

Christian Methodist Newsletter

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So Great A Cloud¹

By Dr. Julia McLean Williams

I grew up in a parsonage home in the Louisiana Conference. We moved every four or five years - as was the custom then - from North Louisiana to South Louisiana and places in between. There were seven children in Slim and Lucille McLean's family. I was one of the twins, born at home while my Daddy was attending annual conference. When we drove into any new town on moving day in the month of November, we were the social event of the season. Everyone was certain that seven children would wreck the parsonage, but they soon calmed down when they found out what kind of housekeeper Mama was. Of course, it didn't hurt that we filled up at least two rows in church and that as time went on, those who were "just friends of the family" increased church attendance, the church roll and its financial resources.

We heard about what Daddy and Mama expected of us and what God expected of us at home and in the church. We learned early on that, even with our own big family and the larger one of the local congregation, we were just a small part of an even larger family that lived around the world. From the big, soft Bible beside the dining table we learned about the kingdom of God. At night when we went to bed we heard stories from a thick, illustrated book, *Hurlbut's Stories of the Bible*, and discovered what happens to ordinary people when they become God's people.

One Sunday Daddy invited a bishop from Mexico to speak at our church. He ate Sunday dinner with us. Between my plate and his was a lone English pea on the starched tablecloth. He pointed to it, winked and said, "Mine? or yourrrrrs?" It was then that I heard for the first time the trilled "r's" of the language I would one day learn in order to share the message of Christ in Bolivia, South America.

On Wednesdays after school the World Friendship Circle met in our parlor. Present was a giant map with mysterious names all over it.

Nurture

Seven days a week the church nurtured our lives for service in that world. Wednesday night prayer meeting was as essential to our health as the spoon of black strap molasses Mama gave us every night. I remember the first prayer meeting at the last church Daddy served in New Iberia, Louisiana. It was moving day. Daddy had been transferred from Crowley, Louisiana, just 25 miles away, in one of those mid-year moves caused by a death in the conference. We arrived just in time for a quick supper and then ran next door to the church to meet our new church family. Daddy was the last one to arrive. He had hastily unpacked and changed into his new seersucker suit from Sears Roebuck. As he lifted his well-worn Bible to read the Scripture, there dangling from the button on his sleeve was the price [tag] of his new suit. My sister and I, both college students, broke into gales of laughter. Daddy stopped and asked what was so funny, and then joined our laughter; the congregation followed.

I learned a lot from my preacher Daddy: his view of the world and of his Heavenly Father, the value he placed on the Scripture and the place of prayer in his life. I was deeply affected by the way he serenely met the complexities of a minister's life.

And then there was Mama. She was his help in his work and was a giant in her own right! After I had become a missionary, she went with me back to where Daddy had served when I was six years old to hear me speak. Mama came into the church after the prelude had begun. When the people recognized her, they all rose from their seats to hug her and to applaud her presence. Her arrival literally broke up the service. She was a great woman. My faith was nurtured by Daddy and Mama and by all those precious souls who faithfully shared our church life in Franklinton, Vivian, Bastrop, Crowley and New Iberia, Louisiana. Daddy had great expectations for me and for all his children. He expected us to continue to grow spiritually and to serve the Lord he served. In my first Bible he wrote the verse: "Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed" (2 Timothy 2: 15a, *KJV*).

Daddy died just two weeks before I graduated from college. He went home one Sunday in May after preaching a communion service and died of a heart attack. Twenty three years later Mama died, holding my hand & my sister's, talking to us about our families and to God about being ready to be with Him.

Heritage

No story about my journey could be complete without recognizing the heritage of faith I received through Mama, Daddy and that group of faithful servants in those churches who took seriously the command of Christ. They made sure that I heard his command [and] that I understood it as well.

Scripture

The words of Hebrews 12:1-2a come alive to me today because of them. These verses honor our heritage and unite us with those who have gone before. The testimony of those who have gone before us challenges us to be obedient. ...reflect on these words:

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross...”

(Hebrews 12:1-2a).

My Story

Perhaps my story can be helpful as we look at what it means to lay aside every encumbrance. Laying aside encumbrances means to be set free of entangling sin within ourselves and our church. It means being able to run, not only with endurance but with the joy Jesus knew, the race before us. That race is the mission of the Church!

But I come as a layperson. I represent the millions of United Methodists who look to our bishops, our pastors and our church to nurture and guide us. We live out our Christian faith from the pews, the Sunday School rooms, the vacation church schools, the mission studies, the United Methodist Women’s groups, the neighborhood prayer fellowships and the places across this land where we minister outside the doors of the church.

My roles in the United Methodist Church since those early days of being nurtured in a parsonage have been many. I’ve served as a Sunday school teacher, youth leader, choir member and UMW member. I studied missions at Scarritt, went to Costa Rica to learn Spanish and served as a missionary for the Board of Global Ministries to Bolivia, South America. I have led work teams to Central and South America and have interpreted the mission of the church as a core interpreter for the World Division. I organized Volunteers In Mission in the North Carolina Conference and taught missions in local churches at both conference and jurisdictional levels. On one occasion I was named Layperson of the Year in the North Carolina Conference. I have been Dean of the VIM rally at Lake Junaluska, and served five years as President of the Board of Missions in the North Carolina Conference....

Each of these roles placed me in direct and close contact with the lay people I represent...So great a cloud of witnesses - all kinds of people. In some we recognize ourselves or someone in the church we attend. There are lots of others: * the chronically ill * the elderly huddled around a TV * the young mother who just lost her baby * the 60-year-old man who married his 30-year-old secretary * the wife he left * the dying and...on and on, all sitting beside us right here and now. As the Scripture says, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders” (Hebrews 12:1). What stands in the way? What encumbrances do we need to lay aside? As people of God whose eyes are fixed on Jesus, let us lay aside these and any other encumbrances we in this community of faith carry!

I must tell you, and I do it with sadness, that there are many encumbrances in my journey. When I returned from the mission field in 1969, I went straight to the conference office and told them I was a returned missionary and that I wanted to volunteer to help promote missions in my conference. It was fully two years later when the Conference Council on Ministries director called on me to serve, and then only because he accidentally scheduled himself in two places at the same time. After that, things began to happen. He asked me if I would consider starting a Volunteers In Mission program like the one in the Holston and Western Carolina Conferences. We organized it and conducted five months of training and orientation. The first team went out from Edenton Street Church, the largest United Methodist Church in the conference. It was a huge success! All across the conference the people in the pew began to get excited about being Christians. They were being called on to testify to their faith, to pray and to rely on God. Everyone wanted to go. Not surprisingly, Advance Special giving nearly doubled.

One night when I arrived at a North Carolina beach for a team’s orientation, I received a call from a minister. He said, “Julia, you don’t know me, but can you meet with me and another minister this afternoon?” When we met they said, “We are district superintendents. We think you should know that the bishop told us in the cabinet to try to stop this ‘Bolivia thing’ that is getting ‘out-of-hand.’”

I was shocked! I wept as I said to them, “I feel grief for him and for whatever it is that could motivate such action. But we couldn’t stop it if we wanted to! It has been out of our hands for a long time.”

Encumbered!

Other teams went to Bolivia. The bishop of the church there asked if we could provide a scholarship for the Bolivian who had been our team leader. Before we landed in Miami we had our strategy planned, and in just two months we had raised the funds for two years of study. Since I coordinated everything through the Latin American office in New York, I called to tell them the good news. They were furious! The next year I took a team to Chile. The Latin American office graciously offered to send a letter of introduction commending us to the church of Chile. When I arrived there with a team of 16 volunteers, the district superintendent and the Board missionary showed me the letter. Attached to it was a personal

note from the Latin American director saying, "Watch this woman. She does her own thing." Again, it was grief I felt; not only because of the note, but because her relationship with that church was so poor that they would share her note with me-a relative stranger-out of their own grief and frustration.

The Volunteers In Mission program multiplied astronomically as a vital movement from the people in the pews across the Southeast. Soon I became a leader in VIM. For three years I served as dean of the United Methodist VIM Conference at Lake Junaluska, North Carolina. At the same time I was speaking all over the Southeast as a core interpreter for the Board of Global Ministries....

But as I worked as a conference officer, visiting churches and pastors and women across the church and hearing their concerns, I saw more problems and became more filled with grief. My telephone calls to New York were many. Conference calls with our treasurer and the treasurer's office in New York and letters, letters, letters-some signed by our entire board-were answered with one of two attitudes: We were either trouble-makers or were too dumb to understand the intricacies of the connectional system and the complexities of the international scene. They had too much to do to spend time answering their "critics." Soon I began to ask myself, "What does this mean? I'm not dumb. Our North Carolina Board is not dumb. And many of us have spent more time on the international scene than those who are writing us those miserable responses. Is this what Christians who were nurtured in the church and are eager to serve are supposed to get from the offices which were created to enable us to be obedient to the Great Commission?"

Then one day I got a call from H. T. Maclin. I had known him for some time and had found him to be the only one who seemed to have really heard our concerns. H. T. had been the General Board's field representative for the Southeastern Jurisdiction. He told me how a group of United Methodists who loved their church - people who felt the same as I did - had formed a supplemental missions agency, The Mission Society for United Methodists. He asked me to serve on its board. I was ecstatic because I thought that now we would surely be able to get some issues resolved! I knew and respected many of the people who had organized the Mission Society. I knew that theirs were the finest mission-supporting churches in our denomination. Mostly, I felt hope! And so I accepted H.T.'s invitation gladly, feeling that the North Carolina Conference could be a real reconciling agent. My conference board fully supported me. In fact, I was elected to the board for a second quadrennium with only three votes against me. But those three votes gave me insight into the next encumbrance. They came from the conference president of the United Methodist Women and the two women who happened to be sitting on either side of her. A week after I accepted the Mission Society's invitation to be on its board and two weeks before the series of UMW spiritual life retreats were to begin in Kentucky, I received an early morning telephone call. The voice on the phone said to me, "I have never had to do anything so hard, but you are not to come to Kentucky. We are canceling the retreats. You have betrayed the United Methodist Church. We do not want to hear anything you have to say."

I said, "What did you say?" She repeated herself. I asked what was going on. She said they had been at the national UMW conference and found out I was on the board of that "other" agency. They had called New York to verify it and were told that I should not be allowed to speak.

I wept.

It did not stop there. I went to Lake Junaluska where for 14 years I had attended Missions Week. That summer I taught on missions in the local church. There were 57 in my class... Afterward the dean of the Missions Week came to ask me to teach again the next summer. "But you know," he said, "they called us and told us to take you off the program. We argued with them and settled it by agreeing to put a monitor in your class." I called the office and asked, "Did you put a monitor in my class?" "Yes," was the reply.

I wept....

H. T. warned me that the opposition would be great. But I didn't know what an encumbrance was until I felt the grief and deep sadness we have experienced in our journey to restore the heritage of missions to our great church. I learned in my journey just how serious is the battle for the soul of our great church. I've learned in this journey that when God calls us to witness, He enables us to see the enemy clearly. He even gives us the courage to call sin, "sin," and the strength to lay aside its entangling, vicious hold.

We laypersons of the church feel it is time to "throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles" us in the United Methodist Church. (Hebrews 12:1)

Renewal Happens!

I want to tell just one of my missionary stories. I just got back from accompanying a team from Tanner-Williams United Methodist Church of Mobile to Costa Rica. I had spoken at their church several times. On my second visit, B.J.

Sanderson came up to me and asked, "If we get up a work team, would you take us?" And I said, "Absolutely." Little did I know that in just a few months they were going to have assembled a good-sized team.

We went to Costa Rica last year with the first team, which included B. J., his wife Virginia and 14 others. B. J. recalls that after he suggested his idea, he began to think, "Well, you know, they're going to paint and build. Maybe I shouldn't go. Maybe I should just send my money." But a friend kept saying, "Now look, B. J., you need to go. Maybe you don't understand why God's asking you to go, but there's a reason. Have faith and go." B. J. finally decided to go to Costa Rica.

The first Sunday morning there we went to church. B. J. had a video camera, and he was recording everything on video. I saw him come down the side aisle and ask his wife for the Bible. He went to the back of the church and in a few minutes he motioned for me to come. B. J. was trembling. He said, "Julia, I prayed before I came here and asked God to reveal to me why I should come. I saw a vision of a little crippled child. Last night I had that same vision. Now I've come in here to this church and I want you to look on the back row. There is that child!" And he began to weep. He said, "What must I do? What must I do? I went to get the Bible and I opened it up and it said, '...anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these. . .'" (John 14:12). He said, "Julia, do you think God is telling me that the reason I came here is to enable him to heal that little child through me?" I looked at him and said, "Well, we certainly can't ignore what you are feeling."

I went up to tell the pastor. He stopped the service and called B. J. to the pulpit with me to translate, and B. J. told the story. The little child was brought to the altar. Many other people came up to that altar, and for 45 minutes we prayed for healing for all kinds of things that were brought to that altar. The preacher asked B. J. to lead the prayer.

After the service nobody wanted to go home. Everybody stayed around. There was something there that was so precious. A lady stood up and said, "I've got to tell you something. I didn't want to come to church this morning. I have been full of anger and awful thoughts for years. I want you to know I am free today!" I found out that day that this was the first time B.J. had ever prayed in public.

We went back to Costa Rica on a second work team just two weeks ago, and B. J. went again. We went back to that same church and the little girl came running up to B. J. and threw her arms around him. The mother told us that the child was scheduled for two operations, and the doctor said, "We don't have to do either one of them. She is well."

The laypersons of our church are trembling from encounters with God!

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¹ Dr. Julia McLean Williams served for 10 years as a United Methodist General Board of Global Ministries (GBGM) missionary to Bolivia in community development and Christian Education. She has directed some 16 mission teams to South America. She served as Executive vice President of the Mission Society for United Methodists, and later as its president. *Permission to reprint given by Dr. Julia McLean Williams*

[Note: This is a summarized version of "So Great a Cloud" by Dr. Williams that is published in its entirety in the book *The Church in Bondage* on the Concerned Methodists' website: <http://www.cmpage.org/bondage/appendixm.html>

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Joy in Every Day **By Neva Latham**

You've probably heard it said that "you may be the only bible some people ever read". We are to be living examples of the love of Christ to the world and be ready to give an answer for our hope if asked (1 Peter 3:15). John and Pearl Thomson were like that with their lives and with their love and compassion for others. I knew them through our church congregation; their lives were a blessing to me and all those they encountered.

Pearl was a true "proverbs 31 woman". *She speaks with wisdom, and faithful instruction is on her tongue. She watches over the affairs of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness. Her children arise and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her. Proverbs 31:26-28.* In many ways Pearl lived out the scriptures. She always put others before herself; Pearl never spoke ill of nor gossip about anyone.

She ministered to the sick by taking them hot soup and iced tea - or one of her delicious pound cakes. Pearl, who never learned to drive, would often call me and say "If you will drive, I will bake a cake" and she and I would deliver it to those stuck at home. We attended a monthly bible study together. John would drop her off and I would drive her home. Even for such a good reason as bible study Pearl did not want to impose on others. She always wanted to do more for others than she would let them to do for her.

She worked with her hands like the Proverbs 31 woman and all year long made crafts to sell at the Fall Church Bazaar. The money was then used to help support missions or the needy. Insofar as I know, Pearl never

formally “witnessed” to anyone; she used the witness of her life in Christ and never boasted of all she and John did for others in the name of the Lord.

They owned a boat and had a tradition of entertaining some of her lady friends by taking them boating. Then they would go to their beach place and enjoy picking and eating the fresh crab, shrimp, and fish that they caught that day.

John was a man of 1 Corinthians 13. Never have I seen a person who demonstrated that scripture as closely as he did, *Love suffereth long and is kind. Love envies not and does not boast. It is not proud. It does not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not its own, is not easily provoked, it does not delight in evil...* He always kept his word even if it was to his own hurt, like Psalm 15:4 says for us to do, *Lord who may dwell in your tabernacle? Who may dwell in your holy hill? He who swears to his own hurt and does not change.*

If I were asked to describe the most outstanding characteristic of John Thomson it would be that he was a man of love. He tried his best to keep Christ’s commandment in John 13:35: *A new commandment I give you that you love one another.* He also lived out what the apostle Paul wrote in Romans 13:10: *A love worketh no ill to his neighbor.*

One of the things I remember most about John and Pearl was their giving spirit. One time John, Pearl, and his brother were stuck in a freak snow storm in South Carolina. They were heading home after a fishing trip in Florida. The heater had gone out in the car and they were snowbound. The motels in the surrounding area were all full. They eventually found shelter at the home of a very kind lady in the area. They wound up staying 2 nights with her. After this, each year at Christmas time John and Pearl sent the woman \$100.00. Even after Pearl’s death in 1982 John continued to send the woman money every year until she died many years later. John and Pearl helped out others in need financially as well.

They were very close, a loving couple who often held hands as they drove together on long trips or even just going home from church. Pearl and John are now in heaven rejoicing together and praising God. Before his death, John started to openly witness to others with his words as well as with his deeds. He witnessed to the goodness of God. When he felt happy about what God had done in his life or when a prayer was answered he would say “Praise the Lord”. John used to say that God wants us to enjoy all that he has given us here on earth. John’s life theme was to “Look for Joy in every day”.

John and Pearl lived their lives according to the word of the Lord. Let us remember their example and also “look for joy in every day” *For the joy of the Lord is your strength.* - Nehemiah 8:10

* * * *

The Rev. Charles Walker

Charles Walker,

It is difficult to put into words all that your friendship means to me. When I think of the times we have enjoyed together talking, eating at restaurants, joking, and preaching. I so much appreciate his passion for the United Methodist Church and his prayers for its renewal....

One of the highest honors you have paid me was when you allowed me to preach at the Community Evangelical Methodist Church, which you were pastoring at the time. Each time I would get up to preach, you would softly say to me, “Pour it on, Allen.” One time I gave my testimony “A Texas Mule”; another was when I preached an “apologetics” sermon entitled “Who is Jesus Christ?”

But one of the most memorable sermons was one that I had worked hard in preparing. I just knew it was going to have a great message. Before the service, I prayed and sought the Lord’s blessing on what I had to say. But during the delivery of the sermon itself, I really struggled with it. It was if I were trying to run through waist-deep water, but barely walking at half speed. At one point in my preaching, I don’t know what I was saying with my mouth, but my brain was having a conversation with me. It said, “Who are you anyway? Why did you ever think you could preach? You don’t have anything to say that would interest these people.” I struggled with the rest of the sermon just wishing it were over....I even committed the “unpardonable sin” of going until fourteen minutes past noon.

As I stepped down from behind the pulpit and joined you as we walked up the aisle to the back of the church, I said to you in a very low voice, “That is the worst sermon I have ever preached in my life!” Your response to me was, “Just give the Holy Spirit room to work, Allen.” I felt like a little boy who had fallen into the dirt and was picked up and dusted off by his father.

As the people filed out of the sanctuary, they shook my hand and told me how much they enjoyed the message. Person after person told me, “When you said _____ that really spoke to me.” I didn’t remember saying any of the things for which they thanked me but knew it was exactly as you had said – it was truly the Holy Spirit at work using me to speak to some of those people. No one was in a hurry to leave but just stood around talking with each other....

The last thing I want to say is that in one of the fundamental teachings in the Bible, we are told, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind and with all your strength." This is something that I believe women as a whole do much better than we guys do. I myself find it a bit difficult – to "love" another male even though it is God. Quite honestly, I used to really struggle with the idea. I would ask myself, "How can I do that? It seem unnatural, even if it is our Heavenly Father." Then I think of a guy named Charles Walker – and how much he characterizes what I call "The old-time Methodist pastors" who really loved the Lord and who shone with His holiness. A phrase that describes the preachers is the title to a song "There's a sweet, sweet Spirit in this place." There was a sweet, sweet Spirit in these men.

To me Charles fairly radiates the love and holiness of our heavenly Father's shining through him; I see in Charles all the love, compassion, and goodness that God can put into any one human being. For that, it is easy for me to love Charles as I would a father - and because of that, I have learned just how I can love my Heavenly Father.

With deep gratitude, love, and admiration,

Allen O. Morris

[Note: At 87 The Reverend Charles Walker is the most senior member of Concerned Methodists.]

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Spiritually Speaking

*Now I lay me down to sleep.
I pray the Lord my soul to keep.
If I should die before I wake...
I pray the Lord my soul to take.*

*If I should live for other days...
I pray the Lord would guide my ways.
- A Childhood Prayer*

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Worth Remembering

It is better to build a fence at the top of the cliff than to build a hospital at the bottom. – Tim Elmore, Mentoring, p. 140.

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Kids' Stuff

While working for an organization that delivers lunches to elderly shut-ins, I used to take my 4-year-old daughter on my afternoon rounds. The various appliances of old age, particularly the canes, walkers and wheelchairs, unfailingly intrigued her. One day I found her staring at a pair of false teeth soaking in a glass. As I braced myself for the inevitable barrage of questions, she merely turned and whispered, "The tooth fairy will never believe this!"

* * * *

A little girl had just finished her first week of school. "I'm just wasting my time," she said to her mother. "I can't read, I can't write and they won't let me talk!"

* * * *

On the first day of school, a first-grader handed his teacher a Note from his mother. The note read, "The opinions expressed by this child are not necessarily those of his parents."

