

REV. JON REGIER:

The Migrant Ministry grew out of Protestant women attending a League of Nations conference on the conditions of women around the world. The plight of migrant women in other countries opened their eyes to the needs of migrant women and children in the United States. The World Day of Prayer and its offerings were started to interpret the needs of women and children in the migrant streams and to support programs meeting those needs.

In September 1958, I left an exciting inner city ministry in Chicago to go to New York to be the Executive Director of the Division of Home Missions of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA. During the interview process, I became acquainted with a most remarkable woman, Edith Lowry.

When I asked Edith why she [having served in one of the two executive positions that were now being merged] would not be the new Executive, she explained that if the cause of justice for the migrants was to be taken seriously in the present political climate, a man was needed. Unfortunately, she was right, for the Protestant church was a bona fide 'Old Boys' operation.

Edith brought professional day care to migrant children through the employment of Monica Owen. Strong operational committees managed the Ministry in 40 states, with leadership from field staff. Edith used the Church Women United network, superbly making progress in providing tools, equipment and transportation for program and staff. Elizabeth Harrington, a political activist of the YWCA, and Edith Lowry had become good friends by the time I came to the scene. Elizabeth was most helpful as our efforts moved into the national arena.

From my first day on the job, Edith kept my feet to the fire on staff needs and development as well as problems of increased costs due to growth. To move the national interests nearer to 'the field,' Edith had established three regional directors: the Rev. Dean Collins on the West Coast, the



Edith Lowry

Rev. William Scholes in the Central region, and Edith in the Eastern area. Our Division was the poor stepchild of the NCC. This was exemplified in our obsolete, broken-down equipment and cruddy offices on Fourth Avenue in New York City. In the minds of many, our only viable programs were our Town and Country Churches, the Urban Church and the Church Building and Architecture departments. I can still hear Edith saying, "Jon, we have to find ways to make migrant work important to other people." Two things were classic Edith: 1) to stress a point, she started the sentence with your name, and 2) that which was important happened in 'the field.'

In an early staff meeting, Edith, with a cheer leader's enthusiasm, asked how we could make the Migrant Ministry more visible. Louisa Shotwell, the Division's staff person for mission interpretation, said it was time to personalize the Ministry. The charming book Roosevelt O'Grady was Louisa's contribution, as were numerous articles.

Urban Church Executive Meryl Ruoss suggested that we get TV coverage, so I approached the Broadcasting and Film

Commission. "Migrants, forget it! Now if you want to talk about something like inner-city ministry, great." God has mysterious ways, her wonders to perform! I began working on Urban Issues with Bruno Krocher of the BFC and a wonderful woman, Pam Ilaf of the CBS staff. I arranged for Pam to meet Edith, who explained the incredible network of Migrant Ministry women, Church Women United, and the interest of the 40 State Councils. We never did a Migrant program, but some months later Edward R. Murrow's "Harvest of Shame" appeared on CBS from seemingly nowhere. We later learned that it had been in the can and had not been shown because the lawyers thought it too controversial.

The impact energized the troops all over the nation. Edith forged an excellent relationship with Senator Harrison (Pete) Williams, Senate Labor Committee chair. She suggested that it was time to get the White House involved. Thanks to the help of Senator Williams, Elizabeth Harrington and some friends in the labor movement, President Eisenhower set up a national Migrant Advisory body.

In the newly built 'God Box,' Edith and I had adjacent offices. On a regular basis, she would bounce in with another idea. For the 40th anniversary of the founding of the Migrant Ministry, we decided to do a one-year study. The process would begin with the migrants and concerned local people, and would culminate in a national conference in Washington. That conference resulted in the "Goals For the Next Decade," the most significant of which was to assist migrants in organizing to exercise their right of self-determination.

Edith was also concerned about replacing West Coast director Dean Collins, who'd left before I came on board. Edith, Bill Scholes and I decided to have Bill move to Denver, still covering the Midwest and Coast, and to hire a director for the California Migrant Ministry. At the next Division Board meeting, Edith asked me to meet a young man soon to graduate from Union Theological Seminary, who she and Bill thought would make a good CMM director.

That morning my mind wandered back to my high schools in the Sacramento and San Joaquin valleys. I thought of my friends, children of the managers of corporate mega-farms developed when other friends' farms were foreclosed by the banks. I knew the toughness and brutality of these corporations. In the depression days, we five preacher's kids worked in the fields and sheds. Migrants, streams and shanty camps were no strangers to us.

We had a delightful lunch. Chris Hartmire was most impressive. On the way back to the meeting, I told Edith and Bill that I really liked Chris, but that he was too inexperienced for the job and would be chewed up by the corporations. Bill, in his quiet way, was very clear in telling me that I was wrong about Chris. Edith confirmed Bill's opinion. Chris was hired, and the rest is history--'O what fools we mortals be.'

Shortly after this, Edith Lowry, daughter of famous Baptist minister and hymn writer Robert Lowry, was laid to rest in the Lowry plot in a cemetery in Plainfield, NJ, the home of her lifetime. Though it was a most local occasion, her national impact was recognized: a few migrants and Senator Williams with tears in their eyes quietly slipped into the service and waved goodbye at her grave side. I can still see the Senator standing quietly after others left, watching the cemetery people fill in the grave. Soon after, the Senator took sick leave from the Senate, re-emerging a year later and addressing the Migrant Ministry in his first national appearance as a recovering alcoholic. The Migrant Ministry has ministered to many of us who don't work in 'the fields.'



From left: Monica Owen, Edith Lowry, Louisa Shotwell, Bill Scholes