

*Dear
Church*

To my late husband
Carl G. France, my partner and helpmate in ministry,
who believed for the fifty-one years we served together
that nothing was impossible.
There were no barriers that could not be removed
or no tasks too difficult
as long as we continued to believe that we could
do all things through Christ who strengthened us.

Dear Church

*Intimate Letters
from
Women in Ministry*

Dorothy D. France, ED.



CHALICE
P R E S S

ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI

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Cover art: Lushpix/Unlisted Images, Inc.

Cover and interior design: Elizabeth Wright

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

10 11 12 13 14 15

EPUB: 978-08272-06427 • EPDF: 978-08272-06434

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Dear Church : intimate letters from women in ministry / [edited by] Dorothy D. France.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-8272-0639-7

1. Women clergy—United States. 2. Christian Churches (Disciples of Christ)—Clergy. I. France, Dorothy D. II. Title.

BX7326.D43 2010

286.6'73082—dc22

2009047125

Printed in the United States of America

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Acknowledgments

My deep gratitude is extended to R. Jeanne Cobb, Archivist and Coordinator of Special Collections (retired), Bethany College, for her willingness to share her boundless knowledge of all things “Disciple.” Her immediate recall and response is inspiring. I remain grateful to Judy Pyle, Executive Assistant, Center for Institutional Advancement, Bethany College, who has graciously taken the time to answer questions, make contacts, offer suggestions, and let me invade the hospitality of her home. Thanks to Peter Morgan for his guidance and support; he always has more facts and knowledge than one can imagine. To the staff at the Pension Fund and the Historical Society, I am appreciative of your willingness to listen and answer one more question no matter how unimportant it may have seemed. To members of local congregations who inspired me by your feedback and positive memories of leadership provided by women clergy and to all who have shared your letters, I say thank you. I owe a debt of gratitude to those at Christian Board of Publication/Chalice Press, both past and present, who gave me my first opportunity to write and who have continued to provide encouragement, allowing me to put my thoughts on paper for these past fifty-four years.

Preface

I checked in at the General Assembly in Charlotte, N.C. (2003), received my name tag, purchased a cup of coffee, and proceeded to a nearby table to wait for a friend. Across the table sat a young African American woman enjoying her salad. We acknowledged each other's presence and let silence ensue. Then she noticed my name tag.

"Are you a minister?" she asked.

"Yes," I replied. "I'm now retired."

"How did you survive so long? This salad can wait. We need to talk." She pushed the salad to one side. This was not the first time I had been asked that question nor will it be the last. We talked and shared concerns and joys for quite a while. A recent seminary graduate, she shared her anxiety about when and where she would be called to serve.

A day or so later we met in a hallway. She ran to me saying, "I've been looking for you. I've been asked to sing for the service. I'm so nervous. Will you pray with me?" We found an out-of-the-way spot, held hands, and prayed. During worship as she sang, "In this very room there's quite enough love for the all the world," I truly felt the presence of God and knew we had been brought together for a reason. She had the most beautiful voice I have ever heard.

During my meeting with Rev. Shauna McGhee, God planted the seed that led me to pursue the book you now hold in your hand. On these pages, thirty-five Disciple clergywomen share their heart-rending and inspiring stories of love, pain, disappointment, faith, and hope for the future—all part of their journey—as they shared the good news in local churches as regional and general staff, as publisher and editor, in academic settings, and on the mission field.

My prayer is that those of you who read their letters will find words of encouragement and promise whether you are clergy, a member of a congregation, a seminary student, or just beginning to hear God's call to ministry.

Dorothy D. France

Dear Church

Introductory Letters

LETTER 1: *Sharon E. Watkins*

General Minister and President
Indianapolis

To My Second Home

Dear Church,

I suppose I am in ministry now because you have always been a second home to me. As a child, I went to be with you every Sunday without fail—and often in between—for pitch-in dinners, special events, and eventually youth group. You showed me a bigger world than I knew in my Indianapolis neighborhood.

So many of those church dinners honored missionaries home on furlough. I remember the mysterious “dot” on the forehead of the woman from India, the dances from the Philippines, the picture of our Living Link Missionary on the wall of the Cornerstone classroom, the model of the Palestinian house in my own second grade class. I remember after one church dinner, when I was about ten years old, having just listened to a missionary speak, hearing a voice in my head. It was as clear as if the words had been said out loud: “You will be a missionary.” It startled and scared me. I pushed the thought to the back of my mind—even forgot about it until later.

You taught me to think.

I remember the arguments among friends in Church School as we discussed the issues of that time from a faith perspective—civil rights,

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Vietnam, the first Earth Day. Any topic was fair game. I remember those good laymen who were willing—seemed even to enjoy—being with us through middle school and high school, guiding us, as we sought to find the language of faith to clarify our convictions. I remember the more intense debates at assemblies where we struggled as one church to find one voice—even as we knew that, as Disciples, we’re not likely to find a single voice on most issues.

You nurtured me.

I remember my confession of faith—when my minister, Dr. Lowell C. Bryant, looked into my eyes and told me, “Jesus said when we confess him on earth before people, he will confess us before God in heaven. Sharon, I think we know what God is doing right now!” It moved me. The memory brings tears to this day—the sense of being part of something so big, of Almighty God paying such close attention to me.

You nurtured me in so many other ways. You learned my name, asked after me, noticed my accomplishments, big and small. You fostered my talents, helping me to sing, giving me opportunities to lead. You provided an opportunity for youth to gather—to learn, to play, to serve. You helped me learn to worship God.

You challenged me—not always in a good way.

I remember when my minister strode into a youth service in full swing, a regional youth service hosted by our congregation. But the band was too loud, the worship too exuberant, the era too recent for anyone of his generation to understand—and he stopped it. I remember the embarrassment, the hurt, the anger.

I remember, as Christian Youth Fellowship president, seeing adults behave at church board meetings in ways we wouldn’t have been allowed to in CYF.

I remember the confusion of learning that sometimes the differences of opinion cannot be resolved and that separation results.

You challenged me in good ways.

You challenged me by pushing me—and supporting me—to lead when I didn’t know I was ready. I remember learning things that were difficult, that racism is a challenge bigger than my feelings of personal prejudice or my ability to overcome that prejudice.

You taught me to pray at Camp Barbee, in northern Indiana, during the silence of morning watch, looking out over the green fields with golden hay bales under the blue sky, feeling the presence and majesty of God.

Perhaps I should not be surprised that when I had graduated from Butler University in Indianapolis—had my economics and French degree but no

desire to go into business, banking, or teaching—you gave me a job. You sent me to Kinshasa, the capital of the African country then known as Zaire, as a short-term missionary to work in an adult literacy program—my first experience as an adult. I learned so much about you—how very big is the Body of Christ, how diverse, and how precious is the part of the Body that is us, Disciples, with our longing for unity among Christians, for wholeness within the entire family of God. I learned so very much about me—that I could be competent, that I had learned a few useful things in college after all, that my faith would support me, and that I still had so much more to learn about both life and faithfulness.

It wasn't until my return from Zaire (now known as the Democratic Republic of Congo), that I began—finally—to hear your call. It came first through the people who worked around me in the Missions Building. “Your future is with the church, you know,” they said. Then one day, Dr. Robert A. Thomas, president of the Division of Overseas Ministries, said to me, “Sharon, go to seminary. Everyone knows you will someday. Do it now and get it over with!”

I still thought the goal was to clarify my own faith story while training as a social worker. So I went to Yale Divinity School, a seminary that offered a dual degree: Master of Divinity and Master of Social Work. At Yale, I met Rick Lowery, a second-year student, who was just moving into the Disciples fold from the Churches of Christ, the tradition of his upbringing. We married the next summer.

Your call came more insistently still, through the voice of my new husband—“You’ve got to try ministry, Honey—parish ministry. Take a field placement in a congregation.” At Rick’s continued urging, I did take that field placement in a local congregation. At the Spring Glen Church (United Church of Christ) in Hamden, Connecticut, I knew I’d come home.

With “home” came clearly the call to ministry.

Of course, as in any home, you don’t always make it easy. In seminary, I heard the stories of “the walking wounded,” as Professor Letty Russell called them—the women whose calls you’d rejected or challenged too severely. We learned their stories even as we learned to be grateful for their courage, for the path they had cleared, a path that we could now walk down with greater ease.

I found that being a woman in ministry worked just fine—if I could only get in the door. Sometimes that door slammed shut in my face, but when it opened (often with the help of a strategic-thinking regional minister such as Howard Goodrich in Indiana), the journey could be amazing.

I had a baby in each of my first two congregations served—Bethany, arriving just before Christmas while I was still serving at Spring Glen Church, and Christopher just before Palm Sunday while at Boone Grove

Christian Church in Boone Grove, Indiana. What a joy that was both times! You embraced our children as your own and loved them.

You embraced me, pregnant, post-partum, all.

You served up the normal challenges, of course; congregations with their own life stories, their conflicts, their moments of glory and moments of disastrous short-sightedness. Over the years, you showed me your many facets—through committee work in both the Indiana and Oklahoma regions (stewardship interpretation, commission on ministry, regional assembly worship planning, regional minister search committee, and eventually Moderator of the Oklahoma region.) You introduced me to the general expression of our church through participation on the General Nomination Committee, the General Board, and the Administrative Committee. You helped me understand our ecumenical partnerships as I served on the Ecumenical Partnership Committee with the United Church of Christ, the Stone-Campbell Dialogue, the National Council of Churches Governing Board and Executive Committee, and Presidential Panel.

You called me to work in higher education.

You called me to work as director of church relations for Phillips University, as director of student services at Phillips Theological Seminary, as adjunct professor in the areas of worship, spirituality, and practical ministry—again learning more of you as I followed my husband in his calling to teach. Our early marriage pact was to take turns in our respective careers. While he was still in graduate school, I would take my first solo pastorate. When he had his Ph.D. and a call to a tenure track position, I would seek a call near to where his job had taken us. Such joy overflowed when eventually we both had “our turn” at the same time—Rick as professor of Hebrew Bible at Phillips in Tulsa and me as pastor of Disciples Christian Church in Bartlesville, Oklahoma. Both of us were doing what we felt called to do—at the same time, living in the same house, and Rick’s forty-mile, open country commute seeming as nothing.

Now this lifetime of exploring and learning your many parts has led me back to Indianapolis, back to the geographical home of my childhood. Here you have called me to serve God in the most challenging and fulfilling ministry yet—as General Minister and President. All I have learned and experienced in congregational life and regional, general, and ecumenical work serves me well as I face new challenges every day, as I move into a volume and range of work I could never even have imagined before this. I marvel at the journey that has led to this place, and I give thanks for all the people who have helped me along the way. Even more, I pray I will be open to God’s guiding and that I will know to join hands with all of those who are called to be partners on this journey together.

I know, Church, that you are, even now, calling others, women and men, young and old, to serve God by serving through you. I know that some of them are covering their ears to your calling as I once did, that others are running in the opposite way, that still others are responding and getting mixed signals as the challenges become larger than the fulfillment.

I can only hope, dear Church, you will nurture, challenge and open up the world to these others as you have done with me, so that their rich talents will be available to you—to us. I pray that in you many will find a home, a place of hope and possibility—as we seek to be faithful to God’s calling to be Disciples of Christ, a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world.

Sharon

LETTER 2: *Dorothy D. France*

Editor
Retired Director of Refugee Resettlement (CWS),
Virginia Council

Setting the Pace

Dear Church,

Ministry has been a long, exciting and fulfilling journey.

On June 11, 2008, at the age of eighty-one, I traveled back to Bethany College, Bethany, West Virginia, so I could stand in front of the Old Meeting House (designed by Alexander Campbell and constructed in 1852) and reflect on my journey. My late husband, Carl, and I were ordained there fifty-eight years earlier (June 11, 1950) at 7 a.m. on graduation morning along with fellow students Herbert Lambert, Billie Joe Hannon, and Austin Coe. My dad, Arthur R. Daniel, participated in the “laying on of hands” along with President W.H. Cramblet, many Bethany professors, and elders of the Bethany Church. We believe I was the first woman to be ordained in the Meeting House.

That place—that space—is where we were taught, shown by example, nurtured, encouraged, and made to believe that we could do and be anything we wanted to do and be. There I first learned that “*all life is connected*” and confirmed my call to ministry. I have always tried to live up to the honor Bethany placed upon me on May 2, 1992, when my daughter, Gail Frankle, class of 1977, presented me the Outstanding Achievement in Ministry Award.

You called me to be ecumenical.

I grew up in the small town of Blackstone, Virginia; Carl in the even smaller town of West Middletown, Pennsylvania. We were nurtured in the church. In Blackstone Christian, I was led to be ecumenical long before I ever heard the word, much less knew how to spell or pronounce it. I suppose in the 1940s and '50s, all small towns were church towns. Life centered around the church. Everything was closed on Sunday, especially the local theater. A 1938 newspaper article titled “Pioneer Club Organized” reported that junior age boys and girls had organized a Pioneer group with programs scheduled for Sunday afternoons. Dr. Dennis, pastor of the Presbyterian Church, was made sponsor. Miss Elizabeth Holden and

Miss Dorothy Daniel (me) were named pianists. I was only twelve, but Dr. Dennis believed I could do it! When we became teenagers, the “in-thing” to do on New Year’s Eve was to attend the joint Communion Service at the Episcopal Church. There I learned to respect and appreciate the way others observed the Lord’s Supper.

You called me to be sensitive to the racial divide.

During my high school years, I first confronted the racial divide that existed in the 1940s. World War II had begun, and Camp Pickett was built just outside of town. Life changed! While the war was being waged in Europe, savings bond and stamp drives were being promoted. I was aware of this because my Dad was behind the action. Several of us were recruited to make posters and deliver them to the schools. All except the “colored” high school were nearby. We walked the half mile to the “other” school. Once inside, we went down the hall to the principal’s office. We hadn’t gone far before we came upon a section blocked off with chairs. As we came closer, we saw that the chairs were there to make sure that no one fell through the hole in the floor.

I remember telling Dad that evening what I had seen ... not just the hole in the floor, but walls badly in need of painting as well as broken windows. I asked why they hadn’t been fixed. Couldn’t he do something since he was on the town council? He shared his concern but told me that I would learn as I got older that some things I could not do alone. It would take time. Those words have echoed in my mind during my journey in ministry.

You introduced me to my life partner.

I planned to attend college, but my mother was uncomfortable having another child leave home. I obtained a position at Camp Pickett with the Army Directory Service, a part of the United States Postal System. Along about the same time, a young sergeant, Carl G. France, was invited to speak for a Sunday evening service at the Christian Church. It was my turn to play the piano. We sat on the front pew and picked out the hymns. That evening I gave thanks for the times I had played at the Presbyterian Church. At least I knew how to play hymns.

The rest is history. Carl was shipped off to serve in Europe. I even stamped his APO card. When he returned, we enrolled in Bethany College, married on August 6, 1946, and entered Bethany in September. What a marvelous journey! He was my companion and rock as we ministered together, each with our own areas of expertise and calling, for more than fifty-one years.

To be sure, we encountered bumps in the road but none that we couldn’t find a way over or around. When the school year began, the six government army barracks, one of which was to house six married couples and the other five single men, were not completed. We rented the parlor in the house next

to Chambers Store, a landmark even to this day. A leather sofa served as the bed, with one side held up by a footlocker where our clothes were stored. We finally moved into our apartment on campus lavishly furnished with an army bunk bed and a small chest for the combination living/bedroom, a large army table and a six-foot ice box for the kitchen, and two small desks that fit snugly in the closet. In the winter, we placed pans of water on the front stoop to freeze. The next morning we had ice for the “box.” I wouldn’t have traded it for a mansion.

My sophomore year, one of my religion professors suggested I drop out of college and work. He thought carrying a full course and working as assistant to Dr. Paustian, head of the sociology department, was too much. “Besides,” he said, “*the minister’s wife doesn’t need a college education.*” Dr. Dwight Stevenson, my counselor, nipped that thought in the bud. I remain grateful for his advice.

We returned to Blackstone each summer. I worked as director of recreation at the Memorial Center teaching crafts and ballroom dancing to teenagers and servicemen. My qualifications: I took dancing lessons as a child and received instruction to teach during my volunteer days with the U.S.O. I even took tap lessons at Bethany! I’ll have to admit that when I was young, my dream was to be a dancing instructor. Some used to tease me saying I did my “sinning” before I was ordained. At youth camps, dancing was called “folk games” to satisfy some of the church folks.

Yes, at Bethany *I learned that all life is connected, even dancing and ministry!* When visiting water and gardening projects in Haiti for Communities Responding to Overcome Poverty (CROP), Church World Service’s hunger program, in 1977, I found myself singing and dancing with the children who greeted us. Nothing shows someone you care more than interacting with them.

You endowed me with a sense of humor.

I was fulfilling my student teaching requirement at Wellsburg High School. One class included mostly football players. I had just begun speaking when one of the young “gentlemen” wadded up some paper and tossed it across the room hoping to hit the trash can. My comment was: “I hope you are not on the basketball team, because if you are we’re going to have a tough year.” As I continued, I saw Dr. Eliassen, my supervisor, sitting on the back row. Surely, I was in trouble. The next day he said, “I enjoyed your class. Your sense of humor will be a great asset in the years to come. You took control of that class in a hurry.”

Years later, I was asked to supply a couple of Sundays for a church on the verge of closing. The first Sunday, the lead elder greeted me as I left the pulpit with “You are the first woman ever to stand behind *that* pulpit!”

I remembered Dr. Eliassen’s comment about a sense of humor. So I said, “Let’s check things out.” We checked the floor and the ceiling. They were

both okay. We walked over to the windows. “The stained glass windows all seem to be okay.”

He laughed and said, “I’m sorry. I guess that was an unkind thing to say.” The last I heard the church was still open and a woman was behind the pulpit! A sense of humor does come in handy.

You taught me to be patient.

Carl was accepted at Duke Divinity School in Durham, North Carolina. Women weren’t eligible. I compensated by taking college classes and attending workshops and seminars related to my employment. In the 1970s, I considered seminary but was advised not to go that route; my years of experiences here and in other parts of the world were of far more value.

Word spread that we were interested in serving in Virginia. Carl received a call to Crewe Christian in Crewe, Virginia. He would be at Duke from Tuesday through Friday. I would carry on the church duties during that time. Once again, I found that life was connected. The superintendent of schools, who happened to have been my high school principal, offered me a position. This began a pattern that blessed me all my life. I never once applied for a job. They all seemed to be there wherever we were.

We moved to Crewe and settled into a rented house while a parsonage was being built. A neighbor came to welcome us. I can still see the look on her face when I answered the door. After saying hello, she sighed and said, “Oh, I’m so relieved. We didn’t know what to expect when we read in the newspaper that the new minister and his wife were both ministers!” She was relieved that I wasn’t wearing a long print dress, black “stockings” and oxfords, and that my hair wasn’t pulled back in a bun. “You look just like the rest of us,” she said. To my knowledge, in the early 1950s, I was the only ordained clergywoman (along with a woman licensed in the Methodist church) serving in the Commonwealth of Virginia. I officiated at my first wedding in 1950, and Carl sang. The church was packed. I think it was because no one had attended a wedding in which a woman performed the ceremony.

I taught school and performed pastoral duties while Carl was at Duke. I spoke to Dr. Allen Stanger’s classes of ministerial students at Lynchburg College on “The Role of the Minister’s Wife” but never on the role of the minister. I fulfilled every duty expected of a minister but will never know whether I could have been called as “*the pastor*” in the 1950s.

You called me to write and inspire others.

At the age of twenty-seven, I was selected to represent the Virginia region at a Laboratory Training School for Adult Workers of Youth at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, Texas. Christian Board was preparing new material for intermediate age youth. Individuals were invited to review the materials. Each of us was given a lesson to teach. The one I received

was more than a little dull. I obtained material from a nearby travel agent and reworked the lesson. After my session, one of my classmates asked if we could sit together for lunch. I was surprised to learn that the gentleman, Sherman Hanson, wasn't just an attendee from St. Louis. He was the editor of Bethany Press! I owe him a debt of gratitude for giving me—no, pushing me—into writing! He gave me my first writing assignment in 1954. It was an article titled, “Youth on the Telephone,” for *Vision*, a youth magazine.

In 1961, I was offered a scholarship to attend an editor's and writer's conference at the Green Lake Conference Center in Green Lake, Wisconsin. I hesitated because Carl was now on the regional staff in Virginia, scheduled to attend a Men's Conference in Salt Lake City, and would not be able to oversee our daughter Gail's care. Christian Board assured me that would not be a problem. She could be a part of the lab school for teachers. We took a month, combining work and pleasure, and drove to Utah and then Green Lake. Carl dropped us off and returned home. Gail and I had a marvelous train ride home.

I had the privilege of revisiting Green Lake in 2001. My dear church, you were there to welcome and remind me of my journey. I visited the “Prayer Tower” to offer prayers of thanksgiving for Sherman Hanson and the Christian Board staff who had placed confidence in me and continued to give me the opportunity to write. I was able to use my writing skills wherever you have called me, including co-editing a manual on *Grouping in Reading* while teaching and the manual, *Welcome to the United States*, translated in numerous languages, for use by volunteer agencies when resettling refugees.

You called me to be international.

As was the custom in the '50s, I went where Carl was called. We moved to Richmond, Virginia, when he accepted a call to pastor Lakeside Christian, a new congregation. We had no building and no parsonage. I was “very much” pregnant. Gail was born shortly after the move. Naturally, she chose Sunday as the time when Mom should go to the hospital.

Several years later, I was invited to speak for a women's luncheon at First English Lutheran Church. During lunch, I learned that the program leader had saved a newspaper article (no picture) from a year earlier and invited me to speak based on the article. What faith! I met Dorothy Eckert, the minister's wife. She asked me to speak for World Day of Prayer. I was introduced to what was then United Church Women. Although I didn't realize it at the time, this was one of the “defining moments” in my life. I was introduced to issues of international and cultural concern, racial inequality, poverty, domestic and world hunger—all issues that eventually became front and center in my life and ministry. It reaffirmed my ecumenical beginnings as a child.

To mark the twentieth observance of World Community Day (1964), United Church Women sponsored a program at the new Church Center for the United Nations in New York City. The purpose was to train selected women leaders for effective peace action, and 160 selected women leaders were called together for intensive in-service training in international affairs. I was privileged to represent Virginia women. As I entered the conference room, the words on the banner displayed in front of the room struck me: “*Not to decide is to decide!*” What powerful words! I returned to Virginia committed to world issues. I led numerous adult seminars to the U.N. in cooperation with the Virginia Council of Churches.

In the spring of 1966, when I was almost forty, I was the program chairman (that’s what women were called then) for the Church Women United Assembly. Dr. Margaret Shannon, a Presbyterian, had just become executive director. She chose the Virginia Assembly for her first official appearance. I guess I was too young to realize that I should be frightened and nervous about having a new executive present. I went about doing the best I could to make the experience meaningful.

Early that fall a message came over the intercom to my classroom saying that I needed to return a call to New York. It was Margaret Shannon inviting me to be a part of United Church Women’s first Christian Causeway to Africa. I still remember her reply when I told her I was not qualified. “Let me decide your qualifications,” she said. “Anyone who can stand up in a green wool suit and preside over a Communion service for Protestant, Orthodox, and Catholic women can relate to women anywhere!” Being a “Disciple,” I assumed that everyone was welcome at the table. After much “soul searching,” I knew I wasn’t ready and used the fact that I had signed a teaching contract as my way out.

I did not participate in 1966 but agreed to go to Nigeria for a follow-up teaching assignment in 1967. Dr. Louise Clark, a physician friend, would go with me. We would be a teaching, preaching, and healing team. As preparation for the trip, in July of 1967 we attended an International Consultation at Anderson College in Anderson, Indiana, along with women from forty-two countries. But again, it wasn’t to be! The Biafran War broke out just before our time of departure. The center in Enugu where we were to work was destroyed.

In 1968, Margaret called again, asking me to spend two and a half months in Africa with major emphasis in South Africa. I kept asking God, “Why me?” Carl assured me that God would not have called me three years in a row if I wasn’t supposed to go. I listened and made the marvelous journey that truly changed the direction of my life. When we left the terminal in New York to board the plane to Monrovia, Liberia, I received an envelope with instructions not to open it until we were out over the Atlantic. When I opened it, I found these words: “God’s Speed

and God's Speech (Margaret)." In that moment, I released Carl and Gail into God's hands.

In South Africa, we taught classes for the wives of the African Independent Ministers Association. The meetings were held in Soweto. Each day we linked arms as we marched in the middle of the road and sang our way to lunch. When Dr. Beyers Naude, our host and the director of the Christian Institute, picked us up to take us to the home of Olive and Percy Webber in Johannesburg, he told us that he heard we marched and sang on the way to lunch. He asked if we knew what we were singing. We didn't have a clue. With a smile on his face, he said: "You were singing 'We Shall Overcome,' which is banned in South Africa." Then he added, "If the security police had been around, you would have been picked up and given twenty-four hours to leave the country. Don't let the fear of being stopped keep you from sharing with the women. Keep on being who you are. They desperately need you to give them hope!"

Just prior to my departure for Africa, Carl accepted a call as minister of First Christian Church, Pulaski, Virginia. He would sell our house and move the furniture to Pulaski. He sent the papers to me in Port Elizabeth, South Africa, for signing. I took them to the American Embassy to be notarized. When I placed them in the mail, I realized that I would soon be moving to a new place filled with both opportunities and challenges. Two days after returning to the United States, the three of us flew to Kansas City for the General Assembly, then back to Virginia to pack the cars and journey to our new home.

You called me to feed the hungry.

Shortly after settling in, a call came from the director of New River Community Action stating that a staff person was retiring. He had heard of my work in the "hunger field" and thought I might be interested in becoming the director of community development. I accepted the position, which allowed me to continue and expand my concern in the areas of domestic and world hunger. In the summer of 1969, women's groups were organizing hunger workshops. These preceded the White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, and Health convened by President Richard Nixon in December of that year. I was chosen as a delegate and served on the Women's Task Force. Participants were guests at a White House reception where Mrs. Pat Nixon was a gracious hostess.

When the Senate Select Committee's report on hunger was released in 1974, I worked with leaders of other agencies to form the Virginia Coalition on Nutrition and became its first president. We obtained grants, hired staff, and began to address the hunger problems especially in southwest Virginia. A food stamp hotline was established, enabling those in rural and out-of-the-way areas to apply.

A major conference on the “Dimensions of Hunger” at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia, was partially funded by CROP. The Virginia Coalition staff provided support. Following the conference, I shared a cab to the airport with John Metzler from the national CROP office. He commented that I should be working for CROP. I remember saying to him, “Someday that would be nice, but I have to take care of the hungry in Virginia first. Then I’ll take on the world.”

You challenged me to broaden my vision.

My dear church, *you were continually challenging me to broaden my vision.* I received a call a few days after that cab ride offering me a job as associate for Virginia/North Carolina CROP with the responsibility of opening the Virginia office in 1975. I accepted. What a challenging and rewarding experience working with churches, colleges, schools, and civic clubs to raise funds for domestic and world hunger through walks, fasts, and sacrificial dinners!

In the late 1970s I never knew when and where the topic of women clergy would arise. I was in a TV studio in Lynchburg, Virginia, preparing to tape an interview regarding an upcoming CROP walk. The reporter and I had agreed on the parameters of the interview, or so I thought. When the interview began, the first question he asked was, “What do you think about the controversy in the Episcopal Church regarding the ordination of women?” I immediately stopped the interview and reminded him that we had agreed that the topic of discussion would be hunger.

You called me to be a peacemaker.

In 1971 I was amazed to learn how quickly we “Disciples” can act. While attending the General Convention in Louisville, Kentucky, I received a note from Robert G. Nelson, executive secretary of the Department of Africa, requesting that I have lunch with him. A few days later, back in Pulaski, Virginia, I had updated my inoculations, received my plane ticket and funding, and repacked my bags. The next day, I would be on my way to New York to represent Disciples as part of an ecumenical team of six denominations leaving for a Consultation in Southern Africa on American Corporate Investment in South Africa. After briefings in London, we obtained visas for several countries. We arrived in Johannesburg after a visit in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. This was indeed a sensitive mission filled with moments of uncertainty, challenge, and opportunity. On our return, we reported to our particular denominations and met with leaders of the corporations we had visited. I served as a member of the Disciple Task Force on Investment Guidelines.

In 1974, I was privileged to participate in the Church Women United Causeway to Asia to explore with Asian women what it means to be

“builders of peace” in our time. Four peace caravans of twelve women each visited in two Asian countries. I led a team that visited Thailand and Vietnam. We visited Sister To Thi Ahn at the House of Peace in Saigon and heard firsthand their heart-rending experiences. Who could have imagined during my college years that one day I would be sitting in Saigon waiting for the opera to begin. As Ambassador Graham Martin opened with the roll of the drums, I remember grasping the “mustard seed” charm Carl had attached to my watchband when I left for South Africa in 1968. I offered a prayer of thanksgiving for Dr. George Hauptfuehrer, my organ professor at Bethany, who had insisted that we share in the weekly dinners in his home to listen to opera!

The caravans later came together at Tozanso, Japan, with eleven Asian women from eight countries and Japanese and Korean women living in Japan to participate in a Peace Consultation on the Role of Women in Peace Building. Following the conference, we boarded the bullet train to Peace Park in Hiroshima to participate in the World Day of Prayer Service written by the Japanese women. When we changed trains in Kyoto, I was thrilled to see the familiar face of one of my role models, The Rev. Thelma Hastings, as she waited to catch the train.

You called me to welcome the stranger.

Following my work with CROP and after serving as director of development for Virginia Institute of Pastoral Care, denominational heads convinced me of what I already knew – my heart and ministry were with the hungry and the refugee. I became director of refugee resettlement for Church World Service and Episcopal Migration Ministries, serving twelve denominations resettling refugees in Virginia. During my tenure, more than 2,500 individuals from twelve different ethnic groups were resettled. In 1986, I visited refugee camps in Asia (Hong Kong, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines) and in 1990 camps in Europe (Germany, Italy, Greece, Austria, and Switzerland.) As unbelievable as it may seem, I attended the opera in Vienna, Austria, as guest of the director of the refugee office. Best of all, I had the privilege of working with Jennifer Riggs, who continues to provide excellent dedicated leadership, not only to Disciples but to all of Church World Service.

As a clergy couple, Carl and I had experiences so deep and life changing that together in 1972 we led a study tour for teachers, doctors, and nurses to Africa and the Middle East. We led church groups to World Conventions in Australia, Jamaica, and Hawaii. Through all of these journeys, we came to appreciate and value new cultures, their welcoming of the stranger, unusual ways of travel, other cultures’ creativity, and the inner and outer beauty of our “worldwide” family. It would take volumes to express the love I have received from “the least of these.”

You called me to preach the good news.

Over the years, my dear church, you called me to interact on your behalf—denominationally, ecumenically, and with agencies and civic groups on the local, state, and national level. Their agendas have included the needs of people. While with CROP and Church World Service, I served as part-time pastor of Petunia and Galilee Christian Churches in Wytheville, Virginia, and Prospect Christian in Dinwiddie County. I was deeply involved with the local congregations of the twelve member denominations through whom I resettled refugees, participating in worship and attending committee and board meetings and women’s and men’s organizations.

While I was at Bethany College, some people kept saying, “There will not be a place for women in ministry.” You, the church, offered a different view. You kept tugging and urging me on. You taught me to listen and absorb whatever was around me as if saying, “You never know when that might be helpful.” Now that I am in my “golden years,” you still allow me to write, lead elders and women’s retreats, speak for anniversary celebrations, provide pulpit supply, and mentor and encourage young people as they prepare for ministry.

May we as clergywomen continue to have the presence and the vision to change the world by being the carriers of Christ’s love, bringing unity to all of God’s people wherever they may be. Sometimes God will call us to leave familiar settings and launch out into uncharted waters. He will never say where they will take us. We take him at his word, remembering that within each of us there rests a creative and perhaps powerful message just waiting to be shared. Capture those moments with patience and time and God will take care of the refining.

To those of you considering ministry or perhaps having stressful moments on your journey, this is not just the story of those whose letters are recorded here. It can and will be yours, too. Trust and prepare your heart and mind to follow God’s leading and direction. Dr. Shannon, who first sent me on my way, once said that the symbol of fellowship is not the clasped hand but the “cocked ear.” Learn to listen ... really listen ... so that you may receive both the challenges and the blessings that will be yours in the years to come.

Dorothy