

# *Women in International Mission:*

## A DEDICATED LIFE: LOU ANN PARSONS, SOUTH AFRICA

by Ana Gobledale

In spite of missionary life not necessarily being a lucrative one, generations of people have dedicated their lives to serving others through the church in distant lands. Their salaries have adequately sustained them, but not necessarily resulted in large piles of personal capital! Returning to the USA upon retirement, these servants of the church often have limited resources. So, what to do with them?



In response to this concern, mission-minded folks realized the need for a continued commitment to missionaries, and made a mission project out of the task. The result... Pilgrim Place Retirement Community in Claremont, California. Having just spent a month at Pilgrim Place, I can vouch that it continues to thrive as a remarkable community of retired missionaries and other church workers. New generations of "Pilgrims" bring their rich international experiences, dedication and faith into this vibrant community. Tod and I look forward to our own retirement there!

At Pilgrim Place, I was re-united with Lou Ann Parsons, a wise and strong woman, with the "power to do" who served Global Ministries (and previously the United Church Board for World Mission) for more than 40 years in South Africa. Through the dark days of apartheid she and her husband, Jack, unswervingly continued their ministry in often violent and threatening surroundings. When Tod and I moved to South Africa in 1984, Lou Ann welcomed us with 30 years experience, and offered her love and guidance throughout our years there.

May Lou Ann's words, shared in this interview, inspire you as she has inspired me through the years.

**Ana:** What childhood relationships or experiences influenced you toward your commitment to the church?

**Lou Ann:** I was born in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and spent my high school years in Detroit...very involved in the Congregational church. ...My pastors were influential as was the church secretary, Esther, who put up with me asking if there was anything I could do to help, especially on Friday with Sunday's bulletin. She cared about me and gave me much wisdom. I had support from my mother and grandmother for all of the time I spent at the church.

**Ana:** What happened to make you consider international mission?

**Lou Ann:** A formative time for me was at senior high summer camps of the Michigan Conference. At one when I was 16, the stories and pictures of an American Board missionary from China, Alice Murphy, had a real influence. I encountered a new vision, a wider understanding. We also did a play about a young woman inspired to become a missionary but whose parents were dismayed. The play revolved around the dilemma. It was an emotional experience for me to play the part of the young woman. The more I learned as Mission Chairman for the Michigan Pilgrim Fellowship and on the National Pilgrim Fellowship Council, the more my direction became clear. My faith grew and led to a firm decision as I went to college. God called and the rest of my college was preparation for serving in a world context believing in the importance of a global presence of Christians. I met my husband, Jack, at Grinnell College and we shared the same convictions and plans. While at Hartford Seminary, it was decided by the Mission Board that we would go to South Africa.

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**Ana:** What other significant events in your faith journey might help the women of the church better understand your call to mission?

**Lou Ann:** A belief that 'we are one humanity' led to experiences with persons of different races. At Wayne University my best friend was Tunnie Martin from the African American Congregational Church. We often sat alone in the lunch room as race relations were at a poor point in Detroit, and we were often viewed with suspicion. This was also just after the war [WWII] when many people of Japanese heritage were returning from camps. We took in two women who lived with us and became good friends.

**Ana:** What was your work in South Africa?

**Lou Ann:** Jack and I worked with Congregational churches among the so called "colored" people. My work was mostly in Christian Education doing leadership training and assisting in developing programs with women. As apartheid became more entrenched, I worked ecumenically with educators from many churches to develop training programs to help deal with and work toward the elimination of apartheid. The church grew in its strength to oppose the injustice and help persons to claim their right to freedom and dignity. Two groups besides the church in which I worked were the Black Sash, a women's organization which wrote, spoke and exposed injustice, and the World Affiliated YWCA which worked for human rights and justice for women.

**Ana:** What was the most rewarding aspect of your work in South Africa?

**Lou Ann:** A great and rewarding part of my experience was being on teams with great people who were united in the belief that God calls us to

be faithful to the Gospel, and being part of the development of educational programs and a process which would lead to freedom of spirit and thus to freedom as citizens of their own nation. Many of us worked to help victims of apartheid, establishing advice offices, monitoring police action, searching for people taken by police, monitoring court trials and writing to inform the public of the real happenings especially in the [Black] African and [so-called] Colored communities.

[Also,] as I was a music major in college... I gave voice lessons to students in the high school in the Colored community in the town where we lived. This was great fun as there were no such opportunities for them in the community.

**Ana:** What was the most challenging aspect of your work in South Africa?

**Lou Ann:** Because beliefs and activities of many groups were in direct opposition to those of Apartheid (which separated people from one another by laws, force, and restrictions on gatherings and communication), it was always challenging to find ways to keep us together, to be one church, to keep courage and perseverance and to interpret the Gospel in dark times.

**Ana:** What is your favorite Bible verse?

**Lou Ann:** "Who will separate us from the love of Christ?...I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Romans 8:35, 38-39 NRSV

The entire passage gave constant encouragement to people I worked and lived with under the Apartheid regime in South Africa.

**Ana:** What spiritual disciplines have strengthened you in your work and daily life?

**Lou Ann:** The discipline of reading on faith and spirituality has always been important to me. The Mystic writers and Henri Nouwen have taught me much. I believe the observance and discipline of a quiet time, a withdrawal, to reflect and pray with a daily reading guide is important. It was for many of us in times of stress and difficult situations, helping us keep focused on God and keep our trust in God's love and guidance. In retirement I have more time to explore new writers and to spend more time in prayer.

**Ana:** Please share a time when you met Christ or God face-to-face.

**Lou Ann:** A National YWCA conference, held during a time of deep crisis with great conflict in the townships between police and freedom fighters, met at a theological school the government was closing down. At a worship service my beloved colleague, Ellen Kuzwayo, and I sang the spiritual "Deep River" as a duet. Our deep emotion seemed to express all the tears over lives lost, but also God's guidance as we tried to affirm our resolve. It was a spiritual experience. God was present.

**Ana:** What have you done since retirement to keep you connected to international mission?

**Lou Ann:** I have taken groups to South Africa and have visited churches to tell of our partners overseas. I spent time as Missionary-in-Residence in the [Global Ministries] Africa Office working on projects including a special meeting in Lesotho of all our [International Mission] partners on the African continent.



Ana Gobledale has served Global Ministries in South Africa, Zimbabwe and Australia. She recently commenced a new ministry as interim co-pastor with her husband, Tod, at Kirkland

Congregational UCC in the Pacific Northwest Conference.

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## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How does your church or Conference help support retired missionaries and ministers?
2. How does your church offer opportunities for young people to feel useful and helpful, as Esther, the church secretary, did for Lou Ann?
3. Lou Ann felt called by God to a particular vocation as a young person. How are you helping the young people you know be in tune with God's call in their lives?
4. How is your church "growing in strength to oppose injustice" as did the churches of South Africa during the time of apartheid?

## PRAYER OPPORTUNITIES

1. Pilgrim Place Retirement Community and the retired missionaries and church workers residing there.
2. The people of South Africa and Global Ministries missionaries serving there in the past, present and future.
3. Church Camp directors, counselors, staff and campers
4. Church secretaries