

# UCC ROOTS

## *Remembering our History*

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October 2019

### **“The Youth Caravan Program”**

On August 6, 1746, an adventurous Swiss pastor arrived in Beginning in the late 1940's, for twenty years they came together each summer for training; and then fanned out across the US, providing leadership and assistance in churches, camps, conferences, community agencies. Some of the teams of young people, age 17 and up, were “stay put,” spending six to eight weeks in a church-related community center. Others were part of traveling teams of four spending a week in each location for five to six weeks, immersed with resident youth.

The “Youth Caravan Program” started in the Evangelical & Reformed Church. It was led throughout its history by a remarkable woman named Ethel A. Shellenberger (1910 – 2001). Ethel was born in eastern Pennsylvania, grew up in the German Reformed Church, graduated from Ursinus College and taught junior high school for 13 years. In 1945 she became staff Secretary of the E&R Girls Guild, then Associate Director of E&R Youth Work, and, later, of Camps, Conferences, and Caravans in the new United Church of Christ. Ethel's devotion to this work enabled her to serve on the UCC national staff until her retirement in 1975. Throughout her life she remained an active member of her local church, St. John's UCC in Lansdale, PA—teaching Sunday School until age 88.



The United Church of Christ was shaped by Ethel's fierce commitment to youth. Caravan training and service exposed many young people to key UCC leaders and thinkers all over the country—educators, theologians, missionaries and social activists. Summer experiences changed young lives and many Caravanners later felt called to church vocations. Some returned to enrich churches “back home.” Ethel A. Shellenberger made it all work. She never compromised standards. She knew, challenged, and valued every Caravanner. She lived the New Testament words she shared with Caravanners at the end of their service, “never flag in zeal, be aglow with the Spirit, serve the Lord.”

*Contributor: Marti Baumer*

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