

Ruth Eschbach
Union Church Oral Narrative Project
Harry Rice
July 17, 2001

Transcribers: Bradlee Keller, Jason Canter, Thea Dickerson
GSTR Stories - Fall 2002

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[Bradlee Keller, transcriber]

HARRY RICE: [This is the] Oral history project and I'm talking to Ruth Eschbach on July 17, 2001. Ruth, to begin, we're just wanting to talk about your time at Union Church, but it would be real nice if you could start out to begin with talking a little bit about just some of the things that intervened between your arriving in Berea--perhaps where you were born, and some of your early experiences that got you on the road to Berea.

RUTH ESCHBACH: Well, first of all, I had known about Berea for some time, lived in New York city, and where I was working and both of my aunt and my sister were on the nursing faculty here at Berea college, and so almost by chance, my sister suggested that it might be a good place to retire. So, I came down here and purchased a house, walked through house and it was within walking distance of the college, where I was really interested in the college and what the college would be able to offer in terms of retirement. So, about 3 years later, then I actually moved to Berea. I was working for the United Presbyterian Church in New York City and was their executive for United Presbyterian women, and I had lived there for about 10 years, having lived previously in Chicago. I was looking for a place to retire, feeling that New York City would not be an easy in which to retire. So, this kind of opportunity opened up, and I moved here. Because my sister was related to Union Church and Union Church was within walking distance of where I bought my home, I just naturally gravitated toward Union Church, and I have never regretted it. Although there was a little Presbyterian Church out in the country and Whites Memorial, it was just too difficult for me to get back and forth. That helped to make me choose Union Church.

HARRY RICE: To hearken back to New York just a bit, how long did you work for the Presbyterian Church?

RUTH ESCHBACH: I worked for the Presbyterian Church. I worked as a staff person in Chicago from 1968 to '72, and then in '73, I think I moved to New York. My husband was the executive of the Presbyterian in Chicago when we were living there, and I became involved in working as a staff person for the national church after my own children went to college.

HARRY RICE: What was your first husband's name?

RUTH ESCHBACH: Donald E. Zimmerman

HARRY RICE: And he was an ordained person?

RUTH ESCHBACH: Yes. And he served in the capacity of what they call a general presenter in St. Louis and Chicago, and previously he had been a pastor in Dearborn, Michigan.

HARRY RICE: Well, when you came to Union Church, let's be sure, what year was that when you finally made that move?

RUTH ESCHBACH: I moved from [pause] I retired in 82--I need to check—'82 or '83 and came directly then to Berea.

HARRY RICE: For the record, your two sisters' names?

RUTH ESCHBACH: Sarah Wiley, who was a missionary in Thailand, and Martha Pride, who has been on the faculty of Berea College and connected with the Nursing Department.

HARRY RICE: And both at that point, both of them were teaching here at Berea in the Nursing Department.

RUTH ESCHBACH: I think probably it was '83, actually it was '83 that I moved here. I was thinking and because in '84 then Carl Eschbach who had been a long time friend moved here, and we were married and so then I was here in '84.

HARRY RICE: You had your two sisters to tell you something about Union Church maybe before you came, but I wonder what your first impressions of Union Church were having been sort of a professional church person for some years and then having lived in a parsonage with your first husband as a pastor's

wife and all of those background kind of things that you brought with you. So, I was wondering what you saw when you got there.

RUTH ESCHBACH: Well, I think the thing about Union Church that attracted me to it right away were the people that were members of the church. I found here a community of people with ideals that I could share, many of them, of course, connected with the college. So, that was the kind of situation, and I found it easy to make friends, and, of course, people knew Martha. So, you see, I was just sort of incorporated into her family and attended college functions immediately.

I was always interested in biblical studies, and one of the things I did almost immediately was get in some of the courses at the college in the Religion Department and also in the Greek Language Department so that I had something right away to absorb my energy. Then, of course, there's a closer relationship between the college and the church and many of the friends I made have both the college and the church. We're the same people as you see. And Carl who was the United Methodist minister since I had been here a year, he was very much interested in worshiping with me, so he came to Union Church too. Although he tried to relate to the United Methodist Church here in town, but I was already established at Union Church, so he choose to stay with me at Union Church. That was the way that got started.

HARRY RICE: Was there perhaps for both of you, or at least for you, some adjustments to make in terms of being in a non-denominational church after many years of the structures of your denominations?

RUTH ESCHBACH: Well, I'm obviously a very connected person, and I think then that I miss it. I continue to miss that kind of relationship beyond the local church, but on the other hand, being a part of the community and sharing in this particular community I found really very helpful, although I think there's things to be said both for Union Non-denominational church. There's a kind of diversity, which I like.

On the other hand, I have been steeped in the prophecies of Presbyterian government and I've added that and I also value the relationship beyond the local congregation, which I think Union Church misses.

But the people with the Union Church were very supportive and open, and I found a place immediately where I could serve in different capacities. I joined as

a wayside member which means I still have a membership elsewhere as well, but then with Union Church's special provision that if you make a request in writing, you can be granted full privileges and so that has been honored and I have participated actively in all the different boards of the church, and I think have served in all the different ones.

HARRY RICE: Are you on one now?

RUTH ESCHBACH: Yes I'm on the Mission Board now, but I have served on Trustees, and Christian Education, and I served a year as a deacon to fill out a term on the deacons.

HARRY RICE: When you came, who was doing what, the pastor, deacons perhaps? Or the Sunday school teachers, choir and so forth, who were the leaders at that point?

RUTH ESCHBACH: The pastor of the church was the Baptist Church minister, I can't think of his name right now.

HARRY RICE: Charlie Murray?

RUTH ESCHBACH: No

HARRY RICE: No?

RUTH ESCHBACH: No, he was, I know if I didn't have to think of it I would think of it.

HARRY RICE: Yes, I forgot to write that down, I'm sorry.

RUTH ESCHBACH: But anyway...

HARRY RICE: It has to be before Charlie Murray.

RUTH ESCHBACH: Yeah and he was also very ecumenically inclined, and so, therefore, he welcomed me. And was instrumental in connecting me with the Kentucky Council of Churches, where I served as a member of the Commission of Christian Unity. So he was really very interested in those kinds of relationships. Eventually, though, he left, and under a little duress.

Charlie Murray came. Now Charlie Murray was a Presbyterian, and so I felt very much at home with him because we thought very much alike in many things. I was a part of the committees that choose Charlie Murray, and so I was really pleased to have him come. I used to attend some of the Presbyterian meetings and things when Charlie was here and so kept a little bit more of a connection there. I was very fond of his wife, Mary Ann. I felt very much at home with Charlie Murray and planning and thinking and working on things with Charlie Murray. We were coming out of the same stream, although this was Union Church and was not connected with the Presbyterian Church.

HARRY RICE: Who were the Sunday school teachers?

RUTH ESCHBACH: Well, Martha was teaching and for a while we taught together, the adult class, and then she did something else and I became the adult bible class teacher and I thought that was simulating and had a good group of people.

HARRY RICE: At that time, were there the two adult groups, the bible and the discussing class?

RUTH ESCHBACH: It was only one, it was only one, and so I can't remember just how long we did, and then when Carl came, the church really welcomed Carl, and he was very happy in Union Church.

[Thea Dickerson, Transcriber]

Ruth Eschbach (RE): Although occasionally we'd, he'd, go to the Methodist Church, and he was active in the Methodist Church men's group, and for years, he would attend that regularly. And then he'd always made a point of getting acquainted with the Methodist pastor. And he regularly supported both Union Church and United Methodist Church.

HR: Who was the choir director?

RE: Ray Durham, I believe. Because I was involved with the Sunday morning bible class, I never became active in the choir, although in other situations, I have been involved in some of the choirs. But...

HR: Over the years, there's been disagreements over a variety of things. I wonder if you have any impressions about whether the disagreements were more about people, or were they more about what people believed, the personalities, or more about what people believed....

RE: Almost certainly personalities. I think there's a wide acceptance of diverse ideologies here and theologies. And, and I don't think, rarely, our decisions made, let's see, on the basis of the theology of someone. I think, I think there's a

difference, there's a wide diversity in Biblical interpretation in the church. But somehow, people seem to be rather accepting of the diversity. But the very, very diverse, if they actually had, would sit down and think about how what they're, what people are coming up with and I know of instances where more, for instance more literal biblical interpretation, made it difficult for some people. Some people left because of that.

HR: Because they were more conservative?

RE: Much more conservative.

HR: Conservative people left.

RE: Um-hmmm.

HR: The liberal people left, did you remember?

RE: Well, not while I was here. (Harry laughs) There may have been but no.

HR: I wonder, though wonder if--for a variety of reasons, especially diversity--does Union Church stand out to the community in contrast or comparison to other churches?

RE: I think, I think, I think it does. I think it's on the side of more liberal. And I think the church people support various social issues, like peace and are very active in well, Habitat for Humanity, things like that. Wherever I go, there's always the largest representation, and some of these things are made up of Union Church people. And I think there's no question that they're on the forefront of a lot of this.

HR: Was there any, do you think there's any negative impressions of Union Church?

RE: That other people around here....

HR: That other folks have. The more conservative folks, or just generally. It's so different that it doesn't seem to, people don't quite understand what it's all about...

RE: Well, I think people who like a very, formal traditional type of service may, may choose to go somewhere else. I don't know, I haven't heard very much.

But I would not be in a position here, so, you know, it would be difficult for me to judge that, but I think that things like, well, Habitat, Crop Walk, the Actors' Ministerial Association, the settling of refugees--these are places where you'll find people from Union Church. And, you know, almost more so than in some of the others. I would think that would be true.

HR: What was, what was Industrial like when you got here, and has it remained the same?

RE: It's not changed a great deal. I've never been active in Woman's Industrial because I've had some other things I needed to do on Fridays when they met so I've never been active there, though I'm very supportive of it. Carl served for a

long time as their chaplain, so we did have that kind of connection with, with Woman's Industrial. But...I volunteered occasionally but not, not significantly

HR: Do you remember who the various leaders of that program (RE interrupts: Woman's Industrial?) would have been during your time?

RE: Well I really would have to go over and look at the names because I just don't have them in my mind at this point and, and not having actually worked with them. I really wouldn't have that background, though I knew people were working with them and always were supportive of it. And when I was on the finance committee, I was really very supportive of the trustees getting regular raising the salary and things like that. So, you know, I've been supportive that way, encouraging it, because I think it's the one place where we do have an opportunity to contact, get in personal contact with people who are not always comfortable in Union Church. I think that people that come from Women's Industrial just are not quite comfortable with our type of service; I'm sure this is true.

But I think some people may come out of a more evangelical tradition and may find it difficult to adjust to Union Church. I think you find this in things like choice of hymns and things like that; they would much prefer some of the older, more familiar hymns. But I think basically, they are pretty accepting. And open, there's a kind of openness there that I have liked. I think some of the problems when Charlie left, we had some problems because people were not quite ready to accept Theresa Scherf, you know.

HR: Um-hmm.

RE: And, for various reasons, but I think the fact that she was a woman may have made a difference, you know.

HR: She certainly was, was the first woman pastor...

RE: Yes.

HR:...had there ever been an assistant ____+

RE: Well, she came as a co-pastor. And then, there was some misunderstanding as to what that meant when Charlie retired. I think that's the basic problem. Some people felt "co" meant that one or the other, and other people felt no, the arrangement was for both of those, both of them and not individually. So I think that was difficult.

HR: Was, this just came to me, the, the minister before Charlie Murray, was that Harley Patterson, no? No, I'm trying to think...

RE: ?Baptist? Umm...hmp (makes noise indicating she is stumped)!

HR: Well, O.K....I forgot my notes.

HR: So, I wonder what, what memories you have, you've served on all of the boards. Was there one that, that you liked most? You felt the busiest or the most useful?

RE: Well, I think it's hard to compare them. Because some are more programmatic than others. I was with Christian Education for a long time, and chaired it, at one point. We've always had a difficulty trying to secure teachers and that's always been a rather difficult kind of, of...of problem with your teachers(?). Basically, a pretty small contingency of children. You know, *small* classes. And not a lot of people who are free to, or feel that they are able to, to, to...to teach children, so that has been a problem. When my sister was here, she, at one point, was a superintendent, Sarah Wiley, was superintendent and that was kind of exciting because she was a trained Christian educator, and particularly with children. And she enjoyed that *very* much. She seemed to be able to, to enter into it in, in, in a kind of exciting way.

HR: How long was she in that work?

RE: She was there for maybe two years. She developed cancer and died, and she was active there for maybe a year or so. And part of the time she also sang in the choir, so she had-

HR (interrupts): Did she actually teach class or was she more of a-

RE: She was, she was really, they asked her to be a superintendent, and so she worked with the teachers primarily. But she herself was able to generate a lot of enthusiasm for that. And...Now, Martha, has been very active all these years with Woman's Industrial and has served there just continuously. She knows how to work with women; she particularly is good as a counselor, with their problems and stuff. So...she's been involved that way with them. I think there's no question about the Board of Trustees is a board that has some pretty, makes, has responsibility for some major decisions, particularly in the period when the Church has been, when we've needed to do something about the building. And I was part of in, in, during this period was the served on that board. I served at a difficult time, and we were having a lot of tensions. I've always felt Union Church needed to be commended for staying together and, and supporting the Church financially, even though I knew that people were not agreeing with some of the decisions that were being made in some of the leadership. But the amazing thing is that Union Church hung in there until they finally resolved some of their problems. And that to me is a real tribute to the Church. That they had some very serious disagreements but they still hung in there, supporting it. And and I felt to enjoy being [on the board of...]

[Jason Canter, transcriber]

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RE: Trustees, yeah, the trustees. And I really enjoyed that because I think that it was interesting to watch the development over time and where the emphases were being placed. I'm always...and I was supportive of having the daycare nursery there because I think that's something that community really needs. We have facilities for it, even though again, it's not all been smooth sailing.

HR: Just from your time with the trustees and as financial secretary, did you see any trends in financial support of the church?

RE: Well, at that time, we were just holding things together, but it didn't [*Interrupted*]

HR: This was before Kent (Gilbert) came?

RE: Yeah, that's before Kent came and...but...so things improved considerably, you know, once the church had someone like Kent pulling it together. Then I went back and served part of the time as, on the, with Christian Ed and then on the General Committee. Served on the General Committee, and then on the Mission Board.

HR: I wonder, with all this exposure you've had to the inner-workings of the church as well as days Sunday to Sunday, who are some of the saints that you've come across. Some of these people who have stayed, perhaps, I don't know. What is your impression?

RE: Well, I think a great deal of the Blackburns. They've been here a long time. And, of course, the Evans.

HR: Wilson Evans?

RE: Yes, Wilson and Ellen Evans. And they were always gracious to me and very welcoming. And...let's see...I'm trying to think who, of course, I was acquainted with the Hutchins when they were here. And Warren Lambert, I think he provided, when he was physically able, he provided a very steady impartial kind of leadership.

HR: Was he the moderator all the time that you were [*Interrupted*]

RE: He was the moderator all the time and that has just recently changed. That's been...he's been the moderator. But I know that there have been times when I have talked with him and have found him very impartial, open and really trying to represent what the congregation wanted.

I know during some of the difficult times, my husband was a Methodist said, "Oh they need a bishop"

HR: [*Laughter*] They do!

RE: They need a bishop, but I'm coming out of my tradition. I think of the corporate bishop of the Presbyterian you see.

HR: Which is a group?

RE: It's a group. Corporate bishop. And I really like that and I like the fact that decisions made within my tradition are, for instance, in connection with the pastor. It's a three-way kind of decision made up by the congregation, the pastor and the Presbytery is the third member of the group and I think that there is strong points there. I think also, particularly, in terms of the stimulation that comes from some of the kinds of programs that national groups can offer, particularly in leadership training, exposure to a wider world. I find that very exhilarating. And I have been able to attend some of our national, my national women's meetings. And I have...of course I was involved when I was on the staff in the development of these meetings, but I've also been able to go. And they bring together a lot, women from all over the world. And so often I think, "Oh, I wish I could bring Union Church people along with me" because it's something that is they don't really have a feel for.

HR: In the area of missions, what has been your impression of how missions have been looked at here at Union Church.

RE: Well, I think it's [*Interrupted*]

HR: It's changed? Or stayed the same?

RE: No, I think it's pretty much the same. But, their support tends to be for certain projects rather than a continuous support of any particular mission, you see?

HR: They shift from time to time, yeah.

RE: Yeah. And...but it's been very small, I mean as a representative, very small part of their giving, though they are very supportive of local projects like Habitat for Humanity and local community-type projects. They're very supportive of that. I think they are not as aware and do not...have not had...the continual kind of interpretation through a national body what feeds those kind of things, for overseas kind of work. They will...at the present time we're involved in a project...the development of wells, and, which was actually part of the mission program of the...the Synod of the Living Waters here in Kentucky. It tends to be sort of one-time gifts, you know, rather than a continual reciprocal relationship with any ongoing program outside of the church.

HR: Do you remember the mission giving as small, large, medium?

RE: It's not large.

HR: Does that stay much the same?

RE: It's getting a little bit better, but it stayed pretty much the same. I think the last few years, the Bazaar has been there for that. I think that has increased their giving considerably. But it's been a very small percentage of the church's giving. And I think partly, without continuing reporting from a regular mission program, it would be to be expected, though I think even in our connecticut denomination, the people respond very often to specific projects. You know they really do. And one thing, this church does not have any responsibility for denominational type program, which has to do with training pastors, providing pensions for ministers and development of curriculum materials, you see they don't have. They don't contribute to that kind of-

HR: You're suggesting that Union Church, in part of the denomination they would be sending more money out.

RE: Yeah, I think the other thing is they would be supporting some of these things that like pension programs for pastor seminaries, educational institutions, things like that, you see?

HR: Yes.

RE: Which they don't, you see. Other denominations train their pastors because they take pastors from other denominations and provide pensions for them. We contribute to pensions for a particular pastor, but the overall program, you know the administrative part of that, has to be paid by somebody else. They have no assessments like the Methodists seem to have.

HR: Per capita?

RE: No per capita, no.

HR: Portion?

RE: No! That's right.

HR: Any more saints?

RE: Here in this church?

HR: Yeah.

RE: Well, there are lots of saints. I think [*Interrupted*]

HR: Pillars maybe.

RE: Pillars? Bob Menefee and...let's see who else...well, you just take a look at the honorary deacons and you've got a pretty good list. Dorothy Tredennick has been here a long time. I hesitate to name people because some obvious people will be left out, and I don't have my list with me.

HR: Do you remember people particularly because of some service they've performed, some office they held, that you thought they were impressive or memorable?

RE: Well, during the period when Warren was not able to attend, Bob Menefee did a remarkable job holding things together. That worked very well. Then I think you have people like the Chaos, Dorothy Chao. Really something when it comes to her concerns--social concerns. And the Paynes...and, of course, the fact

the Paynes are going [and] have been on a mission trip [and] are still working constantly on that.

Betty Wray's family and her father was--when he was here--was a very steady kind of influence on the church. I don't know. Is it Betty Miller...Anyway, she's worked with children for a long time. She's really been very much committed to Christian education. Mary Miller. Of course, Mary Miller. She's someone that has been there over the long haul, very much interested. Jan Hamilton and her sister.

Some of the new saints and the Hobes and the Culps, and they have come since I have come. The Hobes and the Culps have made a significant contribution to the church and the...Boyces. Jean Boyce was always there...

HR: I wonder...if you may also think perhaps the same ideas maybe a little bit different way of what the church needs to do, keep on doing, or what the church needs to change. What don't we want to lose? What do we need to lose? Things that you really [*Interrupted*]

RE: Well, I think their openness and their accepting of diversity is really...is an interesting experience, and it's interesting because you can be with people of very different points of view and able to work with them and grow in the process and it's helping. The Orwigs is another family that has been there a long time and have not been able to do quite...[tape 3 ends]

[Tammy Horn, transcriber]

RE: ...and the Drakes...People like that, I just enjoy being with. But I think that for both Kol (?) and me, it been wonderful to be apart of this community. Oh, and Jack Henderson and Joyce: they've been around a long time. They've put unbelievable effort into this church. I don't know that the Wrights have been as active.

HR: So many people who are not so visible anymore. Of course, some people have died, but some people are not around, and you don't see them so much.

RE: That's right. And they are not able to be as active as much.

HR: Well, that's all the questions I can think of at this point. Thank you very much. Do you have a final analysis?

RE: No, except that I've probably been a member of this church longer than I've been a member of any church, aside from the local church. Because I have been a Presbyterian much longer. But, this place is the one I've been the most closely associated with, and for the longest period of time. I've actually lived in Berea now longer than I've lived anywhere else. That's about eighteen, nineteen years.

HR: Did you keep track of how many places you lived before you came to Berea? Or perhaps how many churches your first husband served? How many parsonages he would [unclear]

RE: Well, I grew up on the mission field. I joined the church when my parents were on [word unclear]. That was a Presbyterian church in Bloomington, Indiana. My first husband was Donald Zimmerman, who was the pastor of United Presbyterian. Eventually, those two churches came together, but that was after we were married. Then, we went overseas and eventually came back to Dearborn, Michigan. We were there for about nine years. Then, my husband went into national missions work for a few years. Eventually, we moved to St. Louis, where he became the General Presbyteriate [spelling?]. From there, he went to Chicago, and was the GP [????] there. Then, he retired from that and did some fundraising for the Board of National Missions for a while. During that period, I became employed, working as a staff for with women's program. But, I was active in the Presbyterian church in LaGrange, which is a suburb in Chicago and where I retain my membership. I draw a pension from the Presbyterian church. One thing about Presbyterians: they have a good pension plan. So, I've been able to be comfortable and live here in Berea.

HR: Well, thank you very much.

RE: Okay.

Tape ends.

