Ruth C. Duck
Birth of a Hymn/Nacimiento de un himno

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

Name/Nombre: Ruth C. (Carolyn) Duck

Career/Carrera: Seminary Professor; Writer of Hymn-Texts/
Profesora de seminario; escritora de testo para himnos


Birthday/Cumpleaños: November 21, 1947

Place of Birth/Ciudad de nacimiento: Washington, D.C. with
Tennessee roots

Color of Hair/Color de pelo: Brown/Café

Color of Eyes/Color de ojos: Blue gray/azul grisaseo

Brothers or Sisters/Hermanos o hermanas: No

Favorite Subject/Clase favorita: English/Inglés

Hobbies/Pasa tiempo: Bird watching/Observar aves

When by myself, I enjoy/Lo que me gusta de la naturaleza:
Reading, praying, walking in nature/Leer, orar, caminar

What kind of friends did you have?/Qué clase de amigas /amigos tenías?
Children in my neighborhood who enjoy swimming, exploring
the woods, riding bikes/Niños/as que les gustaba
nadar, explorar el campo, y montar bicicleta

My friends and I liked/A mis amigas y a mi nos gustaba Scrabble,™ Monopoly™

I looked up to/Admiro a Mrs. Frances Ayton, fourth grade teacher/Mrs. Frances Ayton, mi maestra de cuarto grado

2. What Do You Call God?

"Awesome God And Holy Friend"
"Breath Of Every Living Being"
"Breath Within Our Breath"
"Bond Of Peace"

"The Creator"
"Creator Of All Time And Space"
"Creator Of Us All"
"Faithful God"
"Fire Of Love"
"Friend of Friends"
"Friend Of Outcasts"

"Giver Of Life"
"Glorious Sun"
"God Ever-Loving"
"God Of Grace"
"God Of Generations"
"God Of Journey Faithful Friend"
"God Of Planet Moon And Sun"
"God Of Wisdom"
"God The Loving Gardener"
"Great Spirit Of The Cosmic Whole"
"Great Spirit And Source Of Birth"

"Healer"
"Healing Light"
"Healing River Of The Spirit"
"Hokmah (Hebrew for wisdom)"
"Holy Fire"
"Holy Gardener"
"Holy Of Holies"
"Holy One"
"Holy Wisdom"
"Lamp Of Learning"
"Life's Fountain"
"Light Of Every Nation"
"Like A Midwife"
"Listening God"
"Living Bread"
"Living Christ"
"Living Spirit"
"Loving God"
"Loving Maker Of The Earth"
"Majestic Creator"
"The Maker"
"The One"

How about these?

"One God"
"Our God"
"Parent"
"Renewing Spirit"

"Saving Grace"
"Saving Spirit"
"She"
"Shepherd God"
"Shepherd Of My Soul"
"Sophia (biblical Greek for wisdom)"
"Source Of Unity"
"Spirit"
"Spirit God"
"Spirit-Guide"
"The Spirit Of All Good"
"Spirit Of Undying Life"
"Spring Of Hidden Power"
"Sun"

"Teacher"
"True Life of All"
"Vine Of Truth"
"Well-Spring Of The Healing Spirit"
"Wisdom/Sister Wisdom"
"Word Embodied Word Of Life"?¹

Ruth Duck's hymn-texts sing many names for God as she lives the promises of her baptism. "Our language in worship says something about God and not just ourselves."²

3. How Was Your Youth Journey, Ruth?³

Ruth: I was awkward, a shy teenager from a difficult family background. Healing religious experiences guided my growth. We lived near Annapolis, where I got to know a lot of kids. I have learned "to love God more nearly with heart, mind, and soul."⁴ I felt no longer diminished but grew into affirming myself and reaching beyond myself.

Dee: Please talk about your career journey.
Ruth: In high school I did not think ahead much but wanted to be a visual artist. I might not make a living at it so in college, I started out as a piano major. When I had to perform publicly I was too frightened. I was an English major next.

Dee: How did the times influence your choices?
Ruth: I became interested in sociology. I was brought up as an evangelical, charismatic, fundamentalist Christian. I took many religion courses.

My faith extended to include social justice. It all galvanized when Martin Luther King, Jr. was killed. I lived in Memphis. My parents forbade me from getting involved. I was Presbyterian then and did a research paper on how Memphis


⁴Duck. "What To Do About 'Lord,'" 9
churches were using their “Crisis in the Nation” curriculum, which addressed race relations and justice.

Dee: How did you sort out what you wanted to become?
Ruth: In fourth grade, I wrote a poem, "I Want to be a Missionary." A missionary teacher had talked to us at lunch time.

In college, I searched. I took more and more religion classes and did the religion major. I had never heard of or met a woman minister. I planned on the two-year Christian Education program at the Chicago Theological Seminary.

Ruth: When I met Peggy Way at seminary, I realized I needed to get my master of divinity. I was still searching. Should I even be ordained? In 1974, I was. I served churches from 1974 to 1989 then applied to teach at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary.

Dee: How did you discern what God had in mind for you?
Ruth: I thought getting the Garrett position was a long shot. On the train going to see a friend, I heard a voice saying, "You have found your home."

I have been on the faculty since 1989 and am also dean of the chapel. As professor of worship, I teach classes, lecture and lead workshops on worship and hymnody here and abroad.

Dee: What about sharing a career with a relationship?
Ruth: Being a seminary teacher is demanding, sometimes frenetic, and not conducive to being a writer and poet. Although I always wanted to marry, it took a long time to be ready. My first marriage at 39 turned out to be a difficult situation. Soon after divorce, I met my present husband – a gift. I have found in my experiences opportunity to discover a wider, fuller grace of God than I imagined.

4. That Did It!

Ruth discovered, "not without tears and anger, that the church had far to go to be just toward women and other humans. I began to make connections between the church’s many masculine images for God and its historic exclusion of women from ministries."

The idea of God that most people carry is too small and containing, Ruth said. In 1972, while at seminary, she was guest guitarist at a local church. Asked to use inclusive language, she took care to substitute "humanity" for "man" and "mankind." Yet in one song, she sang "Father" over and over for God. Then, inclusive language meant changing language about humanity, not expanding the language of worship.

At first, anger and a new curiosity fueled her enthusiasm when some churches refused to interview her as a woman. However, this "name thing" was greater than avoiding sexism. As her language about God expanded, her vocabulary of spirit increased. Her concept of God grew richer.

She would do something about sexism in the church. As she studied, she found surprises. Biblical images for God reached beyond masculine and feminine dimensions of expression. New names awaited discovery. She would use them in hymns or ritual words of the church.

5. Where Would It Take Her?

She used her gift. Word by word, the life song of Ruth Duck filled the musical staff of a career. Her hymn texts became standards. At least fourteen denominational hymnals include them.

"This pioneer in worship and hymnody continues to write remarkably apt and artistic hymns and service music, articulating our faith with insight and sensitivity," said composer and musician, Jim Manley. "She combines the personal and the theological in a beautiful manner."6

- In 1973, she served on the committee that produced the first twentieth-century collection of hymns adapted for inclusive language.

- Courses about the Psalms while earning a master's in theology at Notre Dame inspired Psalm paraphrases.

- By 1984, she was at Boston University School of Theology for a doctorate in worship and theology. Linda Clark was the project director for Becoming One.7 As her graduate assistant, Ruth edited the collection. While there Linda

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6 Manley, Jim. (23 Dec. 2005 email to author)
7 Published 1986
Clark's hymnody course sparked "Womb of Life, Source of Being" and "We Cannot Own the Sunlit Sky," two of fourteen in The New Century Hymnal.

6. "What to Do about 'Lord'?"

What would hymn selection committees for two gender-inclusive hymnals do with hymns such as "Dear Lord and Father of Mankind"? The committees were to provide an inclusive hymnal that avoided use of only masculine imagery for God. At UCC General Synod, 1993, their decision to avoid using "Lord" ignited debate. The committee restored about thirty uses of "Lord."

Ruth advised moving ahead with expansive language, but with gentleness. Respect treasured word associations that help to form the spiritual dimension. “God receives our lives respectfully, carefully, without coercion, at our own speed," she said. Each name enlarges our sense of God. The committee chose to expand imagery rather than narrow it by using only gender-neutral names. Ruth would offer much of her career to bring understanding and add to the expansive imagery and language of worship.

Brian Wren cites her as "one of the foremost hymn-poets in the English-speaking world. Ruth Duck has consistently and persistently sought for worship language that expands our vision of the divine mystery and makes all human beings visible." In 2002, she took a nine-month sabbatical from her seminary position to study worship in three multicultural Chicago churches.

"Cultural diversity in the church brings rich gifts of song, of visual arts, of dance, of exuberance, of quietness, of many ways to praise God and to open our hearts and minds and doors. Being a multicultural church ultimately means being united to Christ and

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8 From paper first presented at Faith Works, July 5, 1994; later published as monograph, "What To Do About 'Lord.'"
9 Chalice Hymnal (Disciples of Christ) and The New Century Hymnal (United Church of Christ).
10 "What To Do About 'Lord,'" 9
11 Wren, Brian. (Email to author, December 23, 2005)
one another—finding sisters and brothers we never expected to have.”

7. Birth of a Hymn

Dee: We call to God in many ways.
Ruth: We continue to grow spiritually. Our minds are the creative work of an ever-creating God. Celebrating God's creativity, "Colorful Creator" (WGT 74) teems with names for the Author of our unique life-stories:

"Colorful Creator"
"God of Mystery"
"Harmony of Ages"
"God of Listening Ear"
"Author of Our Journey"
"God of Near and Far"
"God of Truth and Beauty"
"Poet of the Word."

Dee: Ruth, did you just "start writing" hymns one day?
Ruth: Not quite, although I am basically self-taught. Both parents also had a love of language. I love to sing and I enjoy hymn study.

Dee: Your first song?
Ruth: In Girl Scouts, working on my songwriter badge. It was something about nature. After learning to play the guitar, I started writing texts. One of my first two published hymns was "Arise, Your Light Has Come."

Dee: Writing hymns has become a central part of your call. Do you prefer words or tunes?
Ruth: I'm a text writer. My family started my reading with poetry. My high school English teacher had us memorize poems.

Dee: How many poem-texts have you written?

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12 As quoted in Cynthia K. Buccini. "Singing the Praises of a Multicultural Church” in Distinguished Alumni/ae Honored. Boston University School of Theology Focus (Spring 2003), 2
13 "Colorful Creator." The hymn interpretation column, The Hymn 50.2 (April 1999), 41
Ruth: Around 150-200, about ten a year.

Dee: Have you a special hymn-writing routine?
Ruth: I try to save one day a week. I write in solitude, but being in community almost always prompts my texts.

Dee: How does an idea become a hymn text?
Ruth: Writing a text and finding a tune almost always go together. Let words and ideas free-flow then look at what is there. At times I begin hearing a tune in my head. I go back and forth between shaping text and tune until a final rhythm emerges.

One day I was brainstorming for fresh ideas that would lift up the way the Spirit prods us toward life and justice in the face of death and injustice. I thought about the life of Nelson Mandela and Maya Angelou and others who have the capacity to affirm life despite all challenges.

I considered the surprising vigor of planted seeds and seedlings, the vigor of life itself. When those images united with Romans 5:5, "O Spirit, Spring of Hidden Pow'r" (COC 26) was borne:

O Spirit, spring of hidden pow'r
that hallows day and night:
You are the force that prods the flow'r
through pavement toward the light.
You are the song that brings release;
in prison cell you do not cease.

Ref.: Spring of pow'r, fire of love, giver of life:
come, renewing Spirit, come.

O Spirit of the holy cry
for human dignity,
you are the pride of head held high
before all bigotry.
Your rhythm rouses weary feet
to move to freedom's steady beat.

O Spirit of undying life,
O breath within our breath:
You are the witness in our strife
that love surpasses death.
You are the gift that we desire;
anoint our heads with tongues of fire.

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The gathered community brought its own experience to this hymn. It was first sung at Garrett-Evangelical Seminary during a time of gender issue debate. "O Spirit of the holy cry for human dignity" took on a meaning that "I did not intend, but which I affirm."\textsuperscript{15}

\section*{8. A Hymn for Young Adults}

As Ruth prepared to write "O Loving Maker of the Earth" (WGT, 62), she thought about the lives of young people, their energy and enthusiasm for new experiences, their yearning for acceptance and a firmer sense of identity. She remembered her own "joys of friendship and learning, fears of rejection, conflicts with parents, and above all a gnawing sense of vulnerability."

Now, high school friends ask her to tell how God accepts us all as we are. One popular young adult spoke about her loneliness. No one really knows who she is. At about the same time the Littleton, Colorado, school massacre by two classmates unveiled the cycle of rejection and violence that can come from being an outsider.

Ruth thought about "naming." We want to be accepted as persons who are known by name and loved for who we are. God knows and calls us each by name, no matter who we are or what our age. The first verse unfolded:

\begin{quote}
\textit{O Loving Maker of the earth,}
you name us, young and old.
Your love surrounds us from our birth
and as our lives unfold,
and as our lives unfold.
\end{quote}

She sang about God's name for Simon and Christ's calling Mary by name on Easter morning. Then she returned to us:

\begin{quote}
And when my eyes are full of tears,
with anger, hurt, or shame,
or when I tremble, torn by fears,
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{15} "O Spirit, Spring of Hidden Pow'r." The hymn interpretation column in \textit{The Hymn} 50.3 (July, 1999), 47
O Savior, call my name.
O Savior, call my name.

and

Then lead me to your sacred place,
a people you prepare
to love your name and so embrace
the world you hold in care,
the world you hold in care.

She completed the circle of caring, our naming God:

O Loving Maker, gentle Friend,
inspire with Spirit-flame,
that we may follow to the end
and know and love your name,
and know and love your name.16

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9. The Healing Hymns

Dee: Several youth hymn texts are about healing.
Ruth: Expression of what is deepest within us comes for some as a poem. My most intimate hymns come as I pray.

I wanted the hymn for the 1999 Faith Odyssey Youth Event in Chicago to be special. My wellspring of creativity clogged with exhaustion and discouragement. I sat at my backyard table. Then, as a prayer, my prayer, it came in one piece. Of the four texts I submitted, the committee selected it, "Send Us Your Spirit" (WGT 22 and 24). From verse one:

The bones were scattered, dry and dead,
divided, torn apart.
You breathed your Spirit of new life,
gave new and faithful hearts.

REFRAIN:
Stir up the waters, make
us swift

16 "O Loving Maker of the Earth" from Ruth C. Duck. Welcome God's Tomorrow as quoted in the hymn interpretation column, The Hymn 50.4 (October 1999), 50
to rise up when you call.

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Dee: You wrote other Faith Odyssey hymns.
Ruth: “God, Breathe New Spirit” (WGT 98) and “We Pray, O God, for Hearts Made New” (WGT 98). That year, I also wrote "Come, God, and Hear My Cry" (WGT 54) and "If God Had Not Been on Our Side" (WGT 20).

I hear the younger people of my generation saying, "We are seeking new ways to live in faith. We want to move past habit and dull routine and find ways to make a difference in this war-torn world." My interpretation of that found expression in "God, Breathe New Spirit" (WGT 31). "Sacred the Body" (COC 39) responds to a colleague’s request to speak to issues of battering and abuse by using Paul's idea of the body as the temple of the Holy Spirit.

Dee: Do other hymns relate to your faith journey?
Ruth: To a greater or lesser extent, they all do. "When We Must Bear Persistent Pain" (WGT 58) and "When We Are Tested" (WGT 60) reflect the physical challenges of the present time that push me to a deeper level of honesty and hope.

"God, How Can We Forgive when bonds of love are torn? How can we rise and start anew, our trust reborn?"17 (COC 40) was borne out of my struggle to deal with a deep hurt. Remembering that all fall short (Romans 3:23) can help us learn to forgive.

In fall of 2004, I wrote "Hope of Abraham and Sarah" (WGT 88) as an expression of hope for peace and interfaith understanding. I wanted a hymn that Christians, Jews, and Muslims could sing together. Abraham, Sarah and Hagar's stories are part of the faith heritage of Christians, Jews and Muslims.

God meets all of us in our sacred places, shows us "paths of understanding" and blesses us "in our common search."

17 (Words by Ruth Duck, copyright 1996, The Pilgrim Press. Used by permission of The Pilgrim Press.)
Christian hope should be bold, even if it seems foolish to the world. It must not be only a feeling but a way of life shared in community.

10. Living Baptism

Preparing for confirmation, Ruth had decided to be baptized as an expression of her faith. Only total immersion would satisfy her Baptist-raised family. So everyone -- her pastor, family, and friends -- went over to the Baptist church. Later, she was confirmed with friends in her own church.

"The baptismal water washed over me. It made tangible my dying and rising with Christ to new life in the Spirit. Baptism became then a sacrament of God's presence. I belonged to Christ. I was 'water-washed and Spirit-born.' I could feel God's presence as the pastor immersed me in the water. It was as if the Spirit of God were moving over the waters as at the first creation."18

Her baptismal promise shaped her life, theology and hymn texts. Baptism is not an isolated event but a lifelong process, part of a continuing faith journey. In Dwight Vogel's words, Ruth reveals an understanding that "[e]xpanding our language is one way we can live out the grace, love, justice, and hope of our baptisms and our table communion."19

"Baptism reaches beyond us," she writes. "It makes a difference in how we relate to other people and to God . . . even how we relate to ourselves. We belong to one another, for at the water God makes us one people."20

11. Why Liturgy, Worship, Seminary Teaching?

Thinking aloud together about theological matters is fun, yet serious, and sometimes creative for professor and seminarian. From baptism to the Trinity, Ruth Duck has enjoyed life-giving ideas. Her energy as a seminary professor streams from working with interested students. Robin Knowles Wallace, a professional colleague, said, "Issues of justice, both local and global, shape her

18 "Wash, O God, Our Sons and Daughters." The hymn interpretation column, The Hymn 50.1 (Jan. 1999), 47
19 "Expansive Language in the Baptized Community" in Dwight Vogel, ed., Primary Sources of Liturgical Theology, 294
20 Ruth Duck, "Cutting Edges: Water-Washed and Spirit-Born" in Aware (Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary) (Oct. 2002), 4
In 1993, Ruth wrote "We Praise You, God, for Women" (COC 27) for All Saints' Day to honor courageous women throughout church history who have walked in "newness of life" (Romans 6:4):

We praise you, God, for women who lived before their time, for prophets, priests, and abbesses, for poets with their rhyme. Great Hildegard of fiery tongue, Teresa, tireless, bold: such women lived with trust in you, and broke tradition's mold.

We praise you, God, for women who championed freedom's cause: Sojourner Truth and Rosa Parks, who challenged evil laws. They spoke the Truth and held their ground, resisting what was wrong. They rested on your love and power; their courage makes us strong.

We praise you, God, for women who made your call their choice. The church denied, but they affirmed your Spirit's inward voice. They break the bread and bless the cup, though that was man's domain. Their priesthood opens worlds of grace to heal our grief and pain.

We praise you, God, for women who ventured paths unknown with faith that you had called them there and claimed them as your own. When we lose heart, then bring to mind the courage you bestow.

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The saints surround, a witness cloud
to cheer us as we go.

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12. What About You?

- Read Isaiah 45:3. Reread "O Loving Maker of the Earth."
  Part of baptism is the holy act of naming, claiming: Teri Ann,
  I [call you by your name] baptize you in the name of
  the One who gave you life
  the One who came to save you for life
  the One who walks with you through all of life.

  "It is I" is another way of saying "I AM." Read Exodus 3:12,
  Psalm 75:3, Isaiah 41:13. Take a look at Mark 6:50 and
  Revelation 22:16. God says to us, "See, I told you I would be
  with you."

  **How have you sensed God's presence in your life?**

- Read Romans 6:4. Ruth said, "We belong to one another,
  for at the water God makes us one people." Not an
  isolated event, baptism is part of a lifelong process, a faith
  journey of how we relate to other people, God, and
  ourselves.

  **How have you claimed the promises of your baptism?**

  **What difference does that make as your life unfolds?**

- Hymn writing became a vehicle for Ruth's ministry. Through
  healing, justice-inviting and inclusive/expanding hymns,
  she lifts difficult life events to a productive level.

  **What "challenges of [your] present time push [you] to a deeper level of honesty and hope?"**

  **How are you a life-giving woman?**
In "We Praise You, God, for Women," Ruth said, "[S]uch women lived with trust in you, / and broke tradition’s mold." Name important learning about Ruth’s life from her hymns.

**What makes a person a pioneer?**

**How do you express what is of deepest meaning to you?**

**What talent do you have about which you are so passionate that you are largely self-taught?**

**How might you grow this gift in a way that connects it with your baptismal responsibility to God, others and yourself?**

### 13. Church Family Project

Exploring "Expansive Language" about God

**FOR PARTICIPANTS:** Bible, markers, construction paper, copy of lectionary readings for present season of church year (from pastor).

**FOR EACH GROUP:** Poster board, glue sticks.

**PART A.** In small groups, share names of God you use when you pray. (Goal: To expand worship language, no right or wrong answers.)

**PART B.** Pass out paper and markers. Write names for God that you want to add to worship. (Write/print large enough to read from a distance.) Add to poster board.

**PART C.** Hand out lectionary readings, Bible, marker, paper. Choose a reading then list the ways it describes God. For example, Psalm 23 shows God as shepherd and host -- leading, restoring, remaining present, preparing a table, anointing. Read aloud these names.

### 14. Still Curious?

**A. By Ruth C. Duck**

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22 Adapted from Ruth C. Duck. "Naming God: My Thirty-Year Journey" Worship Arts, 10
AS AUTHOR

AS HYMN TEXT WRITER
Forthcoming.


AS EDITOR OR CO-EDITOR OF HYMN RESOURCES
Editorial committee and contributor. Because We Are One People. Chicago: Ecumenical Women’s Center, 1974.

WORSHIP RESOURCES

B. OTHER RESOURCES:

23 For United Church of Christ publications, contact UCC Resources (1-800-537-3394). For GIA Publications, visit www.amazon.com.
Gabriele Rico. *To Write is to Know*. Audible download at audible.com and Audio cassette at amazon.com. 


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