Inspired By Our Foremothers

The Story of
the Women’s Interfaith Institute
in Seneca Falls

by Rev. Allison Stokes, Ph.D.
Founding Director

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In celebration of our first twenty years, and in gratitude to hundreds of contributors, supporters, volunteers, board members and officers, family and friends for their “time, talent and treasure.”
Introduction

20th and 10th Anniversary Celebrations

The Women’s Interfaith Institute is observing two anniversaries during 2012: the founding of the Women’s Interfaith Institute in the Berkshires in 1992, and the founding of the Women’s Interfaith Institute of the Finger Lakes in 2002. Although in distant locations and led by separate boards of directors, the sister nonprofit organizations share a common logo:

![Logo](image)

and a common mission:

*women supporting women of diverse faiths*  
in generating spiritual leadership, scholarship and service

During its 20 years of existence, the group in the Berkshire Hills of Western Massachusetts has been housed in a number of spaces, including a rental office in the historic Women’s Club building in Pittsfield (recently sold) and a church parish building in Lenox. But since its founding 10 years ago, the group in Upstate New York has had the privilege and challenge of a permanent home in an historic church building in Seneca Falls—next door to the Women’s Rights National Historical Park.

As Founding Director of the Women’s Interfaith Institute, in this anniversary publication I tell the story of the Institute in Seneca Falls. The Institute in the Berkshires has developed in its own unique way, partly because it has not had a permanent home and partly because of a different geographic and cultural context. The Berkshire story is for a different publication. Here you will learn about our experience in Seneca Falls—our building’s purchase, beginnings and fire; our programs and outreach; and the value and challenges of maintaining a dedicated space for women’s multi-faith work. I also discuss the experience of learning about 19th century foremothers in this journey of reaching across faith boundaries. Our efforts are not nearly as pioneering as we once thought!

Allison Stokes  
Seneca Falls  
June 21st, 2012
Inspired By Our Foremothers
The Story of the Women’s Interfaith Institute in Seneca Falls

We were at a Women’s Interfaith Institute board retreat and one of our members was remembering how she first learned of our organization. “We were driving down Fall Street when I noticed the sign in front of the church: Women’s Interfaith Institute. ‘Stop,’ I ordered my husband, ‘Stop.’ But he kept driving. ‘No, I mean it: STOP!!’”

Ruth Bradley, a Quaker leader, described how excited she had been not only to discover the existence of a women’s organization dedicated to interfaith activities, but also to discover that the organization had its home in historic Seneca Falls.

As Ruth told us about her delight that day, I couldn’t help recalling my own excitement when I was driving down Fall Street one morning in September 2002. Having been to the village just once before, I was watching for the Women’s Rights National Historical Park when I noticed the large brick church standing next door to the Park. The yard sign that caught my attention read: “For Sale—Price Reduced.”

The Women’s Interfaith Institute had been launched ten years earlier in the Berkshire Hills of Western Massachusetts by a group of women representing different faith traditions. We had incorporated as a 501(c)3 organization and with grant support had hired a consultant to lead us through an organizational development planning process. The first step was to come to clarity about our purpose by creating a mission statement. After hours of intense discussion we determined that the Institute is “women supporting women of different faiths in generating spiritual leadership, scholarship and service.”

Although the Institute’s monthly, inter-religious1 programs and occasional retreats continued in the Berkshires, I had moved to Upstate New York in 2001 to take a college chaplaincy position. On the day that I serendipitously came upon the historic church for sale in Seneca Falls, I had been looking for space to house a professional library that Dr. Norma Thompson, a retired professor of religious education and one of the Institute’s members, wanted to donate to us. So it was that as I drove past the Century 21 “For Sale” sign and the enormous (though neglected looking) church, my thoughts began racing.

Next door to the site of the first Women’s Rights Convention would be a perfect place to house Norma’s magnificent collection of books and the Women’s Interfaith Institute. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a leader of the 1848 Convention, and her suffragist sisters were pioneers in their time. We women religious leaders doing interfaith work felt like pioneers in our time. The power of place was compelling; here we could draw inspiration and courage for the journey from our foremothers.

1 In this publication I use the words “inter-religious” and “interfaith” interchangeably.
Continuing down Fall Street, I decided I would stop to locate the realtor’s office. I wanted to see this building. No sooner did I have this thought, when I looked ahead to see in the distance a large Century 21 office sign emblazoned on a low building. I had an immediate, oh-my-gosh-this-was-meant-to-be feeling. An hour later, a tour through the spacious church revealed sanctuary seating for more than 200 people, an office, a meeting room and 2 bathrooms on the first floor; a kitchen and social room on the second floor; and four carpeted Sunday school rooms, storage space, and a bathroom in the basement. Also apparent was a badly leaking roof.

When I telephoned back to the Berkshires to share my enthusiasm about a church for sale in Seneca Falls with asking price of only $120,000, board member Phoebe Williams laughed. We were having trouble finding the money to pay the Institute’s phone bills and the monthly rent on our room at the Women’s Club in Pittsfield. How could we think of buying a church?!

To make a long story short, with the well wishes of people eager to support our vision and mission, we forged ahead. We formed an affiliate organization and incorporated as the Women’s Interfaith Institute of the Finger Lakes. The Rev. Marilyn Foster, Pastor of the United Methodist Church, and the first woman pastor in Seneca Falls, agreed to take on the role of Board President.

I sent out a personal appeal letter, the kind that a friend commented can be sent only once in a lifetime. I explained that the Institute in the Berkshires was celebrating its 10th anniversary, that I was celebrating the 20th anniversary of my ordination to ministry and that it was my 60th birthday…and I urged family, friends and colleagues to Send Money! And they did. Contributions also came from churches, foundations, and organizations. Through the generosity of many, and with the seller (the Living Hope Assembly of God) agreeing to hold the mortgage, the Institute purchased the building in February 2003.

Not much later I received a poetic email message from Madeline Hansen, a creative woman who was a supporter from the outset:

Courage
is
a
visitor
too
infrequently
invited
to
the
unfolding
chapters
of
our
lives.
But
in
each
moment
we
dare
to
call
upon
it,
courage
will
not
disappoint.

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2 Marilyn was honored during Convention Days 2009 for her many contributions to the Village of Seneca Falls and to her church. She retired in 2010 and moved to Syracuse after serving for 18 years.
It is the lubricant of valor, and the midwife of all our dreams. **Welcome to the neighborhood!**

Another warm welcome came from New York State Senator Michael Nozzolio when he wrote at the time of our blessing ceremony in June 2003 saying, “There is no better venue for an interfaith educational resource for women than the birthplace of women's rights.” A year later, with roof newly shingled and no longer leaking, the Institute held a grand opening celebration of our historic building.

We prayed at the close of the multi-faith dedication service:

*Creator of the World, Our God, Adonai, Allah, the Compassionate One, Wisdom, Spirit: we call you by many names for you have made us many people. May this be a space in which all are welcome and all are safe. May this be a space in which the breath of the Spirit fill our hearts and replenish our spirits to sustain us in our journey together. Amen.*

**Beginnings**

With the opening of the Women’s Interfaith Institute’s building in Seneca Falls, we felt like pioneers. We were doing a new thing in providing dedicated space where women of different faiths could learn from and support one another. Nowhere else that we knew of did a place like ours exist. Through inter-religious dialogue and action, we would be “Bringing Peace to Life” (the theme of the dedication weekend).

A brilliant article written by Professor Ursula King of Bristol, England and published in 1998—“Feminism: the Missing Dimension in the Dialogue of Religions”—convinced me of the significance of our efforts. I had attended the Parliament of World Religions in Cape Town, South Africa in December 1999, and had been dismayed to find the gathering of some 7,000 people dominated by male leadership. As Founding Director of the Women’s Interfaith Institute in the Berkshires, I had hoped to connect with other women, grassroots leaders like myself, but it seemed that with some exceptions, there were precious few. My experience told me that Ursula King was doing a great service in identifying feminism as the missing dimension in inter-religious dialogue. How grateful I am for her insightful truth-telling.

By good fortune, the scholar who members of the Women’s Interfaith Institute board had hoped would give the keynote address at the gala dedication of our building accepted our invitation. In June 2004 Professor Maura O’Neill travelled from California,

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where she was teaching philosophy at Chaffey College, to give a talk that made our hearts sing. A leader in the emerging women’s interfaith movement, Maura had completed her doctoral dissertation, “Examining Gender Issues in Interreligious Dialogue,” at Claremont Graduate University. And she had received numerous grants for her work in ethics, gender methodology and interreligious dialogue.

In preparation for her coming, many of us read Maura’s groundbreaking book *Women Speaking, Women Listening: Women in Interreligious Dialogue*, published in 1990. Unfortunately, obtaining copies had not been easy: it was out of print. During the time that she was with us in Seneca Falls, we urged her to bring out a second edition of this important study. She was moved by our pleas and promised to work on a revised and updated version. Later Maura explained that as the project progressed, it became a wholly new book—*Mending a Torn World, Women in Interreligious Dialogue*, published in 2007.

Maura O’Neill’s moving address at the Institute set a precedent; she was the first of many distinguished speakers. In 2006 the Institute began a tradition of opening Convention Days celebrations in Seneca Falls every July with a Friday night keynote speaker. Dr. Helen LaKelly Hunt, Founder of the Sister Fund, launched the tradition with a talk about her book, *Faith and Feminism: A Holy Alliance*. The following year Dr. Farzaneh Milani, then Chair of Women’s Studies at the University of Virginia, spoke about Tahirih, Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s contemporary in Persia, in a keynote address entitled, “Seneca Falls and Badash.” (I will return to this topic later.)

Because of the proximity of Seneca Falls to Rochester, the Institute has been blessed to have the help and leadership of several Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School interns. In 2004 a CRCDS student led a book study of *Relating to People of Other Religions, What Every Christian Needs to Know* by M. Thomas Thangaraj. Another CRCDS intern took a summer to make a complete inventory of our Kathleen Finney Library, a collection donated by the late clergywoman’s family.

In 2007 a book group met monthly to discuss Mary Pat Fisher’s remarkable textbook *Women in Religion*. It includes chapters on Women’s Religious Experiences, Women in Indigenous Religions, in Hinduism, in Buddhism, in Confucianism and Daoism, in Judaism, in Christianity, in Islam, in Newer Religions, and Women Beyond Religions. Discussion questions at the end of each chapter sparked fruitful multi-faith sharing.

To meet leaders in the interfaith movement beyond our own region and to share resources and information, the Women’s Interfaith Institute joined the North American

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5 Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books.
Interfaith Network (NAIN). Larry Whitney, an Ithaca College student and an intern at the Institute, represented the Institute at the NAIN Connect (annual meeting) held in New York City in 2004 and at the University of Nevada in 2005. (Br. Larry is now University Chaplain for Community Life at Boston University.) I attended the NAIN’s 20th anniversary celebration at the NAIN Connect held in San Francisco in 2008. While there I was glad for the opportunity to visit the historic home facility of another interfaith organization—the Interfaith Center at the Presidio. I learned from the Founding Executive Director, Rev. Paul Chaffee, that their challenges were not unlike ours in Seneca Falls.

At the NAIN Connect in Kansas City, Missouri in 2009 I had the good fortune to meet Audra Teague, a Young Adult delegate and panelist at one of the sessions. Audra was leading an interfaith peace organization in Columbus, Ohio and studying for her Masters Degree at the School for International Training Graduate Institute in Brattleboro, Vermont. We had a long conversation about women’s participation in the interfaith movement. I spoke about how little academic work has been done on the subject of women’s role in promoting interfaith dialogue, understanding and action, and none at all exploring their reasons for doing so. I urged Audra to pursue the subject. In November 2011 Audra was graduated from SIT. Her M.A. thesis, “Women’s Perspectives on their Interfaith Agency: Exploring Motivations, Impacts, and Visions,” is a significant contribution to what little research there is on the subject. Ideally, it will be published. Now a M.Div. student at the Andover Newton Theological School, Audra’s commitments will surely continue to influence and impact the women’s interfaith movement.

In her book about Religious Institutions and Women’s Leadership, Catherine Wessinger wrote, “For women to be included fully in leadership in mainstream religious institutions, structures need to be created to advocate for women, to educate people about women’s issues, and to nurture women’s leadership and self-expression.” Advocating for women’s interreligious leadership and nurturing women’s religious and spiritual self-expression is what the Women’s Interfaith Institute has been about for 20 years now. It is the raison d’être of our historic home in Seneca Falls, an undertaking that we believe is unique. Only recently, however, have we discovered that our initiatives are not as groundbreaking as we had thought. To explain, we need to recover some 19th century women’s history too long overlooked.

Feminist Pioneers in Inter-Religious Leadership, Scholarship and Service: Looking Back to 1848 and 1893

When Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott created the Declaration of Sentiments, a document that 68 women and 32 men signed at the Seneca Falls convention, they had specific things to say about “the usurpations on the part of man toward woman” when it came to the subject of religion.

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Among their grievances: “He closes against her all the avenues to wealth and distinction, which he considers most honorable to himself. As a teacher of theology, medicine, or law, she is not known....”

Furthermore, “He allows her in Church, as well as State, but a subordinate position, claiming Apostolic authority for her exclusion from the ministry, and, with some exceptions, from any public participation in the affairs of the Church....”

And finally, “He has usurped the prerogative of Jehovah himself, claiming it as his right to assign for her a sphere of action, when that belongs to her conscience and her God.”

Forty-five years later, at the time of the World’s Columbian Exposition (more commonly known as the Chicago World’s Fair), the situation was different. Progress had been made. When the Rev. Anna Howard Shaw, MD, gave a sermon at the closing event of the World’s Congress of Representative Women held during the opening month of the fair in 1893, on the platform with her were 18 ordained clergywomen from 13 different Christian denominations. Shaw opened her message in a manner that was extraordinary. She began, as expected, with a text from the New Testament, but immediately followed it with readings from the religion of Zoroaster, Buddhism, the “Mohammedan scriptures,” and Confucius. Throughout her message Shaw demonstrated a global feminism and inclusive vision that viewed in retrospect was a preview to the first World’s Parliament of Religions that would be held at the fair four months later.

Although Elizabeth Cady Stanton did not attend the World’s Parliament of Religions in September 1893, she wrote a paper for the occasion that was delivered by Susan B. Anthony—“The Worship of God in Man.” This was just one of 19 speeches delivered by women in the massive building (with halls that seated 5,000 people) that is now the Art Institute of Chicago. Feminist scholars of religion owe a debt of gratitude to Professor Ursula King for her article, “Rediscovering Women’s Voices at the World’s Parliament of Religions.” Here Dr. King points out that ten percent of the addresses given at the Parliament were given by women. This proportion is stunning considering that at the time it was considered improper for women to speak in public, and many were ostracized for doing so. Feminist scholars also owe a debt of gratitude to the Rev. Dr. John Henry Barrows for publishing before year’s end in 1893 the papers of the World’s Parliament, and so preserving a

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11 www.nps.gov/archive/wori/declaration.htm
record of women’s contributions. At the conclusion of the Parliament Barrows observed, “The Congress was a notable event... for woman, for then she secured the largest recognition of her intellectual rights ever granted.” Unfortunately, not much at all has been made of this fact in histories of Women in Religion.

Inspired and surprised by the achievements of our foremothers, I have been doing research on Women’s Voices at the 1893 World’s Parliament. In December 2009 I presented a PowerPoint lecture on the topic at the 5th Parliament of World’s Religions in Melbourne, Australia. People were amazed: “Why don’t we know about this?” Indeed. Recovering the stories of women who were earliest pioneers in the interfaith movement is an ongoing project of mine.

A Devastating Fire

Having reroofed our building in 2004 with the guarantee that it would last for 30 years, the Institute is now raising money for another new roof. On the evening of March 5th, 2009 valiant firefighters were compelled to chop holes in our splendid roof in order to save the building from a fire. It started in old electrical wiring above the ceiling of the Great Hall (the former sanctuary) just as a beautiful renovation was completed. Most of the damage was caused by water. Hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of library books in the basement had to be discarded; the loss was devastating.

Fortunately, the Institute was able to gain a Certificate of Occupancy and reopen a significant portion of the building on Women’s Equality Day—August 26th, 2010. This was the result of the hard work of a professional clean-up crew; a skilled contractor; and the help of many volunteers—students from nearby Hobart and William Smith Colleges, and the Institute’s Special Projects Coordinator, Marissa Garcia.

The Evelyn Copeland Room

The Value of Symbols

The challenge of renovating and maintaining Women’s Interfaith Institute’s building in Seneca Falls can be absolutely overwhelming. Not a few board members have become discouraged and have moved on to other endeavors. The situation is not unlike that of congregations that are tied to historic, difficult to keep up, edifices. What happens inside is so much more important to most people that they lose patience with maintenance issues. Why bother? Why not move elsewhere?

As Founding Director, I am convinced that the bricks and mortar symbolism of our historic church building next door to the Women’s Rights National Historical Park in Seneca Falls cannot be underestimated. Symbols matter. People the world over are

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drawn to Seneca Falls because it is seen not only as the birthplace of women’s rights, but also as a birthplace of human rights. As Hillary Clinton famously declared in Beijing at the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995: “Women’s rights are human rights.” My hope is that in years to come the Women’s Interfaith Institute will prosper and stand as a symbol of the Women’s Interfaith Movement.

Within our building we treasure another material symbol. It is an exquisite framed tapestry depicting Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Tahirih. This remarkable work of art was presented by the Baha’i National Committee on Women to the Village of Seneca Falls in 1988, and is now on permanent loan to the Institute. Designed by Vickie Hu-Poirier, the tapestry was created in commemoration of the 140th anniversary of conferences at Seneca Falls and Badasht, Persia (now Iran). These conferences, held worlds apart, yet within three weeks of each other, were led by Stanton and Tahirih.

Written underneath the tapestry image of Stanton are the words, “First Public Speech by Elizabeth Cady Stanton.” And also: “And on our banners will beat the dark storm-clouds of opposition...Undaunted we will unfurl it to the gale, for we know that the storm cannot rend from it a shred, that the electric flash will but more clearly show to us the glorious words inscribed upon it, ‘Equality of Rights.’”

Written underneath the image of Tahirih are the words, “Tahirih Appearing in Public Unveiled.” And also: “‘You can kill me as soon as you like, but you cannot stop the emancipation of women.’ The last words of Tahirih, a Baha’i heroine, before she was executed for her religious beliefs and for championing the cause of women.”

A Future in Seneca Falls for the Women’s Interfaith Institute
A Personal Word

This summer, as we celebrate 10 years of accomplishment, and I turn 70, retire and hand over my leadership responsibilities to others, it is not without some concern. Hundreds of donors, countless volunteers, and dedicated board members have worked with me in achieving so very much; yet the Great Hall is still in need of work and a third of the roof waits to be finished.

What’s ahead for us? It’s a time of transition and opportunity. We seek new WII members, and particularly new board members. Help with the building, help with programming, and help with new ideas and sources of funding would be greatly appreciated. Awed and inspired by our foremothers, we persevere and welcome partners in the journey!

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In honor of Michelle’s Grandmother Marlette Morehouse on the occasion of her birthday

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In honor of our good friends Ralph and Joan Kubista

Catherine and Leonard Kilmer
In memory of Catharine’s sister Sally Korte

Cynthia and Stephen Whitaker
In memory of Cynthia’s mother Nelle E. Smith and in honor of the birth of her namesake
Nelle Elizabeth Kniffen, Cynthia and Steve’s granddaughter

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