

REMEMBERING HER

". . . what she has done will be told in remembrance of her."
Matthew 26:13



Article 23

Retrieving Women's Histories

Another Niebuhr

We often read about the Niebuhr brothers (Reinhold and H. Richard), but few people know very much about their sister, Hulda.

The Niebuhr family was rooted in the German Evangelical tradition. In the 1880s a young pastor, Gustav Niebuhr, met and married the daughter of the pastor of a German Evangelical church in San Francisco named Lydia. Many German immigrants were flooding into California.

The first of four children of Gustav and Lydia, Clara Augusta Hulda Niebuhr, was born in 1889. Unfortunately, although her father made plans for his sons, Pastor Niebuhr had rather conventional ideas about the education of his only daughter. Fortunately Hulda did not fit his image. It never occurred to him that a girl should or might be interested in advanced education.

For a few years after graduating from high school in 1906 Hulda found meaningful work in her home church in Lincoln, Illinois and in her brother Reinhold's church in Detroit, Michigan. But eventually she moved to Boston and completed her Bachelor and Master of Arts degrees at Boston University. She started teaching in the elementary division of that school and by 1927 she was one of three female assistant professors on the BU faculty. In 1928 she moved to New York City and worked on a doctorate at Columbia Teachers College. Although she never did finish her doctorate, from 1930 until 1945 she did "the practical work of the church" as she called it, employed as a staff religious educator in a large urban church (Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church.)

During those years Hulda Niebuhr wrote creative church school materials and published two books exploring how story and drama might be used in church schools. In 1945 the

Presbyterian College of Education, associated with McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago, recognized her experience and scholarly expertise and invited her to join the faculty as associate professor of religious education. In 1949 that school merged with McCormick and in 1953 Hulda Niebuhr became the first woman to hold the rank of full professor at McCormick Theological Seminary.

Professor Niebuhr approached religious education with three concerns. She focused on what contemporary educators call a “praxis” model of education—dialogue, reflection and action. She insisted that the home and the church (1) needed to be intentional about nurturing faith in others, (2) should use age related methods to promote learning, and (3) flourished when teachers functioned as artists.

In her teaching she encouraged students to use all their gifts to serve the church. She wrote that the teacher needs “to help the pupil make the gospel experience his/her own, its historic context invading the pupil’s own, so that the pupil can live in that context, can snare it in imagination and discover for himself/herself its meaning.” [from “*Is Christian Education True to Its Reformation Heritage?*” p. 15]

Hulda Niebuhr died at age seventy in 1959. As the church celebrated her life and work, she was recognized by her colleagues as a creative and imaginative scholar.

One student remembered,

“There was an atmosphere in the class that education was growth and must be related to experience (doing). There was a high regard for the importance of each member of the class—often our projects would be evaluated by our peers. I do not recall anyone ever being humiliated in class. Also, we were encouraged to get out of the class what we put into it—nothing came from just being there. Consequently, we all learned from our outside reading, from doing our projects, and from each other. Creativity was encouraged, imagination was stimulated.” [Quoted in Elizabeth Francis Caldwell, “Hulda Niebuhr: Teacher as Artist” in Barbara Anne Keely, ed. *Faith of Our Foremothers: Women Changing Religious Education* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), pp. 37-38.]

[July 2007]

Barbara Brown Zikmund is a UCC minister and historian who served as general editor for the seven volume collection of UCC resources called *The Living Theological Heritage of the United Church of Christ* (Pilgrim Press, 1995-2005). She now lives in Washington, DC where she and her husband are members of First Congregational UCC. Please write her at beebeebee@verizon.net.