

## A MORAVIAN WOMAN WHO HAS INSPIRED ME

Rev. Dr. Willard R. Harstine

The Moravian woman who has most inspired me, second only to my mother, is the late Ruth Grams, wife of the late Rev. Roy Grams. Ruth was the daughter of Bishop and Mrs. Pfohl of the Southern Province and she received a rich musical background during her upbringing. She was a short, attractive woman with sparkling eyes and vivacious personality, a contagious smile, a delightful way of giggling, and boundless energy. Upon marrying Roy, she partnered with him in ministry in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania; Dover, Ohio; and Downey, California. I met Ruth as a teenager in Dover, Ohio where I joined the Moravian Church in the late 40's and became active in the Sunday School, youth group, worship, and choir.

From the first Ruth inspired me to use my gifts to the glory of God. Her cheerful personality and her loving devotion to the Lord rubbed off on me. She knew that I played piano fairly well, so she frequently invited me to accompany or to perform at church events. The Sunday School at Dover back in the 40's featured a Sunday School orchestra which played for "opening exercises." I quickly became the pianist in the orchestra. Many congregational dinners were enjoyed, and the entertainment for those dinners was often provided by Joe Steiner and me as we played vigorous duets on the piano, at the prompting of Ruth Grams. When I indicated a slight interest in learning to play the organ, Ruth offered to give me lessons. After only one year of lessons, I played just well enough to be asked to play at my high school class graduation ceremony in 1954, thanks to Ruth. I also learned to sing, at Ruth's invitation, by joining the senior choir during my freshman year in high school. I have been singing ever since.

And then there was the harp. Ruth was the first person, and one of the few persons I have ever known who could play the harp. She would play at special services, and without fail at the Christmas Eve service every year. I came to believe that this was the hallmark of a Moravian Christmas - to hear the lovely, transcendent tones of the harp celebrating the birth of our Savior! My one regret is that I did not respond to Ruth's offer to teach me to play this instrument. I am satisfied with my life, but it would certainly have been richer had I taken that unusual opportunity.

Ruth's inspiration for my life reached far beyond these musical notes, as important as they were. She and Roy were the leaders of the youth group, and I can recall the many activities, discussions, outings, and projects during which her dynamic personality and uplifting spirit kept me interested in the things of God. During my college years, I was invited by Ruth at the summer breaks to take a leadership role in Vacation Bible School at the Dover congregation. This rather minor activity helped to prepare me for my as yet unforeseen vocation. I attended summer camp at Tar Hollow for six or seven years in a row, and again, Ruth was the person who inspired me to make the most of those foundational experiences as she challenged me to use my musical and speaking abilities. I believe she saw possibilities in me that I had not yet imagined.

My most significant contact with Ruth occurred one day "out of the blue". As we were talking about various things including what I would be doing in the future, Ruth turned to me and asked, "Willie, have you ever thought of going into the ministry?" I mumbled a bit and admitted that I had not thought of it. But she made some encouraging remarks, and because of all that she meant to me, I began to think more deeply about what she had said. Within a year from that moment, I decided that the Lord was asking me to consider ministry. And the rest, as they say, is history.

My last vital contact with Ruth came in the summer of 1961. The Gramses were now serving in Downey, and Roy was suffering from cancer. I was about to enter my final year in Seminary when I got a call asking if I would go out to California for the summer to serve the congregation, as Roy was incapacitated. Although I had other plans, I could not turn down my dear friends who had truly impacted my life. So I went to Downey where I had a magnificent summer leading the congregation in all of its activities and living in the parsonage with the Gramses. Every evening we shared a devotional time together, and once again, Ruth's example of Christian love and faithfulness in the midst of this obvious trial (Roy's earthly life would end in October) made a deep impact upon my soul. Her guidance also helped me, a very inexperienced pastor, to maintain the congregation through that difficult summer which turned out for me to be eventful and highly memorable.

No woman whom I have ever known has fulfilled this description better than Ruth Grams - "She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue." (Proverbs 31:26) I owe a debt of gratitude to her for befriending me and channeling me in the vocational direction of my life. I consider her to be one of the truly great Moravian women of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. She lived into her 90's maintaining a vital witness, even playing the harp, until her latter years. And every December I would receive a Christmas card from Ruth bearing a greeting and a prayer that had been written by Roy during his ministry. I have been truly blessed and inspired by Ruth Grams, a woman without equal among my mentors, friends, and spiritual advisors. Perhaps it is no coincidence that both my mother and my daughter bear the lovely biblical middle name of "Ruth".

---