

Rev. Betty Conrad Adam,

Priest, Lay Chaplin, Teacher, Philosopher, Leader, Founder, Author

September 29, 1939 – June 30, 2022

Betty Adam's life has ended. Throughout the next weeks as people share their remembrances, many accolades will be heaped upon her. All earned. All most deserved.

Yet, I hope someone remembers to describe her rebellious nature, her dogged determination and her will of steel. Maybe someone will talk of her persuasive abilities and the feeling of being hit by an iron fist hidden within a velvet glove. I hope someone describes her wild passion as she shared another new discovery. Who could ignore her bravery? She shone during a time when opinionated women came under suspicion and personal courage was a cloak to distrust.

Those are the attributes of the woman I knew. Granted they are not descriptions often associated with a priest or a woman. Thank goodness, Betty was never bound by one label.

Early on, Betty asked: What is the Church doing for Women's Struggles?

In the late 70's and early 80's that question did not have an easy answer. In fact, some women would insist it didn't have any answer.

It's easy to forget what the '80s were like for women. It's easy to let the years in between then and now erase memories of what was unfair or unjust, or how women were relegated to roles they seldom chose; roles they were told were 'right' for them. It was a time when careers were limited. Women could be teachers or nurses as dictated by society, but only a handful were granted entrance to medical or engineering schools, and then grudgingly. Of the 24 women who held seats in the Congress, only two were Senators.

Still, the glass ceiling was never thicker than the ones found within the church. Women could prepare the altar but not stand behind it.

Women, like those who formed Brigid's place, were curious, immersed in scholarly study and ached for dialogue. Many were highly educated, holding positions reserved for men in the corporate world and challenged daily to prove their worth. Some were women of wealth and influence. All were frustrated.

Sitting in the pews week after week, they fought a gnawing anxiety. They struggled to embrace the teachings or find comfort in the words from the pulpit. They had come to the hard realization that the Church did not minister to women.

These were Betty's words, not mine, as she talked about the early days of forming Brigid's Place. The Betty I knew came years later when she dared to introduce another new concept and shared the true story of Mary Magdalene.

I was one of a handful of women who met weekly in what was termed a book study. Actually, we were recruits, being made ready for a revolution, one that is still not over. With each meeting, we left wearing a bit more armor and hungry for more. Many of us worked and it was no easy task to carve out time from busy schedules to travel downtown to Christ Church Cathedral for those noon gatherings.

Always the scholar, Betty shared her understanding of the early Christian church, its ever-evolving history and the myths that continued to be handed down from generation to generation. This was a woman who held five degrees, Masters, a Doctorate in Philosophy, and earned her Masters in Divinity long before entering the Episcopal Seminary. Most of us were novices, ignorant in theological history and learning of things we never imagined possible. Yet, Betty never 'dumbed down' her discussions. She spoke of names, history, and belief systems I had never heard. To be certain we were adequately exposed, she brought us dozens of books and copious articles to read on our own.

It didn't take long to realize that traditional religion and its teachings were created by and for men. For the most part it worked, as long as men were in charge.

Our little group continued to meet, for over 14 months, we met. We would spend weeks on a single section from the Gospel of Mary, not realizing that we were using techniques similar to those of ancient times. We read, discussed, waited for clarity, debated meanings, questioned, read more, and discussed again.

In those early days, we felt like detectives, we were all involved in uncovering some kind of mystery. There were moments when we actually shuddered upon recognizing a new insight, other times our excited voices tumbled loudly over each other's. More often, we sat stunned in stumped silence. Each week led to another discovery, another way of knowing.

As Betty opened my eyes, I vacillated between strong emotions. I journeyed from being shocked, to feeling confused until finally coming face to face with a raging anger that will never be quelled. All that I treasured and had believed to be the absolute truth was in question.

I struggled learning that women had been deliberately eliminated from biblical accounts. And, if they couldn't be entirely eliminated, their characters came under scrutiny, their motives questioned, and their contributions diminished. None, however, were more defamed than Mary Magdalene. She must have been an extremely dangerous threat to have warranted such treatment...for nearly 2,000 years, she remained the prostitute, the fallen woman, the sinner and the penitent.

Betty helped us to understand why the stories of powerful women did not survive the scrutiny of the Nicene Council and taught us to look between the verses for their absences. She introduced us to the discoveries at Nag Hammadi and showered us with page after page of information about the Magdalene. Betty described Mary Magdalene as a liminal figure, one who stood at the threshold of a new world.

It was Betty who filled Christ Church with over 500 attendees who came to hear Harvard Divinity School Professor and author, Karen King, present the homily during the Feast Day celebration for Mary Magdalene in 2004. It was Betty who convinced other modern-day scholars such as Jane Schaberg, Ann Brock, April DeConick and Kayleen Asbo to present to our community. All were examples of her persuasive skills, but then she had a long history of moving mountains.

Ours was not the first group of women to be galvanized into a new way of being by Betty. In 1993, 46 women gathered to hear of Betty's dream of a new kind of ministry, one that was focused on feminine spirituality, one called the Women's Assembly. In 1996, that dream morphed into Brigid's Place which by 1998 received its nonprofit status and went on to birth a dozen other offshoots, including the Magdalene Community.

The tensions for women in the 70's, 80's, and 90's were different, but no less difficult than those of today. The question that haunted many discussions then, and one we must continue to ask today was: *If something doesn't change, what do I tell my daughter or granddaughter about her future?*

Women came to Brigid's Place, to book studies, to Feast Days and to the Magdalene Community to find a sacred space; a place where their voices could be heard, where ideas could be shared and, on some occasions, perhaps, where the fires of a revolution could be kindled.

While Brigid's Place is no more, the Magdalene Community continues. From years of holding services at the Rothko Chapel to gathering in different homes to straining to touch through virtual meetings, we meet.

We still yearn for something the traditional Church can not provide, grieve for all that has been lost and patch together that place of our own. Like the Magdalene, we stand at a threshold.

And, we remember Betty. She stands beside us.

Leading a non-profit was never part of Betty's vision, changing the world was.

Dorothy Gibbons
The Magdalene Community