

**Acceptance Speech, by Elizabeth Spencer Leone (1941)**  
**June, 2000, Marian University, Indianapolis, Indiana**  
**Recipient of the**  
**Francis and Clare Award**  
**for Distinguished Achievement in Peace and Social Justice**

**Introduction**

My life has not been one of major professional accomplishments. Somehow, during my time at Marian College, I began to hear a call to serve God as a Christian lay person. It had to do with social justice -- helping people in need and empowering them to grow and to develop to their full potential. In my effort to respond to this call, I found myself at times with a sense of social maladjustment for Christian reasons. I wanted to encourage people to protest against the personal and institutional injustice of the world about them. Today, I would call this a plea to "hear the cry of the poor."

During my years at Marian, I began asking if there were any black Catholics who might want to go to Marian. If so, where are they? I discovered that I made people, including some faculty members, quite nervous! You see, I was a scholarship student from Cincinnati in the first 4-year graduating class. Fr. Doyle, my major and minor professor, listened and encouraged me. My dear friend, Mary Jane Lang (Reichsman), who was another of the 5 lay graduates in that first class (1941), understood too. Somehow, I was wrestling with a larger dream of what Marian might become.

**Early Years**

This tendency to reflect on my social experience has been a part of me throughout my life. Following graduation from Marian, I chose to prepare for a career in Social work, receiving an MSSW Degree from Catholic University (National Catholic School of Social Service). After a brief professional career (working with Jewish refugees in New York City), I married Fred Leone, whom I had met when he was a graduate student at Georgetown University. We raised a large family. To my present amazement, our children have turned out surprisingly well -- despite the confusion and pain of raising teenagers in the turbulent 60's and early 70's.

They seem to have caught my tendency to reflect on their lives. One is a socially constructive lawyer with deep concerns for neighborhoods. Another is a linguist who teaches English as a Second Language and accompanies and empowers migrant worker children toward their dreams. Another is a professor of special education who is opening up possibilities for incarcerated youth and youth at risk to acquire educational opportunities. A fourth has been a creative and successful elementary school principal who is now embarking on a new career. A fifth is a physical therapist and hospital administrator whose concern is to assist people to heal from neurological damage. A sixth is a family-practice doctor in a rural area. And the youngest, an artist with a bright autistic daughter, is shaking up her local school system to develop special education resources for handicapped children. At age 40, she is returning to college to fulfill a dream of advocacy for the physically and mentally challenged.

## **Parish and Diocesan Activities -- Cleveland (1949-1966)**

**1) Sodality of Our Lady** -- My husband and I were searching for a small Christian community -- first in our parish, then at a nearby Jesuit parish. What we found was a unique group, a Sodality which combined adult faith formation with social justice. This Sodality had developed a dialogue between black and white business and professional people about race relations. The time was the mid-fifties. Challenged by what we learned, we both joined.

**2) Catholic Interracial Council** -- A little later with other Sodalists, we joined the Catholic Interracial Council of Cleveland and we developed a lecture and funding program for encouraging integration of Catholic high schools in the diocese.

3) I helped set up a summer tutorial program at a parish school operated by the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament. Tutors were Catholic high school students, including three of my own.

**4) International Youth Leaders Exchange Program (1955-60).** We hosted foreign social workers for three summers. One remained for 2 1/2 years and received a Master's degree from Western Reserve University. She was very active in Sodality (now Christian Life Community) and has continued her work in lay spiritual development and formation in Western Germany. She has focused on sorrow for the Holocaust and reconciliation with Jewish People.

**5) Moving.** In 1966, the Leone family moved from Cleveland. My husband accepted a professorship at the University of Iowa and we sold our house to an African American professor who filled my husband's position of Professor at Case Institute of Technology (now merged into Case-Western Reserve University). This was only the third African American to move into Cleveland Heights, a city of about 68,000 residents. There were many repercussions, but we knew we must follow our consciences in helping to provide equal opportunities regardless of race or creed.

## **Iowa City Activities (1966-73)**

**1) CLC - USA** -- We continued contact with Sodality when we moved to Iowa City. In 1967, Sodality worldwide became Christian Life Community with three-fold charisms of community, spirituality, and mission. For me, it was encouraging laity to take responsibility for their actions -- at home, in their professions, in the world, all integrated with Faith.

During these turbulent years, I became more aware of God's presence in my life and in the world -- especially in the work of Martin Luther King, Jr. In the 60's, our three oldest sons declared themselves conscientious objectors to the Vietnam War. We supported their stand and accepted the potential consequences.

**2) Sao Paulo, Brazil (1968-69)** -- The year our family spent in Sao Paulo on my husband's Fulbright Professorship was a year of awakening to the world of the poor. I visited the favelas (equivalent to the barrios in other South American countries) and did a small amount of volunteer work. This year of strong social contrasts touched our entire family.

**3) Ecumenical Groups** -- After returning to Iowa City, I represented my pastor in an ecumenical group of religious leaders. This council was composed entirely of ordained ministers except for me. We became acquainted, listened to each other, read the signs of the times, shared prayer, and planned for an annual ecumenical Pentecost service

which was held at the University of Iowa Field House. This was a marvelous experience which began with parishioners marching with banners from their respective churches to the Field House.

**4) United Action for Youth (1970-73)** -- I participated with my husband and others in establishing this volunteer organization for youth at risk in Iowa City and vicinity. Today, 30 years later, UAY continues with expanded programs, including a temporary home for unwed teenage mothers and children, and is a member of the Community Chest.

**5) Iowa City School Board** -- With my husband, I was a member of the School Board for the Catholic High School of Iowa City.

### **Washington, D.C. and Silver Spring (1973-2003)**

**1) Catholic Mission Council** -- I served for two years on the Board of the U.S. Catholic Mission Council. Though I do not recall too many of the particulars, I do realize that this experience gave me additional insight on the theology of mission.

**2) NCCB: Committee on Vocations** -- I served briefly on the National Council of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Vocations. During my tenure, I was quite vocal in insisting that "vocations" meant not just to the priesthood and religious life, but to lay vocations as well. The vocation of the laity in the world was of great importance -- and it might even be a source of priestly and religious vocations.

**3) Service at a homeless shelter** -- In order to serve and to be helpful to the poor, I spent more than one year on periodic overnight duty at a shelter in downtown Washington, D.C. I encouraged others to do the same.

**4) Synod of the Laity (1987)** -- In 1987, Fred and I joined a group of about 250 laity who went to Rome for the Synod on the Laity. We met with and supported our US. Bishops who were delegates to the Synod. Prior to the Synod, our small Christian Life Community responded to the *lineamenta* (the first formal document prior to the Synod, that requests responses) in preparation for the Synod. We sent our response to the National and World offices of Christian Life Community and to Cardinal Pironio, the head of the World Commission on the Laity.

**5) Christian Life Community, world, national, local levels** -- My husband and I have continued our very strong participation in CLC. In 1975, I was given the National CLC "Development of Peoples Award" because of my concern and action for "justice for all" and not just for some.

**6) United Nations** -- My world was expanding. As a member of the World CLC Committee on Justice and Peace, I submitted a proposal and a clear justification to its Executive Council to apply to apply for Non-Governmental Organization status (NGO) at the United Nations. World CLC now has a voice with many other international NGO's on crucial global issues, such as disarmament, world health, concern for children, and the role of women.

**7) Parish Activities** -- It is in part due to our total commitment to CLC that we have joined and gone into parish work within a predominantly African American parish in all the time we have been living in the Washington D.C. area. Our parish is now expanding into a multi-cultural parish, with a very large contingent of Nigerians (Nigerian Catholic Community), Latin Americans, Haitians, Filipinos, and Caribbeans. In 1975, I was chosen President of the Parish Council. For about the past ten years, I have been an

instructor in the Parish RCIA Program. Then, in 1998, my husband and I were asked to co-chair Renew 2000, a program of small faith communities in the parish. We have 25 such communities with about 250 participants. We see these parish communities as the future of the Church in the Third Millennium. The focus of this program in this Year of Jubilee is on Christian Unity -- a clear message in our parish as we celebrate our Parish Centennial Year.

**8) Study at the Washington Theological Union** -- During the 1980's I spent six years working for a Master's degree in Theological Studies with a major in spirituality. After a life-long involvement as a constructive (I hope) change agent, I have a firm conviction that we cannot do anything worthwhile without discerning God's leading in our lives. Our outward journey towards the world, be it professional, or volunteer, or both, must be supported by and integrated with our inner journey of personal growth, self-awareness, and faith.

### **Publications and Meetings**

**1) Harvest** -- I have published over 15 articles in the U.S. Christian Life Community quarterly publication over the period of the last 25 years. I have also published several articles in Progressio, the publication of the World Christian Life Community.

**2) Other publications** -- I have also wrote articles in America and The Catholic Mind.

**3) Meetings** -- I have participated in many national and world meetings of Catholic Laity. I have co-chaired (and presented papers in) several National Assemblies of Christian Life Community.

### **And Today**

I continue to listen, learn, grow, and serve to the best of my ability. We keep in touch with, encourage, and support our grown children and their families in their Christian faith. These are the members of our "Domestic Church" of which we consider ourselves pastors. Our extended family is made up of our children and their families and some wonderful younger people from Congo (formerly Zaire) and Syria, who now find their future in the United States.

There is the journey of my life of 82 years and married life of 55 years. God isn't finished with me yet!

(Delivered at Marian College June, 2000, though the exact date may need checking.)