

Anne Pearse Smith,  
Ministry of Christian Education/  
Ministerio de Educación Cristiana

*We make our world just what we want it to be. We can have a world where people are first, or we can have a world where we put people at the tail end. It's up to us, and it's in our power.* – Anne Pearse Smith at age 88



1. Getting to Know Anne/Aprendiendo a conocer a Anne

Name/Nombre: Anne Louise Pearse Smith

A. Brown Recipient/A. B. honor: 1989

Color of my hair/Color de pelo: Auburn/Rojo oscuro

Brothers and sisters/Hermanos o hermanas:  
Brother, Graham; sister,  
Isabel/Un hermano,  
Graham; una hermana,  
Isabel

Birth Order/Orden de nacimiento:  
Middle Child/Segunda

Hobbies/Pasa tiempo: Athletics/Deportes

2. *If work is this much fun, then this is what I want to do!*

Anne Pearse's ministry began in Michigan. As she began her first sermon at a country church in Cheboygan, a man burst into the church and walked straight toward the pulpit. He said, "Mr. Flowers' cows are out." The farm girl responded quickly, "Well, then, we'd better terminate this service. Will all the men please step outside to

help Mr. Flowers? Thank you." Later Anne said, "They accepted me right then. I guess they figured if I was that flexible, I'd be OK."<sup>1</sup>

Anne was born on her great-grandfather's farm to Ed and Bessie (Graham) Pearse. Her uncles who lived on the historic Graham farm owned huge fruit orchards. Although the Pearse family had lived for a time north of Kent County, she graduated from Central High School in Grand Rapids.

In 1930, Anne decided to prepare for the ministry. She liked rural life and loved God, so, she said, "I just always figured I was supposed to be a country preacher."

She studied at Michigan State University and Olivet College. While pausing from study to generate enough income to finish college, she served as Director of Christian Education and Assistant under the Rev. Samuel Oliver at First Congregational Church of Muskegon, Michigan.

The two-year position from September, 1930 through July, 1932, was her first, full time church job. She established a summer-long weekday vacation church school for 200 children. She wrote the curriculum and trained a staff of twelve high school seniors. This was before any curriculum was prepared at the national level. Then she wrote a closely graded, correlated course for the entire church school. She said, "I thought, if work is this much fun, then this is what I want to do!"

### *3. If the church is a community, the children will always want to be a part of it.*

From these beginnings when she served on a conference youth committee in Muskegon and shared in the development of the statewide Pilgrim Fellowship, Anne remained in the ministry of Christian Education.

Wherever she went, she brought focus and vitality both to local, conference and national level Christian Education committees and to the camps she designed and directed. Reflecting later on her lifework, she said, "If I could do it all over again, I wouldn't change a thing."

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<sup>1</sup> From Brian Willoughby, "'A Special Lady' – Rev. Anne Pearse Smith, 88, celebrates a lifetime of service" in The Columbian (Oregon), 1996

She had introduced the concepts of team teaching and the "learning community"<sup>2</sup> as an alternative to the traditional Sunday school system. "If the church is a community," she said, "the children will always want to be a part of it."<sup>3</sup>

She believed that the environment around education is as important as the content:

I felt that before the children could come to any kind of appreciation of the basic facts in the Christian faith, they had to experience it. They had to experience the love and the caring and the concern and the joy and the excitement of being a part of the church. Then when they were old enough to reason, they'd say, 'Why?' And when you would begin working with them, they'd say, "That's right. That's what I've known in my church."<sup>4</sup>

#### *4. Oh, we had a ball, the young people and me.*

During her study at the Hartford Theological Seminary, the Michigan Conference assigned her a student pastorate in a rural church in Central Michigan. West Carmel Congregational Church had been closed for twelve years. On Sundays, she opened the church, cleaned, led morning worship. Then she led a high school group of 60 young people. When she returned to seminary, the church was strong enough to call a full time minister.

In June, 1936, she graduated from seminary. She was one of three women in a class of 100 students. The Michigan Congregational Conference asked her to go to Cheboygan to serve a church that had been closed for two years. On April 20, 1937, she was ordained in the Congregational Christian Church, a forerunner of the United Church of Christ.<sup>5</sup>

Anne was awakened in the middle of the night to see the birth of twin heifers: "They both made it," she said. "They grew up to be real nice cows."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The learning community put children, teenagers and adults together for open exchanges. Adults of all ages shared talents including carpentry, photography, puppetry, and pantomime.

<sup>3</sup> From unidentified interview at retirement

<sup>4</sup> Retirement Interview

<sup>5</sup> The Congregational and Christian Church merger came about in 1931.

<sup>6</sup> From a 1986 article, "Portland woman puts warmth into work as church minister" by Terry Moss in The Oregonian

After a hard winter, she had rescheduled church services to Sunday evenings so farmers could get in another full day's plowing and planting. "I said that was fine. I didn't care when we had church, as long as we had it."



She organized a county fair with the church children. "They wanted a fair because they'd never had one. So they rounded up their horses, cows, pigs and sheep, and we had a fair. Oh, we had a ball, the young people and me."

The challenges the West Carmel and Cheboygan churches presented were similar to those of today's new church starts. She guided the churches to discover their identity, explore their mission and to decide and implement what they needed to do to accomplish their goals.

## 5. Corn Shucking Talk

"I'd go into these country homes, sit on a stool in the kitchen and talk to the women, and then go out into the barn, shuck corn and talk to the men," she said.

During the years of the Great Depression (1929-1940s), ministers were not moving so Anne worked as a social worker in rural Michigan. She also found work in the YWCA and from 1938-1942 with the federal government in recreation leadership training.

She lived on Paris Avenue in Grand Rapids for a time with her sister Isabel and her husband, said her niece and namesake. Ann Louise DeVries, whom Anne called "WeeAnn," said her aunt is the reason she is an avid reader. "She taught me to read simple words as a three-year-old and how to sing with her. She took me to Sunday School. She gave me my first dog, a cocker spaniel. I have loved her all of my life."

Ann characterized her aunt as a strong woman. "If she had an opinion, she shared it. If she did not talk about something, you did not ask."

Then came World War II.

*6. If I didn't so thoroughly enjoy my civilian occupation, I would have stayed.*

"I loved the Navy," Anne said. After a brief ministry in Toledo, Ohio, and a short period of living in Jackson, Michigan, she

enlisted in the U.S. Navy in 1942. She served as an officer until her honorary discharge in 1946.

She rose to the rank of lieutenant in the women's reserve of the U.S. Navy and was officer in charge of the barracks both in Washington, D.C., and at Pearl Harbor. Although the Navy did not hire its first woman chaplain until thirty-five years later, Anne acted as unofficial chaplain to the WAVES. No male chaplain was assigned to her station after she came on board.

"Of course, the Navy didn't take women chaplains until 1977, but that's what I did," Anne said. "I was their counselor, confidant and friend. I baptized some of them and helped some plan their weddings."<sup>7</sup>

Her niece, Patty Baker, said her aunt spoke to her about her Navy years. "It was a time that was dear to Aunt Anne. She felt that serving as a chaplain was her main duty while serving."<sup>8</sup>

Anne married Alvin Smith, to whom she always referred as "Mr. Smith." They had been married for not quite a year when he died while serving in Europe after contracting the flu. Anne said she never looked at anybody else or ever wanted to. "He was the love of my life."<sup>9</sup>

### *7. I never forgot that I was a minister.*

After the war, Anne moved to the Pacific Northwest. From 1946-1949, she was a counselor and administrator for women's programs at the University of Washington. She said, "I never forgot that I was a minister. I tried to work with all people from that point of view."

In this interlude before continuing formal ministry, she used her GI loan to start a small business. All of a sudden, news articles about Anne P. Smith turned to farm talk. In addition to caring for 90 sour cherry trees, she raised chickens in Washington. She became known as "one of the Kent area's most progressive veteran-farmers:

Symbolic of spring and Easter, these week-old Parmenters are part of 500 at the poultry breeding farm operated by Mrs. Anna Smith, Miss Barbara Hallock, and Miss Regina Adams. The women will take deliver on another 600 Parmenters soon.

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<sup>7</sup> UCC Press, March, 1989

<sup>8</sup> From letter to author, June 25, 2007

<sup>9</sup> From "A Special Lady"

These chicks will be switched to an all-oat diet by the time they are six weeks of age. Mrs. Anne Smith says the oat program is cheaper than that with conventional scratch. She also says birds raised under the oat program are sturdier.<sup>10</sup>

Her hens were capable of laying for a longer period of time. They



Anne at far right with farming partners

also produced uniformly large eggs. In her first year of chicken farming, she lost only one chick of 150. Anne also was known in the area as an accomplished square dance "caller."

Her niece spent many weekends at the Benson Highway Breeding Farm with Anne and her two work

partners. "I bonded with Aunt Anne while making the daily tour of chicken houses collecting eggs, counting baby chicks, candling eggs and painting outdoor houses for the chickens," Patti said. "She was a person I could talk to about many things. She helped me walk through difficult decisions in my teen years."

## 8. "Her early zest carried her through a career that included ten positions."

When Anne Pearse Smith resumed ministry in 1949, she served as interim minister at several Washington churches. Among them was the Lakewood church (1955-1956). From 1955-1962, she was associate minister at Magnolia Congregational Church in Seattle. Then she served as an associate in churches in Milwaukee, WI (1962-1965), Beaverton, OR (1965-1968) and Portland, OR (1968-1974). From 1973-1978, she was associate pastor in Vancouver, Washington.



Colleagues and church members spoke about Anne Pearse Smith, the minister:

Richard Arnold:

*In the pulpit, Anne wove a carefully crafted fabric of personal faith, genuine caring, Biblical solidness,*

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<sup>10</sup> "A Lawyer, a Nurse, and Minister – All Women, Team Up to Make Successful Poultry Combine." Kent News-Journal, March 22, 1951

*humorous and joyous inspiration, and educative nourishment.*

*I have known "Rev. Anne" as a caring friend and then as a colleague from my post high school youth through these twenty-four years. Over long conversations and many cups of coffee she nurtured with wisdom and care my embryonic faith.*

*From a youth, reared largely outside the church, she guided me from simpler to larger questions, without a need for final answers but a hunger for deeper meanings. She led me to baptism and church membership and seminary.*

*It was at Magnolia Community Congregational Church that I first knew and worked with Anne Smith. She is committed to preaching that both inspires and educates. Working with great respect and sensitivity for individuals in their diverse backgrounds and needs, she would lead committees not only to the "what" of creative and meaningful programs and events but to understand and appreciate the "why" of what they were about.*

*She was and is a "potent" person. The only limiting aspects to her ministry unfortunately have been sexist in that the prevalent cultural attitudes and prejudices kept a full open pastoral ministry too distant and a few insecure men may have felt threatened by such competence in a woman. . . . Because of Anne many people and the United Church of Christ itself stand taller.<sup>11</sup>*

Ruth Bailey Hayward:

*Anne had a sense of the whole parish. She would become a rallying point, a source of encouragement, a planning resource, for all areas of church life. People from her churches became curious about, interested to participate in activities of the wider church.<sup>12</sup>*

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<sup>11</sup> From letter, on January 21, 1981

<sup>12</sup> Former staff member of the Oregon Conference, January 13, 1980 letter

Lois Ralston Conkle:

*For me the Reverend Anne Pearse Smith was the special person who sometimes comes along to exert a profound influence on one's life. Her capacity for care and attention to individuals brought me a new and fuller understanding of what it means to be someone's friend.<sup>13</sup>*

Board Chair at Bethel Church:

*She was called as the Minister of Christian Education, however, her special combination of radiant Christian joy, infectious enthusiasm, and leadership skills were soon felt throughout every facet of our church life. She exhibited the rare gift of awakening a new life into people, organizations, and "everyday" activities.<sup>14</sup>*

Don Sevetson:

*Nothing scares Anne. She completes whatever she sets out to do, and she does it with such joy, such faith, such confidence. <sup>15</sup>*

## 9. Even a Motor Scooter!



On her 79th birthday, Anne Pearse Smith's legendary and indomitable spirit, her athletic prowess and her ability to inspire deep affection were recognized by her church family. To her delight, First Congregational Church in Vancouver presented her with a motor scooter.

Church member, Connie Oppel, was active a decade earlier in the call of Anne as associate pastor. Now she was a secret party to another plan.

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<sup>13</sup> From letter, December 29, 1980

<sup>14</sup> From 1965 report at Bethel Congregational Church of the United Church of Christ, Beaverton, OR, January 23, 1981

<sup>15</sup> Central Pacific Conference Minister

"Rev. Anne was still a free spirit," Connie said. "Her dream was to have a motorcycle. Farley Maxwell, our senior pastor, hid behind the petition in the fellowship hall. He came roaring out with that Honda."<sup>16</sup>

While serving the Vancouver church, Anne raised Christian Education to a higher priority. She involved more adults, provided for better leadership training and left the church with a smooth running program.

"She did everything," Connie said. "She was a great team with Harv Kramme. "Although he was a younger senior minister, he was not threatened by the expertise of a 65-year-old woman."

While she was held back by local church attitudes, Anne never let this deter her from putting the good of a church first. "I was too busy enjoying what I was doing to have the time to worry about discrimination," she said.

"As a woman stepping into a man's pulpit," she said, "you had to sort of accept that attitude back then. You just had to understand that no matter what you said, what you wore or what you did, some people would find fault with it. That's just part of life. You can't let it keep you from what you want to do."<sup>17</sup>

Even in the late 1980s, she heard it asked before a wedding if the marriage would be legal if a woman performed the ceremony. "That kind of thinking still lingers in some people's minds. I feel that people must come to an acceptance of women as clergy on their own. You can scold people for closed-mindedness, or you can help them to open up."<sup>18</sup>

Wherever she went, Anne gained the confidence of people. Weeks before her death in her 60th year of ordination and her 88th year of life, she commented, "If everybody was as happy as I've been with my life and my work, the world would be a happier place."

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<sup>16</sup> From January 14, 1981, Award nomination letter to Harve Kramme and February 14, 2007, phone conversation with author.

<sup>17</sup> From "A Special Lady"

<sup>18</sup> From "Portland woman"



10. *If I could do it all over again, I wouldn't change a thing.*

"Over the years," Anne said, "I have worked so that young clergywomen coming after me will find churches open to them. Now some church members tell me that their churches have hired a woman minister because they knew me. I've worked to help make churches open to hiring women ministers. "

From the beginning of her active, purposeful retirement in 1955, Anne Pearse Smith held the distinction of having preached in all fifty-one churches (UCC) in the Central Pacific Conference. She preached her last sermon at about 88. Afterward, her goal was to preach at age 90. However, she died at 89.

"Rev. Anne was an excellent preacher," said her friend Connie Oppel. "I was her chauffeur those last years. She was ahead of her time. She could have had a church of her own and handled it."

She felt women make excellent ministers because women express both traditional male and female emotions. She said, "I think women come in to serve a congregation in the way in which that congregation needs to be served. They talk with people, find out who they are and where they are and then say, 'How can we build the program to fit these needs?'"<sup>19</sup>

"Women enjoy a special success," she said, "because they are more willing to embrace new ideas and reach out with extra warmth and emotion."<sup>20</sup>

In 1983, Anne helped organize the first North West regional conference of nearly 250 United Church of Christ clergywomen, held in Oregon. She was a national leader in the women's

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<sup>19</sup> From unidentified interview after retirement

<sup>20</sup> In undated article, "Portland woman puts warmth into work as church minister" written by Terry Moss, correspondent for [The Oregonian](#)

movement in the United Church of Christ. She opened church camps for women. In the local church as well, she was an advocate for laywomen and clergywomen.

"A highlight of my ministry," she said, "has been working to help women see that they are a vital part - not just an appendage - of the church."

## 11. Church Family Project

Most women in the 1930s and 1940s did not have opportunity for further education and careers. However, they were skilled in managing. During the Great Depression and World War II, they contributed to the economic and emotional survival of their families, churches and communities.

Work with your pastor or youth leader to invite women of these decades to visit with your youth group or another gathering in the church. Ask them to share how they did it. Ask about the role of the church in their lives. Celebrate their joys, their victories and their lives.

## 12. So What About You?

- Anne Smith said, "If this work is this much fun, this is what I want to do."

***What makes work fun in the highest sense?***

***Tell about a time you felt that way about something you were doing.***

- No matter what work she was doing at the time, Anne said she always remembered that she was a minister.

***What do you think she meant?***

***What do you understand to be her calling?***

***What are some differences between living as a Christian and serving a minister? Similarities?***

- Anne gave several reasons why she felt that women make excellent ministers.

***Do you think her opinion is true today?***

***Why would you agree or disagree with her?***

- Anne chose a ministry of presence to help bring about change. She spoke of two different approaches: "You can scold people for closed-mindedness, or you can help them to open up" [to new attitudes].

***How do you think Anne might have helped to bring women into the senior pulpit?***

***Are you by nature a noisy or a quiet activist when bringing about change?***

- A colleague said that Anne had a "sense of the whole parish." She saw Christian Education as a "learning community" that includes all people with all ages teaching each other intergenerationally.

***What clues tell you that Anne was committed to this larger definition of Christian Education?***

***What role do you see Christian Education playing within the whole church?***

- Some women who have fought for and won full pastorates might look at Anne's life and think she "wasted" herself on Christian Education. Others understand that she blurred the line between Christian Education and the rest of the church.

***Do you agree or disagree that a Minister of Christian Education is a lesser position? Why or why not?***

***Where do you see Anne's focus to promote women in full ministerial leadership?***

### 13. Still Curious?

To learn more about the Congregational and the Christian predecessors to the United Church of Christ, visit "Short Course in the History of the United Church of Christ." Go to [www.ucc.org](http://www.ucc.org):

For the Christian Church, go to :  
<http://www.ucc.org/about-us/short-course/the-christian-churches.html>

For the Congregational Church, go to:  
<http://www.ucc.org/about-us/short-course/congregationalism.html>

To learn more about women in our early church years, visit Barbara Brown Zikmund, Hidden Histories in the Church of Christ, Vol. 1. Print edition is also available. Go to [www.ucc.org](http://www.ucc.org):

For "Women and Their Work," go to  
<http://www.ucc.org/about-us/hidden-histories/womens-work-and-womens.html>.

McKenzie, Vashti Murphy. Strength in the Struggle: Leadership Development for Women. Insight and encouragement for women to develop and grow as effective leaders. To order, phone 800-537-3394.

To read about another early Christian Educator, watch for the Finding Voice story about Leila Waite Anderson on this web page.

To learn more about Christian Education, visit these resources:

Felts, Elizabeth Chandler. New Occasions Teach New Duties: Renewed Vision of the Teaching Church. A foundation paper on education in the local church. To order, phone 800-537-3394.

Professional Educator's Guide. To order, phone 800-537-3394.

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Dallas (Dee) A. Brauninger. *Antoinette Brown Women: Finding Voice*, November 2007