

*"American Baptist Women: The Violet Rudd Years, 1951-1976" by Doris Anne Younger*

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*American Baptist Women's Ministries*

*Posted February 2010*

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By Doris Anne Younger

One year after the creation of the American Baptist Convention on the foundations of the former Northern Baptist Convention, a denominational news release announced:

The National Council of American Baptist Women [NCABW], constituted June 11, 1951, is a dream fulfilled. Its purpose is to unite American Baptist women in their devotion to Jesus Christ, through a program that will cultivate a missionary spirit and a commitment to active participation in helping attain the objectives of the newly named American Baptist Convention.<sup>1</sup>

NCABW was able to spring forth in full bloom because a Women's Study Committee had been at work for five years and presented a constitution, a slate of officers, and a candidate to become Administrative Secretary. Women's work had been carried on for many years by state and association boards and in about 4,000 local societies under the cooperative work of the Woman's American Baptist Home Mission and Woman's American Baptist Foreign Mission Societies. The new organization inherited their practice of publishing attractive program packets (prepared by a different state each year), a basic structure of "chairmen" responsible for various program areas, a complex reporting system, and a small news sheet. For years each chairman had "channeled" information to her counterpart in the state who in turn channeled it to her counterpart in the association and then on to the local Baptist woman. The system also encouraged information to come back to the national chairman through the reverse process.

Channeling was and continues to be one of the unique strengths of ABW. As the work of women expanded and grew, a growing sense of need surfaced for an organization which would be largely promotional and educational in nature. The new entity had asked to be recognized as a "Council," assuming that the new structure of the denomination with national councils would be adopted. It requested financial support from the two organizing women's boards and the denomination. Mary Edith

(Mrs. Leslie) Avey, the Chairman of the Study Committee, wrote in a letter, "The matter of starting a new women's organization is becoming a bit expensive...However, there seems no way out of it but for our board to launch the affair and assume the cost. I guess it's like marrying off the daughter of the family."<sup>2</sup> Financing the organization continued to be a drain on the energies of the Board of Managers through the first 25 years. Not until 1975 was an agreement reached with the denomination that ABW should be funded nationally by the denomination.

On June 11, 1951 a new slate of officers was proposed in the morning and elected that afternoon. Miss Violet E. Rudd, known as Vi, was chosen as Administrative Secretary. Her task, to "correlate women's plans for extending the Baptist World Mission into every local church."<sup>3</sup> The records offer no hints as to how she was chosen, but a better choice could not have been made. For the next 25 years she gave her heart and full commitment to the task. She was, at the age of 40, an early woman graduate of Berkeley Baptist Divinity School. She had served a local church through its community and Christian education project. She also had been Christian Friendliness missionary and Director of

Children's Work for the Baptist Convention of the State of Washington. The Christian Friendliness program had been launched in 1919 as a Christian Americanization program for immigrants. It was known for its goal of changing fear and hostility toward strangers into understanding and friendship. By the 1950s its emphasis was clearly on building racial and cultural relations as it sought to win people to Christ. Vi had organized a volunteer ministry among foreign-born persons by utilizing existing community resources to teach English and help parents with child rearing, health concerns, and the like. She brought to her work a fierce loyalty to the ABC, along with a strong commitment to social justice issues. Her vision permeated the organization through its next 25 years. At her election she stated that the day would mean a great deal to women across the country and the world. She expected that women would become "more

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<sup>1</sup> DORIS ANNE YOUNGER followed Violet Rudd as Executive Director of American Baptist Women serving from November 1976 to March 1983, as General Director of Church Women United from then until August 1989, and as Interim Director of the ABC Commission on Ministry until 1990. A graduate of Yale Divinity School and New York Theological Seminary, she is a member of Riverside Church in New York City; Correspond: 333 Elmwood Ave., Apt.J-321, Maplewood, NJ 07040-2429.

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rich in knowledge and all manner of insight enabling us to have a sense of that which is vital as we seek to grow in sensitiveness to the needs of others.”<sup>4</sup>

The organization was born at a peak time for women’s work in Protestant churches in this country. Churches were full and growing. Young adults, many of them veterans of World War II, had just settled down and begun raising families. It was the era of the station wagon. Women, especially those college educated, were not usually employed outside the home. Yet, they needed other interests beyond homemaking—fellowship with other women, intellectual stimulation, and places to use their leadership skills. Lois Mayes, the Chairman of Program in 1956, noted that “women today have the opportunity to participate in many excellent organizations—how much greater the challenge for US.”<sup>5</sup> But Baptist women were loyal to their women’s organizations. The women’s circles continued to grow in strength. A woman in a local Baptist church once described it this way: “We participated fully in the women’s program in our circle, but as soon as refreshments were served, we eagerly began to talk with each other, sharing our joys and problems. It was really a support group, but we didn’t call it that in those days.”

## **STRUCTURE AND ORGANIZATION**

ABW began as one of the “Councils” of the denomination. As the denomination reorganized, it took on different titles. In 1961 it became one of nine divisions—“The Division of Women’s Work” of the ABC. It dropped “Council” in 1966, becoming simply American Baptist Women (ABW). In 1972, after another denominational reorganization, it became an independent entity, administratively related to the Board of Educational Ministries. Its own structure underwent change as well. Following a survey and in-depth analysis prior to the tenth anniversary, it took a first step toward simplification. This action was repeated in the seventies.

Regardless of the structure, the Board of Managers continued to function in much the same way over the years. Its commission was primarily, first, to provide education to the national leaders for their task and, second, to plan for the work of the board. This included a magazine, program packet, conference programs, and the Women’s Day program. Originally, because of financial constraints, all board members had been chosen from The Woman’s American Baptist Home Mission and The Woman’s American Baptist Foreign Mission societies. When these boards went out of existence and as funds became available, other women were elected to the Board, but representatives from National and International Ministries continued to serve, as well as a staff non-voting consultant from each of the program boards. There was ample up-to-the-minute input from the denomination about programs that needed to be interpreted to the constituency. Long hours were spent in committee work doing the planning. The whole Board heard reports and endorsed the work of each committee. This gave each board member an overall picture of the program so that she was able to include that news as she communicated with her counterparts. The Board did, from time to time, take action on goals, issues, or concerns, but most of the action focused on how their plans were to be implemented.

Among the first major milestones for the fledgling organization was the replacement of its small publication, *Sign Posts*, (a newspaper) with a magazine. A “Paper Committee” developed a plan for the new vehicle, writing the state presidents early in 1956 with a full description:

Each officer and chairman will have an 8 1/2 by 11 sheet, printed on both sides. These 20 sheets, including a cover, will come to every subscriber in loose-leaf format. It is suggested that state and association officers and chairmen plan to maintain one copy in its entirety and have a second copy for distribution to her officers and chairmen.<sup>6</sup>

The letter also asked for subscription lists, suggesting that, ideally, it should be sent to every local society, and every association and state officer. Dorothy Ellis, the Chairman of the committee, asked in a subsequent letter, “Do you like the suggestion that we speak of this Paper as our Magazinette?”<sup>7</sup> The state presidents were enthusiastic, subscriptions poured in, and by 1960 there were 7,700 subscribers to the magazine. When the first edition appeared it was appropriately named, *The American Baptist Woman*.

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Constance Shaw, the Administrative Assistant, became the first editor. She was succeeded in 1965 by Janice Bailey, who continued as editor during the remainder of Vi's tenure. Not until 1961 did the "Paper Committee" become "*The American Baptist Woman* Committee." In that first edition Lois Mayes wrote, "Now, through these pages, we have the privilege of writing *directly* to all officers and chairmen,"<sup>8</sup> thus giving suggestions, helpful information, ideas, and recommendations to each officer and chairman for her specific area of the program. The editorial page was planned from the beginning to present well-known writers on "timely topics in the total picture of the work."

## LEADERSHIP TRAINING

How did ABW succeed so well "on a shoestring budget"? Disciples, Lutheran, Methodist, and Presbyterian women's organizations had multiple staffs; some even had regional offices. Vi began with only one assistant, who later became editor of the magazine. By the 1970s her staff had grown to include two secretaries. How did she manage with such meager resources? The first answer is obviously the counterpart system that utilized those magazine pages. The Chairman of Leadership Training reported in one of the first issues of the magazine that 1955-56 was the first year in which the National Council of American Baptist Women presented an organized, Convention-wide program of leadership training emphasizing the structure, purpose, and effective functioning of each leader.

In addition, each national leader saw herself as a "trainer" of her counterparts. The annual summer conference, begun in 1954, provided a time for face-to-face contact with many state, association, and local leaders. Similarly, Women's Day and the booth at the Convention/Biennial provided a similar opportunity. The Board published a Leader's Guide, which was updated several times through the years. Vi Rudd traveled extensively to State Conferences (originally called House Parties, a name inherited from their foremothers). National leaders also were invited to take leadership roles. The national board quickly noted that the states frequently "copied" elements from the national conference, and consequently intentionally included components that could easily be replicated. From January through the spring of 1966, the Board conducted a national leadership training program entitled, "Women in the Mission and Ministry of the Church." Fourteen teams of national Board members traveled to 29 states to lead training for local and association leaders. The Board also recommended that women participate in training offered by Church Women United. Because of this training and the experience women gained on the national board, an impressive number of women went on to become presidents of state and regional organizations, and even of the ABC itself.

Local women were provided with more than enough tools for their work. Each year a home and foreign mission study theme was chosen, always with interdenominational material, and usually with complimentary ABC material as well. Interdenominational regional mission conferences supplemented these printed materials with inspiration, training, and additional tools. American Baptist women also 'had constantly updated materials about their Special Interest Missionaries, White Cross, and Love Gift resources. Reading was encouraged by the Chairman of Literature. The Bible Book of the month was published in the magazine. The annual (and later biannual) program packet contained complete plans for programs, including worship materials and a featured hymn.

In addition to factual information, leaders were also being fed good resources on group process. The booklet "You Can't Be Human Alone," by Philip Anderson was promoted in the early fifties along with listening skills, buzz groups, and brainstorming. The Group Conversation Packet utilized a technique that was introduced by Christian Friendliness but taken up with enthusiasm by the women in the late fifties. Gordon W. Allport, a Harvard psychology professor, said that "One session employing the group conversation technique seems to me to teach more about the common ground of ethnic and religious groups than many hours of lectures."<sup>9</sup> It continued to be used for almost ten years. Group process was incorporated into program plans. Vi Rudd noted in 1970 on her page in the magazine, "As involvement in the total mission of the church expanded, programs changed from entertainment and listening to becoming informed and then involved. A greater understanding of the world and its needs was necessary."<sup>10</sup>

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It is also significant that the organization did not just keep repeating itself. It stopped in 1960 to survey the constituency and issued a significant report, “History Turns a Page.” This incisive report provided ideas for future modifications that were enacted well into the next decade. Again, in late 1970 another pause was taken to survey the constituency, evaluate, and plan. The Twentieth Anniversary Long Range Planning Committee spent quality time formulating theological and environmental assumptions before it began the planning process. The result was a comprehensive set of “Goals for the ‘70s.” At the time, Vi Rudd pointed with pride to a composite count of women who were leaders-national, state, association and local—they totaled 92,429.<sup>11</sup>

### **VIOLET RUDD’S UNIQUE CONTRIBUTIONS**

A lot of what ABW became was due to Vi’s leadership. She was fully supportive of things ecumenical, participating faithfully in Baptist World Alliance women’s meetings and the annual gathering of denominational staff women called the Secretarial Conference. While she began her position with clear convictions about the relationship of her faith to social issues, she had an unusually open and inquiring mind. She kept growing as the issues and concerns changed. As the women’s movement developed during these years she was supportive of statements on the role and status of women. When the National Organization of Women (NOW) was organized, she became a member and remained connected with that body throughout her life. Probably because she met regularly with other denominational women’s staff, she was aware of the pressure women were placing on their churches for adequate representation. As a result, the Board adopted the following action at their January 1973 meeting:

That it be the policy of ABW that whenever we find inadequate proportionate representation of women on the General Board of the ABC/USA we will petition the Credentials and Caucus Committee of the ABC/USA that American Baptist Women become a Recognized Caucus and that this will be a Standing Rule of American Baptist Women...That ABW initiate a Task Force to prepare background information necessary for proposing to the General Board of ABC/USA the establishment of a Commission on Women at the national level.<sup>12</sup>

ABW did become the recognized women’s caucus, and the General Board of ABC/USA voted the establishment of the Task Force in February 1974 with ABW as its staff.

Vi became a good friend of Rev. Elizabeth Miller, another seminary educated woman who in the early sixties became the Educational Secretary of the Division of Social Concerns of the denomination. She was one of ABW’s staff consultants and in that role “spoke with an authoritative voice on matters of social action.” Vi also maintained her membership in a local ABW group, indicating that she needed to know what local women were thinking.

Vi was a statuesque woman, quiet and unassuming, friendly, gentle and proper, but strong. She was well organized and efficient, a detail person who became quite political, learning to work the system.” Women who served with her remember her as having a special knack for developing leadership in other people. She was ahead of her time in social consciousness. She was able to help others to a keener awareness of the need for social change and showed them ways to achieve it.

### **PROGRAM COMPREHENSIVE AND CONTEMPORARY**

Skimming through the pages of the ABW magazines gives one a picture of what the organization was about. Since each page was designed to meet the needs of a particular leader, the publication did not read like a magazine. Topics included mission and denominational matters; publications (like *Crusader*, *Missions*, *The Book of Remembrance*) ; special offerings; Bible; mission and evangelism conferences; the annual (later biennial) convention; every aspect of home and foreign missions; and special programs such as the Baptist Jubilee Advance, The Fund of Renewal, or Key ‘73. An especially difficult task was helping local women understand the changing interpretation of missions. In 1959 the Vice President of Missions quoted from an address by Rev. James L. Sprigg: “Christians overseas no longer consider themselves to be members of missions. They have fully constituted churches.”<sup>13</sup> This continues to be a

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major challenge, as does how to include more American Baptist women in the work of local organizations.<sup>14</sup>

A quality soon noted by a reader of the magazine fifty years later is the *comprehensiveness* of the program. No element of the denomination's programs or emphases was omitted. The women still had the programs carried over from their prior organization: White Cross, Special Interest Missionaries, and Love Gift. But, as Anna Canada Swain had stated in a presentation to a joint session of the two women's boards when the planning began, "Today we have anew situation...there is a growing feeling of the importance of the church itself. Women are increasingly carrying responsibility in the church and its activities. ...Women are now an integral part of the church."<sup>15</sup> This theme was reiterated in 1960 in the words of Helen Stuber, then the President:

Our concept of the role of women in the church has changed in recent years from *women's work in the church* to *women in the church's work*. While we may have been satisfied at one time to initiate some project and keep it within the Woman's Society, now we feel we can no longer do so... We must always remember that we are a part of the whole church.<sup>16</sup>

Magazine items and program materials can also be described as very *contemporary*. The post-war years saw the organization of the United Nations (1945), the World Council of Churches (1948), the National Council of Churches, and the publication of the Revised Standard Version of the Bible (1952). ABW, following the lead of the denomination, was supportive of all of these organizations and events, and tried to help women understand them and interpret them to local women.

Bringing her Christian Friendliness concerns with her, Vi helped to push the organization to deal with issues of racism. During these years it was a "front burner" issue. During the civil rights struggle the emphasis gradually shifted from "integration" to tougher issues like working against segregated public facilities as well as the interrelationship of such factors as affluence and poverty, job opportunities, and access to education and health care.

Among the goals adopted in 1961 was the one "to work toward complete integration of every phase of the Women's Society so that it becomes racially inclusive not only in word and spirit, but in reality and fact."<sup>17</sup> Probably because of Vi's commitment, there was almost always at least one African American woman on the board and finally a Hispanic member as well. Before Vi's retirement she somehow saw to it that an African American woman, Emma Hamilton, was elected ABW's national president.

The organization reached out to the women of the American Baptist Churches of the South and welcomed the women from Puerto Rico when they joined the Convention. At about the same time a plan of action was adopted to meet the needs of Spanish speaking women, translating program and leadership materials and encouraging closer relationships with their women's groups.

Ruth McKinney, among the first African Americans to serve on the board, was the Vice President of Christian Service in 1956. She established a baseline for the meaning of Christian Social Relations as "merely living Christian principles in our everyday lives." She saw exercising one's rights as a citizen, working for refugee resettlement, school desegregation and decent housing, as well as showing hospitality to foreign students, as living those principles.<sup>18</sup>

The women supported the denomination's social action positions. In 1957, the Chairman of Christian Social Relations urged the women to sponsor a brunch to study the ABC resolutions adopted at the Convention the previous June. She also urged them to see that their congregation had a Christian Social Action Committee. A year later she was able to report that 115 brunches had been held and that 1,185 women had attended. In "History Turns A Page," the Survey Committee reported that:

seven out of every ten Association Presidents indicated that when they think of "Mission Society" they feel this is the Baptist woman's impact in ALL areas of life... as His {Jesus'} followers we cannot fail to admit that our mission includes complete involvement in endeavoring to set right all phases of the conditions of our communities about us...we cannot justify neglect because we refuse to work in areas of controversy. We must learn how to work through controversy Programs MUST deal with the

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Christian impact upon the great and vital issues of our day, including both education AND channels for action.<sup>19</sup>

As the issues in society changed, so did ABW. In 1966 as feminism began to challenge ideas about the roles of women, that subject increasingly became a part of the discussion. In 1967, an entire day of the board’s meeting dealt with the role of women in ministry. Even sticky issues such as the Equal Rights Amendment, sex education, family planning, abortion, and divorce were openly addressed. The board voted in 1967 to undergird a family planning project of Church World Service.

We know the facts of hunger, need and a mounting population. Women in many areas need the knowledge which medical research can give them in planning families. Do we care enough to say “I will share the woman’s burden by contributing 35 cents, together with my love, concern and prayers”?<sup>20</sup>

In 1974, Dr. Phyllis Tribble was the featured conference speaker. The January issue of *The American Baptist Woman*, reporting on the conference, recorded these telling quotations from participants: “The Bible will be banned in Boston if she doesn’t quit interpreting it so clearly.” One of those attending opined, “I’ve never heard the Bible interpreted the way she interpreted it,” to which another replied, “That’s because you’ve only heard it interpreted by a man.”<sup>21</sup>

Violet Rudd’s twenty-five years with ABW laid a strong foundation for its future—loyal local organizations, a cadre of well trained leaders, a well received magazine, a tradition of an annual conference and Women ‘s Day at Biennials, and a theology and practice that even at times challenged the denomination. The theme of the twentieth anniversary was “And Yet It is not Finished.” That was surely Vi’s thought as she retired in 1976!

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> News Release, 1951.

<sup>2</sup> Letter of Mary Edith Avey, Chairman of the Study Committee.

<sup>3</sup> News Release (September 1951).

<sup>4</sup> Violet Rudd statement (June 11,1951).

<sup>5</sup> *The American Baptist Woman* (November 1956): 7.

<sup>6</sup> Letter of Dorothy Ellis, Chairman of the Paper Committee, to State Presidents (February 1956)

<sup>7</sup> Letter of Dorothy Ellis to State Presidents (August 1956).

<sup>8</sup> *The American Baptist Woman* (November 1956): 7.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted by Eleanor Hull, *Women Who Carried the GOOD News, The History of the Women’s American Baptist Home Mission Society* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1975): 75.

<sup>10</sup> *The American Baptist Woman* (January 1970) : 2.

<sup>11</sup> *The American Baptist Woman* (September 1970): 2.

<sup>12</sup> *The American Baptist Woman* (April 1973): 12.

<sup>13</sup> *The American Baptist Woman* (January 1959): 4.

<sup>14</sup> ABW also inherited from its predecessor organization an article in its constitution which states that every woman who is a member of an American Baptist church is a member of ABW.

<sup>15</sup> Address by Anna Canada Swain, Joint Board Session of the Women’s American Baptist Home and Woman’s American Baptist Foreign Mission Societies (January 22, 1947).

<sup>16</sup> *The American Baptist Woman* (April 1960): 3.

<sup>17</sup> *The American Baptist Woman* (April 1961): 3.

<sup>18</sup> *The American Baptist Woman* (November 1956).

<sup>19</sup> *History Turns A Page* (Valley Forge: The Judson Press, 1962): 20.21, 25.

<sup>20</sup> *The American Baptist Woman* (September 1967): 10

<sup>21</sup> *The American Baptist Woman* (January 1975): 2