

Illinois WMU ... A History of Mentoring

Vignette by Donna Brewer

As Illinois WMU women, we have been turning our thoughts to our history. In 2008, we will be 100 years old. Many of us feel as though we have been involved for the entire 100 years. The reality is, however, that for most of us our years of service to WMU have slipped quickly. As I find myself looking over my WMU history three faces and names stand out in my mind. Two you will find in the written history of our State WMU. The third no one but I would know, yet she was my first missions mentor.

Her name was Carine Edwards and I had known her from the time I was a child. She was the president of what was then called Women's Missionary Society in my church. I had been a GA (Girl's Auxiliary) but our church did not have YWA's, so I became a missions "dropout." When I was in my early 20's she asked me to come to a WMS meeting. As much as I loved her, I politely declined. I mistakenly thought that would be the end of that. After all, those were the "older women" of my church in that group. She continued to ask and I continued to find excuses. Finally I thought, "I'll go just once and then I can say for sure that this group is not for me." So I went. What I found was a group of "older women," at least 40 years old, who loved the people of the world and the people down the street from the church and all across our nation who did not know Jesus. They learned about missions, and prayed, and gave not only money but themselves. I was hooked! Years later, Carine told me how God had laid it on her heart to pray for me and invite me to the meeting and to give me my first attempts at leadership. Before she died, I told her how much her faith in me meant and that I would do my best to follow her example.

The second woman who influenced my missions life was Grace Laughlin. I was 23 years old in 1965 when Grace was elected to serve as Illinois WMU President. The next year I went to my very first state convention. To say that I was in awe of the lady who presided at the meeting with her beautiful hat and gloves would be an understatement. I was sure she was a great celebrity. I knew, of course, she was from my association, but I never dreamed I would ever get to know her personally. Many years went by and we became friends, working together in our state and our association. In 1987, I was asked to serve Illinois WMU as president. My first thought was "Oh no! Will I be expected to wear hats and gloves?" At that time Grace talked to me about serving in that position. The first thing she said was that she would pray for me. She would ask God to provide guidance and wisdom and the strength it would take to fulfill that task. She also gave me pointers on presiding at meetings, what to wear, (no hats please), and how to sit and stand. More importantly she helped me to understand my role in the state and on the national WMU level. Grace and her husband, Jim, moved to North Carolina but her heart never left Illinois. When she would come

back for a visit or a doctor's appointment she would call me and say, "It's your turn to buy lunch and I want to hear all the Illinois WMU news." Just a few years before she died, she was living in a nursing home in Birmingham. I had a chance to visit her one afternoon. We talked over old times and all the latest "WMU news." Before I left I hugged her, and thanked her for gifting me with her love for missions.

My third mentor was Helen Sinclair. For 25 plus years Helen served Illinois WMU as executive director. During a number of those later years I had the privilege of working with her both as an Associational WMU Director and as a conference leader. To say that I was "green" as a leader would not be an exaggeration. To Helen, however, I was someone who could be nurtured and taught, and to that end she took me under her wing. She gave me opportunities to travel with wonderful women and lead conferences. She helped me to see Illinois as a mission field. It was she who took me to China Town in Chicago for the first time. She showed me how we did missions in Illinois and why we did them that way. She was loving and patient with someone who needed just that. I'm not sure if I ever told her how much her leadership and trust in me meant. I know many of the things I learned from her I still use today. In case I didn't say it, "Thank you, Helen."

As I think over my WMU years many other names and faces come to mind. People have cared enough to give of themselves and share their wisdom and leave a lasting impression on a life. Is there a life you or I could touch? Is there a difference we could make? Will the future find us faithful as mentors?

This is a personal story of mentoring. It could be used to stimulate other stories of mentors at a church or associational WMU event. A leader might ask participants to tell or write a paragraph about someone who influenced their lives for missions by being a mentor. It could also be used to challenge women to become a missions mentor to a young person in their church or association.