

## **An appreciation of Shirley Jackson Snelling's life and times** (Oct 7, 1928 – Feb 17, 2016)

David Dunn, March 17, 2016 • Park Hill United Methodist Church, Denver, Colorado

I want to create a frame large enough to give a sense of the significance of Shirley's life, work, and relationships.

When we think of the first half of the 20th Century we think about two world wars, a global depression, and the Holocaust. Many people found this such a catastrophic time they gave it names like the "End of Civilization." The second half of the 20th Century, in reaction to the first, was an explosion of order (think of the Marshall Plan, the United Nations, and the creation of many new nations) and an explosion of spirit (think of returning soldiers going off to colleges and universities, cultural and theological ferment, and the breath of fresh air we call the ecumenical movement, the renewal of the church).

During the first half of the 20th century, the ecumenical movement evolved in a series of international conferences related to Christian education, university students, and world missions. In 1937, when Shirley was nine years old, the two most recent of these several conference streams on the Church—"Life and Work" and "Faith and Order"—agreed to form a World Council of Churches. The implementation of this decision was delayed by World War II.

In 1946, when Shirley was 18, the not yet formally constituted world council founded a Commission of the Churches on International Affairs and the Ecumenical Institute in Bossey, Switzerland. In 1948, when Shirley was 20, the World Council of Churches came into being at its first assembly in Amsterdam.

Six years later, in 1954, when Shirley was 26, the Second Assembly of the World Council of Churches was held in Evanston, Illinois. Among the products of this second assembly was a resolution to found an Ecumenical Institute in the Americas. That same year, the Christian Faith and Life Community, a two-year-old campus ministry at the University of Texas, Austin, admitted the first women to its residential program.

Eight years later, in 1962, when Shirley was 33, Dr. Edgar Chandler, the Executive Director of the Chicago Council of Churches, invited Dr. Joseph Mathews, the Christian Faith and Life Community's Director of Studies, to be the Dean of the Evanston Institute for Ecumenical Studies, soon to be renamed the Ecumenical Institute (EI). During the summer, Joe Mathews and the seven families who comprised the teaching staff of the Christian Faith and Life Community, moved to Evanston. On October 11, 1962, three days after Shirley's 34th birthday, Pope John Paul XXIII, opened the Second Vatican Council in Rome. He said that it was time for the Church "to bring herself up-to-date where required."

In the fall of 1964 when Shirley turned 36, she, Jean Smith, Karen Wright, Sr. Pauline Wagner, and I arrived at the Iliff School of Theology, in Denver, Colorado, for our first year of study. In collaboration with Clarence Snelling, Shirley would become one of the first women to study at St. Thomas Seminary in Denver, and subsequently, one of the first Protestant women to teach religious education at St. Thomas. Pauline (Wagner) Rippel was the first Roman Catholic religious to study at Iliff. That fall, the delegates of Vatican II were working on the roles of priests, bishops, and laity; religious liberty; the Church's relationship with Judaism; the role of the Church in the modern world;

issues of marriage and family life; and Christian Education. That fall the Ecumenical Council promulgated three documents: *The Church, Ecumenism*, and the *Eastern Churches*.

In 1967, when Shirley was 39, teachers from the Ecumenical Institute in Chicago—members of the Order Ecumenical—taught the first of many religious studies courses in Denver. Terry Wright, Karen’s husband, recruited me for the second religious studies course, in early 1968. Later in 1968, Shirley proposed that course graduates meet regularly for study and conversation. She suggested that a group be called the *Maieutum*.\*

The *Maieutum* study group that met between 1968 and 1970 included both Iliff students and others. We met weekly at 5 a.m. in a basement classroom at Evanston United Methodist Church, a few blocks west of the Iliff and University of Denver campuses, where Rev. George Yost was then pastor. We became the core of the early Ecumenical Institute “cadre” in Denver. In addition to our discussions, we organized and recruited EI courses, and studied the several teaching roles. Many of us took advanced courses, attended summer programs at the Ecumenical Institute in Chicago, and eventually became members of the Order Ecumenical and staff members of the Ecumenical Institute and its successor organization, the Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA).

This movement that Shirley, Jean, Karen, Pauline, I and many others joined in the 1960s was already a marvelous assortment of Protestants, free-spirited Roman Catholics—including priests, religious, and lay people—and a sprinkling of Jews. The lay and clergy education, parish formation, social justice, and human development work that these interconnected organizations pursued during the ’70s and ’80s led to a global expansion into upwards of 35 nations and the embrace of additional hundreds of Hindus and Muslims as coworkers and colleagues.

This work involved service in poor villages across the world; a disciplined corporate life of study, reflection, and celebration, often in community; and respectful collaboration among people with all levels of learning, diverse professional roles, and varied religious/spiritual vocations and intentions. In retrospect, the staff and colleagues of the Ecumenical Institute of the ’60s and early ’70s and the Institute of Cultural Affairs of the ’70s and ’80s, were an early vanguard of what Dietrich Bonhoeffer described as a “new type of monasticism” in the mid-1930s and Jonathan Wilson was to name the “new monasticism” in his 1998 book *Living Faithfully in a Fragmented World*.

Many today would call such diverse and disciplined collaborative relationships an “inter-religious” or “inter-spiritual” intentional community. For nearly three decades they constituted a *de facto* cross-cultural action-research movement implementing the vision and intentions of Vatican II.

This vast, deep breath of spirit that blew through the 20th century engaged people like Clarence and Shirley Snelling. Clarence, I offer my deep gratitude for our five decades of collegiality. On the occasion of the completion of Shirley’s life, I offer deep appreciation for her life and work. You both have been—for hundreds of participants in the emerging ecumenical movement of our time—beloved colleagues, spirited mentors, and revered exemplars.

\* The name was related to the Greek word *maieuesthai* “act as a midwife,” from *maia* “midwife.” A Google search reveals the word *maieutic* for the “Socratic method of eliciting new ideas by means of questioning.”