

A Service of Death and Resurrection

Dr. Norma Taylor Mitchell
November 14, 1936 - July 7, 2023



Dr. Norma Taylor Mitchell, 86, died Friday, July 7, 2023 at Croasdaile Village in Durham, NC. A committed feminist whose independence, intellect and strength were balanced by warmth and kindness, she made the most of her life in every area. She was an imaginative scholar of women's and Black history, a progressive church and community leader, a dedicated teacher and mentor, a faithful relative and friend, and a supportive, interested, and generous parent and grandparent. Her family and friends will cherish her memory forever.

Norma was born on November 14, 1936, in Norfolk, VA. She graduated with honors from Maury High School in 1954, and Phi Beta Kappa from the College of William & Mary in 1958. In the fall of 1958 she began the History Ph.D. program at Duke, where she soon met Religion doctoral student Rev. Frank Joseph Mitchell, an Alabama native who had returned to Durham after serving Methodist churches in Virginia. They married on September 5, 1959 in Norfolk.

In 1961, the couple moved to Northfield, MN, where Joe taught at Carleton College. In 1962, after Joe completed his Ph.D., they moved to Barbourville, KY, where Norma taught history and political science and Joe served as Campus Minister and Assistant Professor of Religion at Union College (Methodist).

In 1965, they moved again to Fayette, MO, where Joe took a faculty position in the Religion Department at Central Methodist College. In 1967, Norma finished her Ph.D. in History at Duke and had their daughter Anne Virginia. From 1968-70, she worked half-time as Dean of Women at Central Methodist.

In 1970, they both accepted faculty positions at Troy State University in Alabama. The move to Troy – where they spent the next 31 years – heralded a busy, professionally active, and productive period in Norma's life. Much of her work clustered around her longstanding commitment to the United Methodist Church and a prescient engagement with the emerging fields of women's and African American history that had begun while she was in graduate school.

Throughout the 1970s, Norma was deeply involved in local, conference, regional, and national United Methodist activities. Perhaps her most significant accomplishment during this period was to chair (1977-80) the church's pioneering Women's History Project, a wide-ranging public history initiative. In 1980, this project convened a national scholarly conference on women's history in the Methodist tradition – the first such conference held by a large U.S. mainline religious organization – in Cincinnati, OH. In 1981 and 1982, Abingdon Press published conference papers in *Women in New Worlds: Historical Perspectives on the Wesleyan Tradition*.

Norma continued substantive involvements in United Methodist organizations into the 2000s (boards of Scarritt-Bennett Center, Alabama UM Children's Home, and Birmingham Area Pastoral Care and Counseling). In 2013, the Commission on the Status and Role of Women for the Alabama-West Florida Conference honored her with their Alice Lee Award, which recognizes key advocates for women's equality and inclusion in the church.

Meanwhile at Troy State, Norma was the first female History faculty member to achieve the rank of Associate Professor (1970), to be tenured (1977),

and to be promoted to full Professor (1984). She devoted herself to creative undergraduate teaching across a broad array of topics and introduced new permanent courses in American women's history (1981) and African American history (1988).

She also continued her research on the women and enslaved community within the family of the Virginia governor who had been the subject of her dissertation, as well as beginning a biographical project about pioneering Alabama physician and Methodist leader Dr. Louise Branscomb. From the late 1980s to the 2000s, she lectured frequently and published several articles on both topics.

Norma was also a thoughtful and engaged partner to Joe in raising their daughter, Anne Virginia. Deeply informed by the feminist politics and parenting approaches of the 1970s, Norma encouraged her daughter's androgynous tendencies and exploration of her full personhood. She and Joe also paid sustained attention to Anne's education, from elementary through graduate school. They served as PTA co-presidents and followed Anne to high school football stadiums to hear her play trombone in the Charles Henderson High School marching band. When Anne was a Birmingham-Southern student headed to Zimbabwe with a college group in 1988, the college chaplain invited Norma to deliver remarks to the group before departure. And Norma patiently answered the phone through Anne's first year in graduate school.

From 1989-92, Norma and Joe had a "commuting marriage," while Joe served United Methodist Churches in Chesapeake, VA, and Birmingham, AL. In 1992, Joe retired completely and returned full-time to Troy, where he supervised building of a new, custom home into which they moved in 1993. In 2001, Joe and Norma moved back to Durham to be near Anne and her family. They became active members of Epworth United Methodist Church, where Norma led committees focused on programming for older adults, a churchwide study of poverty, and community outreach. She was also active in the local branch of the American Association of University Women (AAUW).

Coming to Durham provided Norma the welcome opportunity to become more involved in the lives of her young grandsons. She and Joe traveled with Anne, David, and the boys, attended every performance and family event, and made possible many enrichments. While Evan won a full scholarship to Birmingham-Southern, Norma underwrote college costs for Derek at UNC Asheville, and was proud to see both boys become third-generation college graduates in 2019 and 2021.

An expanded version of this obituary with family photos can be found using the QR code below. Point your phone camera at the code to be taken to the online version.



October 7, 2023, 11:00 a.m.
Epworth United Methodist Church
3002 Hope Valley Road
Durham, North Carolina 27707

Service of Death and Resurrection

Dr. Norma Taylor Mitchell

**Rise in body or in spirit.*

ENTRANCE

Prelude and Gathering

Entrance of Family

The Word of Grace

Greeting

*Hymn 577: "God of Grace and God of Glory"

*Prayer

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Let us pray.

O God, who gave us birth, you are ever more ready to hear than we are to pray. You know our needs before we ask, and our ignorance in asking. Give to us now your grace, that as we shrink before the mystery of death, we may see the light of eternity. Speak to us once more your solemn message of life and of death. Help us to live as those who are prepared to die. And when our days here are accomplished, enable us to die as those who go forth to live, so that living or dying, our life may be in you, and that nothing in life or in death will be able to separate us from your great love in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

PROCLAMATION AND RESPONSE

Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 40:28–31

*Hymn 92: "For the Beauty of the Earth"

Witness

JoRhea Ford

Richard Brown

Evan Whisnant

Derek Whisnant

Anne Mitchell Whisnant

Special Music: "Precious Lord, Take My Hand"

David Whisnant, soloist

*Gospel Lesson: Luke 10: 25-37

Sermon

The Rev. Donna Banks

Affirmation of Faith: World Methodist Social Affirmation (Hymnal, p. #886)

*Hymn 435: "O God of Every Nation"

COMMENDATION

Prayer

Prayer of Thanksgiving

The Lord's Prayer

*Hymn 700: "Abide With Me"

Dismissal with Blessing

Recessional: Iris Dement, "Let the Mystery Be"
(A favorite song of Norma's)

*Everybody is wondering what and where they all came from
Everybody is worried 'bout*

*Where they're gonna go when the whole thing's done
But no one knows for certain and so it's all the same to me*

*I think I'll just let the mystery be
Some say once gone you're gone forever
And some say you're gonna come back
Some say you rest in the arms of the Savior if it's sinful ways
you lack*

*Some say that they're coming back in a garden
Bunch of carrots and little sweet peas
I think I'll just let the mystery be
Everybody is wondering what and where they all came from
Everybody is worried 'bout*

*Where they're gonna go when the whole thing's done
But no one knows for certain and so it's all the same to me
I think I'll just let the mystery be*

*Some say they're going to a place called glory
And I ain't saying it ain't a fact
But I've heard that I'm on the road to purgatory
And I don't like the sound of that
I believe in love and I live my life accordingly
But I choose to let the mystery be*

*Everybody is wondering what and where they all came from
Everybody is worried 'bout
Where they're gonna go when the whole thing's done
But no one knows for certain and so it's all the same to me
I think I'll just let the mystery be
I think I'll just let the mystery be*

All present are invited to join us immediately after the service for lunch in the Fellowship Hall. Members of the extended family are asked to remain briefly in the sanctuary for group photographs by Evan David Whisnant.

Participants

Rev. Donna Banks, Senior Pastor, Epworth UMC
Rev. Laurie Hays Coffman, Chaplain, Croasdaile Village

Organ & Piano: Dr. Fred Ibberson

Ushers: Kenneth Roberts and Susan Armour

Sound: Brian Barnett

Fellowship Hall: Jill Shiflett and Martha Society