

FALL 2014

# JUST **+** WOMEN

EMBRACING LIFE

BREAKING THE CHAINS,

# LINK **BY** LINK

ERADICATING HUMAN TRAFFICKING

**QA**

QUADRENNIAL

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# SANDRA GOURDET'S *journey of faith*

BY LORI ADAMS

In December of this year, the Reverend Sandra Rucker Gourdet will retire from full-time professional ministry. For most of the last five decades, she has served with Global Ministries as a missionary in the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire), Swaziland, Zimbabwe, and Haiti. During the last nine years she has worked with more than 40 partners in 14 African countries in her role as area executive of the Africa Office. Yet Sandra's call to ministry began as a child in Birmingham, Alabama.

"Early on, my family went to what we called, 'The Little White Church on the Hill,'" she explains, "where our minister was 25 years ahead of his time. Pastor Earl Murray, Jr., was devoted to youth leadership development, so every fourth Sunday we preached, sang, and presided at the communion table."

Sandra felt a deep sense of belonging to the church and began taking on a leadership role in the congregation as soon as she joined at age nine. Every child in her church also went to summer church camp, where Sandra learned to believe that God moves in the lives of all people and cares deeply about how they choose to engage the larger world. Overseas missionaries came to these summer camps, planting seeds in Sandra that grew into a full-fledged determination to get herself placed as a missionary teacher in Zaire.

Sandra's parents supported their daughter's commitments but stressed that this important work had to include finishing college. Meanwhile, her pastor began to focus his call to his parishioners on the importance of social responsibility through advocacy for civil rights for all persons.

"We participated in children's marches for justice, listened to our pastor call us to active engagement in 'the movement,' and received people like Ralph Abernathy into the pulpit. I learned that church, education, and social responsibility go hand in hand," she recalls.

These three commitments came together in an early test of faith for Sandra. She was the oldest, a high school junior, of five girls who integrated the local white school two blocks from her house. Sandra found herself in the role of standing up to the horrible meanness of white classmates as well as protecting her younger friends. "For me," she says, "finishing high school in that white school was a huge test of faith. I found out how hard it can be to stand firm in what you believe. I learned that if you are weak, you will fall."

Helping people in need take strong stands to help themselves — especially women and children — evolved into the theme of Sandra's ministry. Like many

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activists of her time, Sandra joined in voicing protests against the Vietnam War. At Alabama State University, she joined the call for an end to sending black soldiers overseas to kill other people of color — especially when there were race wars raging in the United States. She also protested against the Alabama state curriculum, mandated by an all-white board of trustees, which disregarded African-American literature, authors, and history. At the same time, Sandra watched her father, who was a foreman at U.S. Steel, get passed over for employee promotions, as he was instructed to train entry-level white employees to become his supervisors.

In 1969–1970, Sandra’s marches on the capitol in Montgomery got her arrested and jailed twice. The governor of Alabama expelled her from attending any public Alabama school. Although she was anxious to connect her passion for civil rights advocacy with internationally supported movements like the anti-apartheid work going on in South Africa, Sandra honored her father’s advice to finish her education. She graduated from Miles College in 1972.

One day soon after graduation, she received invitations to join the Peace Corps and to work with the Division of Overseas Ministries (DOM) in Zaire. Sandra chose the church. Her fraternal worker assignment through DOM equipped her with values and skills for mission that shape her ministry of presence and accompaniment to this day.

“Here I was this young, arrogant, gung-ho worker, and I was humbled in the first few weeks,” she recalls. “I had

learned formal French that didn’t work in a land where most people speak Lingala in everyday life. I wore glasses that most of the women mistrusted because of the implication of being an outside intellectual who wanted only to talk to men. I drove a car, a sign of privilege.”

Sandra remembers hearing the voice of her mother, who had scolded her children when they got to “I can’t do this” moments. She went to the wife of the general secretary of the church to ask how to get to know the women of the community. The woman instructed her to pound grain with the women, to carry water, chop wood, and learn cooking terms in Lingala. And the woman added the most important leadership lesson Sandra ever learned. The women told her to *walk more slowly*. “Take time to say, ‘How did you sleep? How is your youngest child? What is your day like?’”

It didn’t take Sandra long to learn that *walking more slowly* translates both literally as an instruction to stop and listen as well as conveying the nuance of instruction to be with people in their struggles — being present to peoples’ needs, standing firmly in the place of accompaniment, and sharing challenges means drawing people together to help them come up with their own solutions.

She explains, “Struggling *with* people means learning to know them, being present to their true concerns, accompanying them in implementing their ideas, so that they can truly say, ‘We did it ourselves!’”

This kind of partnership led Sandra to supporting Congolese women as they initiated community cooperatives to care for their children so the women could

have free time for education and fellowship. It was this kind of pastoral leadership that brought neighborhood families together in Zimbabwe to figure out how to care for children orphaned by the AIDS pandemic. And it is this kind of accompaniment that has nurtured female students to believe in themselves in every place Sandra has taught.

Mama Sandra, as many have named her in her 45 years of ministry, continues this ministry of empowerment in her work as Africa executive, traveling tirelessly to give herself to the face-to-face work of accompanying people as indigenous partner ministries create projects of healing, relief, and hope for themselves. She doesn’t point to her own accomplishments or brag about the remarkable work of her missionary family. In her own words, Sandra Gourdet sees herself as, “an ordinary person being used by an extraordinary God.”

After she retires in December, Sandra intends to write down stories, highlighting the contributions of African and Haitian women she’s met along the way — women she sees as anything but ordinary, yet women whom she knows are being used by an extraordinary God.



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