

# Callings

in the Church of the Saviour

Special Edition

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## Celebrating Mary Cosby

By Kayla McClurg, *the Church of the Saviour*

Mary Cosby died peacefully at Christ House on July 3, 2016, which would have been Gordon's 99th birthday. Born on September 27, 1922, to the Rev. Dr. Ernest Campbell and his wife, Anne Goetchius Campbell, in Gainesville, Georgia, Mary grew up in the church. Along with her sister, Elizabeth Anne, and her little brother, Charles, the family was devoted both to one another and their spiritual community.

Mary's father was a minister in the Southern Baptist tradition. ("Not the way we think of it today, but the way it used to be," she was quick to add.) "Everyone in the church—in the entire town for that matter—knew they could count on Father if they needed him."

When she was 10 years old, her father answered a call to the Rivermont Avenue Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Virginia, where Gordon Cosby, age 15, was active. Already a leader in the Rivermont church, he spent much time in the Campbell home where the young people gathered and dreamed big dreams that would guide them throughout their lives.

Mary, a gifted musician and vocalist, used her talents in the church, but majored in history at Randolph-Macon Women's College. "I hate to say it, but I was hoping that studying history would be easier than other subjects. My main focus was on people and fun activities more than my studies."

When Gordon became a chaplain for the 101st Airborne Division during World War II, they married in 1942, before he went overseas. During the war, Mary lived with her parents in Alexandria, Virginia, where her father served the First Baptist Church. "While Gordon was away, church was central," Mary said. "I missed Gordon, but it never occurred to me that things wouldn't work out and he would return and we would pick up from there. I suppose I was naïve, which can be one of God's best gifts to us sometimes, don't you think?"

When Gordon got home, he worked in a Baptist Church in Burke, Virginia, but they soon realized if they were going to pursue their dream of building a different kind of church, the time was now. So together with Elizabeth Anne, they began. On Sunday evenings they met with a few others at eating establishments to pray and plan, and even began to think that perhaps theirs would be a "restaurant church." But another path was given, and in two "run-down but glorious" buildings near Dupont Circle, the life of the young church began to take shape and grow.



"Our early years smelled more of paint and turpentine than candles and incense," Mary said. "Our work parties were legendary and I think the hard work, along with our knack for southern hospitality, attracted more people than our plans to save the world. Our goals were a bit grandiose, I'm afraid, but it was also a very sweet time."

Elizabeth O'Connor dedicated her first book, *Call to Commitment*, to Mary with the inscription, "To Mary Cosby, whose life is music in our midst." In all the buildings and missions, Mary was an advocate for beauty and hospitality over mere utility. She insisted that "art and ambience" are marks of the Holy Spirit, and that people heal when they are in the midst of beauty. She encouraged School of Christian Living dinners and other gatherings to be beautifully appointed and festive. Later on, she would close her classes at the Servant Leadership School by inviting the students to her home for a feast around her spacious dining room table.

Mary also provided hospitality in more substantial ways as she and Gordon became the foster parents for Michael Murphy, who gave them extra lessons in the power of tenacity and love. She also has

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### **Marjory Bankson, *Editor of Callings***

On my first silent retreat, Mary must have seen the stack of books that I brought. As a recovering Presbyterian, I simply could not imagine spending a weekend “doing nothing.” In her introduction, Mary smiled and said, “If you’ve brought any books, I hope you’ll lock them in your car.” With that, she opened a door to the spacious wonder of God’s presence, unfiltered and true – a presence which could be held around me by others when I could not find my own stillpoint. In so many ways, Mary embodied the inward/outward journey as invitation rather than rule.



### **Barbara Moore, *Church of Christ Right Now***

I was entranced by Mary's teaching of the New Testament class in the School of Christian Living. As a young woman of 25, I hung on every word in every session. Jesus became so alive to me. I left floating on air and so grateful to God and for Mary's faithfulness. One night I was flying so high after the class that I ran a red light at 20th and Massachusetts and caused an accident!



### **Jimilu Mason, *Sculptor of the “Kneeling Jesus”***

Among my fondest and most vivid memories is working with Mary and others getting the original Potters House ready to open. I had noticed that 1658 Columbia Road was for rent while driving home from my former church. When I saw the sign, I called Mary right away. Several of us went by to check it out. It was quite unattractive inside—orange, green and yellow. We couldn't wait to get started with the renovations. Mary and I worked on design and ambiance while Hart Cowperthwait worked on the lighting. We used burlap on the walls and hung beautiful pieces of art. What memories and what fun.



### **Basil Buchanan, *Festival Church***

On a recent visit, I said, “Do you remember a conversation we had during my time with a mild bout of anxiety, depression and feeling of being alone? You said, ‘You always have the power of invitation.’”

“Did I say that? You are so kind to have attributed that to me.”  
“Yes, Mary. You gave me a way forward to dealing with loneliness at a time when I was just beginning to learn the meaning and joy of solitude.”

### **Jim Dickerson, *New Community Church***

One of the things I remember is how tough Mary was underneath that genteel southern charm when she had to be. In the Potter's House Mission group we were in together for several years, she could cut to the chase and mix it up and confront if need be. When I took her classes, I never did remember the substance of the subject she was teaching, but rather all the stories she could tell. She and her sister, Elizabeth Anne, had an entertainer in them, and it made Mary a very good, imaginative and popular teacher.

### **Ann Barnet, *8th Day Community***

A source of Mary's enduring inspiration to me is her amazing capacity for gratitude. Mary radiates faith in God's goodness and belief in the goodness of ordinary people like us. Once, many years ago, she responded to a substantial theft from her Mount Vernon home of family silverware, the culprit being someone to whom she and Gordon had shown unfailing kindness, saying, “It's only silverware. (Our relationship) is founded in God's grace, not silver.”



### **Cami Seward, *Mary's niece***

I once read about the creative power of our words as part of our being made in God's image: we have the ability to speak things into being. You make me know this is true. You have been speaking into being God's gracious realm of goodness, hope and beauty all of my life. Thank you.

### **Rebecca Stelle, *Church of Christ Right Now***

Mary Cosby recalled when, as a music student, she composed a piece for the piano. How she worked on that assignment! How she performed for her professors and peers! And then, somehow, the piece was lost. She smiled as she delivered her punchline with a nod of humble irony: “Ever since I lost it, that piece has gotten better and better.”

The music which was the life of Mary Cosby was pure and redeeming, without guile. Her capacity to expose the core of an issue with insight and wisdom seemed increasingly honed. She was, as she liked to say of her sister-in-law, Ellen, “completely converted”: never puffed up, always building up in love.



"People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did but people never forget how you made them feel".  
 Maya Angelou

**Dixcy Bosley-Smith, Potter's House Board**

There are memories of Mary Cosby that many of us share. Her smooth, satisfying, Southern style in offering a Biblical teaching around the wooden tables of the Potter's House felt so good. Just about anything that rolled off her lips was convincing. Her sound, her speech, her words, her kindness comforted me. I remember home-made bread, cheese, with a sprig of parsley (Mary's touch) which flavored the stimulating conversation about her teaching. I remember how Mary made me feel.

**Carolyn Miller Parr, Festival Church**

Gordon seemed certain that God was calling each of us to a very specific chunk of the world's suffering. I didn't sense that kind of call apart from my vocation, so I despaired of being able to join a mission group and move more deeply into full church membership.

When I mentioned this to Mary, she said, "Gordon and I have slightly different ideas about call. I think people can be called to a particular community of God's people, and your work will be revealed as you live into that call. You need a community to distinguish that what you're sensing is coming from God, not from ego or guilt." She also said a person could be called into and out of a particular work as time passed.

Mary's definition of call – both in its rigorous demands and its flexibility– was a gift that changed my life.

**Terry Flood, Jubilee Jobs**

Mary and I often reminisced about our unexpected children and wonder how we became so involved. Michael Murphy, at age 8, came to live with Gordon and Mary from Junior Village. I more recently have had my young grandson, Tavis, living with me. We looked at one another in bewilderment and then both point to heaven. Only the call from God could have placed these precious lives in our homes.



**Fred Taylor, 8th Day**

I am one of those old timers who pray often with immense gratitude: "Thank you Lord for the gift to my life and to the world of this couple." I think of them in their shared identity and as distinctively different individuals, each with unique gifts and personal style. Being on the serious side, I was drawn in particular to Mary's "lightness of being" and the hope that, if I stay on the path, that too is a possibility for me.



**Killian Noe, Recovery Cafe, Seattle, WA**

For Mary, there was no divide between the spiritual and the physical; between the ordinary and the Divine. Everything was imbued with spirit, everything manifests the goodness of God. The Samaritan Inns buildings in DC, and Recovery Café in Seattle, are tasteful and gorgeous physical spaces because of the incarnational theology that we took in from Mary Cosby. Our philosophy, shaped by Mary, is that every single expression must communicate love. That philosophy drives our commitment at Recovery Café to preparing nutritious meals and serving the food on brightly colored Fiesta Ware. It drove the exquisite interior design of our space – at Samaritan Inns and Recovery Café – the vibrant color choices for our walls, carpet and upholstery. Those choices matter because they help us communicate to those battered by degradation and homelessness, that "your life matters."

**Sunny Branner, Poet**

I first met Mary Cosby in 1946, when she was splashing paint on the drab walls of the newly purchased home of the Church of the Saviour. Her radiance was like sunlight filling that space. Through the years, her music had the same effect. Her rendition of "O Divine Redeemer," and other solos were enduring gifts that took us to new depths of Spirit. How fortunate we were to have journeyed with one who lives her life in the realm of grace.



### **Nona Beth Cresswell, *Dayspring Host***

Mary had the most zesty appetite for fun! She and her sister, Elizabeth Anne, used to tell stories or do skits and monologues that were hilarious! They used these talents also in talking about God, and they made the people of the Bible come alive.

Mary also valued language: poetry and music, scriptures and hymns. These came to have great meaning for me, too, as I grew and became a singer and then majored in church music in college. I believe that her careful preparations for worship influenced me in my work as a church musician in other churches.

### **Ann Dean, *Dayspring Retreat Mission***

We met in the Great Silence of retreat at Dayspring. If I had met Mary Cosby anywhere else, the extent of her amazing intelligence and charm might have been defining. But it was the depth of her stillness. That our friendship is rooted in deep listening is a gift beyond

### **Alice Benson, *8th Day***

I worked at The Potter's House for 20 years – 5 as a volunteer, and 15 on staff. Mary was always involved in its heart and soul, but especially in its ambiance. She had a great love for beautiful things – artwork, music – but especially in the ambiance and growth of people. She showed care to all those she interacted with. She – along with Mary Hitchcock, Dot Cresswell, and a host of others – cared for The Potter's House as if for their beloved child.

### **Muriel Lipp, *Seekers***

When I first came to the Church of the Saviour in the early 1950s, I saw Gordon standing by the pulpit ready for his sermon, and Mary across the chapel at the piano. What a beautiful voice, I thought. And how very spirited the singing!

Mary had a gift for table fellowship, and 2025 had a huge dining room, so there were many get-togethers after church. A good way to get to know people, and to love them. Intimacy grew fast as we became family together.



### **Celebrating Mary, *continued from page 1***

been a favorite aunt of her nieces and nephews. Dogs, too, especially those languishing in shelters, were near and dear to Mary's heart.

When the church scattered into small communities, Mary became a member of the Potter's House Church, pouring herself into its ministry of creativity and hospitality. Her influence in that little church and in the various stages of the ministry's growth was immense. Her love of music and theater (having written and delivered dramatic monologues for years) found a home at the Potter's House. In the early 2000's the art wall at the Potter's House was officially named the Mary Cosby Art Gallery.

When the Church of the Saviour was gaining attention around the country, Mary traveled to hundreds of congregations, conferences and retreat centers to share the story. The way she spoke, with humor and depth, sparked a good deal of enthusiasm among all her listeners. Mary would ask, "What brings you joy?" And she would always want to hear your answer as a clue to your call.

To the end of her life, Mary had a wonderful way with words. When people came to her for advice, she listened and offered sage wisdom, even when her "forgettery" began to work better than her memory. For all who were touched by her long life, Mary Campbell Cosby was indeed "music in our midst."