

Rhoda Jane Dickinson, Pastor by Adoption/Pastora por Adopción

1. Getting to Know Rhoda/Aprendiendo a conocer a Rhoda



Name/Nombre:	Rhoda Jane Dickinson
A.B. Recipient/A.B. honor:	1975
Career/Carrera:	Early Ordained Minister/ Pastora
Birthday/Cumpleaños:	September/Septiembre 23, 1887, to Ella Jane (Sproul) Dickinson and Amos Beresford Carey Dickinson
Place of Birth/ Ciudad de Nacimiento:	On a farm in Wright County, Minnesota between Buffalo and Rockford/En un rancho en el condado de Wright, Minnesota, entre Búfalo y Rockford
Died/Fecha en que Murió:	February/Febrero 17, 1991
Color of hair/Color de Pelo:	Brown/Café
Color of eyes/Color de Ojos:	Brown/Café
Brothers and Sisters/Hermanos o Hermanas:	2 brothers, 1 sister/2 hermanos, 1 hermana
Birth Order/Orden De Nacimiento en la Familia:	Third; younger daughter/ Tercera; hermana menor
What kind of friends did you have?/Qué clase de amigas/amigos tenías? I enjoyed visiting my nieces and nephews/Me gusta divertirme con mis sobrinas y sobrinos	
I looked up to/Yo admiro a	Dr. Samuel L. Parish, a pastor John R. Mott, YMCA Executive

2. Here come the questions, Rhoda Dickinson.

How did you to live for 103 years when a woman's life expectancy then was half that? What was happening in the country when you were growing up? How did you find yourself traveling on horseback between churches and visiting parishioners on the prairie?

Why did you become a minister when few other women were and your home denomination did not ordain women? What were attitudes toward clergywomen?

3. From the President's Office in New York

The Rev. Rhoda Jane Dickinson, retired, of Minneapolis, and the Rev. Joan Bates Forsberg, Registrar of Yale Divinity School, have been selected to receive the first Antoinette Brown Award at the tenth General Synod of the United Church of Christ on June 27 [1975]. The presentation will be made by President Robert Moss.

In light of the pioneering of the Congregational Church, predecessor of the United Church of Christ, which ordained Antoinette Brown in 1853 as the first woman ordained in America, it was very appropriate in this International Women's Year and in the present struggle of women to claim their place in ministry to honor two women who exhibit the pioneering spirit in ministry and extraordinary leadership in realizing the vision of building the oneness of the whole people of God

*Valerie Russell
Sussunah Risman
The Task Force on Women In Church and Society*

4. Who were you, Rhoda Dickinson?¹

On June 27, 1975, at 88 and with the expression of her face still kindly and soft, Rhoda Dickinson accepted the first Antoinette Brown Award. In September, 1986, her niece Winifred Israel told her husband, "Aunt Rhoda is about to be 99. She won't have many more birthdays. Let's go to Minnesota and help her celebrate."

¹ Rhoda Jane Dickinson wrote her professional reflection, "One Woman's Experience in the Ministry" (UCC Office for Church Life and Leadership) in early 1975.

"In 1987 at her 100th birthday dinner, Aunt Rhoda gave the blessing in as wonderful a ministerial voice as she ever had," Winifred said. Rhoda Dickinson lived to be 103 years, four months, 25 days.



Rhoda and Black Beauty

I was among the earliest clergy women in the Congregational Church. Black Beauty, my pony, and I traveled many miles together. Some church members lived a hundred miles from the church.

I was born northwest of Minneapolis where both my maternal and paternal grandparents came from Canada to settle. My father died at an early age so we children contributed to our mother's livelihood. In 1902, my family moved to town, Buffalo, and then in 1909 to Minneapolis.

Even before entering my early teens, there was a rather definite, though undefined realization that some day I would give myself to some form of missionary service. First was the nurturing of a Christian home, where my father led daily morning devotions during the breakfast hour, and there was regular attendance at a little country church, Methodist, in North Rockford.

Dedicated young ministers frequented their home and entered fully into their family life. In her teens, the family moved to Buffalo. She said she will never forget the impression their youth group leader, a young minister's wife, left on her life.

5. Have you a family?

Rhoda did not marry but was close to her nieces and nephews. "When I was a child," Winifred said, "she would reward me if I learned Bible verses. One time the reward was a manicure set because I had been chewing my finger nails. She thought I should not be doing that. Aunt Rhoda loved to have us write letters to her," Winifred said. "Here's one that she kept:"

Dear Aunt Rhoda,

I have learned the 10 Virgins. We are all glad you are coming to see us in June. I think I will be able to say my Bible verses for you if you don't snicker and get me all mixed up. We have lots of baby chix....

Love and kisses from Winifred Dickinson
OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO (hugs)
OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO (and more hugs)I

"When we were children on the farm Aunt Rhoda bought us a piano," Winifred said. "We did not know about that at the time. So my brother and I learned how to play the piano."

6. What did you do between graduation from the University of Minnesota (1911) and your ordination (1921)?

Rhoda taught high school English for two years, but she had something else in mind. Through her teaching, she earned enough money to return to Minneapolis. In 1913 she began a three-month training course at the Twins Cities Y.W.C.A. Training Center.

"Aunt Rhoda wanted to go into YW work," Winifred Israel said. "Then that was not available, so she did ministry. She had a wonderful relationship with people. They trusted her and loved her. She was kind. She was a good student of the Bible."

The University Y. M.C.A. and membership in the Student Volunteer Movement, as well as many extracurricular activities, influenced her preparation for ministry. John R. Mott's "The World for Christ in This Generation" was a compelling slogan, she said. She was also involved in student government, journalism, drama and oratory.

7. You traveled on horseback between churches and to visit parishioners on the prairie.

Between some towns, there were trains. I never did drive a car. I had Black Beauty. Since YW work was unavailable upon completion of the course, I supply taught in the Frazee High School. One Sunday evening I went to the Frazee Methodist Church and listened to a talk given by an elderly woman from a settlement called Caribou some eighty miles from a railway.

She had been doing religious educational work among the children of the area but felt physically unable to continue. As she spoke about the need for religious leadership there, her story struck a responsive chord in me.

Since I felt physically and financially unable to continue my training for YWCA work in New York City, why not attempt to fill a dire need right here in my home state?

Rhoda found the Methodist official responsible for the Fergus Falls District "only too willing" to make use of her services. He suggested the parish of Lancaster "in the same county, where there was a pastorless church on the Soo Line Railway." Rhoda received a salary of "around forty dollars a month."

I found myself assuming all the duties of a regular pastorate and during the coming year began supplying Sunday services in nearby Orleans. I arose at four o'clock in the morning in time to catch the train to Orleans then returned to Lancaster for the regular evening services.

8. That ended that.

After serving in Lancaster about two years, a lung inflammation forced Rhoda to return to Minneapolis. Here she spent several months recuperating. Then she returned to the same district to do supply work. While she was there, the Methodist bishop visited.

Not pleased to learn that a woman was performing ministerial functions, he demanded that the district superintendent dismiss me. Women were not yet ordained in the Methodist Church.

Later, the same superintendent approached her again. Could she go to Alexandria and supply there? The pastor was recuperating from an illness. Rhoda was delighted. She had worked in his church during her school teaching years and taught two of his children.

9. What difficult but life-changing decisions did you make?

By this time I had become fully convinced that I must make the ministry my future career. Completing my assignment in Alexandria, I faced a difficult decision. I loved the Methodist Church. I loved my friends in it, but if I were to continue in the ministry I must change to a denomination that ordains women.

I had become familiar with the Congregational fellowship during University days. My mother had become a member of the Como Avenue Congregational Church which was near our home. I taught a class of girls in church school there

during my senior year. It was only logical that I should seek a place in that denomination.

The Congregationalists adopted Rhoda and Rhoda adopted the Congregationalists. "First," she said, "a year of rest seemed needful." She and her mother, whom she helped to support, stayed with Rhoda's sister in Loveland, Colorado. When Grace's teaching year ended, they all went up to Estes Park. Rhoda and her mother remained until spring.

Rhoda avoided dwelling on the physical exhaustion that interrupted her work throughout her career. Now she spoke about this vulnerability:

Before leaving Minnesota I had been incapacitated for some months because of ill health. After the months went by at Estes Park and I felt no better, I overcame my timidity, my petty prejudice and fear of being thought "peculiar."

I requested the help of a small group of members from the little Presbyterian Church in Estes Park. They were drawn together in a fellowship of prayer. All had received healing through prayer and had been of help in aiding others.

The pastor, his wife and two other couples came to our cabin one Sunday afternoon. He was a plain unassuming man with a wonderful faith in prayer. There was the reading of James 5:13-16, a few sincere prayers offered, then the anointing of my head with oil. Some weeks later, I became convinced that if I would but "launch out into the deep" the Lord would not fail to help me since his promises had been claimed.

For the next eighteen months, Rhoda supply preached in Keota, Colorado. Then in 1919, she began a four-year ministry with licensure in Glasgow, Montana. Before ordination in 1921, she attended the Chicago Theological Seminary for special summer study.

While she did not write about it directly, a *Minneapolis Tribune* article told that Rhoda was not surprised that more women have not sought the ministry as a career because "it is demanding and time-consuming. I don't see how married women with families do it," she said.²

² As quoted in "After 50-year career, minister, 87, is glad she entered profession," Sunday, December 22, 1974.

10. What was happening around the country when you were ordained?

In 1919, World War I ended. These were peacetime years, the roaring 1920s before the Great Economic Depression of 1929. Life expectancy for women in this decade was 54.6 years. Average annual earning was \$1236. A teacher's salary was \$970.³

It was the birth of jazz. Sinclair Lewis set his novel *Main Street* in a small Minnesota town in the 1920s. Electricity would come to rural Montana and Minnesota in the mid-1930s. The year of Rhoda's ordination, the Miss America contests began.

The turn of Rhoda's century was a daring, expectant time. "Pioneer Spirit" gained new meaning. With passage of the 19th Amendment on August 26, 1920, women won the right to vote.

On May 10, 1921, Rhoda was ordained as minister in the Congregational Church of Glasgow, Montana. Antoinette Brown Blackwell died that year.

The Northeastern Association was scheduled to convene in Glasgow and could have arranged for my ordination, but our State Superintendent felt that an Ecclesiastical Council should be called as a special tribute to the young woman minister.

11. Seminaries in Transition

Most women of Rhoda's day who wanted to become ministers trained instead as missionaries or social workers. In 1923, several years after Rhoda graduated from the University with a Bachelor of Arts, she attended the Boston Theological Seminary. She hoped to finance the time by living in a woman's home as companion and helper. In reality, she found no time to study and was physically unable to carry the demanding schedule. She returned home to begin her second Montana pastorate at Roundup.

She reveled in "special summer study at the Chicago Theological Seminary." Although her professional record omits mention of a theological degree, by then Florence Fensham would have opened the CTS door, as had Anna Snowden Oliver and Anna Howard Shaw at Boston.⁴

³ American Cultural History – Decade 1920-1929. Kingwood College Library. <http://kclibrary.nhmccd.edu/decade20.htm>.

⁴ UCC Year Book Necrology Biographical Information.

About the time Rhoda was finding her professional voice, "one of the most interesting chapters in the education of women for ministries in Congregationalism" was in progress, said church historian Barbara Brown Zikmund.⁵

Florence Amanda Fensham was a missionary who in 1900 convinced the Chicago Theological Seminary to admit her to the regular seminary program for the bachelor of divinity degree. The seminary eventually awarded her that degree.

When she returned to Chicago in 1909 after several years in the mission field, according to Zikmund, she became concerned about raising professional standards in religious education. That year she led the establishment of an institution dedicated to graduate theological education for women.⁶

Rhoda Dickinson's summer study at CTS would have been the right timing for her to be among the students in the Congregational Training School for Women. In 1922, a year after Rhoda's ordination, the training school developed a bachelor of religious education degree. In 1926, the seminary absorbed this program. The training school then went out of existence.

12. In these early years how many ordained Congregational pastors were women? How were they accepted?

Ordained women "presented no serious problem to the denomination 'being too few in number and too modest or at least inconspicuous in their form of service.' Women could serve successfully in small churches, but the commission suggested that

⁵ Barbara Zikmund Brown in "Women's Ministries Within the United Church of Christ" in Catherine Wessinger, Religious Institutions and Women's Leadership (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1996), 66-69

⁶"The Congregational Training School for Women was incorporated as a separate institution in close relationship to the Chicago Theological Seminary. Twenty young women lived together, did practical work in the city, and took courses from their own instructors as well as the faculty at CTS. After graduation they worked in urban social work, became foreign missionaries, and most frequently became church or pastor's assistants in local congregations." (Zikmund, 67)

women would be of greater use in the field of religious education or as church assistants."⁷

The National Council of Congregational Churches also reported that in 1919 there were 67 women ministers among their 5,695 clergy. Eighteen were pastors of "very small" churches, 14 were co-pastors with their husbands, 14 were religious educators or church assistants, and 21 were employed outside the churches.

13. Where did you serve, Rhoda?

First, she received a cordial welcome in Montana, both in Glasgow and in the State Conference in Great Falls. Her pastorates included Glasgow, MT (1919-1923); Roundup, MT (1923-1928); Highmore, South Dakota (1933-1936); Dodge Center, MN (1936-1938); Sleepy Eye, MN (1938-1947); and Longville, MN, with a second parish in Remer (1947-1952).

My last regular parish in the tourist area of Longville for six years was a most interesting experience amid the lakes and trees, with an altogether new type of Church activity. Large attendance during the summers was most exciting.

Rhoda was an active church leader at state and local levels. Her years as Conference Field Representative for Women's Work in Minnesota (1928-1932) were "a highlight." She gave missionary addresses as well as often occupying Sunday pulpits.

Life after retirement in 1952 did not slow her until she neared the age of 85. Then she made Minneapolis her home again and only led "a few activities" in the church of her membership and at a care center.

In active retirement, Rhoda served Minnesota Conference as interim pastor in at least fourteen churches.

I never requested more salary from a church, although I was once told by one of the men, "We can save money while you are here." I recognized that the people on the whole were giving as they felt they could afford and that was about all I could expect. Moreover, this was one way in which I could be of assistance to them also. I valued their fine cooperation far more than a little increase in salary.

⁷ National Council of the Congregational Churches of the United States. *Minutes of the Nineteenth Regular Meeting* (New York: Office of the National Council, 1921) 39-41, as quoted by Barbara Zikmund Brown in Wessinger 69-70.

Interim work was a difficult service because of travel and moves from one place to another.

Sometimes I remained in a parish for some months at a time. On three different occasions, I was an interim [minister] in Grand Marais. Each time the kind people there furnished sufficient furniture for the parsonage so that I might have the privilege of living in a home of my own during my stay.

14. How have attitudes change toward women in the ministry?

Sixty years ago, a decade before my ordination in the Congregational Church, few women served as pastors. Even though Antoinette Brown Blackwell had opened the way years earlier, on the whole, I doubt whether churches today [1975] are much more ready than they were in 1853 to accept women as ministers.

I was recently cheered to hear that the Pastoral Committee of our Grand Marais Church indicated they would consider calling a woman.

After Rhoda became pastor of the Glasgow Church, a deacon confessed, "When we were told by our Superintendent of the Conference that we might have a woman as our minister we were dead set against it."

However, I have no doubt that a somewhat diplomatic church leader had told him that I might come as a supply minister for a time and the church could make a definite decision later. This doubtless also had been the procedure in one or two other places that I served afterward. At any rate the Glasgow people received me cordially and ordained me in their church a year and a half later.

Although I wondered at the beginning of my ministry whether men might resist having a woman as minister, I soon discovered my fears were groundless, with scarcely an exception. I think the men of our churches prefer that women ministers just be themselves and not try to imitate men.

15. So What About You?

- Rhoda recognized that missionary work eighty miles from anywhere was as important as work in the city.

Must someone live in a rural area to understand the pioneer spirit?

If you live in an urban area, where do you see people isolated while surrounded for eighty miles by everyone?

Among what people in what region of the country would you be most willing to serve?

- Rhoda's heart showed her a need she could not ignore.

Think about an experience that may be a direction pointer for you.

What clues of experience show you the difference between a direction pointer and a possible career?

How might your hobbies and extracurricular or social activities contribute to career preparation?

- 1 Corinthians 6:20 (Peterson paraphrase) speaks of our body "as a sacred place, the place of the Holy Spirit." Enthusiasm and commitment give important energy to our goals but also expend energy.

As you grow into your self, what do you notice about how you balance the spending with the renewing of yourself?

How do you ignore or profane your body?

In what ways do you keep going until your body forces you to halt?

What habits of preventative self-care have you begun or are you willing to commit to now?

How does this fit with the idea that people see God as much through how we treat our body as by what we say?

- People of Rhoda's time were reserved in speaking about personal needs. When she dared to ask for help, she found both understanding and a deeper sense of God's care.

What does Psalm 36:6 say to you about asking for God's help?

16. Church Family Project

Are there men and women in your church who probably will not have many more birthdays because of aging or illness? Talk with your pastor about how the church might share their wisdom, one by one. Brainstorm ways to gain a sense of how they lived and remained flexible, healthy in spirit and productive.

17. Still Curious?

McGiffert, Jr., Arthur Cushman. *No Ivory Tower: The Story of The Chicago Theological Seminary*. The Chicago Theological Seminary, 1965.

Wessinger, Catherine. *Religious Institutions and Women's Leadership*. University of South Carolina Press, 1996.