2008

Testimonies and Truth-tellings: Women in the United Methodist Tradition.

JOURNAL

TESTIMONIES *and* TRUTH-TELLINGS

WOMEN IN THE UNITED METHODIST TRADITION

BY DANA L. ROBERT, TRUMAN COLLINS PROFESSOR OF WORLD CHRISTIANITY AND HISTORY OF MISSION, AND CO-DIRECTOR OF THE CENTER FOR GLOBAL CHRISTIANITY AND MISSION

Photos courtesy of Dick Bancroft

1. *Mary Clarke Nind and Her Work,* by her children (Chicago: J. Newton Nind, 1906), 20, 22.

2. Mrs. Vane, quoted in ibid., 34. See also Georgiana Baucus, *In Journeyings Oft. A Sketch of the Life and Travels of Mary C. Nind* (Cincinnati: Curts & Jennings, 1897), 31.

3. *Mary Clarke Nind,* 31.

In 1862, Mary Nind of St. Charles, Illinois, was left with sole responsibility for five children when her husband, James, enlisted in the Union Army. The emigrant Nind family was already poor because their hardware business had recently failed. As Mary turned to God for support, she overflowed with a deepened faith and felt an irresistible urge to testify. Even though her husband was a deacon in their Congregational Church, Mary Nind was silenced and threatened with expulsion for speaking aloud about her deepening experiences of God's grace. When disciplined for holding "Methodist doctrines in a Congregational church," she followed the advice of a friend to join the Methodists because "there is more liberty for women to exercise their gifts."[1]

The opposition of the Congregationalists to Mary Nind's call to testify had profound implications for the next century of Methodism. The assurance that God accepted her gifts liberated her to become one of the great preachers of the late 19th century: she was known as Mother Nind or "the little bishop." A tiny working-class woman in a plain brown dress, she gave testimony that was so impressive and "so powerfully accompanied by the Holy Spirit" that Nind became the organizer of women's mission societies throughout the West.[2] Traveling everywhere by train, stagecoach, or on foot, and often arriving late at night with nobody to meet her at the station, Mother Nind spoke in camp meetings, revival meetings, and even in churches where the male pastor opposed the idea of women's societies. In 1877 alone, she traveled 7,000 miles and was home for only 15 weeks. As her family noted: "Having been called into the work of the WFMS [Women's Foreign Missionary Society], it proved to be the open door for the preaching of the gospel."[3]

In 1888, Mary Nind received the highest number of votes from the Minnesota Annual Conference to attend General Conference. But the General Conference refused to seat any women, thereby beginning a 16-year struggle for lay women's rights. Also in 1888, Mary Nind steamed to London as a delegate to the first large ecumenical gathering of Protestant mission societies. There, she read a set of social justice resolutions into the minutes. Through this radical act, her personal testimony—opposing liquor and supporting women's legal rights—gave birth to public truth-telling. In 1894, Mother Nind visited her married missionary daughter in China and preached at women's meetings against foot-binding and other social customs that hurt women.

In Mother Nind's insistence on giving her testimony, we see the relationships among "struggle, faith, and vision." When she struggled to survive as an impoverished single parent during the war, her faith deepened. She saw visions that convinced her God was calling her to preach and to promote women's work and missions. Larger visions of women's work in the church led to bigger struggles over women's leadership across Methodism. The impact of Mary Nind's struggles, faith, and vision impacted multiple generations. What later became the United Methodist Women organization was built on the

Photo credit: Cameraphoto/Art Resource, New York

Detail of Mary Magdalene, from Madonna and Child between Saints Magdalene and Catherine, *by Giovanni Bellini, c. 1500*

foundation laid by a tiny, overworked emigrant woman who answered God's call to testify.

TESTIMONY AS TRADITION

What does it mean to be a woman in the United Methodist tradition? As the story of Mary Nind demonstrates, I argue that the essence of our identity lies not in structures, ordination status, the *Book of Discipline,* race, wealth, or nationality, but in the continuity of testimony from the earliest days of Methodism in England, to the United States, and to world Methodism in the 21st century. Mary Nind did not insist on testifying because she was a Methodist. Rather, she was a Methodist because she testified. A major reason for the success of the Methodist movement in the 18th and 19th centuries was that it called both women and men to give account of their relationship with God and with each other (I Peter 3:15). Even though patriarchal traditions and laws silenced women, Methodism empowered them to pray, speak, and sing publicly of God's grace in their lives.

The power of testimony for Methodist women goes back to the way we read the Bible. Unlike groups that see the Bible as a depository of divine doctrine, Methodists read Scripture as a narrative of the divine–human encounter. This distinction has come home to me often, as I have tried to understand why some churches restrict women's roles in the church, even though women were the last at the tomb and the first witnesses to the Resurrection. Didn't the Samaritan woman, Mary Magdalene, Phoebe, Dorcas, Priscilla, and other followers of Christ act as evangelists, teachers, and church leaders? If women could do these things in the Bible, why can't we do them now?

A fundamentalist friend explained to me that when his church reads the Scripture, it classifies the actions of women in the Bible as human history, and looks for eternal doctrines separate from the historical context. United Methodists, however, count as normative not only doctrines, but the narrative of people's encounters with Christ as found in the New Testament. Another way of stating this point is that Methodists relate to the events of the Bible through their human experience, in what Cheryl Johns calls "knowing in active relationship."[4] As the biblical narrative comes alive through the experience of God's grace, women and men see themselves living out the biblical text. Thus, when Methodist women claim the responsibility to testify, they see their truth-telling as legitimate, just as biblical women were empowered to leadership through their own experience of the Good News of Jesus Christ.

The continuity of women's identity in United Methodism resides in being at home in the biblical narrative and empowered to speak by it. Beliefs do not stem from a rationalistic analysis of doctrine, but from the action of knowing God at work in human history. When Mary Nind was asked to organize women's mission work, she responded that she could "never say no to God's call."[5] Just as women in the Bible were called by Jesus, so are Methodist women today. And as our struggles deepen in dialogue with the heavenly vision, the call to testify grows louder.

4. Cheryl Bridges Johns, *Pentecostal Formation* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 86.

5. Nind quoted in *Mary Clarke Nind,* 33.

The fact that United Methodist women are called to testify by the Bible, and by religious experience, has profound implications for our identity around the world. If women's encounters with Christ give them voices, then they need to be educated so that their words and actions carry wisdom. By the late 1800s, Methodists had founded more coeducational academies, schools, and colleges than any other denomination in America. Through a sense of God's presence in their lives, combined with opportunities for self-improvement, women gained the strength not only to care for their families, but to make the world a better place.

When I travel in Africa, I can often recognize Methodist women because of their confidence that in Christ they are equal to men. For example, Gracia Machel, former minister of education and first lady of Mozambique, and now the wife of Nelson Mandela, has often said publicly that her Methodist education trained her for a leadership that helped Mozambique to move beyond Portuguese colonialism. In the summer of 2006, I was staying in the headquarters of an African indigenous church in Zimbabwe. I met two women who were United Methodists and asked them how they were different from the women in the indigenous church: "The Methodist Church encourages us to be educated, to ask questions, to seek our own way, and not be subservient to our husbands," they replied. "In Methodism, we respond directly to God's call and do not have to ask our husbands for permission."

Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, President of the Republic of Liberia, September 2006

Photo © Christophe Karaba/EPA/Corbis

The power of United Methodist women's testimony to change society is especially apparent in places where girls' education cannot be taken for granted. In January 2006, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, a lifelong United Methodist, was inaugurated as president of Liberia, the first woman elected head of state of an African nation. The day before her inauguration, she sponsored an ecumenical prayer service at First United Methodist Church, Monrovia. Hymns selected by Johnson-Sirleaf included the great hymn of mission witness, "We've a Story to Tell to the Nations."

In her speech before the U.S. Congress in March 2006, she thanked God for his grace in protecting her from rape when she was a political prisoner, and in bringing her to power in a free election that returned Liberia from 15 years of war and dictatorship. She also testified how thousands of Liberians have been educated by missionaries and how she attended a United Methodist high school.

What do Methodist women across generations have in common, from the age of John Wesley and his women preachers to that of Barbara Heck and Jarena Lee, to Phoebe Palmer and Amanda Berry Smith, to Mary Nind, Frances Willard, and Belle Bennett, to Thelma Stevens and Dorothy Height, to Laura Bush and Hillary Clinton, to Helen Kim and Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, and to the 21 living female bishops of the United Methodist Church? What

we have in common is our testimonies of God's grace through Jesus Christ. These testimonies—our stories of struggle, faith, and vision—are the threads that weave our common identity as Methodist women across time and space.

FROM TESTIMONY TO TRUTH-TELLING

I would also like to explore how struggle, faith, and vision interacted in the testimonies of three North American women in the United Methodist tradition. Like Mary Nind, these women came from ordinary origins, and it was their faith that made them extraordinary. Despite obstacles of poverty and prejudice, each was helped by her Methodist identity to rise above her circumstances to a position of leadership. These women converted their testimonies into truth tellings. In other words, each woman's testimony emerged through personal struggle and faith, and bore public witness to her vision of a church that empowers women and creates a better world for all of God's children.

ELLEN DAKE ENGLISH, 1821–1904, ITINERANT PREACHER'S WIFE

At 74 years of age, Ellen Dake English wrote a diary that was typed up by her descendents but never published.[6] She grew up in a modest Vermont home shared with parents, grandparents, and siblings. She had no childhood pictures or books; she milked and drove the cows early in the mornings, and recalled that getting a leftover piece of piecrust or johnnycake was a great treat. At age 12, Ellen began attending Methodist prayer meetings with her grandmother.

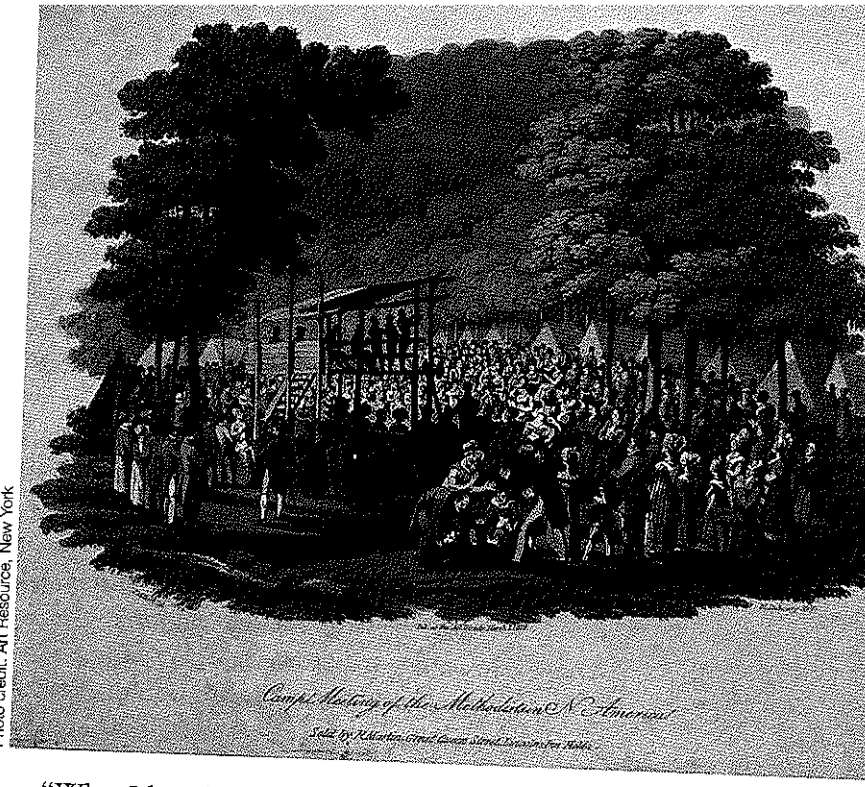

Photo credit: Art Resource, New York

Meeting of the North American Methodists, 1819, an engraving by Matthew Dubourg

"What I heard at the meetings made a strong impression upon my mind and I commenced seeking the change of heart that was so feelingly spoken of and soon felt that my prayer was answered so when I went to meeting again I went to the minister and told him how I felt."[7]

As she was a child, nobody took much notice of her first religious experience. By 16, she was studying tailoring, and throughout her life she made money by sewing dresses or braiding hats from palm leaves. After joining the Methodist Church as a teenager, Ellen attended Newbury Seminary,[8] a coeducational Methodist school that educated women students alongside men who were preparing for the ministry. While at a camp meeting in 1842, Ellen was introduced to a Methodist itinerant preacher named John English, and married him the following summer.

The bulk of Ellen Dake English's diary records the story of being an itinerant preacher's wife in 23 locations over 24 years, until she finally settled in her

6. "Diary of Mrs. John English" [unpublished typed manuscript]. For other early Methodist women's narratives, see Paul Wesley Chilcote, *Her Own Story: Autobiographical Portraits of Early Methodist Women* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2002).

7. "Diary of Mrs. John English," 2.

8. Newbury Seminary was the predecessor school to the Boston University School of Theology.

own home in Newbury and began taking in boarders. The couple moved from one small town to another in Vermont, Massachusetts, or New Hampshire. In many villages, there was no parsonage, and they rented a room in people's homes. The Baptists and Congregationalists were large and powerful, while the Methodists were small and working class and often lacked their own buildings. Besides setting up housekeeping with every move, Ellen formed ladies' sewing circles to raise money for the churches her husband pastored.

The biggest excitement in Ellen's ministry came in the 12th year of itinerancy, when the Englishes arrived in Hampton, New Hampshire, and decided to pray for a revival. They held four worship meetings a week, all in private houses. It was 1859, a year of economic collapse, and there were heightened spiritual expectations across the Northeast that a revival had commenced. Ellen began leading women to Christ, including those from different social classes. After several weeks, 80 people had been converted by a church of fewer than 40 members.

In March 1884, English's husband died.[9] The next year, she took a boat to Florida and began visiting the struggling schools for the children of freed slaves. In her mid-sixties, she took a trunk full of supplies and began teaching African-American children for free in Belleview, Florida. She taught a day school for reading and writing, and a Sunday school that was located in an African-American Baptist church. For several years, she taught in Florida for the school term and returned to New England for the summer. In 1890, she came back to Florida to work in a boarding home for African-American girls, where she taught school, taught sewing on Fridays, and led the prayer meetings. She attended worship in an African-American church and helped out in the Sunday school. She gave away Bibles and Sunday school books to her African-American friends and pupils.

In 1891, English's health broke and she returned to New England permanently. Then commenced the hardest part of her life. In her memoir of 1895, as she reflected on her life of 74 years, she wrote: "Since my children left me and made homes for themselves and my husband went home to heaven there has been a vacuum that nothing can fill. I am alone as far as this world is concerned and nothing satisfies me but to feel that I am doing for others. It requires a great deal of patience to sit and fold my hands and feel that I am useless while ever since I can remember I have been doing for and planning to help some one."[10] After reflecting on how Elijah, Jesus, and Paul suffered disappointments yet trusted in God, she ended her memoir: "My loneliness sometimes presses me sorely... although I may give all my love freely and do all in my power to help and please I cannot help but feel that I am alone and to hunger for love in return for love. How can I know that it exists unless it is expressed? How can I, but the great and good Father understands and will not suffer me to be tempted more than I can bear but will make a way for my escape so I will trust him now and ever."[11]

Converted and educated in the coeducational egalitarianism of antebel-

9. Ibid., 29.
10. Ibid., 40.
11. Ibid., 41.

lum New England Methodism, Ellen English's life bore fruit as the wife of a poor itinerant preacher in working class Methodism, and then as a widow teaching the impoverished children of freed slaves after the Civil War. And yet, her greatest struggle of faith came in old age, when she felt she was no longer needed. At that point, she wrote down her life testimony, still holding fast to the biblical vision of I Corinthians 10:13 that God is faithful, and will provide endurance even to the end.

GRACE HUCK, 1916– , PIONEER PASTOR

Grace Huck grew up in a family of five girls on a homestead in South Dakota. Because her family lived 32 miles from the nearest town, she did not attend church until she was eight, when her family visited their grandparents in Iowa. One Sunday in 1925, the family drove to Bowman. They bypassed a Congregational and a Lutheran Church to enter a Methodist Church with Sunday school in progress, and stayed. In her senior year of high school, Huck attended a weeklong Methodist Camp in the Black Hills. During an altar call, the minister invited those who wished to become ministers or missionaries to come forward. Grace recalled, "I felt God's call stirring in my soul. I could not refuse, and I too, went forward and kneeled at the rough log and made a commitment of my life to full-time service in the work of the church."[12]

The next year, Huck enrolled in a teachers' college. Athough it dawned on her that women were typically not allowed to be ordained pastors, she was mentored by the wife of the minister in Bowman and applied for a local preacher's license. One day while herding sheep, she felt led to write a sermon, "What shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" on Matthew 27:22. The next day, she was asked to preach to a small group gathered at a village school house. And so began Huck's long years of struggle to be obedient to the heavenly vision that called her into the ordained ministry as a woman.

While pursuing an education and taking the ministerial course of study part-time, Huck began filling in as supply pastor for poor rural churches that had no minister, or could not afford one. She taught vacation Bible schools and served churches for less than normal wages. Whenever a district superintendent was appointed who did not believe in women preachers, she would be fired from her pulpit supply post. From December to March, she often fought her way through snow as deep as a horse's belly in order to serve small rural churches that lacked electricity. When unable to get a church, she taught school.

By the 1950s, Huck decided she would never be allowed to be an ordained minister and so applied to be a deaconess. She was rejected because the deaconess board determined that she had a call to the ordained ministry. So she became a director of Christian education while working on a master's degree in education. Finally, in 1956, the Methodist General Conference voted to ordain women into full conference membership. When the North Dakota Annual Conference met, they received Grace Huck "on trial" for full membership, although she had already been serving churches for over 10 years.[13] Even

Photo by Kathy L. Gilbert, UMNS

Rev. Grace Huck addresses participants at the 2006 International Clergywomen's Consultation.

12. Grace E. Huck, "I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision," *Proceedings, North Central Jurisdiction Commission on Archives and History Convocation on the Campus of Bismarck State College, Bismarck, North Dakota, July 7 to 10, 1997,* 53.

after becoming one of the first two women ministers in the Methodist Church, she did not receive a full appointment. Thus, in her mid-forties, Huck went to Scarritt College for a year of missionary training. In 1960, she went as a missionary to the Philippines.

After 11 years of service in the Philippines, including full conference membership there, Huck returned to South Dakota to be near her elderly father. But once again, gender discrimination raised its ugly head and she was not given a church. In fact, the South Dakota Annual Conference would not immediately accept her transfer from the Philippines Annual Conference because she was "unproven." She recalled asking in prayer: "God, what are they trying to do to me?" Then she remembered John Wesley's Covenant Prayer: "I rose from my bed, went to the study and got the *Book of Worship*. I found the prayer and truly prayed 'Let me be employed for Thee, or laid aside for Thee.' I had always been ready to go wherever He sent me and do whatever He asked of me. Suddenly I realized I needed also to be ready to be 'laid aside' for Him."

She wrote a poem based on Wesley's prayer:

Let me be a channel of your love, O God!
My physical strength is waning,
But my spirit grows strong.
Use me as you will.
Your people cry out in their need.
The homeless cry for shelter,
The lonely cry for friends,
The sick and dying are crying out for healing,
And the hungry cry for bread.
Show me how and where I can help, O God!
Let me be a human channel
Through which your love can flow.
I am ready, I am open, I am yours.[14]

After appointments to another succession of small churches at minimum salary, Huck retired. Despite having earned very little over her lifetime of ministry, she used her Social Security and part-time supply preaching funds to pay off most of the $100,000 debt on a dormitory at Harris College in the Philippines, a task she completed in 1993 when the denomination finished off the last $22,000. Of her life, Huck says: "I am so grateful to God for His presence, His guidance and His blessing. I believe He has used me for His service, and I praise and thank Him for every opportunity He has given me."[15] In August of 2006, at age 90, Rev. Huck was one of the three surviving original clergywomen to attend the 50th anniversary celebration of the ordination of women in the United Methodist Church.[16]

VICTORIA GRAY ADAMS, 1926–2006, FIGHTER FOR FREEDOM

For several years before her death two years ago, Victoria Gray Adams gave her testimony at conferences commemorating the Civil Rights struggles of the 1950s to the 1970s.[17] Born Victoria Jackson in 1926 in a tiny African-American community south of Hattiesburg, Mississippi, Adams was raised in St. John's Methodist Church. As a child, she took seriously the church's mottos: "What kind of church will this church be if every member was just like me?" and "Be ye doers of the word and not hearers only."[18] Adams's opportunity to live out these mottos occurred in the 1960s. She was sitting at a desk in her beauty products business, when two young men from

13. Ibid., 59.

14. Grace Huck, "Let me be your channel," *God's Amazing Grace: Stories from my life* (Spearfish, SD: Grace Publisher, 2005), 225.

15. Huck, "I was not disobedient," 62.

16. For her comments to the assembled delegates, see Linda Green, "Pioneer Women Pastors Share Stories, Advice for Ministry," http://gbgm-umc.org/global_news/full_article.cfm?articleid=4187.

17. See the powerful obituary, "Victoria Jackson Gray Adams," written by her son, Rev. Cecil Conteen Gray, at www.nacacad.org/grayadams-pr.html.

18. See University of Virginia, The Project on Lived Theology, 2003 Conference Proceedings, "Civil Rights as Theological Drama," June 12, 2003. www.livedtheology.org/conf03_grayadams_moses.htm.

McComb, Mississippi, walked in and introduced themselves as SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) workers there to help fellow black Mississippians register to vote. Adams introduced the young men to her pastor, and they appealed to the members of the one-room church to meet them at the court house the next morning. Half-a-dozen members agreed to participate, including Adams and the pastor. So began Adams's involvement in the Civil Rights movement. In the words of her son, Rev. Cecil Gray: "One of the earliest and most vigorous supporters of civil rights/human rights activity in Mississippi, Mrs. Gray Adams continued her work in spite of repeated death threats, being shot at, chased by people in cars with guns, threats to kill her family, and other attempts to end her life."[19]

The peak of her involvement came in 1964, during the Mississippi Freedom Summer. With Fannie Lou Hamer and Annie Devine, she founded the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party in an attempt to integrate politics in the state of Mississippi. She also challenged Senator John Stennis in the election for U.S. Senate, losing by 30 to 1 because African-Americans were not allowed to register to vote.

Grounded in the Hattiesburg church network, the Civil Rights movement spread across the South.[20] In the forefront of the movement was Adams, whose Methodist testimony became truth-telling when she confronted the intimidation, beatings, firebombings, and murders that faced local people when they insisted on their voting rights. She recalled the first Freedom Day in 1964, when hundreds of ministers and other supporters descended on Hattiesburg to support voter registration:

> *And it came to my mind the writer of Isaiah . . . we were at a point right there in Hattiesburg where King Josiah was about to leave us, and yet we knew, I knew, we had to keep this momentum going, and so I thought of the scripture when he said that he heard a voice, and it said, "who shall we send and who will go for us?" and I said, "Here am I, send me, I'll go." And as I sat there, and that thing played out in my head, I had to get up and tell the gathered body about it. I said this is what we who live in Hattiesburg, this is what we must understand that King Josiah has died and it's up to us to continue this, and I for one, am saying, "Here am I, I'll go, send me." And I invite you to do likewise.*[21]

In addition to her civil rights activism, Adams was active at Conference and national levels in the United Methodist Church. She taught public school in Mississippi, ran a business, did women's club work, taught in a language school

Photo ©Bettman/Corbis

From left: Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party members Fannie Lou Hamer, Victoria Gray Adams, and Annie Devine read a telegram from Speaker John McCormick granting them permission to take seats on the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives.

19. Cecil Conteen Gray, "Mrs. Victoria Jackson Gray Adams. www.nacacad.org/grayadams-pr.html Gray.

20. Taylor Branch, quoted in Tim Weiner, "Victoria Gray Adams: A Founder of the MS Freedom Democratic Party," http://real-costofprisons.org/blog/archives/2006/08/victoria_gray_a.html.

21. Virginia Gray Adams, "Civil Rights as Theological Drama."

22. Cecil Conteen Gray, "Mrs. Victoria Jackson Gray Adams."

in Bangkok, Thailand, served as campus minister at Virginia State University, and lectured at numerous colleges and universities. As her son wrote in her obituary: "A local-and-global woman, with an immediate and long-term vision, Mrs. Victoria Jackson Gray Adams—with clarity and intentionality—gave her life to her family and local people, all over the globe. She was committed profoundly to empowering and elevating local people, because she wanted local people to access and enjoy greater life chances and greater life choices."[22]

CONCLUSION

What can we learn about the identity of women in the United Methodist tradition from the stories of our foremothers Ellen Dake English, Grace Huck, and Victoria Gray Adams? I think that just as Baptists sometimes like to talk about their descent from a trail of blood that reaches back to John the Baptist, Methodist women should talk about our descent from a trail of testimony that reaches back to the women's encounter with the angel at the tomb, and with the risen Christ who told them: "Do not be afraid; go and tell..." (Matthew 28:10.) From their personal encounters with the living Spirit of Christ, Methodist women have refused to be afraid to give their testimonies. Congregationalist Mary Nind discovered she was a Methodist when she answered God's call to speak in church. Whether as minister's wife, like English, ordained pastor, like Huck, or lay activist, like Adams, Methodist women have witnessed to the faithfulness of God, who calls them to speak and to serve across the boundaries of gender, poverty, age, race, and oppression.

In each of these stories, we see women who were mentored and empowered by the ordinary people of Methodism, whether it was a grandmother or deaconess, a pastor or pastor's wife, friend, or church mother. We see that because Methodist women are confident that they are called to testify, despite isolation and poverty, they have sought educations suitable for their callings. We see that testimony leads to truth-telling, that voices once unleashed refuse to be silenced when they experience prejudice and injustice. We see amazing flexibility born of the "blessed assurance" that once Jesus calls, a path forward will be found, regardless of challenging circumstances and contexts. We see that the hardest trial for a Methodist woman can be when she is set aside by old age, or diminished health, or refusal of others to accept her gifts. But even in the midst of struggle, the testimony to God's faithfulness endures. ◆

Adapted from Professor Robert's keynote speech at the UMC women's history conference, "Struggle, Faith and Vision: Celebrating Women in the United Methodist Tradition—1788 to Today," at the Scarritt-Bennett Center in Nashville, Tennessee, March 9–11, 2007.