

**A History Of  
THE WOMEN'S DIALOGUE**

**of**

**The Highlands Institute  
for  
American Religious  
and Philosophical Thought**

**1992 - 2002**

**WD History Committee:  
Patricia Boyd  
Carole Light  
Fia Scheyer**

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**Trillium Books**

**[scheyer08@verizon.net](mailto:scheyer08@verizon.net)**

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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**The Women's Dialogue  
2002**

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## FOUNDERS

In 1986 a conference of American religion and philosophy was organized by Creighton Peden, Ph.D. The conference, in Paderborn, Germany, was held for professors of American studies in European universities. At Paderborn, Peden shared with a group of colleagues associated with the *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* (Edward Barrett, Delwin Brown, Frederick Ferré, William Dean, and others) his desire to start a dialogue in Highlands, NC, where he intended to retire with his wife, Frissy. At an informal gathering with these AJTP founders, the group responded very positively and gave their wholehearted support for such a continuing dialogue. However, they convinced Creighton to begin immediately in the organizational and planning procedures rather than waiting until his retirement. It took two years to complete the planning for HIARPT's first International Conference on Philosophical Theology, which was held in 1988 at Oxford University. The inaugural program in Highlands the next year was a scholarly seminar on Nancy Frankenberry's book, *Religion and Radical Empiricism*.

Although the Highlands Institute of American Religious and Philosophical Thought (HIARPT) began from its base in the AJTP, it went on to encompass: the Winter Dialogue, the Summer Lecture series, academic seminars and conferences, the book series, and, in 1992, the Women's Dialogue.

Peden contacted Nancy Tarbox, who had been visiting Highlands with her husband, E.J., since Frankenberry's seminar in 1989. Nancy remembers that contact this way: "When E.J. and I attended the first conference, we had no idea that it would bring us to live in Highlands. The invitation to participate in the Oxford conference with a group who were interested in an academic study of American religious thought and 'the Chicago School' fitted with our interests perfectly. We first came to Highlands for a seminar in 1989 and continued to come every summer after that to attend the Highlands Institute's seminars and conferences. We were enchanted with the town and soon decided that we would like to live in Highlands after E.J.'s retirement."

"I was pleased, when in early 1992, Creighton suggested the formation of a group to study feminist theology. Several women, including Pat Boyd, Elinor Metzger, Bobbie Reitt, Virginia Reynaud and I, met in Frissy Peden's home to make plans for a Women's Dialogue and to plan for a meeting which would meet annually to discuss issues of theology and philosophy as they relate to women. My hope for the group was to create a forum in which we could discuss feminist theology lead by professionals in that field."

The first person invited to join the fledgling group to help them explore a summer seminar was Rebecca Chopp, a HIARPT scholar and Provost and Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs at nearby Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia.

The first WD on feminism was held at The Mountain Camp and Conference Center in Highlands on June 27-28, 1993, with Rebecca Chopp as leader. Thirty women of diverse ages and backgrounds gathered to meet, cook together, sleep dormitory style, and dialogue.

The second year, the group decided not to continue the overnight format but, instead, to meet for a two-day period, at which time they could dialogue and share meals together at the retreat center. By the third year, the decision was made to meet closer to the town of Highlands, as the retreat center was located high on a mountain some distance from the town. They contracted with a local tennis club that had adequate facilities for the meeting and, until meeting at the new Highlands Performing Arts Center 12 years later, they continued to use the tennis club facility as a meeting place.

While the cost of the WD seminars was initially shared by HIARPT and the WD, more recently the WD has began to cover most of its own expenses, albeit with some continuing assistance from HIARPT. The approach of HIARPT is to seed programs and have them develop autonomy over time.

As one can see from the comments from both the presenters and the participants, the WD has indeed developed its own persona and focus over the years.



**Creighton and Frissy Peden**



**Frissy Peden and  
Nancy Tarbox**

## **Presenter's Questionnaire**

1. How did you envision your responsibility to the women of the Women's Dialogue when you accepted the role of leader?
2. What was your initial understanding of what this group wanted and needed?
3. What special topic did you introduce to the group and how did you select the topic?
4. How do you feel the group responded to you as a leader?
5. How did they respond to the topic and how does this relate to the growth of the overall women's movement in America?
6. Were there ways in which you were surprised or did the event meet your expectations?
7. Are there elements of your personal biography that made you interested in this task?
8. Is this type of dialogue important to the status of women in the community?
9. Have you addressed similar groups? If so, is there a notable difference in their response?

## PRESENTERS

### Rebecca Chopp

#### 1993: Designing a New Narrative



In 1992, Several women who attended the Highlands Institute of American Religious and Theological Thought (HIART, later changed to HIARPT after philosophy was included in their agenda), felt the need to step away from the traditional HIART programs and lectures in order to examine a more feminist approach to the dialogue.

They approached Rebecca Chopp, then Provost and Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs at Emory University (later, Dean of the Yale Divinity School, and in 2002, appointed President of Colgate University) to be their first speaker. Dr. Chopp accepted their invitation and worked with the group to design a two-day seminar. The first Women's Dialogue, sponsored by HIART, was held at the Mountain Camp and Conference Center on June 27-28 1993.

Although, like the Institute, the seminar sought to encourage thoughtful examination of the dialogue between religious thought and classical American philosophy, the special focus of the seminar examined the relevance of that tradition to the personal and social concerns of women.

Nancy Tarbox, one of the founders, who served as the seminar registrar, commented, "We will focus on women's lives as narratives and stories, and how women continually 'rewrite' their lives in the midst of work, friends, and families."

The planning committee for the first Women's Dialogue was composed of Pat Boyd, Jody Bryan, Elinor Metzger, Bobbie Reitt, Virginia Reynaud, and Nancy Tarbox.

The following comments were excerpted from an article in *The Highlander* newspaper by Beth Holocombe:

During the discussion, Dr. Chopp pointed out that an 'anti-male' version of feminism, if it ever was real and not only a perception, is no longer a driving force behind feminism. "For most feminists, it's a non-issue," she said of the 'anti-male' concept."

She went on to say that, "The culture is in total crisis and we, as feminists, are asking what can we do to help?" For instance, older black women in Atlanta right now are embarking on a 'parenting' program for younger black

women, helping to provide them with information that they may never have had access to otherwise.

“Looking back at the suffrage movement, when women were finally given the right to vote and in connection with their efforts in the temperance movement, now and again, the women’s movement has addressed cultural crisis.”

“Feminist theology is concerned with making society and culture more ‘free’ for everyone.”

She added that she is pleased with the current shift now taking place in Christianity toward more tolerance. “There is a big turn in Christianity now to give up universalism. Pluralism got connected with Christianity in the West. There are lots of theologians today attempting a dialogue with Buddhists, Hindus, and Moslems.”

“Christianity is a fast-growing religion in Asia and Africa, and Christians are increasingly becoming willing to create a dialogue between Christianity and Confucianism, or Christianity and African religions.”

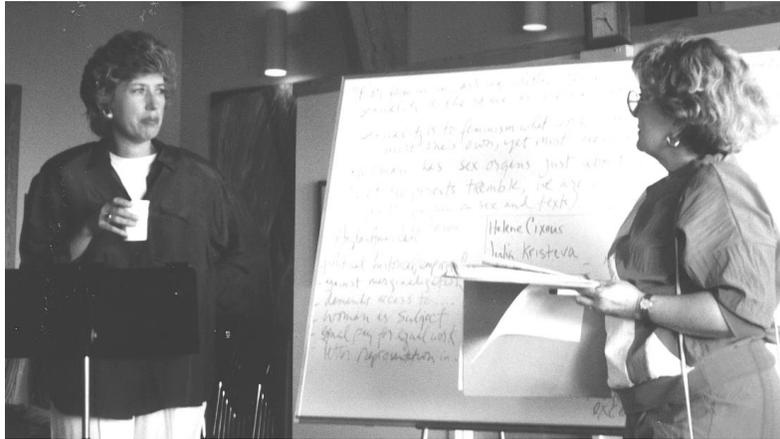
Of her own experience, Dr. Chopp said, “A few Methodist bishops forced me to become a feminist.” She explained that the bishops were preventing her from ‘climbing the ladder’ in her professional capacity as a theologian. She went on to say that she believes organized religion is due for a ‘shake-up’, noting that “. . . organized religion lacks spirituality.”

Rebecca Chopp clearly got the Women’s Dialogue off to a rousing start.

Dr. Chopp was invited to return to the Women’s Dialogue in celebration of their tenth anniversary on June 18-19, 2002. Her topic on this occasion was *Women and Faith Communities in the Twenty-First Century*.

## **Nancy Frankenberry**

### **1994: In a Different Voice**



#### **Nancy Frankenberry and Nancy Tarbox**

The second Women's Dialogue Project, as it was called in the early years, was held from June, 19 to 21, 1994. Invited to be the discussion leader was Nancy Frankenberry, Professor of Religion at Dartmouth College.

The title of the seminar was *In a Different Voice: New Trends in a Feminist Philosophy of Religion*. The focus was a comparison of French Feminism to Anglo-American Feminism.

In her lecture, Dr. Frankenberry pointed out that French feminists were transcendentalists, as opposed to the political, historical, and empirical approach which many American feminists have taken.

She went on to point out that French feminist philosophers emphasize text or writing as a means of portraying the difference between men and women, whereas Americans are developing more autonomous gender definitions.

The provocative question Frankenberry asked the participants to explore was, "Do you think that sexual difference should be located primarily in material reality or in the play of the text?"

Dr. Frankenberry, in commenting on the group's participation, said, "This is an exceptionally vibrant group of women with lively discussion. I am very pleased (with the result of the seminar)." Later in the program, the feminist novel *She Who Is* was discussed in small groups, followed by a discussion about the future of the Women's Dialogue.

## **Sheila Greeve Davaney**

### **1995: Contemporary Trends in Feminist Theology**



**Sheila Davaney, 2<sup>nd</sup> left**

Dr. Sheila Greeve Davaney, Associate professor of Theology at the Iliff School of Theology in Denver, Colorado, and noted scholar of process theology, was the featured speaker and discussion leader at the third annual Women's Dialogue held at the Mountain Laurel Tennis Club in Highlands on June 18-19, 1995.

At the seminar, designed to bridge the gap between the academic and lay worlds and to encourage the free exploration of feminist ideas, Dr. Davaney presented an overview of current thinking in feminist theology and led a lively discussion of the issues raised by feminist theologians.

As has become tradition, the presentation engendered a vigorous debate among the participants and Dr. Davaney.

## **Nancy Howell**

### **1996: Women, Science, and Religion**



The proceedings of the seminar shifted from a primarily tutoring format to a more inclusive process at the Women's Dialogue Seminar of 1996. Nancy Howell, a noted leader in the American Academy of Religion and co-convener of the Women's Caucus, guided the Women's Dialogue towards a more contemporary exploration.

The seminar, entitled *Women, Science and Religion*, took place on June 23-24, 1996. Nancy Howell is seen as "one of our own", as she has lectured and participated in HIART and the Women's Dialogue for many years.

In response to the questionnaire, Nancy replied that when she prepared her Women's Dialogue seminar on ecofeminism, she ". . . needed to work out of my discipline to bring some of the best and most interesting material to an intelligent audience of women. Second, I thought that I needed to connect with a topic of particular relevance to women and their concerns. Third, I sensed that I needed to bring a topic challenging and stimulating, but expressed without jargon and pretension. Fourth, I imagined that the format should be a dialogue rather than a lecture, and I selected a topic that permitted presenting short selected readings that could function as case studies, allowing women participants the chance to discover and analyze information from their own standpoints."

"I understood the participants to be accomplished women from diverse professions and life situations, who were interested in continuing their intellectual growth and developing personal self-expression on a variety of thought-provoking topics. While the group is not explicitly 'feminist', the women are strongly identified with women's concerns. I understood myself to be a partner in the WD who was responsible on one occasion to bring a current topic of conversation. My task was to instigate an energetic conversation that permitted self-discovery, critical thinking, and constructive proposals. The delight in the WD is the opportunity to test ideas."

"I chose to introduce ecofeminism to the group in such a way that we could explore together the relationship of women to nature in Guatemala, India, and the United States. One reason for selecting the topic is my own passion for justice for women and nature. A second reason is that I had successfully worked with the topic in general audiences. I was interested in using a variety of literary excerpts to introduce how women see themselves in relation to nature. The reading selections were intended to encourage women to think

about details of their relationship with nature and to discover the political, economic, and spiritual facets of interpretations of women and nature. Such discovery requires no special knowledge, but good minds open to women's causes."

Dr. Howell responded to the question, *How do you think the group responded to you as a leader?*, by commenting that, "Women have been very kind in their appreciation of my seminar. I think the reason I was well received as a leader is largely due to the fact that women were delighted with themselves and their reflections during the seminar, in a sense, I was received well because women remember feeling positive about their own participation. I note that women did not simply agree with the perspectives I introduced, and sometimes energetic disagreement characterized the discussion. In the conversation, disagreement was not met with defensiveness, which meant that persons could feel free to interact with the content in a variety of ways."

And in her response to the question, *How does this relate to the growth and development of the overall women's movement in America?*, Nancy shared her philosophy this way: "Ecofeminism does not attempt to create a blueprint that restricts how women think. An ecofeminist perspective encourages justice for nature, women, and women's communities. Such an expansive commitment to advocate health and wholeness in the world suggests a non-adversarial approach to justice. While some women shudder at the term 'feminism,' 'ecofeminism' makes room for a range of situations and concerns. The inclusive justice of ecofeminism makes dialogue more accessible. I think that the topic invited all to participate, which mirrors the intention of ecofeminism in the global feminist discourse."

"I was pleased and surprised that the conversation was as dynamic as it turned out to be. In fact, I probably didn't have a chance to cover all the 'discussion starters' that I brought with me. Since my approach was to involve the group in active learning, on one hand, I was not surprised - I expected and prepared for discussion. On the other hand, the contributions of the group may have exceeded my expectations."

When asked about her personal biography, Nancy stated that she was not from an elite family with a history of distinguished college or graduate degrees but from family that values teaching and learning. She went on to say, "My background affects me in two ways; first, I regret that the women in my family were rarely asked to reflect about politics, history and other fields from the standpoint of their own narratives. And second, I am convinced that all persons are intelligent, but not all persons have equal access to materials and resources that nurture continuing intellectual growth. This history combined with feminist commitment to making information accessible made me interested in working with the WD not just for one session, but for a number of years during which I supported women peers in the academy (who make presentations) and women peers in the Highlands community."

"Any activities that encourage women's self-confidence and personal enrichment enhance the creativity and presence of women in the community. I think the WD is an exemplary opportunity for women to form opinions and encounter new perspectives. Although I have rarely addressed groups of women (outside of the academy), I have led programs for college students and churchwomen's groups. I think the WD is unique in its breadth of interest and diversity of perspectives."

## **Marjorie Suchocki**

### **1997: How Do We Respond to Tragic Evil**



From June 22 to 23, 1997, the Women's Dialogue met at the Mountain Laurel Tennis Club. The guest speaker was Marjorie Suchocki.

With Dr. Suchocki, the group asked the question, *How do we Respond to Tragic Evil?*, exploring the convergence of three worlds. The first was the world of art through the film, *Dead Man Walking*, which describes the challenges a faithful woman in the face of evil. The second was the world of theology using as a text, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion*, by Wendy Farley. The third was our world.

Dr. Suchocki wove the themes of the film and theology together to bring the group's focus to one central issue – how to align their intellectual and their personal and emotional experiences in response to tragic evil. She later remarked, "I had a terrific time because it was such a lively group! In terms of comparison with other groups, each group I speak with has its own unique character and I've been pretty fond of them all, so it's sort of like asking a mother which of her kids she likes best!"

Marjorie will undoubtedly be remembered by future generations as the hymnologist of HIART for having composed the HIART Hymn.



**Marjorie Suchocki and Barbara Reitt**

## Barbara Reitt

### 1998: A Room of One's Own



**Virginia Reynaud and Barbara Reitt**

The 1998 Women's Dialogue Seminar became an opportunity to meet with a "regular" member of the Women's Dialogue group, Barbara "Bobbie" Reitt.

It was not by accident that the topic for discussion at the seminar was Virginia Woolf's book, *A Room of Her Own*. Bobbie said, in response to the questionnaire we sent to all the presenters, "I knew in my bones what was wanted since I participated in every previous session and had been a planner from the start. I commented on the topic of Woolf's *A Room of Her Own* in one of our meetings and the group pounced on it as something they wanted to do. I had the luxury of not having to struggle with the topic selection."

"The group's response seemed to be rather positive. The women seemed to prefer listening to the speaker and chatting about their own feelings rather than working together to imagine a very different non patriarchal society. On the whole, I don't think this is surprising, since the WD isn't after all, a classroom. The response to Woolf's story and message was very strong and positive. The credit goes to Woolf, who saw so clearly what the fundamental issues are in a patriarchal society as she illustrated the hazards for women with such inspired genius. The greatest challenge, in my opinion, was to help the participants see how thoroughly her criticism undercuts the foundations of Western civilization, how very radical her ideas actually are despite the temptation to examine her mental illness rather than her ideas. There are not many more up-to-date feminist writers who are a radical as she is, although many may appear to be at first blush."

"My experience has shown me that the undergraduates I taught really don't 'get it' the way older women in the WD do. I think feminism tends to bore many younger women because they never experienced the harsher conditions we did decades ago. Consequently, working with my friends in the WD sessions (those led by others as well as the one I led) is fully satisfying to me in a way that teaching younger women never was -- or could be, I suspect. The older women I taught in federal courses would have responded differently, and probably rather negatively to the ideas we tackle in WD, largely because most of the women I taught were not as highly educated or intellectually inclined as the WD group is. These students were inclined to treat sexist problems in the workplace as a symptom of character flaws rather than the larger pervasive system. Leading the WD after having taught both federal employees and Emory students has sensitized me to the significantly different ways women view the issues of feminism."

“I don’t know that our discussions in WD impact our status in the community very much, but I think it probably helps our mental health a whole lot!”

**Mary E. Hunt**  
**1999: Ethics for a New Millennium**



**Virginia Renaud, Mary Hunt and Patricia Boyd**

Mary Hunt, co-director of the Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics and Ritual (WATER) of Silver Springs, Maryland, was the presenter of the Women's Dialogue seminar of 1999. That seminar, *Ethics for a New Millennium*, was held on June 27-28 at the Mountain Laurel Tennis Club.

She remarked about the Women's Dialogue History Project, "I especially applaud this effort to document the important work that you have done as we need such models for other groups to follow."

Mary Hunt responded to our questionnaire with good humor, remarking, "The women dove in headfirst and really worked seriously on the issues I presented. I recall intense discussions, real effort to engage the material, all the while hearing tennis balls thump next door! I admire that kind of dedication."

In commenting on the WD, Dr. Hunt said, "I did not know too much about the group, although I heard from Sheila Davaney that it was a wonderful crowd. I was told that the group wanted and needed to look at ethical issues, indeed to discuss and develop its own ethical thinking. My role was simply to provide a framework for doing so. My topic was a new approach to ethics. I chose it because I believe that it is often the case that we disagree as much about method as content. We are often ships passing in the night when we begin at such different starting points that we can never expect to come to any working agreement on how to live with difference. I find that women are especially open to finding more effective ways to do so."

Commenting about her impression of the WD, Dr. Hunt said, "My impression was that the group respected me. I felt I was taken seriously, listened to, but also, happily, challenged by people who held different views. I felt welcomed by the group as one of them, albeit in a different role. The hospitality I received, both by the group as a whole and by my gracious hostess, Millie Broughton, would be hard to top. I also like that the women crafted the workshop according to their own needs, unswayed by the usual academic model that does not invite the same degree of interaction. I have seen this kind of feminist approach in many places in the world and realize that it works!"

“I was pleasantly surprised by the high quality of interaction and the high degree of willingness to engage. I was also pleased that so many women came to my lecture (at HIARPT) and to the next day’s discussion, exuding a sense of ownership. It was as if, for a change, the shoe was on the other foot and they, not their husbands, were the experts. I did not feel this was in any way antagonistic for the men, rather that it was empowering for the women. I hope I am right.”

In commenting as a feminist theologian she said, “As a feminist theologian I am always eager to hear how other women put their lives together, how they react and respond to ethical challenges. I also find women who are white, upper middle class and comfortable, who know that they are privileged can be a powerful force for social change. I felt that at Highlands.

“Without a doubt, this kind of dialogue is crucial to empowering women and to bringing about justice. It is only, equipped with such tools, that women can enter into the ethical fray. I have addressed hundreds of groups over the years. I think this one was consistent with most in that they were appreciative and interested. What was unique was the beautiful setting, the outstanding hospitality and the obvious sustained commitment to justice by the WD. It was a marvelous experience for me, one that I have gone back to in my mind when preparing for other groups. Just recently I was in Oklahoma City with a Presbyterian church-based group working on similar issues. I was impressed by how that mixed group of men and women worked together. It might be time to try that at Highlands, not to exclude the Women’s Dialogue Seminar, but as a way the men in HIART might conduct at least some of its work. I look forward to the next time our paths cross.”



**Mary  
Hunt  
with  
the  
WD**

## **Susan Kress**

### **2000: The Feminist Detective Novel As Entertainment and Social Criticism**



#### **Susan Kress and the WD**

Susan Kress, Professor of English at Skidmore College, Sarasota Springs, New York, was the presenter at the 2000 Women's Dialogue seminar. The seminar was unique as we examined *The Feminist Detective Novel as Entertainment and Social Criticism*.

Dr. Kress responded to our questionnaire with a critique of the Women's Dialogue seminar. "I understood that I had been selected because I had written an intellectual biography of Carolyn G. Heilbrun. I was invited to design and develop a two-day seminar on topics related to Heilbrun's life and work. I saw my responsibility as choosing topics of general interest to women from a variety of backgrounds, some retired, some still employed; I also understood that the group wanted the discussion to have a feminist focus. I aimed for a combination of mini-lectures, discussion sections, and writing exercises. It was my responsibility, I thought, to inform, to stimulate, and to entertain. In addition, it was my responsibility to provide a forum where meaningful exchanges could take place among all of us. I was told that the WD was intended both to build a feminist community and to provide intellectual stimulation."

"Prior to my visit, I learned that the WD had focused primarily on spiritual and religious matters. I was concerned that my expertise lay elsewhere, and I did not want to disappoint the group. In conversation with Nancy Tarbox, I learned that many in the group enjoyed reading detective novels; this topic seemed a great way to link feminist topics with our mutual interest with Carolyn Heilbrun (a.k.a. Amanda Cross the writer of detective novels). We began by ascertaining the history, forms, and themes of the classic detective story, and then we established the special features of the feminist detective novel. Then we used two case studies: *Gaudy Night* written by Dorothy Sayers in 1935 and *Death in a Tenured Position* written by Amanda Cross in 1981. The case studies enabled us to look at both writer's lives and work, showing the correspondences and differences, and examining the ways each attempted to criticize and change society. The choice of these two writers also provided the opportunity to see what social changes had been enacted since 1935 and what still, according to Amanda Cross, remained to be done."

"I felt very invigorated by the group--and it seemed, in turn, as though they were interested in what I had to present to them. I designed exercises as well as organized small and large discussion groups so that not only would they

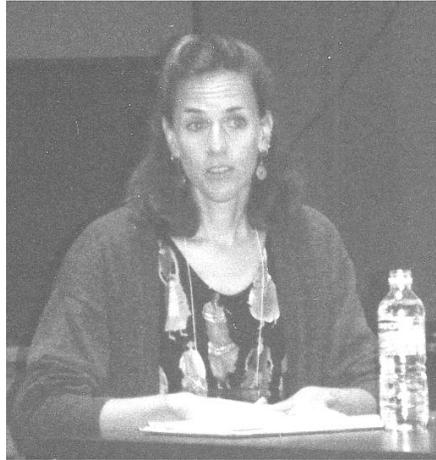
remain interested, but also get involved in ways that were most comfortable for them.”

“All the feedback I received was very encouraging. I think it was interesting to look at the ways literature both influences our perceptions and challenges our conventional assumptions. The women’s movement in America has always depended on the ways women have come together in small or large groups--either formally or informally--to discuss the nature and conditions of women’s lives and to agitate for appropriate political and social change.”

“The WD is important to the status of women in the community. It became clear that the WD had developed as a way for the women in the community to claim and extend their own interests. Many of them were very involved in the philosophical and religious events planned by HIARPT, but there seemed to be also a need for the women to come together as a group without men in order to discuss their topics and assert their voices. I was charmed and intrigued by the way some of the men wanted to be included in the Women’s Dialogue!”

“I have addressed groups of women before--but not over a sustained period of time. I have delivered lectures or seminars for an hour or two. It made a big difference to get to know people in both the seminar and social settings over the two days. I was delighted to meet women from so many different backgrounds. I learned a great deal in your stimulating company.”

**Erin McKenna**  
**2001: Feminist Pragmatism**



The Women's Dialogue Seminar for 2001 was held at the Lipscomb-Martin Performing Arts Center in Highlands on June 24-25. The presenter for the dialogue was Erin McKenna.

The topic of the seminar was, *Feminist Pragmatism*. The texts of the discussion were: *Pragmatism and Feminism: Reweaving the Social Fabric* by Charlene Haddock Seigfried, *Twenty Years at Hull House* by Jane Addams, and *Women and Economics* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman.

In response to our questionnaire McKenna said, "I thought I was to set up a topic that would connect to the lives of the women involved in WD, bring feminism alive. I chose readings that would provide information that would lead to and generate a discussion. I then kept track of the discussion and connected it back to the material we had discussed. I had a sense that I was setting up a situation in which a dialogue could productively occur. I had a definite sense that given the age and background of the women involved that they didn't want to be 'talked at' or 'taught' so much as engaged."

"The group asked me to focus on pragmatism and feminism. Given that selection, I then decided to narrow the topic a bit and focus on Jane Addams and Charlotte Perkins Gilman. These two women present very different views, but both were very active around the same time period and had a great influence on American philosophy and society. Unfortunately most people read the Seigfried book first and got a bit put off by its scholarly tone. I had hoped people would really enjoy Addams' *Twenty Years at Hull House* and Gilman's *Women and Economics* (or even some of her short stories). We never really got to Gilman, since the conversation inspired by Addams kind of took on a life of its own."

In spite of the omission of Gilman, Dr. McKenna went on to say, "I felt very welcomed and people seemed to be genuinely appreciative of my efforts. Several people said they liked that I didn't force the conversation back to my outlined plan, but let it go in the direction the group seemed inclined to take it. Generally, this is how I teach, so that presented no problem for me. I take it as a sign of success if a class or group gets energized. They don't have to stay on any particular topic. The second day I was able to incorporate materials and suggestions from some of the participants and they seemed to like that as well."

“I thought everyone was well prepared and thoughtful. We had good conversations. The life experiences people were able to offer made it a very rich experience for all involved. Everyone was very friendly and we ate well! In retrospect, I wish I had left the Seigfried book to last. That might have reduced the initial anxiety.”

“My mother is 74 and incredibly active--plays tennis, takes Spanish lesson, and involved in many groups. I always find it interesting to be around such vibrant minds, combined with the experience they have. This group clearly keeps everyone stimulated and brings a nice age range of women together for some important sharing. Being a teacher, I always welcome the opportunity and challenge of getting people to see the importance and influence of philosophy--and to help them be less reticent of it.”

“I think the WD is important. It’s an important way to bring a variety of women together. It also seemed to be a very safe place for these women to try new things, speak up, stretch themselves. It also serves to remind the community that women can and do ‘think’ and are not always or only arranging events that serve others by cooking or raising money, although these are important roles that women are largely responsible for. I saw it as a place where you nurture and energize yourselves so you can keep giving back to the community in the many ways that most of you do.”

“I wouldn’t say I have addressed similar groups (as WD). I have given talks in retirement homes and to groups like the Lions and Rotary. I’m not sure they were as prepared to do any reading or do anything with what they learned or talked about, it was more to be entertained for an hour. None of them had a two day format except for the Highlands lecture series. This was very enjoyable and rewarding for me.”

Later in the summer, on August 21, 2001, Dr. McKenna was invited by HIARPT to deliver a lecture on *The Plight of Primates: What is our Ethical Obligation?* After the lecture, the WD gave a reception in honor of Erin McKenna.

## **Biographical Information**

### **Rebecca Chopp**

Dr. Chopp has served as Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs at Emory University, and later, Dean of the Yale Divinity School. In 2002, she was appointed President of Colgate University. Her books include: *The Praxis of Suffering: An Interpretation of Liberation and Political Theologies*; *The Power to Speak: Feminism, Language, God*; *Saving Work: Feminist Practices of Theological Education* (as well as many other important books and articles written since the early nineties.)

### **Nancy Frankenberry**

Dr. Frankenberry has served as Professor of Religion at Dartmouth College since 1977 and was instrumental in founding the Women's Studies Program there. She was co-chair of the WS Program from 1987 - 1991. Prior to her appointment at Dartmouth, she taught at Santa Clara University. She received her B. A. in Philosophy and Theology (*Magna Cum Laude*) from Marquette University. She received both her M. A. and her Ph. D. from The Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California.

She is a founding member of HIART and a member of the executive committee. She has also served as a member of the Steering Committee of The American Academy of Religion's Search Group on Empiricism in American Religious Thought.

The first work chosen by HIART in 1989 was *Religion and Radical Empiricism*, written by Frankenberry. She has continued to be one of America's outstanding feminist philosophers of religion.

### **Sheila Davaney**

Dr. Davaney is noted for her scholarly contributions to process theology, feminist theology, and the Western tradition. She received her B.A. from Manhattanville College and studied theology at Harvard University, where she received both her Masters in theological studies and her Doctorate of Divinity. Her dissertation was on Karl Barth and Charles Hartshorne (a founding member of HIART). *Divine Power* is an examination and critical analysis of Barth and Hartshorne's ideas of God. She was the editor of *Theology at the End of Modernity: Essays in Honor of Gordon D. Kaufman - 1991*. Her work *Historicism and Pragmatic Adjudication: Towards a New Agenda in Theology* was the focus of the HIART's seminar in 1997,

Professor Davaney has lectured widely and has written many noteworthy articles on women's experience as it relates to both theology and changing culture. She has served as Vice President and Program Chair for the Rocky Mountain-Great Plains Regions of the American Academy of Religion.

In her theological consultant role, Dr. Davaney has served Methodist, Presbyterian, United Church of Christ, and Lutheran churches. She is also on the Board of Directors of the Denver Community Television and the Front Range Media Corporation. She serves on the Editorial Board of the *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* and is a member of the Board of Directors of HIART.

### **Nancy Howell**

Dr. Howell is Associate Professor of Religion and Chair of the Women's Studies Program at the Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, Washington. She

received her B.S. from the College of William and Mary, M.Div. and Th.M. from Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. She received her M.A. and Ph.D. from Claremont Graduate School.

Dr. Howell has served as co-chair of the Theology and Science Group and as chair of the Women and Religion Section of the Northwest Region. She is also active in the Institute on Religion in an Age of Science, in the National Women's Studies Association, and the Center for Theology and Natural Sciences.

Her work dealing with feminist issues as they relate to philosophy, theology, and science are legend.

### **Marjorie Suchocki**

Dr. Suchocki received her B.A. in Philosophy (*magna cum laude*) from Pomona College and her M.A. and Ph. D. in Religion from Claremont Graduate School. She taught at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary from 1977 to 1983. From 1983 to 1990 she was Academic Dean and Professor of Systemic Theology at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D. C. She came to Claremont in 1990.

She is a member of the editorial board of the American Journal of Theology and Philosophy and of the HIARPT board of directors. She has published numerous books.

She has also served on the Commission on Faith and Order of the National Council of Churches and the University Senate of the United Methodist Church.

She is currently working extensively in film festivals at home and abroad, while maintaining her residence in California.

She served as the chair of the HIARPT Summer Lecture Series in 2002.

### **Barbara Reitt**

Dr. Reitt received her B.A. (*magna cum laude*) from Duke University, her M.A. from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and her Ph.D. from Emory University. She is also a Diplomat (ELS.D) of the Board of Editors in the Life Sciences Department, the highest recognition that a scientific editor can receive. After serving as editorial assistant at Duke University Press, she created her own business, Reitt Editing Services, whose focus is primarily on scientific publications.

She has served as editor and writer for the American Geriatrics Society, the Family Medicine Review, the Southern Regional Education Board, the Southern Council on Collegiate Education for Nursing, the North Carolina Medical Society, the Spine Bifida Association of America, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Her edited publications and scholarly publications are numerous.

Bobbie Reitt lives full time in Highlands with her retired physician husband, Pete. She has served on the Board of Trustees of the Hudson Library of Highlands, the Macon County Public Library, and is immediate past president the Fontana Regional Library System of North Carolina.

### **Mary Hunt**

Dr. Hunt is a Roman Catholic active in the women's church movement, and she lectures and writes about theology and ethics with particular focus on women's liberation issues. She received her undergraduate degree in Theology and Philosophy from Marquette University, her Master's in Theological Studies from Harvard Divinity School, a Master's of Divinity from the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley, and her Ph.D. from the Graduate Theological Union in

Berkeley, California. She has completed clinical pastoral education and is fluent in Spanish.

Dr. Hunt spent several years teaching and working on human rights in Argentina through the Frontier Internship Mission Program. She continues that work through WATER's project, *Women Crossing Worlds*, an on-going exchange with Latin American women.

She is the author of *Fierce Tenderness: A Feminist Theology of Friendship*, which was awarded the Crossroad Women's Studies prize for 1990. She has edited and written many publications and articles on feminism, Christian ethics, ecofeminism, and sexuality and the sacred.

Mary Hunt serves on the Editorial Board of *the Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* and the *Journal of Religion and Abuse*. She is a member of the Society for Christian Ethics and the American Academy of Religion. She also serves as a member of the Board of Directors of the Religious Consultation on Population, Reproductive Health and Ethics, and as an advisor to the Women's Ordination Conference.

### **Susan Kress**

Dr. Kress received her B.A. and M.A. from Manchester College, England, with First Class Honors in English Language and Literature. She received her Ph.D. from Cambridge University, England.

Susan Kress is currently Professor of English at Skidmore College, where she has served as Department Chair. Prior to her tenure at Skidmore, she taught at George Mason University, the State University of New York, Queens College, City College of New York, and Cornell University in Ithaca, New York.

The feminist detective novel is of particular interest to Kress, as her major publication is *Carolyn G. Heilbrun, Feminist in a Tenured Position*. The book received Honorable Mention from the Emily Toth Award Committee in 1998 for the best feminist study of the year by a single author. *Bookman* named Kress's book one of the best books of 1998. Among her many published articles are: *Can Sociology be Literature*, *Bly(the) Spirits: A Teacher's Ghosts*, *Nadine Gordimer's Accountability*, *Women and Marriage in the Fiction of Abraham Cahan*, *In and Out of Time: The Form of Marge Piercy's Novels*, and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest: Some Myths Exposed*.

She has served as President of the Executive Committee of the Association of Departments of English, and she is a member of the Modern Language Association and the National Council of Teachers of English.

### **Erin McKenna**

Dr. McKenna, Associate Professor and Chair of Philosophy at Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, WA, holds a B.A. from Claremont McKenna College, and a M.A. and Ph.D. from Purdue University.

Dr. McKenna's areas of specialization are social and political philosophy, ethics, feminist theory and American philosophy. She is a member of HIARPT and has lectured in that capacity.

Erin McKenna has an impressive curriculum vitae, with numerous publications and presentations, among them her latest book, *The Task of Utopia: A Pragmatist and Feminist Perspective*. On a personal note, Erin McKenna is engaged with the Chimpanzee and Human Communications Institute at Central Washington University, where she volunteers as a lecturer and guide for observation of the chimps for the institute's public "Chimposium." She also cares for her own animals, two Australian shepherds--one of whom takes her

sheep herding once a week, and two Morgan horses--with whom she does dressage.

## **Participants' Questionnaire**

1. What is your understanding of what the Women's Dialogue group is about?
2. What have you taken from each of the seminars you have attended? Did you have a favorite?
3. Do you see a common thread?
4. Will you keep attending the June seminars?
5. What subject or speaker would you like for the 11th seminar in 2003?
6. Should the monthly meetings be more structured and if so, in what way?
7. What knowledge and gifts do you bring to the Women's Dialogue?
8. What would you like to see changed?
9. Other comments?

## Participants

The Women's Dialogue group is made up of women of diverse backgrounds, loosely woven together as a fabric of many colors and textures. There is no formal structure and no formal leadership. However, from its inception, Nancy Tarbox has played a valuable role as unofficial leader. In the WD, women simply volunteer to carry out needed tasks. Notable among these in their participation are: Nancy Tarbox; Pat Boyd; who served as treasurer for many years; Sara Mann, who serves as the current treasurer; Sue Barrett and Barbara Ferré, who serve as communications persons; Frissy Peden, who serves as the WD photographic historian - as well as many others who have planned events, led discussions, and served in other capacities.



Sara Mann



Sue Barrett

The WD meets each month, usually after the HIARPT discussions, for a “brown bag” lunch. The women discuss the coming WD seminar, articles and books, outreach to the community, and share personal reflections.

The WD has no dues or other income except for the fee charged for the annual Women's Dialogue seminar. The fee for the seminar covers the costs of the leader, facilities, food, and other incidental expenses. Some expenses are shared with HIARPT, as the leader is often invited to be the lecturer of the HIARPT Lecture series. Home hospitality seems to be the rule - generously offered by many and graciously accepted by the presenters. Any dividend from the seminar is put into a bank account to be used for future activities.

The questionnaire sent to the participants differs from the one sent to the presenters in that it asks the participants their opinions on past and future events and asks them to examine what they bring to the dialogue. Not all the participants responded to the questionnaire (in all, nineteen did), as not all the presenters responded to the questionnaires. However, we feel those who did respond gives us a good sampling of their perception of the WD and their experience of it.

### **Following is a synopsis of the responses:**

The group had many different perceptions about “what the WD was about”, but most agreed that the WD provided a forum where women from diverse backgrounds could come together for intellectually stimulating discussions. Some comments on question one are:

“The Dialogue gives women of varied ages the opportunity to promote community for women who are interested in truth, in growing personally, and in promoting justice for all women.”

“The WD is a group of women vitally interested in personal growth and in understanding the world we live in. I find sharing this experience very enriching.”

“The Dialogue is about broadening perceptions and keeping abreast of the thinking of other women, especially women who are in touch with the young, and women of intellectual pursuits.”

“We each bring a unique lifetime of experience and a hunger to hear others.”

“WD helps women navigate through difficult waters and learn to express themselves. We need to express our unique and special talents.”

“As I recall, the group began to provide a forum for the study of present day feminism, in part as it related to organized religion.”

“We provide an interchange of ideas with alert, caring, active, and well educated women who feel a responsibility for their fellow men and women.”

“I don’t see a common thread or a focus. I am an action person and wonder if talk accomplishes anything. What are we doing for one another? Maybe we should think about that!”

“WD is not as professional as HIARPT.”

“I am glad that WD is not as scholarly a group as HIARPT. WD provides a more inviting place where women can communicate on their own terms in a manner of their own propensity.”

In response to question two, *identify a favorite seminar*, there were many differences expressed.

“I do not have a favorite. Each time I walked away with a sense of accomplishment, new ideas, and a greater sense of awareness. I like lecturing least and prefer more interaction among the participants.”

“While I enjoy hearing a group of bright women talk about a subject, I wonder what we are accomplishing in terms of service to the world and to each other?”

“I liked them all. I have taken hope, courage and admiration for the attendees and for women’s issues.”

“Each conference has given me new insights and ways of looking at things. I always tend to favor the last, in this case, Dr. Erin McKenna. I also particularly liked the seminar on the universal problem of evil.”

“I have taken an inspiration (from the seminars) to attempt to stay mentally active and in touch with people who are working in the ‘real’ world. Examining ones perceptions becomes easier in the light of thinking of others. My favorite was Bobbie Reitt’s presentation of Virginia Woolf’s work.”

“I am a newcomer. The more I attend, the more comfortable I am with the group.”

“I’ve been to three and liked Mary Hunt and Erin McKenna best, as in my opinion, those discussions had broader application.”

“I have the feeling that none of us have arrived yet, but are still enjoying the journey. That’s okay. They are all my favorite(s).”

“I remember Virginia Woolf and feminist ethics. I have taken ideas back to my teaching.”

“My favorite meeting was Dr. Kress. She was lively and knew her subject. The discussion from the members was lively as well. She also introduced me to Josephine Toy, an excellent writer.”

“I have always been interested in small group work and particularly in the dynamics of discussion groups. The WD has been a valuable learning experience and a candid look at feminism.”

“From each conference I have taken new ideas and new commitments to the community. My favorite was probably Nancy Howell, as it was more international in scope. But each has been interesting, challenging, and rewarding. The participants have been as enlightening as the leaders.”

“I liked the two ‘Nancy’s’. They were excellent!”

“Nothing in the world has ever changed without first gaining an understanding of the issues. I think WD makes an important contribution in our search of understanding feminist issues.”

On question three, *Do you see a common thread?*, all of the responses focused on the theme of women in society. Although the issues are wide ranging, it all ultimately comes down to the feminist movement and its metamorphoses. Some saw the seminars as an opportunity to deepen friendships and broaden ones outlook by confronting provocative issues from many perspectives.

The subject that is more debatable seems to be whether-or-not the monthly meetings should be more structured. This subject raises the issue of the desire of some for more structure and intellectual stimulation against the need for spontaneity and interpersonal interaction. Indeed, some in the group do not see the need for any connection to HIARPT at all, while some see the connection as a real benefit. This contention has been ongoing for some years - however the fact that the WD continues to function very well in spite of it is an accomplishment in itself, as all the participants responded positively when asked if they would keep attending the meetings.

“I have seen a common thread develop over the years concerning first, women in religion - to a search for personal connection with feminist issues - to a more global exploration of social change. I think every seminar has addressed some part of this journey and I wouldn’t intentionally miss any of them.”

“The gifts people bring to the dialogue are many: ideas; a thirst for knowledge; acceptance and admiration for other women; unique talents and experience. Many indicated they wish to continue the monthly meetings to enhance and develop those gifts.”

The participants expressed the desire to explore: Globalization and its effect on women, women’s education, scientific and medical developments and ethics, population control, and effects and benefits of aging. A good example of study is *How Women Saved the City* by Daphne Spain, we are informed about how women did the practical things that changed society and ultimately the world

The responses to the question, “*What would you like to see changed?*”, people had different responses, as some saw the question as global while others saw the question as pertaining to the WD. The responses included the desire to see change here and now to create a more peaceful world – e.g. “I think America needs to take a good hard look at itself! The terrorist attacks don’t come out of a vacuum. We have learning to do. We need to help women throughout our own country as well as to reach out to the world. We have a chance to learn what really may matter for the future of humankind.”



**Fia Scheyer**



**Carole Light**

**END**