

Davida Foy Crabtree

Ministry of the Laity/Ministerio del Laicado

1. Getting to Know You/Aprendiendo a conocerte

Name/Nombre: Davida Marion Foy

Career/Carrera: Campus Minister,
Pastor, Conference
Minister/Pastora de
la Universidad,
Pastora de la Iglesia,
Pastora de la
Conferencia



A. B. Recipient/A. B. honor: 1977

Birthday/Cumpleaños: June/Junio 7, 1944

Place of birth/Lugar de nacimiento:
Waterbury, CT

Hair Color/Color de pelo: Blonde/Rubio

Eyes/Ojos: Blue/Azul

Siblings/Hermanos o Hermanas?: No

Favorite class/Clase favorite: Science/Ciencia

Hobbies/Cuando estoy sola me gusta:
Sewing, reading, exploring, tree
climbing, entomology, nature/
cocer, leer, explorar, subir en los
árboles, entomología, naturaleza

I enjoyed/Cuando estoy sola me gusta:
Reading, Writing, Collecting
critters/Leer, escribir, y coleccionar
animales

Friends?/Amigos/amigas? Lots of them! Especially those
who also liked the outdoors/
Muchos! Especialmente a los que
también les gusta caminar afuera

We liked to go to the movies, drive around when one of us had a car to use, Pilgrim Fellowship meetings at the church, Silver Lake Conference Center and PF rallies./A mis amigas y a mí nos gustaba ir al cine, andar en auto cuando alguien tenía uno, Juntas de Pilgrim Fellowship en la iglesia, Lake Silver, centro de conferencia, y PF rallies.

Heroes/Mis Héroes:

Susan B. Anthony, Belva Lockwood, Molly Pitcher – all women whose biographies my mother had given me when I was eight/-- y todas las biografías que mi mamá me dió cuando yo tenía como 8 años.¹

2. Beginnings²

In seventh grade, I invited the girls in my class to a no-gift birthday party. I did not like it when I was left out, so I wasn't going to leave out anyone. One girl was the daughter of farm hands. She owned two dresses for school. I insisted that she come. Half of the other girls would not come because she was coming. I just let them have it!



While Davida Foy Crabtree's sense of justice grew from early childhood, she was not always "the rebel."

Although I got my parents' message that I could be secure in who I am, I was a little odd in my town as an only child.³ There were ways in which I never quite fit. I had some leadership capability but not the social skills. Still today I am a truth teller as opposed to always being diplomatic.

¹ Go to <http://www.uh.edu/engines/epi968.htm>;
<http://www.usfaa.com/awards/mollypitcher/>; and
<http://www.history.rochester.edu/class/sba/first.htm>.

² Author phone interview with Davida Foy Crabtree, September 29, 2006

³ Davida Foy, a teacher, and Alfred Foy, a typewriter mechanic, raised Davida in a home where Christian ministry was "clearly everyone's work."

3. Seminary

In 1971, Davida graduated from Andover-Newton. While there, she had begun a field education internship with another seminarian. He was a year ahead of her and treated her with such condescension that she became physically ill.

Since seventh grade, I preached occasionally in Litchfield. I had preached through two years in college, but no churches were willing to receive a woman seminarian except as a Sunday school teacher. That contrasted with having been taught that I was okay and that I could be whatever and whoever God called me to be.

Dean George Peck mentored Davida through the difficult time. "In quiet ways," she said, "he helped me to move from the destructive anger that was eating me to the righteous anger of the prophet that would liberate me to take action."

By the time she was at the Prudence Crandall Center, her seminary rage had mutated somewhat into greater discipline.

Take action, not a flailing action of rage but an action that will overcome the sense of powerlessness. Sometimes white-hot rage gives us the steel to persist.

She began to ask questions in class about the way a biblical passage was being interpreted or the way history was being laid out. Her history professor, Earl Thompson, encouraged her. "I was really mad at him at first," she said. "He insisted that I do my senior semester's paper on Anne Hutchinson. I told him that he was putting me in a track. Women could not write only about other women."⁴

Davida wrote the paper that woke her to Women's History and changed how this part of history was viewed. In "Controversy in Context: Anne Marbury Hutchinson Against the Massachusetts Bay Colony," she presented a woman who believed in a loving, good and saving God and who had "a great capacity for reaching and understanding her fellow women."⁵

"Anne Hutchinson spoke a theology of hope in a time of hopelessness."

⁴ [Http://www.annahutchinson.com/anne_hutchinson_biography_001.htm](http://www.annahutchinson.com/anne_hutchinson_biography_001.htm)

⁵ *The Andover Newton Quarterly*, Old Series, V. LXIII, No. 1, September, 1970, 27-34

Davida concluded that her legacy is "one of the beginnings of liberation from authoritarian and dogmatic control of a few over the lives of many . . . the beginning of a long line of women's-and people's-liberationists."

Although money was spare in seminary, Davida had stickers printed. When she spotted a poster that was men-only, bad theology or all from a male point of view, she added her sticker:

THIS IS AN INSULT TO WOMEN!

Eventually, people began crossing this out and writing, "Dee Crabtree" is an insult to women. Davida and two other women negotiated to bring to campus a powerful Cambridge play, "How to Make a Woman." It played for three nights to record turnouts. From that moment, everything shifted.

4. Prudence Crandall Center

Davida took a one-year position as campus minister at Central Connecticut State University. She received calls from women in the city who were experiencing discrimination or whose clergy told them to stay in abusive marriages.

I caught the vision for starting a women's center with both service and advocacy that would meet the needs of all women.

She gathered a board that included women from the Junior League, churches, women from poverty housing projects and from the women's professionals. They started the Prudence Crandall Center for Women.⁶

Private photos of spousal beatings rushed her into the realm of domestic violence. She began to speak out. She quietly raised money to rent and furnish the first "safe house" apartment in New England. This apartment shared her back porch, so women could use it as an escape route.

I had made a commitment to myself that I was not about creating an empire. I wanted the center to thrive and flourish but not be dependent on me. I thought it would take about five or six years to become organizationally ready with \$10,000 in the bank. Then I would resign. At the end of three years I resigned. I had no job.

⁶ [Http://www.prudencecrandall.org/pages/aboutprog.cfm](http://www.prudencecrandall.org/pages/aboutprog.cfm). The Domestic Violence 24-Hour Hotline, 860-225-6357. View also <http://amistad.mysticseaport.org/forum/links/others/prudence.crandall.html>.

5. Executive Council

Between December seminary graduation and ordination the following year, Davida continued to serve on the Executive Council of the United Church of Christ.

When I first spoke out in the U.C.C. on women's issues, my authority was challenged every single time I opened my mouth. I questioned my intellectual ability . . . 'Oh, maybe I really am stupid' . . . or I just dispensed with my authority and said, 'Oh, well of course he knows what he is talking about.'⁷

She had to maintain strong discipline to speak up in those situations where her view differed. Her identity and security were at stake.

After the Synod 1971 pronouncement on Women and Church in Society, then UCC President Robert Moss asked Barbara Warren McCall and Davida to recommend persons for service on the first Task Force for Women in Church and Society. They did so. Few on the Executive Council then were supportive of women's issues. "I was a brand new member, at age 27, and while brash and an upstart," she wrote, "that would not have been enough. Barbara was the shaping force."⁸

Davida applauded the faithful nurture by this woman, who taught the younger women how to make church structures work for rather than against them.

Barbara urged us to grow in other capacities than our strengths. She looked for opportunities that would stretch us. I am sure she had a hard time with some of our shenanigans.

Among their mischievous deeds was to make a "dramatic, if humorous, impact on the national staff men who "so often stood in our way (or at least we thought they did)."

Somehow we persuaded Barbara to let us have her keys to the office building. We let ourselves in then invaded the men's rooms. We left signs over the urinals:

⁷As quoted by Celia Allison Hahn in *Growing in Authority, Relinquishing Control: A New Approach to Faithful Leadership*. Research from The Alban Institute, 1994, 55

⁸ Davida Foy Crabtree. From Friday April 28, 2006, 8:41 p.m. email. See also Barbara Warren McCall's chapter, April, 2007 entry in this series.

THE KEY TO YOUR POWER IS IN YOUR HAND.

I was not known for my people skills in those days. I had been so hurt by the response of the church initially to my going to seminary, seeking scholarships, candidacy for ordination and advocacy for women that I could not back down. I barged ahead and said what I really thought, whether that would be fruitful and productive or not.

6. In Between

Elected to serve the Executive Council in 1971, Davida at age 27 was the youngest member ever.

It became an issue when I was a nominee during my "fierce era." I was an advocate for women but also a justice advocate. This was the Viet Nam era. I was also Vice President of the National Council of Churches.⁹ Meals at these meetings sustained me. I had no money.

At a cost of \$3000, President Moss invited executives of the national agencies plus a few board members and a couple others to go with him on a five-week trip to Asia to see the missions at work.

Unemployed and without job prospects, I did the exact opposite of what anybody would have advised. I took the \$2500 I had in the bank and asked him if it was enough. So I went to that global awareness experience.

When Davida returned, she was still unemployed for some time before being called in 1976 to Greater Hartford Campus Ministry. An anonymous friend in a high-ranked profession sent her \$500 in cash every month to help her through.

As personnel committee chair when Bob Moss died, she was the Executive Council person responsible for finding his successor. She stood up to the politics, telling them this was not a political moment.

7. Campus Ministry

Greater Hartford Campus Ministry: 1976-1980. Davida bought a house and rejoiced at the grounding of ownership.



⁹ Visit <http://www.nccusa.org/>.

I enjoyed campus ministry, but it sapped my energy. I was part time with 16,000 people on four campuses. I wanted to empower the faculty so that our ministry would support their ministries. I returned to my original reason for going to seminary, love of the local church.

8. Colchester, Connecticut

The first church Davida interviewed called her. She stayed nine years at Colchester Federated Church. The first five taught her that the church is good at gathering in but not at scattering people for ministry in daily life. She hoped to minimize the faith - work gap "because the church, the Body of Christ, is at work wherever its members are at work."¹⁰

We fell in love with each other. I had to invent -- another thread throughout my life, if it does not exist, invent. First, we listened.

Could the congregation gain a sense of their ministry? Davida appreciated "every member [as] equally valued, equally needed and equally in ministry."¹¹ When she asked about empowering the church, two responses in particular launched the congregation's journey:

It's what you're supposed to practice in your daily life that you've learned on Sunday

and

How do we connect the ministry of the laity with our structure and with everything we do in the church and outside of the church?

They formed listening teams comprised of three lay people. They invited occupational groups to talk about their work and their faith.¹² These teams evolved into covenant groups. They asked other important questions. Davida coached them and made their concerns the church's agenda.

Our [National Council of Churches] justice and liberation commission made linkages between communities of color in the denominations and the liberation movements all over the world for the self-development of peoples. Unconsciously drawing from this

¹⁰ *The Empowering Church*, 30 ff

¹¹ *The Empowering Church*, 32

¹² Jackson Carroll uses "reflective leadership" to describe the practice of treating others "not as dependent clients but as people who bring their own insights, gifts, and reflective capacities to the setting." See his *As One With Authority: Reflective Leadership in Ministry*. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991.

global experience, I wove those basic principles into parish ministry.¹³

All the skills and perspectives Davida had within her came together. Another integration happened between her and parishioners:

I use my authority as little as possible. I believe the Holy Spirit is calling every ordained minister beyond timidity and beyond control into a new life lived in rich relationship with those who are called the laity.

I try to enable the group to claim *its* authority. It is a deeply spiritual process. I don't think of God as an external source of authority at all. God is within the community and within my own process.

9. God-Talk¹⁴

This inviting attitude embodies Davida's concept of God. She is orientated toward God's goodness.

I gain my energy from, and give my energy to the wonders of life rather than our failings as human beings.... When a word needs to be spoken over against some forms of sin or injustice, I do speak it.... Still, I believe that the primary word from God is a word of blessing, not a word of curse.

Because I am so intuitive about God, everything seems transparently obvious to me. I do not see how anybody could miss God in it all, so I sometimes fail to explain to others. Theology is far from just thought.¹⁵

10. Southern California Conference

Davida knew as intuitively as at the Prudence Crandall Center when it was time to leave Colchester. So perhaps did God. Unsolicited, a letter arrived. She was asked to consider serving as a conference minister.

We had been doing good work together at Colchester, but the church needed the opportunity to grow the vision themselves. Everything the Southern California profile described pulled

¹³ As quoted by Celia Allison Hahn in *Growing in Authority, Relinquishing Control*, 31-32

¹⁴ See Chapter 3 in *The Empowering Church*.

¹⁵ Hahn, 28

together my experience. I again felt a strong sense of call. It was time.

Davida succeeded her Executive Council hero, Fred Register. When she arrived, the conference still was attached to him. The conference was culturally similar to Connecticut with strong Congregational tradition and New England retirees.

In 1991, however, women were less accepted there. Davida's empowerment way of teamwork did not work. Some churches refused a visit because she was an ordained woman. She had to assert authority.

I led in strategic planning – who are we, how do we reposition this conference for a new era, how do we nurture more new church starts, how do we build relationships globally that will help us welcome? (The Los Angeles school district at that point housed 48 languages.)

They dealt with the LAPD, uprisings, mudslides, wildfires, and the Northridge earthquake.

I had to learn how one works under these circumstances. An earthquake of massive proportion changes power dynamics in a community. It opens huge vacuums into which varieties of people and forces move. The Northridge earthquake opened the doors to gangs.

In addition to paying for bricks and mortar and food, I moved immediately to using earthquake response dollars to work with churches and communities to reweave the fabric of community so the gangs could not be ascendant.

11. Home

Since 1996, Davida has served as Connecticut Conference Minister. Elected with only seven negative votes out of 700 delegates, she said, "Where else but in the United Church of Christ could someone who had grown up in the life of the conference and been in a sense a troublemaker for justice in the midst of it return to become its minister?"

Later those dissenters appreciated her strength for needed leadership. It was an affirmation from the people of the church.

To have recognized when a person has grown was a sign of their maturity. I came to a conference wracked by conflict and

dissension. My job was to work at the healing and restoring of relationships. That is what I have been doing.

An internet search of General Synod resolutions from Connecticut attests to numerous activities of justice, advocacy and empowerment.¹⁶ The straight-forward honesty and action of this truth-teller for justice, healthy earth stewardship and empowerment of a ministry of the laity still holds. For Davida Foy Crabtree, theology is still "lived, not just thought."

12. So What About You?

- God told Moses, "My presence will go with you" (Exodus 33:14). Since early childhood, Davida been aware of God's presence everywhere. As she matured, she saw this truth hold. God will not abandon us, so we must not leave alone those who need us.

What signs of God's presence do you know deep within your soul?

What evidence have you that you carry God's presence as near as a hug wherever you are and in whatever you do?

- Davida gave her granddaughter the biography her mother had given her.

What biographies of courageous women might you share with your family?

What have you learned about these women that echoes in your heart when you need to do right but difficult things?

In what ways has your parent or caregiver prepared you for taking responsible and pioneering initiative?

- Since childhood, Davida has spoken up for justice (even knowing that others would try to shout down her effort).

Have you ever been a "troublemaker for justice?" Tell about standing up for yourself or for someone else being treated unfairly.

¹⁶ See www.ctucc.org.

How did it feel to be an advocate?

What was hardest about it?

How did your action change you?

- Paul wrote about "the authority that [God] has given [him] for building up and not for tearing down" (2 Corinthians 13:10). Wherever she serves, Davida empowers people so they might discover their own authority.

How would you define authority? Empowerment? Responsibility?

What is the difference between sharing your authority and giving it away?

Think about the relationship between authority given someone and authority misused.

Tell about a time that you felt disempowered. Empowered.

13. Church Family Project

Compile a worker list (parents, office workers, construction workers, teachers, doctors, shopkeepers, students). Invite several workers to visit your young adult group or another church group.

- Give each worker the following list of questions that Davida's listening group asked:

Describe how you spend your day.

What is the impact of your work on your health, on your family?

What is satisfying for you in your work? What is stressful?

Does it make any difference that you are a Christian in your workplace?

How does your faith connect with your work?

What are your gifts as an individual person?

- Invite the listening group to withhold comment until all workers have responded to as many queries as they choose.
- Then invite your group to offer a prayer for each specific type of worker, or do so yourself.

14. Still Curious?

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Bertanzetti, Eileen Dunn. *Molly Pticher: Heroine (Revolutionary War Leaders)*. Chelsea House Publications, 2001.

Jurmaine, Suzanne. *The Forbidden Schoolhouse: The True and Dramatic Story of Prudence Crandall and Her Students*. Houghton Mifflin, 2005.

LaPlante, Eve. *American Jezebel: The Uncommon Life of the Woman Who Defied the Puritans*. HarperCollins Publishers, 2005.

Sherr, Lynn. *Failure Is Impossible: Susan B. Anthony in Her Own Words*. Three Rivers Press, 1996.

Dallas (Dee) A. Brauning. *Antoinette Brown Women: Finding Voice*, <http://ucc.org/women/finding.htm>.

February 2007