and worked with ministers and [lay people] on a professional level,” she said, “traditional factors ... have rapidly faded away, but in my personal social life I have experienced this [caricature] full force” (33).

16. *Graduate study was the only way I would move on from that church.*

After seven and a half years of service at Saint Paul's in Lancaster including her senior year of seminary, Beatrice went to Union Seminary to study for a Master of Sacred Theology degree. At that time, only an associate position would have been available for her in a church of similar size.

“I loved Union,” she said. “It was absolutely wonderful at that time in 1954 and 1955. Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich were at Union. I never left the classroom with out the students giving the professor a standing applause. Cyril Richardson was there and Wilhelm Pauck, Robert McAfee Brown and Dr. Handy. It was a time to bring me up-to-date theologically.”

Working under Dr. David Roberts, she completed several months of work on her thesis, “Prayer – Public and Private.” Then he died of a heart attack. He was a specialist in the new field of psychology and prayer. No other professor could oversee her study.

“I had the first draft of my thesis. It was too late to start another,” Beatrice said. “I was heartbroken because I never could get my master’s degree, although the seminary did award me alumni status.”

17. I baptized nine little baby boys on the same day.

After studying at Union, Beatrice was called near Mercersburg, Pennsylvania, to the Lehmasters [sic] Parish of four churches. She served this parish four years, preaching in two churches each Sunday.

When I came, the churches had been without a minister for a year. I baptized eighteen children in the different churches. I baptized nine little boys in the Williamson church on the same July Sunday.

All nine of those little babies decided they wanted to let out some steam when I was reading the scripture. When I asked the sexton later if he could hear any of it, he said, “Oh, yes, we’re used to that.” He told precisely what I had read. I loved that. It meant that you had a family pew. Family pews are so important.

The welcoming, trusting attitude of the people empowered her ministry. “Having been reared on a farm, I felt at home,” she said. “I could stop by the side of the fence and talk to the man on the tractor right there.”

Saint Paul’s at Williamson, Saint Paul’s at Lemasters, Trinity at Saint Thomas and Saint Stephen’s at Upton were about five miles apart in big dairy farm country. Beatrice drove 3200 miles a year to care for six hundred people spread over a 40-mile area. Some visits to distant, specialty hospitals required a three-hour drive.

In each church of the parish had been a small group of leaders who, prior to her coming, said, “Are we that badly off that we have to take a woman?”

The committee chair told her later, “The Sunday after you preached your trial sermon, three sisters -- single, retired high school teachers and the real leaders in the one congregation -- marched into my house at dinner time. They announced, ‘We are going to vote for her.’”

18. *Frank Aldrich McConnell went out of his way by eighty-five miles to ask if perhaps I would have dinner with him.*

“At age 33,” Beatrice said, “I probably was going to be a single minister the rest of my years. Then my friend for a number of years, whom I had never dreamed of as a husband, came calling.”

When Frank McConnell put the note under her door at the parsonage, Beatrice was not home. She was across the county standing on a hayrack in a barn yard dedicating sixty-seven bred Holsteins headed for a Heifer Project in Austria.

Frank McConnell had become Professor of Sacred Music at Lancaster Theological Seminary in 1946 and would remain there for forty-three years. For fifty-three years, he also was organist and choir master of the Saint James Episcopal Church in Lancaster.

Both the church and the seminary said they could not lose him. So Beatrice left Lehmasters Parish to marry Frank and return to Lancaster. They shared life until his death in 2005.

19. *I just want to be with the church.*

“Most enjoyable about my life,” Beatrice Weaver McConnell said, “was my marriage and our son Mark, who was born in 1960.”

She had taken off a year from supply ministry at the time of her son’s birth but became concerned that she might not get into a pulpit again. “I just wanted to be with the church,” she said. She was, until her retirement from active ministry in 1990 at age 66.

When their son was about two, she became minister of Conestoga Reformed Church in Lancaster County. He would sit in the pew with another child about six months older. Mark would tell him, “Don’t talk because I want to hear the sermon and I want to see what she says.”

His parents soon realized that their son preferred to sit in the playpen and read rather than play with his toys. One day at age two-and-a-half, he pulled from the bookcase an autobiography of Roosevelt. He read his mother several sentences then commented, “FDR – some parts are good and some parts are dull. But all in all I wouldn’t say it was all that good.” His parents took their son to a private school where he could study at his level.

20. *A Series of Churches*

Beatrice remained at Conestoga for eleven years then in 1974 was called for three years to a church in Lebanon. After Lebanon, she went to Trinity Church in Columbia for eleven years. She filled churches that needed experienced pastors. Among these were Bethany Church in Ephrata, the church at Muddy Creek and Wilshire in Reading. She served Saint John's in Columbia for almost twelve years until 1990 when she retired at the age of 66.

21. *It was one of the most moving experiences of my career.*

Nine years after her ordination, the denominations merged to form the United Church of Christ. Beatrice and a colleague, Bernice Buehler¹⁰, were the two women from the Reformed Church called to help the committee to prepare the Statement of Faith. Dr. Mary Lyman was called from the Congregational side.

This was one of the best things I have been a part of. Our committee started as soon as the marriage meeting took place.

I fought to keep in the phrase, "He sets before us the ways of life and death." The Norwegian theologian Nels Ferré did not think that was necessary. We all had to write a statement. From this statement Roger Shinn from the Reformed Church and Roger Hazelton from the Congregational side wrote the Statement of Faith of the United Church of Christ. Shinn wrote the final copy that we did not change. Two years later in 1959, it was accepted by General Synod at Oberlin.

That was an absolute Pentecostal experience. The Statement was accepted after many questions and after four hours of discussion in the late afternoon. Somewhere in the auditorium we heard the strains of the Doxology. Everyone stood and sang the Doxology spontaneously.

¹⁰ Bernice Buehler also was an Antoinette Brown Award recipient.

22. Church Family Project

Invite your church historian to visit a youth gathering to tell about the founding days of your particular United Church of Christ.

Was your church originally Evangelical, Reformed, Congregational or Christian?

Was it at founding or is it now part of a wider community church, perhaps a union with a Presbyterian, Methodist or other church in your town?

Talk about how these uniting changes happened and how your church has grown in faith and in spirit from these unions.

23. So What About You?

- Read Luke 10:36-42. Since her earliest pondering, Beatrice has thought about this story.

When are you more comfortable being a Martha and when a Mary?

Should you be more like Mary, how are you putting yourself at the feet of the right teacher for the refinement of your particular gifts?

If you are more like Martha, how do you nurture and “feed” yourself and others as they go about their work?

- Spent some quiet time with Psalm 118:24.

What key words catch your eye or your ear?

Tell ways in which you are a rejoicing person.

How might this verse offer balance to the fullness of the lives of women these days?

- Beatrice experienced two important church unions in her time.

Why do you think such unions are or are not important?

What do you see as benefits of having many different denominations within our Christian faith?

What might be some roadblocks that come from the many different denominations?

- Word by word, the committee worked out the Statement of Faith that would reflect the beliefs of each branch of the new faith group.

Why would a new statement of faith be important?

- Listening to each phrase, read aloud the Statement of Faith.

Mark words, phrases or sentences that are important to you.

How is the guidance of this Statement of Faith making a difference as your life is unfolding?

24. *Still Curious?*

To learn more about the history of the Evangelical and Reformed Church and of the United Church of Christ, contact your conference library or phone 800-537-3394 to purchase any of the following resources:

David Dunn and others. *A History of the Evangelical and Reformed Church* (0749-7). Phone 800-537-3394.

The Celebration Video Series. Celebration Part 1: Who Do We Say We Are? DVD or VHS (PCCD). Phone 800-537-3394.

Marilyn Hedges-Hiller. "A Trickle of Ordained Women," *BULLETIN of the Congregational Library*. 14 Beacon Street, Boston. Double issue, Winter/summer 2000. Contact: circ@14beacon.org or phone 617-523-0470.

History and Program (PO678). Phone 800-537-3394.

Beatrice M. Weaver [McConnell]. "The Role of the Ordained Woman in the Church," *Bulletin: Theological Seminary of the Evangelical and Reformed Church in Lancaster, PA*.

October, 1954. Volume XXV, Number 4, 34. Contact: erhs@lancasterseminary.edu or phone 717-290-8734.

Barbara Brown Zikmund. "Women's Ministries Within the United Church of Christ" in Catherine Wessinger. *Religious Institutions and Women's Leadership: New Roles Inside the Mainstream*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1996. Contact: circ@14beacon.org or phone 617-523-0470.

Barbara Brown Zikmund, Editor. *The Living Theological Heritage of the United Church of Christ*, Volumes 1 through 7. Phone 800-537-3394.

Online, visit www.ucc.org/aboutus :

www.ucc.org/aboutus/hidden-histories/

Barbara Brown Zikmund. *Hidden Histories in the United Church of Christ, Part 1*

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www.ucc.org/aboutus/shortcourse/the-german-evangelical.html

"The German Evangelical Movement"

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"The German Reformed Church"

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"The German Evangelical Synod"

www.ucc.org/aboutus/shortcourse/the-evangelical-and-reformed.html

"The Evangelical and Reformed Church"

(Dallas (Dee) A. Brauninger. *Antoinette Brown Women: Finding Voice*, January, 2008)