

Our Jubilee Year “Ponderings From the Past” February 2007

“From Women’s Society of Christian Service to United Methodist Women”

During our Jubilee Celebration year, Joan VanPatten, a member of the Communications Ministry team will dig into the archives to feature some piece of history every month in Focus.

Rev. Harry C. Mikels, our first appointed pastor, organized the Women’s Society of Christian Service (WSCS) of the Shenendehowa Methodist Church in January, 1958. Each of the four churches in the newly-merged parish was asked to have their Women’s Society become a circle in the new WSCS.

From the Grooms Church came The Grooms Circle; from the West Crescent Church, The Celia McIntyre Circle; from the Crescent Church, The Faith Circle and from the Newtown Church, The Edna Allen Circle and Newtown Circle. Ruth Cotton served as the first president.

Later, more circles were formed the Susanna Wesley Circle, Barbara Moss Circle, Dorcas Circle, Ruth Circle, Dorothy Brown Circle, Sarah Circle and the Mary Martha Circle. The group’s overall name was changed to United Methodist Women in 1972.

The Grooms Circle was obviously named for the old Grooms church; the Celia McIntyre Circle was named after the wife of Jasper McIntyre, the last minister at the West Crescent Methodist Episcopal Church. The Faith Circle’s name came from the faith this group shared in the Crescent Church.

The Newtown Circle was named after the old Newtown Church, and a second circle from the Newton church, The Edna Allen Circle, was named for a woman who was a teacher in Albany at the Edna Allen School. She had founded the United Workers, which was a group of women at the Newtown Methodist Episcopal Church.

The Susanna Wesley Circle first met on June 17, 1958, which happened to be the birthday of John Wesley, who founded the Methodist movement. The circle took its name in honor of John’s mother, Susanna. John was the 15th of 19 children born to Susanna and Samuel Wesley; 10 of her children died before the age of 2. Susanna was the youngest of 25 children, the daughter of a minister.

The Barbara Moss Circle, named for a missionary, was also formed in 1958 but existed for only a couple of years under that name. When our minister’s wife found out that Barbara Moss was no longer a Methodist, she informed the group that they should change their name!

So its name was changed to the Dorothy Brown Circle, to honor Dorothy Brown, a most remarkable woman. Dorothy Lavinia Brown was born in 1919 and died in 2004. She grew up in an orphanage in Troy, and with assistance from the Methodist Women of the Troy Conference attended Bennett College in North Carolina and Meharry Medical College in Nashville, Tenn. Through hard work and perseverance she became the first female African American surgeon in the Southeast and the first African American woman to serve in the Tennessee General Assembly. She was also a teacher and she became the first known single woman in Tennessee to adopt a child.

In 1963, Laura Hoch, the minister's wife, thought there should be one circle strictly devoted to Bible study, hence the formation of the Dorcas Circle, named in honor of Dorcas, a kind and loving woman of the Bible -a real "doer" of the Word of God. Among her good deeds was making clothes and coats to keep the widows and the needy of her church warm.

The Ruth Circle was formed in 1965, named for a woman of devoted love. She and her mother-in-law, Naomi, moved to Bethlehem after their husbands died and she vowed to be Naomi's daughter for life. They were poor, and Ruth picked up leftover grain in farmers' fields to survive. She gathered grain in Boaz's field and later married him and had a son named Obed. King David was her great-grandson. This circle later merged with The Dorcas Circle, becoming The Mary Martha Circle. (There had been a Mary Martha Circle formed in 1958 that had disbanded, and since the merging circles wanted a new name, they decided on reinstating the Mary Martha Circle.) Mary and Martha were two special sisters in the Bible who truly loved Jesus, and showed their love and gifts of hospitality in different ways. Martha was a hard worker, whose approach was to busily prepare her home for Jesus -cleaning and cooking; making sure he felt comfortable in her home. Mary's approach to hospitality was to listen attentively to Jesus' words, while washing his feet with expensive perfume, and drying them with her hair.

The Sarah Circle was formed in 1971. A group of women gathered for a picnic and chose this name, since they had all moved from place to place over the years and felt they had something in common with Sarah of the Bible. Sarah was the wife of Abraham whose tribe was known as nomads and wanderers. God had promised her that she would bear a son and she laughed at the idea, but at the age of 90 she gave birth to Isaac. She was an industrious and resourceful woman who worked faithfully by her husband's side. Sarah lived to be 127 years old.

Fifty years after our Church was founded, three circles remain: The Dorothy Brown Circle, Mary Martha Circle and the Susanna Wesley Circle. Look for an article on our current United Methodist Women's Circles in next month's Focus. *Joan Van Patten*
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