

Mary Ann Wilner Neevel, Ptaya Owo Owo Klake (Talking Together)/ Conversando juntos

*If an adventure opens up for you that leads you
into a larger understanding of the church, Go.*

1. Getting to Know You/Aprendiendo a conocerte

Name/Nombre: Mary Ann (Wilner) Neevel

A. B. Award/A.B. honor: 1995

Career/Carrera: Senior Pastor

Hair Color/Color de pelo: Dark brown/Marrón oscuro

Color of eyes/Color de los ojos: Hazel/Avellano

Brothers and Sisters/Hermanos y hermanas:

Two older brothers, one younger
sister/Dos hermanos mayores, una
hermana menor

Birth Order/Order de nacimiento en la familia:

Third (With a gap of eight years I felt
like a first child)/Tercera (Con ocho
años de diferencia, me sentí como la
primera)

Favorite School Subject/Clase favorita:

Liked them all/Me gustaban todas

Hobbies/Pasa tiempos:

Sewed my clothes, read a lot; learned
to knit; rode my bike/Coser mi ropa,
leer mucho, aprendí a tejer, montar mi
bicicleta

When by myself/Cuando estoy sola:

I enjoyed reading and taking
solitary bike rides./Me gusta
leer y montar bicicleta a solas.



What kind of friends did you have?/¿Qué clase de amistades tenías?
Two groups: a neighborhood group
and the Potluck Group at school/Dos
grupos: un grupo del vecindario y el
grupo que se reunía para compartir
cenas.

I looked up to/Yo admiro a: Certain teachers, ministers, special
adult friends at church./Algunos
maestros y maestras, pastores, y
algunos amigos y amigas especiales de
la iglesia.

My hero/Mi hereo: Margaret Mead, the anthropologist¹/
La antropóloga

2. "Ptaya Owo Hadaka"

Step after step,

From first venturing out to church camp,
To pilgrim fellowship, caravanning and
A Joe Howell work camp,

From her ordination process with theologians and
A March on Washington
With William Sloane Coffin,
To a time in India with her life mate,
A World Council of Churches sabbatical in
Australia, Executive Council and multiple
General Synod committee sessions,

From pastoring Plymouth Church and
A huge interruption of cancer,
To the step of that other sabbatical - learning the
Meaning of grace bestowed upon her,
From being care giver to care receiver,
Mary Ann Neevel has stepped forward
In the art of *ptaya owo owo klake*.

From spending the summer at Ponca Creek, I still remember the
young Lakota-American women about my age. When they called a

¹ With gratitude to Hampton R. Andrews, pastor, Bonesteel Ponca Creek UCC,
who offered the Lakota translation.

mission meeting, they called us *ptaya owo owo klake*. It means "talking together." This mission meeting is still held among the Dakota Association.

3. Ponca Creek Work Camp²

Work camp at Ponca Creek was one of those multi-, cross-cultural experiences that left me open to diversity.

One day a Lakota girl said, "Are you sure you are not part Indian?" I realized that I had begun to understand and know something about the Lakota people.

With encouragement from people at church camp, Mary Ann decided to participate in the work camp. That summer, Joe Howell directed the Volunteer Service Project.

I signed up for the first half of the two-month work camp at the Ponca Creek Church near the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota. We reroofed the church. At that time, there was no electricity in the church or the parsonage. We also dug a water line to the parsonage that would not freeze up in winter.

Sixty years later, she still remembers the young people from all over the country who worked together with the whole community of the Ponca Creek Church. Jim Selmsler, a pastor in the area who was working with the Native American churches, directed the work camp. Among other leaders was Howard Sprague. Leila Anderson³ drove her van around and did Christian education.

A French woman who taught at Bennington College signed on as cook. Her kitchen was the old chicken coup. When we borrowed pots to mix paint, she would yell at us, "Krushan" (pigs.) Just knowing her was something.

A work camp counselor, a graduate of Oberlin College with a master's degree in social work, worked at the Henry Street Settlement House in New York City. Another taught high school in Bennington, Vermont.

Although I had grown up in North Dakota, which has plenty of Indian Reservations, I had been confined to knowing the Indians

² Phone interview with author on Wednesday, January 24, 2007.

³ Find the chapter about Leila Anderson at Finding Voice on the Women's Page of www.ucc.org.

who had tried to get a degree in auto mechanics or something else in Fargo. The level of prejudice was high.

Her fifth grade teacher had come to class angry one morning. Marian Anderson, the African-American opera singer, had been denied hotel room in Fargo.

Our teacher was so upset that she had to talk to us about it. So early on I learned about racism. I realized we had our own racism issues with Native Americans.

Going to this work camp on an Indian reservation was her way of saying, "We need to think about this issue." She has found through her ministry that the voluntary ministries, the work trips, have shown to be "the best things the church has done with youths" and offers these words for young women:

Learn to know the wider church;
Learn to know what faithful people are doing in this world; Look
at the justice issues the church is addressing;
See how that matters to you; and
If an adventure opens up for you that leads you into a larger
understanding of the church,
Go.

4. In the Chat Room

Dee: In early youth, what did you and your friends enjoy?

Mary Ann: We always played outdoors except on rainy days. There was kick ball on the empty lots. We enjoyed the imaginative fun of pre-electronics play. An active neighborhood group grew up together. We were all about the same age. My best friends at school derived from that neighborhood collection.

Dee: How about in later youth?

Mary Ann: Slumber parties. Our mothers let us cook together. A group of my friends and I were probably the oldest Campfire Girls in the city because Mrs. Shickele took us on. She was Peter Shickele's (of P.D.Q. Bach) mother. She had two boys but always wanted to have girls. She was very resourceful. We did all sorts of wild things with her.

Another special group of friends at school called The Potluck got together every Friday for supper and, according to a school newsletter, still do.

Dee: How did your church connection emerge?

Mary Ann: The church was my second home. My parents were active members of the Congregational Church. As a deacon, my mother changed the altar cloths. Mother would take me along and I would do it with her. There was no question about going with her then in the 1950s. We were pretty obedient kids.

We had church school and a youth group. We were included with the adults in a lot of activities in the church. We were well tied in with the United Church of Christ from its beginning.

Dee: Church camp was part of the scenario.

Mary Ann: My first time of venturing out was church camp. My best friend and I went to Pilgrim Park (camp) and both had a good time. The next summer Nancy was doing something else so I went on my own.

That was like stepping into a wider church family. I became connected there. I became a member of the State Pilgrim Fellowship Cabinet and Caravanning. People were kind and encouraging. I found a whole different new group of friends that way.

Dee: Did that carry over into college years?

Mary Ann: In 1957, the year I graduated from high school, a Tornado ripped through the west side of town. It killed eleven people. It destroyed the homes of some of my friends. How does God let those things happen? I had some deep theological questions on my mind when I entered North Dakota State University.

5. College Years

I was still active in state fellowship. I was active in campus ministry. The campus was only a block away from home. The church where I had grown up hired me my junior and senior year of college to be the Director of Youth Ministry. I worked with the

junior and senior high groups along with some adult advisors that I recruited to lead those groups.

The year after she graduated from college, the first national joint gathering of the Congregational youth fellowship with the Evangelical and Reformed church was held at Elmhurst. The conference staff asked if she would go as the adult advisor of the North Dakota group.

"My parents let me use the family car," she said. "For this meeting, we drove the nine hours from Fargo down to Elmhurst, just west of Chicago."

Mary Ann majored in history with a music minor. Her family had prevailed upon her to "have something practical," so she also earned a secondary education degree from North Dakota State. She would have preferred to major in sociology, but courses were not available. Knowing of that interest, her advisor encouraged her to apply for a regional, independent research grant in her senior year.

I applied to do a study of the role of Indian reservations in North Dakota. My advisor had a plan for me. I was going to graduate school at the University of Wisconsin and do a Ph.D. in sociology. That was *his* plan.

6. Seminary?

In the meantime, through my work in the church I had become theologically curious. I felt led in other ways.

I knew of two women who were ordained ministers. That troubled my mother because one was a fairly lonely woman with two dogs living in a tiny town in western North Dakota. My mother envisioned my ending up like that.

The other was the wife of a pastor who had been an advisor of our pilgrim fellowship group. I talked with her. She had gone to Andover Newton. The campus ministers, especially the director of the YMCA, also encouraged me to consider seminary.

Mary Ann applied. Among her final choices was Yale Divinity School. She knew a Yale graduate working out on the Fort Berthold Reservation in North Dakota.

I admired Jim Engel. If he was the kind of person that Yale can produce, that is the kind of school I wanted to attend. My college

YMCA director said that anyone who gets in at Yale needs to go to Yale. It was an excellent choice.

7. Seminary Years

Mary Ann enrolled in the Bachelor of Divinity program, which women were not doing then. They were getting a Masters in Religious Education.

Some of my friends were upset. They felt women were not recognized for what they did, that we had more gifts than were being used. The only seminary majors open at that time to women were Christian Education or campus ministry. I chose Christian Education.

It was a good time for me. I enjoyed the study of theology. I met my husband there. I also left Yale with a Bachelor of Divinity.

Mary Ann and Walter were married in the middle of their last year at Yale. They needed not only parental consent but the assent of the Yale Divinity School:

Because Yale did not yet allow married couples to both be students at that time, we had to have a special vote of the faculty to agree that we could get married and I could finish my degree.

When her life mate was accepted into a world religions graduate program at Harvard, Mary Ann applied for positions in the Boston area. She became a Director of Christian Education, initially at Trinity Church (First Congregational Church of Waltham).

8. Ordination

Meanwhile, she and Judith Hjorth participated in a group of Christian Educators who met regularly. In 1965, both women were ordained, the first women in the Metropolitan Boston Association. That, Mary Ann said, was an interesting process because the Church and Ministry Committee of Metro Boston included such prestigious theologians as Reinhold Niebuhr and Preston Williams.

What I most remember was an afternoon of questions by the rather daunting ecclesiastical council. One minister said, "Well, if we are going to ordain the directors of Christian Education, we might as well ordain the sextons."

I do not recall that anyone responded to the man just then. However, a colleague who had accompanied me later related that

as he lay in bed that night he thought about that comment. An hour later he was up pacing the living room. It was a consciousness-raising moment for him. He told me, "You have the same degree as he has, and you probably have it from a better seminary with higher grades."

Mary Ann was ordained at First Congregational Church in Boston. After ordination, she worked for three years at the church in Waltham. Then she and Walter lived for a year in Madras, India, while he did research work for a doctorate. Madras was another expansion of her awareness of people. When they returned, she found work as a residence counselor in women's colleges. They studied a couple years at the University of Virginia and had their two children.

The Metro Association in Boston, that listed her as an educational worker, kept her standing until she and her husband moved to Wisconsin.

9. A Good Cookie Church

Initially, the association minister in Wisconsin welcomed Mary Ann to do supply preaching for several churches who wanted to experience a woman preacher.

I did a lot of supply preaching. My kids would judge the churches by how good the cookies were. A church that had been an option when I was looking for work decided they liked me. Their pastor needed six weeks away one year so they invited me for the entire time. The kids said, "Oh, yes, that's a good cookie church."

When Mary Ann took a part time job at Plymouth Church in Milwaukee, where she and Walter had become members, she began at half-time. That part time position moved to three-quarter time the next year and then to full time in a senior pastorate that continued for twenty-nine years. She had a co-pastor and a couple associates.

10. Revisiting the Chat Room

Dee: Twenty-nine years is a long time.
Mary Ann: There were challenges along the way. Long term pastorates – if you can keep yourself finding what is fresh – are amazing. You know people from the time you baptize them and marry them then baptize their kids.

Dee: What has been difficult?
Mary Ann: Sometimes when you would rather be reading theology but you have to deal with budgets. People sometimes dig in their heels about small matters. You have to have a sense of humor about those heated discussions. As you look back you see in some of the most precious moments those which were most difficult. You look back and say, "Wow, God was with me in that."

Dee: Did you consider a move?
Mary Ann: At times. The church was in a residential, university neighborhood. My office was a block away from my husband's office. At one point, our conference minister encouraged me to look at conference positions. I was happy at Plymouth.

Dee: What about the times you were feeling dry?
Mary Ann: In thirty years of ordination, I had never had a sabbatical. I decided to attend the World Council of Churches meeting in Canberra, Australia, as a visitor. That year, 1991, I also was nominated to serve on the Executive Council of the United Church of Christ.

At the last minute, a World Council of Churches delegate was unable to go, so I was asked to be a delegate. That was an exciting adventure. I also attended the World Council gathering in Zimbabwe as a visitor.

Mary Ann views the United Church of Christ as her larger family. In 1985, she was asked to be in charge of the committee process for General Synod. She continued for many General Synods. She said that it helped her learn to know a variety of leaders in conferences around the United Church of Christ.

11. *But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*

- Amos 5:24

From first steps of *ptaya owo owo klake* at Ponca Creek to the March on Washington, to service as a national board member of Wider Church Ministries and the Executive Council, to respected ecumenical work among Milwaukee interfaith groups, Mary Ann Neevel has nurtured the art of people talking together.

Relationship building can happen in a church and among interfaith groups. The passage from Amos of letting justice roll down like waters has been significant to me through the years.

Nimble herself in social witness, Mary Ann reflects on the 50-year history of the United Church of Christ:

Growing together in unity is always a process, and as new concerns and directions arose, so did new aspects of the structure evolve. . . . [in] our unique way of being church, with each expression of the church called to honor and respect the work and ministry of each other part. . . . [I]t takes many minds and voices to express the wisdom and mission to which God calls us. ⁴

Decades earlier, the summer of 1963 was the year of Dr. Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech at the March on Washington. Mary Ann was in seminary and working in New Haven, Connecticut.

When my husband and I first were married, we joined Dixwell Avenue Church in New Haven. The church was primarily African American. Five of us were not African American. Joan Forsberg⁵ and I were the two white faces in the Dixwell Avenue Choir.

Along with people from that congregation and Wider City Parish I went to the August 23, 1963, March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Bill Coffin⁶ was the leader of our trainload group, our car. Over the years, I have gotten to know him. I had lunch with him at a Justice gathering one week before I found I had cancer. He had his stroke by then. He was a source of courage for me.

12. Interruption

It was the first Sunday of Advent, 2002. I had to tell my congregation that I had been diagnosed with cancer and that I was going to take a leave of absence for surgery. It was as gentle an announcement as I could make it.

⁴ In the late 1990s, Mary Ann Neevel chaired the national Constitution and Bylaws Revision Team for the new structure. From *Restructuring the United Church of Christ* in *UCC @ 50: our future*, pp 52-53

⁵ Find "Joan Bates Forsberg: Bridge to Understanding" at <http://www.ucc.org/women/finding.html>.

⁶ Rev. William Sloan Coffin, former Yale chaplain, civil rights and anti-Vietnam War activist, led Riverside Church in New York City for a decade.

My experience with the cancer was a huge interruption. It was a different sort of sabbatical, a sabbatical of learning the meaning of grace bestowed upon myself. All of a sudden I went from being the care giver who listened to being the care receiver.

If I ever could learn anything about grace and love and the nitty-gritty things that the people in the congregation were doing for each other all along, this came to me in a different way. Being the recipient of grace was more amazing than having the ability to give it. I don't know how anyone gets through that without church family.

In that time from Advent to Advent, she said, the church was supportive. Council was supportive. The large numbers of ordained clergy in the congregation were supportive. One, an interim pastor currently without a position, became the interim along with Mary Ann's associate minister.

They were all gracious. We got through that first bout. I ended up working about a year beyond what I would have called my retirement age to make up for that. I served Plymouth from 1976-2005.

The theme of resurrection that spring was special for her. She said in an interview for the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel:

It's been a period of really coming to terms with a change in my life. A lot of people in the congregation have had similar changes, whether the loss of a parent, or the war. . . .

It's recognizing that there are moments in our life when all of a sudden there is this powerful recognition that things are never going to be the same again. But then there is that moment of transformation, which to me is God's power. And even out of those despairing situations, grace is renewed, and maybe we move on in a whole different way.⁷

⁷ As quoted by Tom Heinen in "Easter dawn to welcome faithful" posted in the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel on April 20, 2003. Find at <http://www.jsonline.com/story/index.aspx?id=134897>

13. So What About You?

- ***Think about the meaning and guidance that Amos 5:24 offered Mary Ann. For you?***

- She dared go to camp without her friend then continued to venture further.

Talk about your first ventures and what you learned.

What understanding about others and yourself did you gain?

- Mary Ann's fifth grade teacher opened an awareness of justice issues within her town.

What local justice issues have you identified?

When have you gained understanding by initiating a relationship with someone in a situation differing from yours?

- ***How would you define ptaya owo owo klake?***

Name challenges of relating to others in a way that brings about communication and understanding.

How has "talking together" with a family member or a work/school acquaintance influenced your understanding of that person? Of yourself?

- Mary Ann's professor proposed plans for her future, but she listened to the quiet voice within her and explored another route.

What advantages and disadvantages do you find in sounding out others as you discern your calling?

- As Mary Ann ventured into the new territory of a chronic illness, she discovered both the interruption of unexpected change and the awareness of grace.

What strengthened her so that she could resume her career as she recovered?

What supportive role might the ptaya owo owo klake offer in difficult situations?

- ***Are you a long-term pastorate type of person or a multiple pastorates person? Why?***

14. Church Family Project

Invite your pastor, or if your church has more than one minister, invite all as a panel to come to your youth group or class to tell how they use "talking together" to grow the church at all levels, to grow relationships with other faith communities and to grow family relationships.

15. Still Curious?

Ask her: a live interview with Rev. Mary Ann Neevel about the role of faith as she met cancer – GS 2003

The 1963 Protest March on Washington. See Ray Suarez, "A 'Dream' Remembered: NewsHour Special Report." January 23, 2003 at http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/race_relations/july-dec03/march_08-28.html.

Dallas (Dee) A. Brauningner. *Antoinette Brown Women: Finding Voice*, December 2007