

SUMMER 2009

# JUST+TWO WOMEN

EMBRACING LIFE

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LOVE  
T H E  
one  
Y O U ' R E  
WITH

*Women and body image*



# "I have a calling ..."

BY DEBORAH PHELPS



Rosa Page Welch  
(1900-1994)

Charles Webb Jr. remembers sitting on the living room floor, listening as the adults visited. In their midst was Rosa Page Welch, the famous mezzo soprano. She seemed at ease among old friends, able to let her guard down as she told of her experiences speaking before crowds of white people — something almost unheard of in 1950s America. Webb's father was pastor of the Park Manor Christian Church, the first black Disciples of Christ congregation in Chicago. Welch was a friend of young Charles' mother.

When she sang at his church, Webb thought hers the sweetest voice he'd ever heard. Her rich, resonant voice seemed to carry God's very spirit. He'd heard her say she always prayed for God to give her the songs and message God wanted each audience to hear. She could touch and move people — even the biggest, toughest men — to change their ways.

Webb recalls white people coming dressed in their finest to hear Welch sing in concert halls, applauding thunderously and hailing, "What a great woman of God!" Yet they made no accommodations for "coloreds," meaning that Welch could not use the bathroom or eat in many of the places she performed.

"After performances," he recalls, "she would have to wait for the black folk to pick her up, take her across town to stay with them, and feed her. She

couldn't stay at any hotels in town or eat at any restaurants."

Webb grew up remembering Welch's response to the indignities she faced. She accepted as a matter of fact how things were, praying for compassion to replace bitterness for those who hated and hurt her. All the while she

worked doggedly, believing she could be an agent to change things. The God who had called and equipped her would help her negotiate the rough waters.

Whether called to sing or preach, Welch liked to lead her audience in singing. She reached out to people where they were and called them to move forward from there. She reminded each crowd — white, black, mixed, or in foreign lands — that people of all races needed to learn to love one another. All people were God's children, she told them, and God cared for all children just the same.

Rosa Page was born August 23, 1900, into a family of sharecroppers in Port Gibson, Mississippi. Her face bore the heritage of her enslaved great-grandparents and the white slave-holder who had used her great-grandmother, part Creek Indian, as his property. Rosa grew up nurtured by her mother's unwavering faith in God. In church she and her sister loved singing and playing the piano. Their mother taught them that love had the power to destroy hate. From her father came Rosa's musical ability and the seeds of her lifelong stance on

non-violence; a bloody race riot had fractured the Page family a generation before. As a teenager, Rosa was thrilled to receive a scholarship from the Disciples' Southern Christian Institute in Edwards, Mississippi.

Welch spent her life carrying a message of hope, peace, and God's love around the world. Her travels as "ambassador of good will" found her in post-World War II Japan, weeping with survivors of the bombings and sharing spirituals that her "own people used for comfort in times of great trouble." To the Philippines she carried a message of reconciliation from Japanese Christians, and she became the first black American most in the Congo had ever seen. She served in international, national, and local offices of Disciples, Presbyterian, and Brethren organizations, with a special passion for ministry with youth, women, and ecumenical groups. Awards and honors came to her from around the world.

Her ministry also brought sacrifice for Welch and her family. Seventy years later, Welch's daughter Linne still remembers a time when her mother was preparing to leave on an extended tour. The nine-year-old sat at the top of the stairs crying and begging her mother not to go. Welch explained gently, "I have this calling. Where God had called me, I must go."

Thanks to Linne Welch Freeman, Charles Webb Jr., Raymond Brown, Suzanne Brown, and Marjorie Parker for sharing their personal memories.



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## To learn more

*Rosa's Song: The Life and Ministry of Rosa Page Welch* by Oma Lou Myers (St. Louis: Christian Board of Publications, 1984).

To hear to a recording of Rosa Page Welch singing in her later years, visit [www.justwomenmagazine.org](http://www.justwomenmagazine.org).