

REFLECTIONS ALONG THE WAY

Dear friends,

When I visit congregations to speak about Christian unity, I emphasize that ecumenism is for everyone. Ecumenism is not about remote ecclesiastical officials meeting in boardrooms, disconnected from local parish life. Instead, each one of us has an ecumenical story. Even if we've been a lifelong participant in the same strand of Christianity, we've still read books and sung hymns written by members of other Christian traditions. We've known neighbors and friends from other denominations. And most of us have ecumenical connections within our own family.



Janet Bloom and Paul Grevstad
at the piano, 1948

To illustrate this point, I show them this photo. "This is my grandparents," I say. "They might look awfully wholesome, playing piano duets on a date as high school students in Lakewood, Ohio in the late 1940s ... but underneath this peaceful façade, their union was scandalous.

"You see, my grandmother was a Methodist ... and my grandfather was (gasp!) a Lutheran!"

People laugh, but there's truth inside the joke: my grandmother, Janet Bloom, of English and Huguenot descent, was the first non-Lutheran ever to marry into my grandfather Paul Grevstad's Norwegian immigrant family. Both sides of the family had to adjust expectations and overcome stereotypes as Janet and Paul built a marriage from varied Christian traditions.

As it turned out, my grandmother's life would span the ecumenical milestones of the past century:

- Janet and Paul's Methodist-Lutheran pairing began in 1948, the year the World Council of Churches was established: theirs was the not the only cooperation taking place across (predominantly Protestant) denominations and ethnicities.
- Moving from Ohio to Connecticut in 1963, the family joined a Congregational church that had recently joined the new United Church of Christ, one of a global movement of united and uniting churches established in the mid-twentieth century.

- In 1978, in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, she welcomed a new son-in-law, Mark Gerchman (my father), in a wedding presided by both a Roman Catholic priest and a UCC pastor.
- In 1986, Janet and Paul retired to New Hampshire, where a search for the best church choir in their area led them to join an American Baptist congregation: like many contemporary Christians, they de-emphasized denominational branding in favor of finding the right community fit.
- And in 2014, when her granddaughter began a new role, Janet became – of course! – a supporter of the ministries of Christian Associates of Southwest Pennsylvania. For the past nine years, she's listened eagerly to my Christian Associates stories, proofread my appeal letters, and cheered for my every step.

On January 4, I rushed up to New Hampshire; I was able to reach my grandmother's bedside as her breathing gently slowed. My deep grief is mixed with profound gratitude. I'm thankful for her example, her faithfulness, her sense of humor, her service to church and community, her tireless and abundant love for me and my family. And I'm thankful, too, for her ecumenical life, demonstrating in her own story the ways that God calls all who follow Christ to be one. May each one of our own stories reveal that same beautiful truth.

Your sister in Christ,

Liddy

The Rev. Liddy Barlow
Executive Minister
Christian Associates of Southwest PA

*"I am reminded of your sincere faith,
that lived first in your grandmother ...
and now, I am sure, lives in you."*

2 Timothy 1:5



Rev. Liddy Barlow and her grandmother,
Janet Grevstad, 2021