

The Journey of the New Women

Societal Context

The Twentieth Century birthed events that kindled a new consciousness among women. World War II drew women into traditional male jobs and women's views were changed forever.

The "We can do it!" spirit of Rosie the Riveter hindered women from reverting to traditional roles. This led to a decade of quiet desperation as awareness of the potential for creative engagement simmered. Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* ignited the women's movement across the nation in 1963. Thus was sparked a woman's revolution of radical proportions throughout the 60's.

The Civil Rights struggle and key events of this revolution marked many of the new women as "our" journey began. Anne Wood's trip to Selma to march with Martin Luther King and Sarah Caufield Booher's participation in food delivery in Los Angeles following the Watts Riots triggered awakenement.

The Ecumenical Institute¹

The 1954 meeting of the World Council of Churches, in Evanston, Illinois, made a resolution to begin a center for the training of lay people in North America, taking as an example the Ecumenical Institute of Bossey, Switzerland. In 1956, Christian businessmen in Chicago, sponsored by the Church Federation of Greater Chicago founded The Institute of Ecumenical Studies in Evanston, Illinois and invited Dr. Walter Leibrecht to come from Germany to be the director (Stanfield, 2000).

During this time, a group of faculty members and students at the University of Texas were studying the relationship between their faith and contemporary life. Dr. Jack Lewis founded a group called the Christian Faith and Life Community. Dr. Joseph Mathews and others created a curriculum for students and laity. The Community began to work on the role of churches and congregations in society.

In 1962, when Dr. Leibrecht returned to Europe, Joe Mathews was appointed dean of the Ecumenical Institute in Chicago. He brought with him a group of people, seven families, who had been experimenting with a disciplined life of worship, study, and service (Stanfield, 2000).

When the seven families moved from Texas to Chicago, they focused primarily on developing curricula (RS-1) for church renewal. However, in 1963, they relocated from Evanston, Illinois to the west side of Chicago and gradually began an experiment with community development.

From the premise that local communities constitute the basic building blocks of society, the Institute began working in a ghetto neighborhood on Chicago's west side, which became known as Fifth City. Door-to-door interviews and neighborhood meetings provided a way for the local residents to review their many problems and to begin to design practical solutions (Stanfield, 2000).

¹ From ICAI web site www.ica-international.org/history_2.htm

As local residents became involved, strong women, such as Lela Mosley, Charlie Stewart, Ruth Carter and others emerged to participate in building models and experimenting with local community renewal.

The Trilogy

In early 1967, staff at the EI developed a tactic they called “the Trilogy” to further their strategy of recruiting and involving affluent suburban women in implementing the Ecumenical Institute’s plans for the future. Lyn Mathews and Addie Gregory were assigned to recruit women who had been RS-1 participants. Some of these women were already involved in metro cadres. Lyn’s appealing message, “all awakened women are gathering” was highly successful. Room A was filled to capacity with over one hundred women from the Chicago region.

The Trilogy, three Wednesday luncheons in April were the first experience in the west-side ghetto for many. The women learned the story of 5th City, toured the neighborhood by bus, visited the Preschool and were blasted into a new awareness by the story of Charlie Stewart.

Joe Pierce’s pitch for money at the end of the third session was offensive. Despite this, a number of women expressed a desire to return the following week to discuss possibilities over and above financial support for participating in the work of the Ecumenical Institute.

About thirty women met together once a week during the spring probing new arenas of involvement for women. When Joe Mathews gave the women an assignment to put out an EI mailing, several women realized that stuffing envelopes and licking stamps was not what they had in mind for urban engagement.

The New Woman’s Forum

By June about a dozen women continued to meet weekly, driven by a desire to participate in urban renewal and a somewhat nebulous vision that a new style of woman was on the brink of breaking open.

During the summer, several women who had been meeting weekly worked at the Ecumenical Institute preparing food and décor and supplying materials for the weekend 5th City celebrations. Summer was also a time of dreaming and experimenting with model building, with a sense of great challenge although little skill and much unclarity.

Another one day session held in the fall invited more volunteers to work with 5th City. We now referred to our weekly gatherings as the Guinea Pig Program. We divided ourselves into two groups, A and B in order to research and experiment with how suburban woman could link herself with the needs of the city. The A group manned a desk at EI and was assigned a closet for materials. This group began helping in the 5th City pre-school, painting rooms, mimeographing, etc. The B group made up of those who had small children or were employed, participated by special assignment doing research and work relative to 5th City at home and in evening meetings. Aimee Hilliard was assigned to work with the women (ostensibly to keep an eye on us).

Early in our journey we sensed that one of the keys to shaping women’s engagement was corporate study. In the fall of 1967 we studied *Before the Mayflower* by Lerone Bennett, and the 5th City Model. Assignments were made on a rotating basis so that everyone had the

opportunity to assume responsibility for the group's intellectual life and be trained in the process.

By this time we understood ourselves as the New Women's Forum. The core leadership called the FEW assumed responsibility for planning and assignments.

1986 began with an emphasis on the mission in 5th City. This involved training in Imaginal Education, recruiting suburban forces for volunteer aid in the 5th City Pre-School Head Start Program, creating a supply closet for the pre-school and participating in the guild and stake structures of the 5th City Program.

In winter 1968, a training program developed for the Pre-school volunteers gave women a comprehensive context for their engagement. This training during the lunch hour on the days the volunteers worked enabled a vision of the new woman and covered Individual, Family, Community and Globe.

To symbolize that we were standing with 5th City, we made red smock aprons for ourselves with the 5th City symbol on the front. The volunteers proudly wore these as a sign that symbol and the form of events are determining factors in success.

That spring the women made uniforms for the pre-school teachers, wrote curricula for the summer quarter's educational forces, sponsored a 5th City Ensemble production in Evanston and spoke about the 5th City experiment to women in the Highland Park Presbyterian Church.

Then in April the death of Martin Luther King, Jr. and subsequent riots rocked and scarred the community. Many of the women transported food to the west side and cared for Order children in their homes during the period of the riots.

Then the Ecumenical Institute Staff said a radical "no" to continued NWF active participation in 5th City. The decision to carry on the NWF experiment was symbolized by the continuation of weekly meetings in the suburbs throughout the summer, during which we created, packaged and sold 5th City Christmas cards, worked in the Regional Office, and created a problemat on American woman. This problemat became the basis for our next shift in direction.

The Global Woman's Forum

The New Women's Forum met weekly in each other's homes. We studied concerns in women's lives as we read and dialogued. We became convinced that questions of self-esteem and self-confidence were key as women's roles were shifting everywhere. We hungered for courage to break through to new responsibilities, practical skills training and ways to fully participate in the community.

The study of Kazantzakis, *Saviors of God* gave each of us a deepening awareness of the journey of the spirit. We continued to struggle to define the New Woman's role in the Spirit Movement.

By the fall of 1968 we decided our husbands should meet each other. One of the women said, "Okay, I can have an Open House." We planned a cocktail party at her house in Park Ridge.

Early in January our next gathering at the Dresslar's farm near Crystal Lake opened the door to our becoming a group. To further our understanding of 5th City, Joe Mathews, spent the weekend with us. Joe's energetic affirmation was a compelling invitation to the

men. Being a Methodist pastor with a Bishop for a brother, we assumed he knew things we didn't.

That weekend Super Bowl Sunday decided the Sunday timeline. Everybody insisted they had to get home for the game. So toward the end of Sunday morning, Don stood up and addressed a question to each couple. He went around the circle asking, "Do you want to continue to meet together each week to study and plan how we support 5th City?"

Only two couples said, "no."

Nine couples (Betty & Sheldon Hill, Georgianna & George McBurney, Mary Warren & Don Moffett, Betty & Martin Pesek, Laverne & Jim Phillips, Priscilla & Rodney Wilson, Anne & David Woods, Nicki and Len Dresslar, plus the Cawfields) started meeting once a week at one couple's house on Waukegan Road in Lake Forest. All the men had successful jobs, but yearned for something broader. We studied the happenings in the world and the church. We discovered patterns in the world and in our lives. We knew this was a path for the journey we must walk.

Known as the North Shore Cadre this group of couples participated in weekend courses with the Institute at their west side campus in 5th City: cultural studies, individual and the family, world religions, and imaginal education. Several began to learn how to become teachers of the Institute's courses.

One afternoon four women enjoying a soft drink in an Eden's Plaza drug store in Wilmette suddenly conceived of writing a seminar on the "new woman" to take to the globe. The course was developed as a tool to reach women worldwide. The new woman's course was tested with the women of the Order on the west side. A five session Lens (A Seminar for the 20th Century Woman) held with women at Barat College covered the global situation, renewed social engagement, recovered authentic vocation, recreated human value and local application..

Over the next few years, Global Women's Forum events were held throughout the United States, Asia, the Pacific and Europe. Eighty Chicago suburban women attended the newly created five-session course taught by NWF members. Often women who had understood themselves as "less than adequate" discovered a new sense of power as they experienced the imagery in the talks, the tri-layered art form conversations, the centerpieces, the readings from Kazantzakis and the rituals. One Aboriginal woman commented in a Global Woman's Seminar, "If they can do that, I can also."

In villages in India it became clear that placing the woman's montage in front of a woman and writing out her name gave her a sense of empowerment.



In recognition of the seriousness of the task, the NWF accepted the responsibility of recruiting and enabling the spring quarter RS-1 courses at the Moraine Hotel, and gave a monthly donation for the salary of a member of the 5th City Board of Managers.

Greater experimentation in the symbolic area of life together occurred in 1969. New insights were gained into the meaning of contemplation, meditation, and prayer through conversations on the solitaries. Participation in a solitary time during meetings broadened our spirit life.

Quarterly celebrations were carefully planned and highly symbolic. We experimented with exploding old images of time by rising before our families, leaving our homes, driving into the city or out into the country before sunrise and holding highly ritualized conversations with candles or bonfire.

A City Odyssey celebration in the Loop took us on the symbolic human journey by way of a tour through sections of the Art Institute. Each woman, with a map of the Loop, spent time alone in her own meditation in a location of her choice. Then small groups toured particular galleries of the Art Institute, followed by a corporate lunch with participation in a spirit conversation.

During this year the Aztec calendar and a four-year timeline were created which gave an imaginal picture of the future. Excitement and sobering reflection filled the NWF. We had moved out of our comfort zone and were often offensive to both family and friends.

To the Spirit Movement

Summer '70 the Local Church Experiment began. The endeavors of the New Women and the North Shore Cadre provided vital data for the local church experiment. Our methods of edge approaches determined arenas of need, conducted trials and used ourselves as guinea pigs.

The creation of the Global Women's Seminar raised the imperative for a procedural manual to enable the course to be taught by women of the Spirit Movement anywhere.

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The New Women's Forum stood strong before the demand to be spirit women who struggled with a new vision of what it meant to be a woman in the 20th century.

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