



Sonja M. Stewart

Sonja M. Stewart – An Appreciation

James V. Brownson

Sonja M. Stewart came to Western Theological Seminary in 1970 as a part-time instructor in Christian education, having received her B.A. degree from Muskingum College in Ohio and her M.R.E. degree from Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. In 1973, she was appointed assistant professor of Christian education and director of the Masters of Religious Education degree program—the first full-time female professor and one of the first non-R.C.A. professors at Western (Dr. Stewart is a member of the Presbyterian Church [U.S.A.]). During the same year, she began doctoral studies at the University of Notre Dame, completing her Ph.D. in 1977 with only one year's leave from teaching. In 1980, she was promoted to associate professor. For several years in the mid-1980s, she directed Western's continuing education program, and in 1983 initiated and directed a new in-ministry M.R.E. degree program. Dr. Stewart was promoted to full professor in 1984 and completed studies to receive her M.Div. degree from Western in 1996. She continued to direct the in-ministry M.R.E. until her retirement in December, 2002.

This in-ministry M.R.E. degree program remains one of Dr. Stewart's significant contributions to the life of the school. From 1983 until her retirement, ninety-four students graduated from the program. The program employed a number of forms of pedagogy that were remarkably prescient of future developments in theological education: the use of block scheduling, a focus on in-ministry training, and a concern with the integration of spiritual formation and academic preparation for ministry. All of these have become "hot topics" in theological education only in the last decade or so. The in-ministry M.R.E. was ahead of its time, and it has served the seminary well.

Sonja's interests and contributions have been varied and wide-ranging. She has worked and published in the areas of the history of Christian education, curriculum evaluation, development and design, women's ordination and women's spirituality, worship, lay ministry, globalization, and interreligious dialogue and reflection. However, perhaps her most significant contribution, both to the seminary and to the church, is her work on children and worship. Her 1990 book, *Young Children and Worship*, co-authored with Jerome Berryman, has influenced thousands of churches throughout the United States and around the globe. Hundreds of church leaders have been trained by Dr. Stewart to lead young children in worship, both at Western Seminary and around the world. Many others in a wide range of denominations have developed training programs as well. The subsequent 2000 volume by Dr. Stewart, *Following Jesus: More about Young Children and Worship*, has also been very well received.

Precisely because scholarship is about ideas, it is often difficult to assess the long-term contributions that scholars make. We do not know whether our books will ever be drawn down from library shelves thirty years from now, and few of us can realistically expect this to happen. Yet if we are to measure Christian scholarship by its material contribution to the life of the church, by the extent to which it tangibly and specifically contributes to the flourishing of the church of Jesus Christ, then surely Dr. Stewart's work on young children and worship has made an outstanding contribution. These two books have dramatically improved the quality of the nurture of faith in young children throughout the world. We are indebted to Dr. Stewart and grateful for the abundant energy that she continues to devote to encouraging the deepening of children's worship in the church.

If I were to find a single word that expresses much of Dr. Stewart's life at Western Seminary, I would use the word *contrarian*. By this, I do not mean someone who is negative or adversarial. The term occurs commonly in the financial world; it refers to someone who looks for value by investing time, energy, and resources in places and opportunities ignored, overlooked, or shunned by the majority. Dr. Stewart concerned herself with children in a culture preoccupied with adults. She was passionate about the ministry of the laity in the midst of a church culture that often was far more interested in the role of the minister in the church. Though Dr. Stewart completed her M.Div. degree, she never sought ordination as a minister of Word and sacrament. I suspect that this decision arose, at least in part, out of this contrarian impulse.

Dr. Stewart maintained her Presbyterian identity and connections in a seminary closely affiliated with the Reformed Church in America—almost exclusively so in her early days of teaching. She was interested in experimentation, creativity, and wondering in a church that was often tempted to play it safe, and in a Calvinist culture that tends toward the pragmatic and utilitarian. She cared and spoke passionately about justice in a church that often doesn't want to "rock the boat." She sought to maintain a vision for the global church in the midst of many North American churches preoccupied with their own survival. Out of this interest, she traveled extensively. In her travels for *Children and Worship* and for her own teaching and scholarship, she has visited Israel, Jordan, Egypt, Switzerland, Scotland, England, France, Spain, India, Nepal, China, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Italy, Greece, Turkey, Russia, Belarus, Finland, Mexico, as well as numerous countries in Africa and the Caribbean. Always stretching and growing, Dr. Stewart has a surprisingly adventurous spirit that has endeared her to many.

Of course, it is not always easy to be a contrarian, to look for value outside the mainstream. Sometimes Dr. Stewart felt lonely in this role. There were times when her reach exceeded her grasp, and she was not able to accomplish all that she had hoped and dreamed. But she never allowed herself to quit, always looking for new and creative opportunities.

The end of Dr. Stewart's career at Western was marked by the challenge of cancer, and she was able to work only intermittently for the last two years before her retirement. We are extremely grateful to God that her recovery, at present, is thorough and vigorous. However, an additional dimension to Sonja Stewart came out in these last two years of her work at Western—among the most challenging years of her life. This awful illness seemed to bring out the best in Sonja: faith, peace, sometimes even joy, and a deep and expressive love and appreciation for others. In these years, she taught more by how she lived than by what she did in the classroom. All of us who have had the privilege of knowing her are richer because of her witness to the power of prayer, the healing impact of loving relationships, and the sustaining grace of God.

Therefore, it is with gratitude and joy that we dedicate this issue of the *Reformed Review* to Dr. Sonja M. Stewart, scholar, lover of children, teacher, dreamer, traveler, contrarian, and follower of Jesus Christ.