

## MY STORY

The Norwood Park Presbyterian Church joins four other Norwood Park churches and opens an Ecumenical Center in an empty storefront on Northwest Highway. We have imagined this as a place to talk with folks, to read and relax. Rodney is elected President of the Board and by 1962 our lives take a new road.

The Ecumenical Institute has recently moved to the Chicago area and is hunting for places to hold courses. In their hunt the word "Ecumenical" catches their eye and they contact our preacher who puts them in touch with Rodney. They tell Rodney about their initial course called Religious Studies One (RS1)- He agrees to let them teach this course for eight consecutive Wednesday evenings. As they explain the course Rodney hears them asking questions: what am I finally up against in life, is there any word of possibility for life, how can I make decisions about what to do, and how can I contribute significantly to history?

This course sounds intriguing so I decide to take it. In the process of their conversations they have also asked Rodney to serve on their Board. He agrees.

The EI's first course in Norwood Park's Ecumenical Center takes place in 1962. I join that class and am most fascinated with the way they ask life's questions and what I find myself thinking about.

Toward the end of the class they talk about taking the course to Park Ridge and holding it with a group of high school kids. I stay to talk with them at the end of the evening and ask if I can bring some of my church's kids to their course. They say yes and I take them to Park Ridge one evening a week. They use a series of art and music to raise the questions raised by the theologian's writing in the adult course. Don Warren and Fred Buss's insights blow me away as they go through the course with the kids. It feels as if they know what the kids are going to say before they say anything.

From the premise that local communities constitute the basic building blocks of society, in 1964 the Ecumenical Institute began working in a ghetto neighborhood on Chicago's west side, which they call Fifth City.

By early 1967, my telephone rings and Addie Gregory says, "You are invited to join the enlightened women of Chicago for lunch at the Ecumenical Institute."

Fascinated, I drive to Chicago's west side. I hope to hear how to be involved in the urban. Everything I read says, "The real need lies in the inner city."

The women invited have all taken RS-1. The staff of the Ecumenical Institute shares their vision and hopes for Fifth City, the community in the urban ghetto.

Following this luncheon, a group of several women decide to organize a Trilogy, a group of three lunch programs to invite women to understand the urban situation on the west side of Chicago. Fifth City women like Charley Stewart, Lela Mosely and Ruth

Carter volunteer to be the first women to change their neighborhood. These women set their sights on health and education for all and find ways to have caring and safe neighborhoods open new doors.

I begin to volunteer in the pre-school once a week and our daughter, Mary, age four, participates in the class when I go there. Each week, after a day of wiping noses and ushering kids in and out of activities, I load broken tricycles into my station wagon. Rodney repairs and salvages parts so that two broken trikes become one workable vehicle. He remarks, "I think you are running a demolition derby instead of a preschool."

Following the Trilogy about thirty women meet together once a week. When Joe Mathews, the Dean of the Institute gives us an assignment to put out a mailing, several women recognize that stuffing envelopes and licking stamps doesn't fit their idea of significant urban engagement. The reality of the urban issues has captured the hearts of these women.

Several women volunteer in the 5<sup>th</sup> City preschool. After the children eat lunch and have settled down for their naps the volunteers go to another room. There we eat our lunch and go through training on curriculum that a couple of us have written.

An intense period of studying, teaching, and serving with other women consumes us. Commuting to the inner city several times a week gives us a sense of doing something important.

Another one-day session held in the fall invites more volunteers to work with 5th City. One group of women begins helping in the 5th City pre-school where I volunteer once a week.

Then in April the death of Martin Luther King, Jr. and subsequent riots rock the community. The Institute Staff says a radical "no" for the women to continue active participation in 5th City.

We continue to meet once a week in the suburbs for study and planning. We struggle with how to support 5th City from a distance and redefine the new women's role in the urban. We name ourselves the New Woman's Forum. We begin to create a woman's seminar.

The New Women's Forum meets weekly in our homes. We study concerns in women's lives as we dialogue and reflect. We become convinced that questions of self-esteem and self-confidence are key. Women's roles are shifting everywhere. I hunger for the courage to break through to new responsibilities, practical skills training and ways to fully participate in the community.

At the suggestion of the Institute staff we study Kazantzakis, *Saviors of God*. We are excited by Kazantzakis' writing and begin to have a deepening awareness of the journey of the spirit. We struggle with his call to service, "At every moment of crisis an array of men (people) risk their lives," "What are we to do at this time?" We are learning a lot, but wonder how to support Fifth City. We sew several red aprons with the Fifth

City symbol on a pocket for the preschool teachers. We call ourselves the New Woman's Forum and we strive to support Fifth City from the suburbs.

We begin to think we need to introduce our husbands to each other. Nickie Dresslar says, "Okay, I can have an Open House." We plan a cocktail party at her house in Park Ridge.

Two couples Joe Mathews and Charles Moore plus their wives come from the Institute. Rodney says afterwards, "I liked talking with all those people. They are a neat bunch. The bartender Len hired for the party blew my mind. Once I told him what I wanted to drink, he never forgot it."

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

Being a Methodist pastor with a Bishop for a brother, we think he must know things we don't.

It was Super Bowl Sunday and everybody insists they have to get home for the game. So toward the end of Sunday morning, Don stands up and addresses a question to each couple. He goes 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 say, "no." The others say, "yes" and begin to meet at the Pesek's house in Lake Forest one evening a week. Thus begins the North Shore Cadre.

Sixteen of us start meeting once a week at the Pesek's house on Waukegan Road in Lake Forest. Georgianna and George McBurney, Anne and David Wood, Priscilla and Rodney Wilson, LaVerne and Jim Phillips, Betty and Sheldon Hill, Betty and Martin Pesek, Mary Warren and Don Moffett, Nicki and Len Dresslar, Sarah (now Booher) and Bill Caufield.



The North Shore Cadre

*Len Dresslar, Betty Pesek, George McBurney, LaVerne Phillips, Betty Hill, Don Moffett, Mary Warren Moffett, Jim Phillips, Rodney Wilson, Nicki Dresslar, Priscilla Wilson, Sheldon Hill, Jana McBurney.*

All the men have successful jobs, but join their wives as we all yearn for additional ways to serve the community. The cadre studies Kenneth Bouldings, *Meaning of the Twentieth Century* to push our thinking into new arenas.

Soon the New Women design a one-day seminar to aid women to reflect on who they are and what they want to be. We call it the “Global Woman’s Forum.” We train other women to present this forum as it travels to six continents.

Priscilla H Wilson