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MRS. RUTH GIBBS

This is Betty Turnell. Our guest today is Mrs. Ruth Gibbs. Both Mrs. Gibbs and her husband, Dr. Donald Gibbs, have had a long association with the United Methodist Church. We've asked her to tell us something of her career with the church and elsewhere.

Turnell: But, Mrs. Gibbs, I think there isn't very much "elsewhere." It seems to me that your life has been pretty well dominated by the church.

Gibbs: That's true!

Turnell: Let's begin by hearing something about your early life.

Gibbs: I was born on a farm in Christian County, here in Illinois. My parents were farmers at that stage of their lives. Then they bought a farm of their own, and we lived between Springfield and Decatur. I went to a country school for my grade school education. Then following grade school, I went to Illiopolis High School.

Now, to get to high school in those days you had to go on an interurban. You know the interurban, which is an electric means of transportation. We lived within about 3/4 of a mile of an interurban stop. The interurban, of course, stopped at every cross road. For 2½ years I rode the interurban to school every morning and back every afternoon.

I walked to our farm from the station. Then in December, 1918, my family moved here to Decatur. They thought there would be more educational advantages for their children if they lived in Decatur. So we moved here, and I entered Decatur High School in January, 1919, and I joined the First Methodist Church at that time.

I graduated from Decatur High School in 1920, but I somehow, through a high school teacher, became interested in Northwestern University. I went off to university in Evanston and didn't go to Millikin as my folks had thought would happen.

I'm glad I did because it broadened my horizon considerably to have had that experience on the Evanston campus.

I was very active in the First Methodist Church of Evanston. The students had quite a program there, and I was interested in that. Because of my activities in that student group of the church, the Bishops of that area recommended me for a job at Ypsilanti, Michigan, working with students.

So when I graduated from Northwestern, I went out to Ypsilanti, which is near Ann Arbor. The college there then was called a teachers' college. I think it is now Eastern Michigan University, and so I was in Michigan at Ypsilanti for two years.

In the meantime while I was at Northwestern, I came to know Donald Gibbs, and we were married in 1926, after I had been in Michigan for two years.

Now you want to know something about my husband. His father was a Methodist minister. He was born in Charleston, while his father was

serving that church. He lived here in Decatur about 1901, when his father served First Church as an interim pastor, before Dr. Davidson came. Dr. Davidson was the man who built the present building -- that is, he was the pastor while the building was being built.

My husband graduated from Decatur High School and had two years at Millikin. During the first World War they had a Student Army Training Corps, of which he was a part. But the war was over, and then he went to Northwestern University. It was on the campus at Northwestern that we came to know each other.

Then he went off to Japan following his graduation from Northwestern on a two-year contract. He was selected by an international committee of the YMCA. The Japanese government needed persons to teach conversational English to their students. They asked the International Committee of the YMCA to select six young men to be the teachers of conversational English. My husband was one of this group of six men who went out to teach. He was in Japan from September, 1922, to June, 1924.

When he returned home in 1924 -- incidentally, he was in Japan during the great earthquake of September, 1923. He was not injured. He happened to be up in the mountains at a retreat. They were living in a Buddhist Monastery, which is about the safest place to be in an earthquake. There were not many effects of the earthquake in that area of Japan.

When he came home in 1924, he served a year as associate pastor of First Church here in Decatur. Then he went back to Garrett Theological Seminary to get his theological training. We were married in 1926, and we lived in Evanston the last year of his theological schooling.

We came back to Decatur in 1931. He was assigned to serve the Cleveland Avenue Methodist Church. Now that was in the heart of the depression, as you may remember, and the Cleveland Avenue Church served a working class people, and they were very hard hit by the depression. He jokingly remarked that he had to retype his membership list about every month because people had to make living arrangements in the light of their financial circumstances, and they had to change. A man from First Church who helped him a great deal during that period was Dr. E. T. Evans, who was a dentist here in Decatur. He was quite a character, and Mrs. Evans was a very fine person too, for that matter, but Dr. Evans was very helpful to my husband during that depression period.

It was while we were living in that parsonage that the Decatur District Woman's Foreign Missionary society needed a president, and Mrs. A. M. Wells, the mother of John and Art Wells, was on the nominating committee. She was the person who came to see me to get me to do this job. Of course, I was very young and inexperienced and didn't know too much about it, but I took it on, and that was my introduction to the women's work of the church. It was possible for me to do it at that time because our son was about 3 or 4 years old then and my mother was living here in Decatur. She liked to have him stay with her, and he liked to stay with her; so when I went to meetings it was possible for him to stay with his grandmother. So that's how I worked it out, and that was my introduction to the women's work of the church.

Then we left Decatur in 1935 and went to Gibson City. I did not pick up with the district work then. I was involved in other ways, but by 1939 our Methodist Church and the Methodist Church South and the

Methodist Protestant Church came into union to form The Methodist Church. The break had come much earlier for the Methodist Protestant Church over the issue of bishops. The Methodist Protestant Church thought the bishops were exercising too much authority, that the lay people of the church didn't have a vote or say in the work of the church. So they withdrew to form the Methodist Protestant Church. They were centered in Maryland. The other break between the Northern Methodists and the Southern Methodists was over the issue of slavery. That was prior to the Civil War.

These three groups came together in 1939 to form The Methodist Church. It was a part of the union at that time that the women's organization of the church would also unite to form The Woman's Society of Christian Service. It meant in our church that the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society and the Wesleyan Service Guild, which was for business and professional women, and the Ladies' Aid Society all became one organization.

It was really a big effort to bring all these organizations together into one group. So I was a part of the Conference group that worked on that and was elected vice-president for the first election. I think I remember that I was also one of the delegates who went to the jurisdiction meetings. Now one of the compromises that had to be made to have a united church nationally was that the church had to be divided into jurisdictions. This meant that the old Confederate states could be autonomous in certain regards, and all the black folks were put into one church called the "Central Jurisdiction." Many people came to feel that that was a wrong compromise to have made, but in '39 it was the best that could be done even though the compromise brought about some racial discrimination.

We were a part of the North-Central Jurisdiction, and the plan was to elect so many women to be members of the national board. I was a part of that first body that elected nominees. So that was an experience for me. I served three years as a vice-president of the conference society and felt that was enough. That was in '44.

In 1950 I was elected to serve in the Jurisdiction Woman's Society. That was the first experience I had outside the bounds of the Conference. The Jurisdiction was composed of 9 or 10 states in this region. You went to meetings in Chicago or Milwaukee or Minneapolis or Columbus or Cincinnati. It broadened my vision considerably.

I served in that capacity for seven years and then from 1956 to 1968, and I served as a member of the national board for 12 years -- three quadrennia.

Now you asked about the School of Christian Mission. That goes back to my experience as a district president in the early 1930's. I came to know about an institute that was held at Camp Milam, which is still in existence, south of Rock Island. The women in that district were having an institute and some of us from Decatur went up to that institute. We worked out a cooperative arrangement between the Decatur

District, the Bloomington District, and the Champaign District (this would have been the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society then) to have an institute. Our women would come and learn about the mission study program and so forth. It was at that period that we established an institute in the Conference.

It continued, and when the Woman's Society of Christian Service came into existence in 1939, the responsibility for these institutes became the Conference responsibility. It was called a "School of Christian Mission" at that time.

Turnell: May I ask you a question about these institutes? How long did they last?

Gibbs: Well, it's my remembrance that they lasted three or four days, usually in the middle of a week -- not over a weekend.

Turnell: What did you do there?

Gibbs: We brought in leaders from outside the Conference who coached us in the mission text book and showed us how to present a study. We also had workshops on the work of the organization. There were also missionaries brought in to inspire us.

Turnell: Did you study a specific topic at each institute?

Gibbs: Yes. The church as a whole had the study program outlining the studies for a year. We would study about mission work in a foreign country. We always had a Bible study along with it. There were several types of emphases to follow. With several missionaries present on the grounds, you would be interested in their activities. They would be persons home on furlough. It was always harder to get home missionaries present because we were nearer to their place of work, and they needed to be on the job. That's still true today.

My connection with the School of Christian Mission as a member of the Conference Committee that planned it each year was lengthy from the beginning of the school until I retired from the Board of Missions in 1968.

The women really just invited me to serve on that committee. There was no reason why I should have been on the committee except for my long association with it. So I was a part of the planning for 25 years or more.

Turnell: You should mention that all of these jobs were on a volunteer basis?

Gibbs: Yes, I should make it clear that this is volunteer work. We did get expenses for travel--if you traveled by railroad, your ticket was paid for. In the latter years, you flew by plane. When the railroad passenger service was discontinued, you got your plane ticket. If you stayed at a hotel, you got your expense for your hotel room and meals, but other than that, you were a volunteer. My husband often jokingly remarked that I did as much work typing in my den at home as his secretary did at the office.

The strength of the women's organization over the years has been because of this volunteer work. It has reduced the overhead expenses of the organization considerably--saving the salaries of professional people.

During my seven years as a jurisdiction officer, my horizon was broadened considerably as I began going to meetings. It was the plan of structure in those days that a jurisdiction officer came to a Woman's Division Committee meeting once a year. That would bring you in touch with women all over the country. You became familiar with the Southern woman and the Western woman. We do have different characteristics because of the various parts of the country we come from and decisions have to be made based on compromises because we don't all think alike. It was a good introduction to my membership on the board, which is a national body--it's membership is nation-wide. During this jurisdiction experience, we had seminars every few years, which broadened your horizon of current social problems. At that time I had the particular responsibility of Christian Social Relations. That was a very broadening experience. I came to know some of the black women of the church and went to some of their meetings. That meant that I went to campuses that were traditionally Negro colleges. I went to parts of the country where the blacks were predominant. It opened my eyes to a good many things.

This is a rather humorous anecdote. I was down in Jackson, Tennessee, where there was a school predominantly for black students. I was traveling by railroad and went into the station to pick up my ticket. I did not realize that there were two entrances to the railroad station--the black entrance and the white entrance. I came in the wrong way. I didn't know any better.

These experiences as officer in the Jurisdiction Woman's Society prepared me for membership on the national board. The national board--in my day every woman was a member of the woman's division or the world division. During my first quadrennium, I served on the national as well as the Woman's Division. Then in the last two quadrennia, I served on the World Division. I found that more interesting in many ways.

Your responsibilities on the National Board depend greatly on your committee assignments. I found that I had more and more committees as time went on. I found myself on the committee of constitution and bylaws when I first went to the Woman's Division. These were years when there was restructuring taking place.

I became chairman of the committee in my second quadrennium, and that took me into more and more and more detail work. There were more and more structural changes involved. Finally, in the last quadrennium I really carried a terrific load, for between '64 and '68 was when we had the merger with the Evangelical United Brethren Church.

Now it was a very unequal union. The Methodists were about ten million members and the Evangelical United Brethren Church was about 650,000 members. But every aspect of the structure of the new church was rethought in the light of this union so you had to go over everything.

In the women's work we had to do it from the beginning. We had innumerable committee meetings, traveling here and there.

I think I should say here that, since I lived at home, here in Decatur, and my husband's responsibility was with the Preachers' Aid Society, and I had no children at home, and he was willing for me to do it, I could be gone. I tried never to be away on weekends because that was when he was home, and I felt I needed to be here unless it was absolutely necessary to be away at a meeting.

Turnell: May I ask you a question? You speak of quadrennium. For the ordinary person, how long is that?

Gibbs: That's four years. In the Methodist Church even today, we do things by fours. The General Conference meets every four years, and every part of the church is organized for a four-year period when new members are elected.

Turnell: You were with the National Board for years?

Gibbs: Twelve years.

Turnell: And you traveled from here to New York?

Gibbs: Yes, and everywhere else because we had committee meetings. It was unfair to bring everyone to New York every time. With people living in Texas and California, we had committee meetings in various places. I remember going quite a few times to Atlanta -- quite a few times to Cincinnati. I think I went to Denver for several committee meetings. That is so it would make it more even for the western women to come to meetings. They wouldn't have to do all the traveling clear across the continent every time.

Turnell: You weren't working all the time, were you? Every week?

Gibbs: No. I wish now I had kept a record of where and when I traveled, but it didn't seem important at the time. I suppose I could go back to my date books and figure it out, but I don't know that there would be any point to it.

Then I taught in schools. I felt that I had a responsibility to give as well as to receive; so I taught in schools of Christian Mission every summer, mostly in our jurisdiction, which meant that I went to Minnesota or Wisconsin or Michigan, Ohio, or Indiana, or Iowa. I went to Pennsylvania one summer, but it was mostly in our jurisdiction where I taught. And that teaching in the Conference schools was good experience. I did it for twenty years, from 1950 to 1970. My first school was in Iowa, and my last school was in Iowa.

Turnell: You continue that teaching now, even in our own church.

Gibbs: Yes. I'm glad to lead a class. It gives me something to do -- a purpose to my reading.

Turnell: Maybe you could explain just how the school is carried on now.

Gibbs: The church selects certain topics for study in a given year. It's really an inter-church selection because it isn't just our denomination. Decisions are made years in advance.

End of First Side. Second Side:

Gibbs: The topics are remarkably appropriate many times. This year we have a study on the peoples of the South Pacific. Next year - 1984 - the study will be on refugees around the world or a study on certain countries of Africa. Always we have a Bible study. Our local church usually makes that a part of some other studies they are having -- perhaps during Lent.

Leaders of classes in local churches really get much help if they attend the Conference School of Christian Mission each summer -- held up at Bloomington. Men and women are welcome. The persons who teach those classes have had some wider experiences. It introduces you to the subject matter and resources and materials and any personal experiences the person may have had. It's a good coaching experience. I often jokingly remark that it's where I get new ideas because I come in contact with people I don't ordinarily come in contact with.

Now, not every church follows this study plan, but it's one of the strengths of the women's organization that we have promoted this study for fifty years.

When study classes are held in a local church, anyone is welcome to attend -- men or women or young people. Our class has been held on a morning in recent years, and, of course, that has excluded people who are employed. That is the choice of the women. Not many men have attended, and time and again we have felt that the men of our church should be a part of our study group, but we would need to have it at another time for that to be effective. From '71 to the late 70's, the Wesleyan Service Guild of our local church had a study in the fall. For a number of years, I would lead two different study classes--one for the Wesleyan Service Guild in the fall and one at another season of the year for other women of the church. The Wesleyan Service Guild was for business and professional women. As time went by, the distinction between business and professional women and the other women of the church ceased to exist because so many women were employed outside the home. In recent years the Wesleyan Service Guild in our local church has become Circle 6 of United Methodist Women.

Turnell: Why don't you tell us some of the history of the women's groups of the First Methodist Church and the outstanding women you remember?

Gibbs: My memory goes back to my high school days about 1920 because I graduated from Decatur High School in 1920. I remember vividly Mrs. R.C. Augustine, who was a member of our church and a very active woman in the community. She served on the Decatur School Board for many, many years. She was a woman who had a remarkable vision for her day and generation.

Mrs. Lucy Oplinger was her daughter, her oldest daughter, and she, in turn, served as a member of our school board for many years. So she was really a very remarkable woman.

I think of Mrs. Marksmiller. Mrs. Marksmiller has been gone for a good many years. I think her husband was a dentist, but I could be wrong. But she was a very active woman in our church.

I think of Mrs. E. T. Evans, and when you go into our lounge or library, those frescoes on the wall were given to the church by Mrs. E. T. Evans. She was from Maryland--Fredericksburg, Maryland. She was a very remarkable woman who liked to have the church look well.

Our MESSENGER this week has an article about our chimes, which were given in 1910 by Mrs. Conklin. I never knew Mrs. Conklin as a person, but my husband's aunt was a good friend of Mrs. Conklin. She was active in the conference Woman's Home Missionary Society, and she and my husband's aunt were very close friends. She was quite a remarkable woman with a great deal of leadership ability. Of course, she made a handsome bequest to the church in the chimes. With their monetary evaluation today, we realize that it's a good thing we have them because we would never buy them at that price.

Our church has always produced good leaders for the district and conference organizations.

In more recent years Harriet Ellis (Mrs. I. Paul Ellis) and Imogene Brown (Mrs. Ira Brown) have served in the district and conference organizations. There have been other women over the years who have served in these organizations.

Turnell: Of course, our First United Methodist Women's group followed the history of the other women's groups, didn't it? -- the joining of the various units -- the Ladies' Aid and Foreign Missions, etc.?

Gibbs: Well, of course, the Woman's Foreign Missionary group was formed to send missionaries overseas. There was need not only for men missionaries, but for women missionaries because in many countries men had no contact with any of the women--their culture just did not permit it. So there was a need for women missionaries, and that is how the women got involved because the little group of eight women who got together to form the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society in Boston sent out Isabella Thoburn and Clara Swain. Miss Thoburn was a teacher, and Dr. Swain was a medical doctor. Today we have in India the Isabella Thoburn College and the Clara Swain Hospital, which date back to the pioneer work of those women.

The Home Missionary Society came into being after the Civil War because there were areas in which the church was not serving, particularly providing educational opportunities for the black children who had been so recently emancipated. The slaves were given their freedom after the Civil War, and there were black children who had no educational opportunities. There were also mountain children--children who grew up in the Appalachian Mountains who did not have educational opportunities. That was another concern of the women. Then this was an era when many, many immigrants were coming to the United States. At the port of entry for these immigrants, the Woman's Home Missionary Society established residences for the young girls who came without any place to stay.

They established community centers to help orient the people who came from other lands into this country. And then they even had an interest in the children up in Alaska. When John Shaffer talked to our unit recently, he talked about the Jessie Lee Home. The origin of that goes back to 1890 when the Home Missionary Society was concerned about the Eskimo and Indian children who lost their parents. In those years, children were left orphans by the death of one or both of their parents, and so the Jessie Lee Home was established to take care of these orphan children. It's amazing the wide concerns that the women had in those years to establish educational and community centers and to help solve the medical needs of those people who were coming to our shores.

The Ladies' Aid Society goes back to the beginning of the church. The Bible tells us about some of the women who worked in the church in those days because the women have always been interested in how the church looked and how the program of the church progressed, and they really were an aid society in the work of the church--concerned with the appearance of the church building and interested in innumerable ways to make the work of the local church more effective.

Turnell: Did women belong to more than one of these groups?

Gibbs: Yes, they did. There came to be some competition -- and I say that advisedly -- between the Woman's Home Missionary Society and the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society. That was a minor matter in many instances, but many women would belong to the Ladies' Aid Society, as well as one or both of the missionary societies.

Turnell: But under the reorganization plan they all do part of the work of all these groups?

Gibbs: We do the whole emphases now in one organization. And, of course, the Methodist Church South began this union long before we did in our part of the church. So it came hard to us in 1940 to have just one woman's organization, but the rest of the church had had it previously. And it was hard for our local women. In our local church, from 1944 to 1950, when my husband was the district superintendent, that was near to the beginning of the Woman's Society of Christian Service, and it wasn't easy to make the change and shift your loyalty and allegiance to the Woman's Society of Christian Service.

Turnell: Now I know the women earn a considerable amount of money, and the allocation of funds goes back to these various needs, doesn't it?

Gibbs: In our local church at the time of the formation of the Woman's Society of Christian Service, a study was made of the giving of the predecessor organization--the Woman's Home Missionary Society, the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society, and the Ladies' Aid--and that is how we established for the Woman's Society of Christian Service the plan of 2/3 of our funds would go for missions and 1/3 for the local church because that was the proportion of giving at the time of union. We have followed that allocation ever since. Just recently we voted that certain monies would be divided 50-50, but it was based on history of giving that we established the 2/3 and 1/3 plan in 1940.

Turnell: Mrs. Gibbs, you mentioned that your husband had been a district superintendent. Maybe you could tell us what it was to be a district superintendent and the wife of a district superintendent in those times.

Gibbs: It was an interesting experience. The geography of our district entered into a good deal of our travel because in those days the Decatur district was a rectangle. Decatur was in the northwest corner, which meant that to travel to Paris or Marshall or Casey, you had a long distance. I think it was 90 miles to Marshall or Casey. After our son graduated from high school in 1946--from the old Decatur High School, he went away to college. With no family responsibilities to keep me in Decatur, I went along with my husband when he went out of town. It was a good experience for both of us. It gave us companionship, and when he had to travel home after a quarterly conference (as they called it in those days) at night, he didn't have to travel alone. We also used the highway from Lovington to Paris. That highway I think is called 133. It goes right through the Amish community, and I always had a fear that we would hit one of those Amish buggies in night-time driving, because you don't always see the lights on those buggies, but we never had an accident. The only accident we ever had was that we hit a hog, and the bristles left marks on the paint of the car. I don't remember what happened to the hog. That was in another area, not in the Amish community.

But my husband really liked driving home at night after an evening of quarterly conferences. He said it rested him. Only a couple of times did he ask me to take the wheel because he was too tired to drive. I always remember coming to Rt. 36 east from Decatur, there at LaPlace. When we would come to that intersection, it was just 13 miles to Decatur. It always seemed that we were nearly home when we got to that intersection.

Of course, we didn't go every day, but we did go frequently at certain times of the year, because in those days you had a quarterly conference at every church--or certainly at every charge--and there were about 90 churches in the district in those days. Of course, some pastors would have more than one church, so there weren't that many charges.

Turnell: Mrs. Gibbs, your life has just been tied in with the United Methodist Church and you said something a while ago about giving and getting. You certainly have done your share of giving to the church in many, many ways as the minister's wife, as the district superintendent's wife, and on your own as a real career with your work on the Board of Missions and so on.

Now you have viewed many changes in the church. Could you sum up how you feel about that?

Gibbs: I have seen many changes, and I don't regret change. I think it's a sign of growth and development. We shouldn't remain static and do things just the same way we always have. Personally, I'm ready for change if there's a good reason for it. I think the church will continue to change and develop and grow in the light of the needs of the times. Our insight changes as time goes on, and maybe it's better insight than it was previously.

Turnell: And women can be proud of helping to advance those changes?

Gibbs: Yes -- many times women are the instigators. They may not get the

credit for it, but many times they are the reason for bringing about change. You can take the racial issue in the church for one thing. I spoke some time back about the central jurisdiction coming into being. It was the women who took the initiative to have integrated meetings when the rest of the church was having racially segregated meetings. And we have often been the leaders in a cause -- many times.

Turnell: Well, I think, Mrs. Gibbs, you can be very proud to think that you have helped to advance the cause, and we certainly appreciate all the work you have done for the church as a whole and also for the local United Methodist Women at the First United Methodist Church. We thank you very, very much for sharing your experiences with us.

Gibbs: It has been an enriching experience for me. I have gained personally far more than anything that I may have given, I'm sure.

Turnell: Well, thank you. You have been listening to the reminiscences of Mrs. Ruth Gibbs. This is Betty Turnell.

The First United Methodist Church

Decatur, Illinois

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I, Ruth B. Gibbs hereby grant my taped narration
(Name of Narrator)

(memoirs) to the First United Methodist Church as a donation for
such educational purposes that the church shall determine.

Reminiscences

Subject of tape(s)

Ruth B. Gibbs
(Signature of interviewee/narrator)

1500 West William St
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Decatur, Ill.
(City) (State)

November 2, 1983
(Date of Agreement)

Betty Jurnell,
interviewer

Stipulations on the use of the tape(s)

None