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**RUTH DUVALL CRAWFORD’S WONDERFUL CAREER IN MUSIC AND EVANGELISM  
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**Introduction**

Although Ruth Duvall Crawford’s name may not appear in any of the foremost historical studies of evangelicalism in America, in fact, she was an important figure whose innovations in the realm of music significantly altered the course of evangelical gospel music in the 1930s and 40s. Ruth was the wife of one of the leading evangelists of that era, Percy Crawford (1902-1960), and the director of music for Percy’s various evangelistic enterprises. In this capacity, Ruth put together an ensemble of musicians—vocalists and instrumentalists—and produced hundreds of music programs, geared to Percy’s nationwide radio and television broadcasts, that for two decades set a new standard of performance in evangelical circles in the Northeast and Central regions. In the process of building this musical program, Ruth developed

a format and an original style of gospel music that proved to be highly effective in communicating the gospel message to a wide audience.

Raised in a devout Methodist family, Ruth had dedicated herself to a life of Christian service at an early age. So when Percy asked her to join the team of Christian workers he had assembled for his evangelistic services as the piano accompanist, she saw his invitation as giving her the opportunity she had been preparing for as a young adult to use her special gifts to serve the Lord.

Ruth devoted herself fully and faithfully to Percy's work and his singular mission of winning souls. Accordingly, throughout their twenty-nine-year ministry together, she always judged the significance of her music by the degree to which it contributed to this soul-saving work. For Ruth—and all the musicians she worked with—the role of their music was to prepare the listener to receive the message delivered by the evangelist that would lead him or her to make a decision to accept Christ as savior.

But the significance of Ruth's music in her partnering ministry with Percy went well beyond merely preparing the listener emotionally for the preacher's salvation call. Whether she realized it or not, her musical performances carried a message of their own, different from Percy's, and one that had the power in its own right to change hearts and transform lives. In this essay, I will attempt to elicit from her music and the many themes she expressed in it what I believe was the main idea she wanted to convey to her audiences, namely the possibility of drawing close to the person of Jesus, and entering into an intimate relationship with him.

A further aim of this essay is to describe what was different and original about Ruth's style of music, not in the way a musicologist might describe her specific techniques, but rather from the perspective of someone who was thoroughly familiar with her music and who participated in it both as a listener and a performer. I was steeped in my mother's music and heard it practically every day of my life. I started singing on the broadcasts at the age of three and continued in her quartets until I was nineteen. Of course, hearing her musical arrangements and performing them is one thing; but describing the unique style that is expressed in them is quite another. For me, Ruth's style of music is shown in the repertoire of songs she selected and arranged, the messages and the emotional tone conveyed by those songs, the performers she chose to deliver

these messages and her accompaniment of them, and the effect their performances had on the listener. These aspects of her music I am well-equipped to deal with.

In the body of this essay, I will trace the development of Ruth's musical ministry from its beginnings in her adolescence, preparing herself for a life of service by actively participating in the multiple music programs of First Methodist Church in Collingswood, New Jersey. I then turn to her marriage to Percy and the early years of their ministry during which she coordinated the musical portion of the radio broadcast, called *The Young People's Church of the Air*. By the mid-1940s, the broadcast had gained national recognition, due in large part to Ruth's music program which had grown in size to some 40-50 musicians and reached its highest level of performance. The final phase of Ruth's musical career started in 1949, when Percy moved the radio broadcast onto television with the first religious program, *Youth on the March*, aired coast-to-coast on the ABC network. For four years, Ruth continued to produce high-quality shows, while making adjustments in personnel and formatting to fit the circumstances of the new television medium.

One of the ways in which Ruth modified her programs in these later years was by giving women a more prominent role on the broadcasts and a greater share of program time. Women had always been a part of her programming, but men had dominated, with the male quartet carrying most of the vocal music. Ruth gradually changed this pattern by forming various women's ensembles, and finally in the television years, featuring a female soloist as the lead singer. I will follow these important developments which, I believe, helped to reshape women's performance roles in mid-twentieth-century evangelical music.

But for all her successes in the public sphere, Ruth found it difficult in her personal life to reconcile her full-time commitment to evangelism with her desire to create the kind of loving home environment she had experienced as a child. Percy contributed to this difficulty by portraying her in his publicity materials as both wholly supportive of his evangelistic ministry, and also the ideal wife and mother of five children. In this regard, he was bowing to the strict requirement among evangelicals that a married woman's primary responsibility was to her family and to building the sort of home life that would instill the proper Christian values and habits in her children. Ruth acceded to this image and did her very best to fulfill her duties in

the home. But in the end, her primary commitment was to her career in evangelism, and consequently her responsibilities to her children inevitably suffered. Both parents and children ended up paying a price for this neglect.

Nonetheless, Ruth worked comfortably within the constraints placed upon her by the evangelical community that sustained her. What is quite remarkable is that within this framework, she was able to carve out her own identity and realize her full potential as a musical artist.

I begin this recounting of my mother's wonderful career in music making where it started—at First Methodist Church, around which Ruth and her family centered their entire lives.

### Childhood

Ruth Marjorie Duvall was born May 2, 1916, youngest of the five children of Rezin Fenton Duvall and Nancy Viola McDonald, both native Virginians who had recently settled in Collingswood, New Jersey. Ruth's father, a jeweler by trade, was a wanderer who had moved the growing family up and down the Eastern seaboard, living for a time in half a dozen states from Alabama to Ohio, before finally buying a house and settling in Collingswood.

Unfortunately, the Duvalls' permanent home in NJ proved to be Rezin's undoing. Though he was no handyman, still he tackled the job of painting the tall, three-story house, and one evening fell to the ground from the very top and died the next morning. Three-year-old Ruth was playing on the porch at the time the accident occurred. There was no insurance money, and the sale of Rezin's business hardly brought in enough to pay for his funeral. As a result, Nancy suddenly found herself a single parent, responsible for bringing up five children, ages 3 to 16, and for maintaining a heavily mortgaged home. The two oldest children, Esther and Bruce, got jobs and dutifully turned their monthly paychecks over to their mother. Nancy took in sewing, earning only a pittance because she charged so little; but with help from their church and the Masons, the family held together and survived.

The Duvalls were a tight-knit and loving family, thanks in large part to their active membership in the First Methodist Church of Collingswood. Founded in 1886 in a rural town of 200 homes, the church was squarely in the Wesleyan pietist tradition, with its strong emphasis on personal morality and a life devoted to Christian service. First Church experienced steady

growth over its first few decades—in step with the growth of Collingswood into a prime suburban area close to Camden and Philadelphia—until in 1904, the impressive granite church and bell tower that the Duvalls attended was constructed on the site of the original frame building. In 1911, the beautiful “Sunday School Temple” was added on, with space to accommodate the burgeoning Sunday school enrollments. The Temple building, made of stone matching the church, consisted of an auditorium surrounded by a balcony and classrooms that opened onto the main hall. Taken together, the room had a seating capacity of 1100, the largest venue in Collingswood for many years. By the time Ruth and her family were attending (in the 1910s and 20s), membership in both church and Sunday school had soared to 1100.

Although the church on Dayton Ave. was nearly a mile from the Duvall home (at 423 Lincoln Ave.) and they had no car, the family attended faithfully two services every Sunday morning, two in the afternoon, and two more in the evening. A seventh “service” frequently took place Sunday evenings after church, when a large group of young people would gather at the Duvall house for relaxed fun and fellowship. Mother Duvall on the guitar, and young Ruth playing piano, would entertain with fun songs (“The Boy who Stuttered and the Girl who Lisperd”), and sentimental folk songs (“Mandy Lee,” “Tying the Leaves”), winding up with Christian choruses. Someone closed with a prayer before the “gang” dispersed. These wholesome gatherings and songfests were typical of what young people, steeped in the Holiness Methodist tradition, did for fun. And the Duvall family was solidly a part of this movement, orienting their entire lives around the church and its mission.

Another aspect of the Holiness tradition that nurtured Ruth and her siblings was its emphasis on moral purity and the sanctified life, evident not only in the conduct of the Duvall children, but in their devotional life, as Ruth’s next oldest brother, Fenton, recalled in a tribute written for his mother:

A high point of the Duvall family’s background was the nightly family prayer at bed time when mother and five children would kneel and pray in turn, out loud, around the table. Often the “girls” would rise from their knees with tears coming down their faces. The family altar was a nightly experience for which the Duvalls will ever be grateful. (“Mother of Ministers” n.d.)

The Duvalls’ dining room table was also a gathering place. Fenton reported that “ministers and missionaries from around the world feasted” there, (no doubt feasting on my grandmother’s

delicious Southern fried chicken). “Many prayer meetings were held around it.” Ruth spent her early years surrounded by devout people who had dedicated their lives to the church and church work. So it was natural that all the Duvall children just assumed that they too would be leading a life of Christian service. Ruth knew that her path into Christian work would be through music; this was the “gift the Lord had given her,” she believed, and that she would in some way “use for Him.”<sup>1</sup>

### First Methodist Church: A Training Ground

It is impossible to understand Ruth and her later accomplishments as a partner in Percy Crawford’s evangelistic ministries apart from First Church. Unbeknown to Ruth, First Church was preparing her for her future ministry with Percy, first, by making evangelism and soul winning an integral part of its mission; and second, by exposing her to a steady stream of itinerant evangelists who came to the church regularly to conduct weeks-long “campaigns” aimed at saving souls and bringing congregants to a new spiritual awareness.

Another aspect of the church program that influenced Ruth was the communal Camp Meeting, held at nearby Delanco and Aura, at the beginning and the end of each summer. These were occasions when congregations from the district could come together for fellowship and spiritual refreshment in a setting of hymn-singing, special music, and revivalist preaching. Ruth attended these camp meetings from an early age and even accompanied (on the piano) some of the vocal groups.

During the period that Ruth was most active in the life of First Church—roughly from the age of 11 to 15, at which time she began to shift her focus to my father’s ministry—the church had reached a high point in its growth and influence. Unfortunately, there is very little in the family archives that survives from this critical period in Ruth’s life, and nothing at all in her own words. However, two autograph books that she kept from age 12 to 15 remain, that were signed by the people she deemed important in her life. We can get a good idea of who she was and

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<sup>1</sup> Family archives, n.d. Taken from a one-page hand-written statement of appreciation of what First Church meant to her, looking back from the vantage point of her musical ministry with my father, Percy Crawford. It may have been meant to be read at a church function in which Ruth participated or used in a church newsletter. It was almost certainly written by Ruth’s sister, Esther, who helped Ruth formulate any public statement like this.

what she aspired to from looking at who signed her book, what they said about her, and what counsel they offered her.

The multi-faceted program of First Church, largely run by lay leaders,<sup>2</sup> afforded its members many opportunities for spiritual growth and Christian service.<sup>3</sup> Many of the young people at First Church (including Ruth and her three brothers) took part in an active chapter of the Epworth League, a Methodist organization founded in 1889 with the aim of cultivating a Christ-centered character in young adults. The chapter at First Church had a varied program that included sponsoring (foreign) missionary activities, initiating church gatherings such as the Young People's Banquet and the Thanksgiving Breakfast, and holding meetings at the "Old Folks' Home of Collingswood." These young people were focused intensely on evangelism and the winning of souls. In 1916, permission was obtained to hold street meetings every Saturday night in Collingswood; and in the same year, the League started a week of church services aimed at "winning their chums," which resulted in 13 souls saved and the "win-my-chums-week" becoming an annual event. In the 1936 church history, Ruth and her brothers are listed among the many young men and women who "have gone out from our League into Christian work."<sup>4</sup>

Young people also played a major role in the church's large and diverse music program. Under the able direction of Clarence E. Ferguson ("Fergy") who served as "chorister" from 1913-1930, the program included senior and junior choirs as well as soloists and a men's quartet. In addition, two separate orchestras performed regularly: the Sunday School "Temple Orchestra," with as many as 32 musicians, provided an overture, accompaniment for hymns,

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<sup>2</sup> This extraordinary lay leadership was due in part to the Methodist policy of rotating their ministers to new churches after relatively short tenures of four years (more or less). During Ruth's involvement in church life, from toddler to teenager, there were four different pastors, and no associate pastors. See *What Mean These Stones? 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary 1886-1961*, (Collingswood, NJ: First Methodist Church, 1961).

<sup>3</sup> Women played a key role in the operating of church activities. To give just one example, the Women's Home Missionary Society, organized in 1898, grew steadily over the years "in support of missionary work in the town, the area and the nation." The Society had fully seven auxiliaries for girls and women, distributed primarily among different age groups, from the cradle to adulthood. The aim of the W.H.M.S., as stated in the church history, was "the personal salvation of those brought under its influence, and incidentally to improve the home and community with which it comes in contact."

<sup>4</sup> *History of the First Methodist Episcopal Church and Its Various Societies: 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, 1886-1936* (Collingswood, NJ: First Methodist Church, 1936), 107-111.

and a closing march for each Sunday school session,<sup>5</sup> and the “Alpha orchestra,” formed by the men’s Alpha Bible class, played in Sunday services and special events. These various groups gave Ruth ample opportunities to develop her natural gifts for voice and keyboard, and her special skill in piano accompaniment.

Many church members were needed as volunteers to assist Mr. Ferguson in the production of these various services and events. With her blending alto voice, Ruth undoubtedly sang in some of the choirs and vocal groups; but her main contribution was as piano accompanist. Two other young pianists who were close to her in age, Betty Restrick and Ruth Bayne, also shared in these duties, and it is easy to imagine that all three girls played a major role in organizing the various musical groups, rehearsing them, and accompanying them in performance.

The girls in Ruth’s circle of friends were mature beyond their years, even in their pre-teens. This unusual level of maturity was due in large part, I believe, to their having dedicated themselves at an early age to a life of service. For these young girls, it was a matter of fully surrendering themselves to do the Lord’s work, which meant actively seeking God’s will in their lives, and being open to God’s “leading” them in the direction of the most useful service. They did not want to be like those maidens whose lamp was not lit when the bridegroom (Christ) came to the door (Matt. 25:1-13). Ruth’s close friend, thirteen-year-old Betty Restrick, expressed another aspect of their shared goals in the counsel she gave to “Dearest Ruthie” (in Ruth’s autograph book): “My prayer tonight and chief aim in life is to live so close to Christ that the world may see Him in me. ‘For I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ.’”<sup>6</sup> Believing that God’s purpose for her life would somehow involve her musical gifts, Ruth began preparing herself for active service from the tender age of twelve.

In their strenuous efforts to pursue their goals, these young people had the full support of their church. First Church had always viewed itself and its mission as training its youth for Christian service and sending them out to do Christian work. In one of its histories, this point

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<sup>5</sup> *What Mean These Stones?*, 15.

<sup>6</sup> Restrick’s emphasis in quote. The whole entry, dated 12/10/28, (Ruth was 12 at the time) begins with: “Ruthie dearest, Exquisitely tender, absolutely true/Understanding all things/Understanding you/Infinitely loving, comfortingly near/This is God our Father/What have we to fear?”; and closes with: “I love you honey because you’re so naturally sweet, Betty”. Betty Restrick played and sang at Ruth’s wedding in September 1933, and Ruth stayed in touch with Betty throughout her life.

was stated clearly: after noting the year (1918) in which three of its young members went to the mission field (in China, Korea, and India), it commented proudly that this represented “the march of First Church young folk into Christian service careers.”<sup>7</sup>

### Mastering the Piano

Ruth had no formal piano training (except for a few piano lessons from a friend of the family). Instead, she honed her skills and perfected her technique (aided by exercise books and charts of chordal progressions), simply by playing in the various formal and informal contexts that her church work presented to her. The idea of a classical training would never have occurred to her; she was immersed in the rich tradition of evangelical hymnody and choruses, and this was the repertoire and genre of music that she intended to master and perform.

But in fact, Ruth’s musical interests and tastes ranged far beyond this rather narrow religious field. As we have seen, Ruth and her family loved playing and singing folk songs and ballads, a standard part of the “parlour music” performed in the home, and readily available in the form of inexpensive sheet music.<sup>8</sup> (One of the songs Ruth played with her friends was “Old Man Sunshine, Little Boy Blue” made popular in a recording by band leader George Olsen in 1928.) And she would have melted over the soft, “crooning” style of Kate Smith and Bing Crosby, heard everywhere on phonograph records and (after the mid-twenties) on the radio. Also noteworthy is the fact that Ruth enjoyed playing semi-classical pieces, such as Arthur Sullivan’s old chestnut “The Lost Chord.” And she and her older brother Fenton became opera enthusiasts as opera was becoming more accessible both on the radio<sup>9</sup> and in live performance at the nearby Robin Hood Dell series in Philadelphia’s Fairmont Park.<sup>10</sup> All these different styles

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<sup>7</sup> *What Mean These Stones?* 16.

<sup>8</sup> Although the strict Methodist social code did not condone dancing and the dance halls, the big band sounds of Glenn Miller and Guy Lombardo were very much “in the air” and hard to avoid in the 1920s, as was the soft, smooth style of jazz developed by Paul Whiteman and his orchestra.

<sup>9</sup> Symphonic and operatic performances were a large part of the earliest programming on the radio. Ruth and Fenton could have listened to regular radio broadcasts of the Chicago Civic Opera which CBS began airing in 1927, or the Metropolitan Opera broadcasts, which began in December 1931.

<sup>10</sup> The Robin Hood Dell concerts began in 1930. Fenton recalled going there with his fiancé, Hannah, and Ruth to hear John Charles Thomas sing in Verdi’s *Rigoletto*. (Interview, 1/5/04)

and genres of music left their mark on Ruth, and fed into the creative style of gospel music she developed in later years.

Already, in her adolescent years, Ruth was accomplished at the piano and frequently called upon to be the accompanist for the guest soloists and groups that passed through First Church and at camp meetings. Perhaps because her older brother Bill was attending Methodist-related Asbury College, the Asbury glee club made a stop at First Church on their 1929 spring tour. Some of them stayed at the Duvall home, and were duly smitten by Ruth—as much for her personal charm and looks as for her piano playing. One of the singers wrote to the twelve-year-old in her book: “I hope you will always keep those beautiful, long curls. Do it just for me, won’t you? May God keep you His own.” Another sounded a little lovesick: “Dear Ruth, This paper is blue, but I hope that the number of blue days in your life may be few and far between. If you keep using that enchanting smile I’m sure that my wish will come true. I shall never forget the happy days I spent with you and your friends in Collingswood.” A third was humorously florid: “Carus Ruth, Your magnanimous personality and refreshing pulchritude are, as it were, a new ray of sunshine in my garden of memory. To sing with your playing has been a real pleasure. I think I’ll be back to Collingswood immediately if not sooner.”

Later that year, the Asbury College men’s quartet provided special music at the camp meeting in Delanco, and stayed at the Duvalls after the meetings ended. They too were impressed by Bill’s little sister, now thirteen. One wrote: “Dear Ruth: You don’t know how much I have enjoyed knowing you, how much I have enjoyed being in your home. May God bless you continually with his presence, and may you be a blessing to many others as you have been to me. Your friend.” Another in the quartet, who seemed to see Ruth as a little too coquettish, addressed her as “Sweet Damsel,” and admonished her to be true to the “old-fashioned ideals for women, [which] remain the best.” It seems clear from these admiring remarks and others like them, that the young men who met up with this cheerful adolescent were struck by her outgoing nature and charming personality, as well as her musical gifts. But however alluring Ruth may have been to these singers, by getting to know groups such as these and playing for them, she was gaining valuable experience of what was “out there” in the larger realm of gospel music.

In the course of her training at First Church, Ruth was also being introduced to the world of evangelism and the importance of personal experiences of conversion and spiritual renewal. From its earliest days, the church had experienced what it came to see as “recurring cycles of blessing [in which] the Holy Spirit accomplished his work in mighty power.”<sup>11</sup> These outpourings of the Spirit which produced many converts and new members were sparked most often by revivalist meetings conducted by itinerant evangelists. Foremost among these was the revival of November 1928, when evangelist Ray N. Johnson, the “Boy Preacher” from Texas, conducted a three-week campaign that “changed the whole church, revitalized hundreds of its members, reached large numbers of unbelievers for Christ, and later filled many parsonages and mission posts with First church youth of that day.”<sup>12</sup>

This great awakening at First Church had a definite impact on the Duvall children. Their commitment to the Church and their devotional life together had prepared them for this occasion, and so, “when the great revival came in 1928,” recalled Fenton who was sixteen at the time, “it is not surprising that, shortly thereafter, four of the children were heading for full-time Christian work,” adding that “the fifth, Bill, had already entered Asbury College to prepare for the ministry.” Twelve-and-a-half-year-old Ruth, who was quite old enough and mature enough to realize what was happening, was one of the four who experienced spiritual renewal.<sup>13</sup>

By the age of 15, Ruth had settled into her own style as a piano accompanist and had attained a high level of proficiency and self-assurance. Although she was fully occupied at First Church and making good use of her talents, she had gone about as far as she could go there, and was beginning to focus her thoughts on what lay ahead—beyond First Church and Collingswood. Her older sister, Esther, had dropped out of high school after tenth grade and had been working in Philadelphia full time for 12 years to support the family after their father’s death. And her three older brothers were all moving forward in their education and beginning to chart their own career paths. Ruth would have felt no compunction about following her sister’s lead, and quitting high school if an opportunity arose for service in the area of music.

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 31, 18.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 17-18.

<sup>13</sup> Later, in her ministry with Percy, when she was asked to give her testimony and she mentioned that she had given her life to Christ when she was 12, she was surely referring to this time of dedication.

She was far more interested in finding her calling from on high than in getting a diploma from Collingswood High.

As a young Christian woman whose talent was in musical performance, there were only two avenues of service open to her: she could move either within the framework of the Methodist church or outside the institutional church in evangelistic circles, since evangelists usually traveled with a song leader, soloist, or quartet—all in need of a pianist. Both these options would have meant that she should be looking for a mate who was also committed to a life of service, and whose ministry she could support. And in that time and social milieu, it was not too early for her to be thinking about marriage.

### Winona Lake Bible Conference

The summer of 1931 would prove to be a critical time of transition for Ruth. After starting the summer at camp meeting in Delanco, Ruth decided it was time to venture into deeper waters and signed up to go to the Rodeheaver School of Sacred Music at Winona Lake, Indiana. She chose to attend a two-week summer workshop whose stated purpose was to enable church laypersons and musicians to develop their musical abilities and strengthen the music programs in their local churches. Homer A. Rodeheaver (1880-1955) was the longtime song leader, pianist, and soloist for the popular evangelist Billy Sunday, and by then the chief publisher and promoter of Christian gospel music. There was much that Ruth could learn from him and his staff about repertoire and piano performance, and we can only imagine how exciting the prospect was for her.

For many years, Winona Lake had been the site of Chautauqua lectures and cultural events, but gradually was taken over by conservative evangelical groups, and (in the 1920s) by the newly-formed fundamentalist wing of evangelicalism. Billy Sunday had built his permanent home there in 1911. The following year, Rodeheaver built a cottage on Winona Lake and later made it his home and the base of his various enterprises. In 1920, the Billy Sunday tabernacle was constructed, seating 7,500, and by 1931 when Ruth arrived, the Bible Conferences held there were indeed, as advertised, the most well-known conferences in the country.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Winona Lake Bible Conference was founded in 1895 by Presbyterian Sol Dickey, and directed by evangelist J. Wilbur Chapman from 1896-1908. It was W. E. Biederwolf, however, the Director from 1922-39, who moved the conferences from a moderate to a more conservative fundamentalist position.

And so, in late August, fifteen-year-old Ruth set out for Indiana, eager to participate, and full of hope for spiritual leading. Her specific goals would have been to immerse herself in the music school and look for opportunities to play piano for some of the groups. Unfortunately, there is no record of Ruth's time at Winona, and I cannot remember her ever talking about it. But a great deal is known about the School of Sacred Music that she attended, and we can at least get a glimpse of her experience there from the comments of the signers of the bright new autograph book she purchased upon arrival.

The School of Sacred Music was founded by Rodeheaver in 1920, offering classes in voice, piano, directing, organ, elements of music, and "hymnology." In Ruth's year, there were about 120 participants. From its very beginning it was organized around a Music Festival which featured world-class artists performing sacred and secular works. Its various summer sessions usually culminated in a "Sacred Music Week," with contests for the participants, and performances by special guest artists.

Ruth would have found several classes that year that met her needs such as "Gospel Song Interpretation," Rodeheaver's signature class, and a class in "Platform Deportment," taught by his sister Ruth Rodeheaver Thomas, that covered "attitude, posture, gesture, and manners on the platform."<sup>15</sup> She surely would have been drawn to the class in "Piano Accompanying," taught by pianist Katherine Norris Carmichael, one of the founding members of the school. Ruth could not have had a more suitable piano teacher than Katherine Carmichael, organist and music director of the Third Baptist Church in St. Louis, who also happened to be the official accompanist for the Winona Bible Conference. Carmichael was a fixture at Winona, and the perfect role model for Ruth, who would surely have jumped at the chance to take private lessons with her (at \$2 per half hour).

The climax of Ruth's session was the Sacred Music Week, packed with concerts and performances. It began with a teaching event that demonstrated "Sermons in Song"—perhaps bringing out for Ruth the way in which music can be employed to deliver a message as well as a melody. The next evening, a public performance of Mendelssohn's oratorio "Elijah" was given

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See Mark Sidell, *The History of Winona Lake Bible Conference*, Doctoral Dissertation, Bob Jones University, May 1988.

<sup>15</sup> Brochure, 1934. (Grace College archives)

(by then, this work had become a tradition featuring Chicago baritone Rollin Pease, and was attracting audiences of over 4000). The next two days were taken up with sacred music “contests” for the school participants—the first listed as “Gospel Songs,” probably consisting of arrangements of current favorites (drawn from Rodeheaver’s songbooks). The second day was the competition of “Solos, Duets, Quartets (Mixed, Male, and ‘Ladies’), and choirs.” These contests would have given Ruth the opportunity to show off her piano skills in the interpretation of gospel songs, both as soloist and accompanist, and she may even have walked away with some of the \$1200 that was offered in prize money. On the last evening, after all the hard competition, the participants were treated to a full performance of Handel’s *Messiah*, featuring guest soloists and the Music School choir. What a week!

Ruth’s experience at Winona undoubtedly was rewarding and fulfilling for a young artist bent on improving her skills, developing her own interpretive style, and preparing for a ministry of music. At Winona, she took a giant step forward in advancing each of these personal goals. But just as important was the exposure she had gained to the very best in musical performance that the evangelical world had to offer at that time. She had witnessed a full-scale production of high-quality sacred music that featured the gospel repertoire she knew so well. Here was a model of musical performance that she could file away and put to great use in her future ministry.

Ruth returned to Collingswood refreshed and renewed, but with only two weeks’ time before the next big event at the end of summer—the three-week evangelistic campaign of the internationally-known, British evangelist, Gipsy Smith, (September 14-October 4). The campaign was sponsored by the various denominational churches in Collingswood, and was held in a large wooden tabernacle seating 3000 that had been moved over from nearby Mt. Holly, New Jersey, where it had been used the year before for a Billy Sunday campaign. Many thousands of people “came from everywhere to hear [Gipsy Smith]. . . . and after the first week, people were standing every night.”<sup>16</sup> Smith’s love of singing as a boy carried over into his ministry: he could sing as well as he preached, and sometimes interrupted his own sermon, bursting into song. Ruth and her brothers sang in the mass choir of 250 voices assembled for the meetings, and

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<sup>16</sup> *First Church History*, 41.

hence would have joined in the singing of the invitation hymn each night as hundreds were coming down the aisles to accept Christ as Savior.

### Meeting Percy Crawford

As wonderful as it must have been for Ruth to be a part of Gipsy Smith's Spirit-filled event, she had something else very much on her mind as the meetings drew to a close. Some weeks before, the young Philadelphia evangelist, Percy Crawford, had come to the Duvall home to listen to Ruth play, and recruit her to be the pianist for a new, weekly radio program that he was starting on a local Philadelphia station. Already that summer, Percy had conducted four weekends of outdoor, "open air" services from the veranda of the old First Presbyterian Church on Washington Square, capped by a sixteen-day campaign, at which there were some 200 in all who made "professions." To assist him in this endeavor, Percy had assembled a large cast of young people from local churches, who put on a varied program of vocal and instrumental music, testimonies, and hymn singing, all leading up to Percy's sermon and salvation call. Inspired by what he saw as "tremendous movings of God's Holy Spirit," Percy decided to take the next step and move the entire ensemble indoors to an auditorium in one of the church buildings, and there to conduct an hour-long radio broadcast.<sup>17</sup>

Ruth must have seen this as the opportunity she had been waiting for, and gladly accepted Percy's invitation to join his band of young people. Being part of Gipsy Smith's great campaign that summer had given Ruth a taste of what mass evangelism could accomplish, and I imagine that her heart leapt at the thought that she would soon be actively engaged in this same soul-saving work, possibly on an even larger scale, and that she would be taking part in an exciting new venture—a radio program that would take the gospel message into the homes of many thousands of listeners who might otherwise never hear it. This was the avenue of service that was opening up for her.

But there was another side to Percy's invitation, mixed in with this thrilling opportunity for service and personal growth—the possibility of romance! At 15 years of age, Ruth was attractive, physically and emotionally mature, and already being wooed by the older boys coming through Collingswood. And Percy was handsome, full of ambition, and still in search of

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<sup>17</sup> See Percy Crawford, "A Modern Revival," *Revelation* (August 1932): 325, 349-50.

that ideal mate who could assist him in his life's work. Ruth had every reason to think that this dashing fellow would react to her in the same way the other young men had. (Hadn't he said outright to mother Duvall as he was leaving the house that day, "It's a shame she's so young, I'll be back as soon as she is old enough to date"?)

The day after the Gipsy Smith campaign ended, Ruth began to prepare for the next week's broadcast—getting to know the musicians, rehearsing with them, and familiarizing herself with the radio format and setting. She too was ambitious, and had prepared herself for exactly this type of opportunity. What she didn't know of course was that on that day, October 5, 1931, she was embarking on a twenty-nine-year journey that would require from her a total commitment to the many-faceted ministry of this aspiring, youth-oriented evangelist. And what she could not have known then, as well, was that she and Percy would become co-partners in evangelism, and that she would play an equal part in shaping the character and content of the gospel message that went out from them through the multiple channels of their shared ministry.

#### Beginning the Radio Broadcast, 1931-1933

For the first two years of Percy's emerging ministry, Ruth focused her creative energies almost entirely on the *Young People's Church of the Air* weekly radio broadcast. Her assignment in the YPCA organization during these years gradually took shape—it was to build a musical program that would attract a listening audience, hold its attention, and prepare listeners for the evangelist's message that would follow. Ruth began working with the musical forces that Percy had assembled for his open-air meetings, selecting the better singers and players from among this disparate group, and molding them into a reliable performing ensemble. She was accustomed to working with other young musicians, and very quickly won their friendship and gained their confidence in her abilities.

Initially, the musical cast was made up of the YPCA quartet—the mainstay of the ensemble, a brass ensemble ("The Harmony Trumpeters"), female vocalists, various string instruments including harp, and a men's chorus. Ruth had brought with her from her Collingswood church a fine quartet which soon stabilized into one of her best, consisting of top tenor Horace Davies, second tenor Charlie Jewett, baritone Fenton Duvall (Ruth's brother), and bass Ken Schick.

It was the musical portion of the broadcast—taking up the major part of the hour-long program—that distinguished it from the many competing religious programs available to the listener, and which very likely accounted for its almost instant popularity in evangelical circles. Nothing even came close to the musical productions put on by Ruth and these young dedicated musicians.

The success of the radio broadcast meant that Percy was getting many invitations to conduct services at churches in the region and he accepted as many of these offers as he could, always accompanied by his evangelistic team of Ruth and the quartet. Hence, another part of Ruth's new job was traveling with the quartet to "meetings" as often as four or five nights a week.

Further, in the second season (1932-33), Percy took on another radio station, WMCA in New York City, at the same hour as in Philadelphia. He had already extended his ministry into the New York metropolitan area: in the previous year he had been invited to conduct a rally at Will Houghton's historic Calvary Baptist Church, the first of many engagements there. As Percy extended his reach, Ruth's responsibilities grew proportionally.

Later, in the summer of 1933, Percy opened Pinebrook Bible Conference in the Pocono Mountains of Pennsylvania, bringing together in one physical place the many young people in the Philadelphia and New York regions who had been following the radio broadcast and attending his meetings. At the nine-week conference, Ruth played the piano and coordinated the music for the three daily services which featured the vocal quartet, the brass quartet, and lots of singing of hymns and choruses. Recognizing the way in which the congregational singing of choruses in the tabernacle was contributing mightily to Pinebrook's success, Percy and Ruth set to work compiling a new collection of gospel songs, resulting in the publication of *Pinebrook Choruses* (1934), many of them newly-minted and bearing the copyright of Percy B. Crawford. This was the first of twelve songbooks that Ruth would compile for the organization over the years, giving her the chance to work with leading composers of the day and cultivate a new breed of composers who were setting new trends in gospel music.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> *Pinebrook Choruses*, 215 songs compiled by Percy B. Crawford & Ruth D. Crawford (Philadelphia: n.p., 1934).

In no time at all, Ruth was devoting practically all her time and talents to Percy's work, and had to drop out of school in tenth grade in order to meet his heavy demands.

### A Marriage Contract

Percy had his sights set on Ruth as a potential mate from the moment he saw her, and to find a woman who was both as attractive as she was and a valuable member of his team must have seemed to him a clear sign of the Lord's leading. To everyone who worked with Percy and Ruth, it was a foregone conclusion that the couple would marry; the only question was "when?" And the answer for all concerned—most importantly for mother Duvall—seemed to be "when she reached the acceptable age of seventeen."

There was never any doubt in anyone's mind about Ruth's devotion to Percy and his ministry, but the rising evangelist needed to be sure of her commitment before he signed on to the marriage. He made it very clear to Ruth when he proposed that he could marry her only on the condition that she would "have third place in his life and affections," after the Lord (first place) and the Lord's work (second place).<sup>19</sup> But in fact, Ruth *was* willing to put the Lord and the Lord's work above everything else in her life; this is what her dedication to a life of Christian service meant to her. And besides, she was head over heels in love with this man. Ruth gladly accepted the terms of the contract.

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Percy had already put out a songbook, *The Young People's Church of the Air Hymn Book*, (Copyright 1932 by Percy Crawford), which, he claimed, included only "the cream of the songs from the best song books" and left out the "dead songs." Since the book was published after Ruth was on the scene, she probably had a hand in compiling it, considering her recent exposure at Winona to Rodeheaver's latest publications. Indeed, one of her own compositions is included in the collection—a setting of one of her sister Esther's poems, "The Nail-Pierced Hand." This was a serious piece of music with a piano harmonization that showed unusual chordal complexity. But Ruth chose not to develop her songwriting ability in her years with Percy; in all eleven of the subsequent songbooks published by the YPCA, "The Nail Pierced Hand" was the only piece of significance that Ruth composed for any of them. For a complete list of the YPCA songbooks, see Dan D. Crawford, *A Thirst for Souls* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 2010), 349.

<sup>19</sup> "Pioneer for God: The Biography of Percy B. Crawford" (1954), ch. 4. A copy of this typed draft of a biography (by an unknown author, no pagination but fifty-two pages long), which was authorized by Percy but never completed or published, is in the Billy Graham Center Archives.

Shortly after Pinebrook closed its first season, Percy and Ruth were married in the Pinebrook Inn, September 18, 1933, just four-and-a-half months after Ruth turned seventeen. Ruth's sister Esther "stood for her" (witnessed the ceremony), and Percy's older brother, Alph, stood for him. The thirteen year difference in their ages was not uncommon in that era, but for family and friends it was a perfectly natural match, in part because Percy had crafted an image of himself as a youth leader, but primarily because Ruth had become such an integral part of his ministry.

But what did Percy mean when he explained to Ruth that she would have third place in his life and affections? I believe he was telling her that his first love and loyalty would be to his evangelism—even if this meant that they would have to sacrifice or curtail their family life; and further, his words seem to imply that he would sometimes have to ride roughshod over his wife's emotional needs and feelings. Ruth almost certainly did not think of these possible implications, but she would be put to the test on both counts, as we will see.

For their honeymoon, the newlyweds drove to New York City where Percy splurged for a night at the Waldorf-Astoria hotel. The next day, Ruth found time to get a letter off, addressed to her mother and family from "Mrs. P. Crawford," effusing over her "hubby" and recounting what they had had for breakfast. A few days later, Percy penned his own note to "Mother," commenting on his (and their) "seven days of joy—married to the sweetest girl in the world! Believe me she's a bundle of love! Having a grand time." From New York City they drove to Michigan for a visit with brother Alph's family, and then pushed on to Chicago where Percy began to mix business and pleasure, stopping at his alma mater, Wheaton College, to take part in a chapel service. He also made a stop at the Moody Bible Institute radio station WMBI in Chicago, checking in with friend and station manager Wendell Loveless—probably to introduce him to Ruth and arrange for the songwriter/song leader to come to Pinebrook; and probably too, he was thinking that in the not far future, the successful *Young People's Church of the Air* broadcast would be airing on his station.<sup>20</sup>

### Ruth's Supportive Role in Evangelism

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<sup>20</sup> By the third year, Wendell Loveless was on the roster at Pinebrook both as "speaker" and song leader, but later just as song leader. Loveless also contributed many songs to the YPCA songbooks.

After their marriage, as Percy worked feverishly to expand the organization, always thinking of new ways to communicate the gospel, Ruth continued in her (unofficial) role as director of music for their evangelistic ministry. She threw herself into her work, viewing each new challenge as an opportunity for growth and greater service.

Percy had given Ruth a free hand to develop a format and a repertoire of her own making, and a platform (radio) from which to communicate her creative work to a wide audience. This was the kind of freedom for self-expression that any artist would crave. There were very few constraints on her. Working outside of the established churches in the uncharted waters of radio (and later, television), she had none of the denominational, liturgical limitations that, for example, a church music director or organist typically would have. Of course, she was not starting with a blank slate. Rather, she was building on a long tradition of evangelical and revivalist gospel hymns and choruses, accumulated for more than a century by composers the likes of Charles Wesley, Philip Bliss, and Fanny Crosby—a repertoire that she had grown up with and knew thoroughly. But far from restricting her, she understood Percy's vision to mean that she should *remake this tradition* in a way that would appeal to a new generation—her generation.

To be sure, Percy was not relinquishing his final authority over the broadcast—in all aspects, including the music program. Ruth was always aware that her role required that she work within the general framework of Percy's evangelism. She realized, first, that the texts of the music she selected and their messages should be consistent with the basic beliefs of the evangelical faith they both adhered to; but since Ruth's Methodist tradition was so close in doctrine to Percy's Fundamentalism, she had no trouble meeting this requirement.

Further, the style and tone of her music had to be well within the bounds of evangelical decorum and clearly distinguishable from the popular genres of jazz, blues, folk, rock and roll, etc. This requirement was, of course, highly subjective, but Ruth knew intuitively where to draw this line without violating standards of propriety in her circles. At the same time, many of her associates recognized the influence of secular genres, such as jazz, folk ballads, and some forms of classical music on her musical style; and it is clear that entertainment styles such as the close harmonies of male quartets and girl's trios influenced her arrangements and her programming.

Percy simply entrusted Ruth with the entire musical program, and to the best of my knowledge, never had occasion to question any of her choices or interfere with any of her musical productions.

Most importantly, however, Ruth recognized that the whole point of her shared ministry with Percy was “to bring men and women to Christ.” Hence the purpose of the musical portion of the program was to put listeners in the right mood, so that they would be more receptive to the spoken Word, and more apt to open their hearts to the “movings of the Holy Spirit.” For Ruth, the quartet, and all the musicians, the value and significance of their performances was measured solely in terms of the extent to which they contributed to this overarching goal.

Understanding her role in this way, then, as supportive of the evangelist, far from restricting her and limiting her creativity, made it possible for Ruth to express herself and her particular skills in the most productive way. Each week, as she put together the 15-18 minute musical segment (for what had soon become a half-hour broadcast), selecting the medley of songs and choosing the singers and players who would perform them, and then participating in that performance, she was both composing something new, and taking part in the enactment of it. Each of these musical productions was an original creation in which a *message* was conveyed through its verse, and a *feeling* instilled by its emotional tone.

These musical packages were at the heart of the radio and television broadcasts for the next 20 years, and they constituted Ruth’s lasting contribution to the evangelical gospel genre of that time.

Apparently, however, it did not occur to Ruth or any of these performers that their music could *in itself* be the vehicle through which the gospel message was communicated to the listener, and even that their performances might be the instrument through which a person was brought to Christ. I will return to this point later in the essay.

#### The Radio Years (1933-1949): Achieving National Prominence

It took about a decade for the *Young People’s Church of the Air* broadcast to gain national recognition in the world of evangelical broadcasting. For most of the 1930s, it aired on four stations in the Northeast (Philadelphia, New York, Baltimore, and Boston) until, in 1940, Percy finally put the program on a coast-to-coast hookup. A critical point was reached in 1942 when he signed with the Mutual Broadcasting System, garnering the network’s choice stations in major cities across the country.

Over the next seven years, as Percy juggled Mutual with smaller networks and independent stations, the total number of stations that he announced being on fluctuated from 250 to 400, but for most of this time held around 275. The radio broadcast would thrive throughout the 1940s until 1949, when Percy moved the program and the entire entourage onto the ABC television network, and the long, eighteen-year career of the broadcast as a separate entity came to an end.<sup>21</sup>

It was during this period of expansion over the air waves that Percy also stepped up his schedule of meetings and rallies with his evangelistic team. He did this as a follow-up to the broadcasts in order to meet in person as many listeners as he could, and more importantly, to bring the gospel message to a wider audience in a more direct and personal way.

Ruth spent probably half of her working life traveling in a car with Percy and the quartet to and from meetings, as many as six nights a week, logging forty to fifty thousand miles a year. Most of these meetings were conducted in churches and auditoriums in the Northeast, and usually close enough to Philadelphia that the team could drive there and back again in one day. But the group did occasionally make forays into the Midwest, and in 1943 began a series of five arduous cross-country tours that always included services in Los Angeles where Percy had attended Bible School.

These tours certainly took a heavy toll on Percy, Ruth, and the different quartets that took part in them. One wonders how they endured the rigors of these long travels—the endless hours in the car, often driving all night, the cramped quarters, getting “up” for performing at meeting after meeting, and all the time maintaining a positive and cheerful attitude. Ruth certainly helped with her pleasant and sympathetic disposition, as did Percy with his fondness for jokes and his good humor.

Over the years, Ruth developed some very fine quartets. She loved working closely with the “boys,” selecting all their music, arranging it in close harmony, and training them in a way that expressed her unique style of music to its best advantage. She pushed her quartet members to take regular lessons with her voice teacher in Philadelphia, Klara Kase Bowman, and reach a high standard of performance before allowing them to do solos on the broadcast. (Tenor Bob Straton, who started with the quartet in 1950, said that he worked with “Madame Bowman” for a year before Ruth would let him sing solos.)

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<sup>21</sup> Charles Fuller, based in Long Beach, California, had signed with Mutual five years earlier putting his Sunday broadcast, the *Old Fashioned Revival Hour*, on 90 stations with the first coast-to-coast religious broadcast. Percy always prided himself in being a pioneer in many of his ventures, but he had to admit that Fuller was the leader in the realm of (radio) mass communications. It should be noted that Fuller also featured a musical ensemble on his program—albeit on a smaller scale than Ruth’s—directed by the very capable pianist Rudy Atwood. See Tonya Hangen, *Redeeming the dial: radio, religion, & popular culture in America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002) for a full account of Fuller’s radio ministry.

The quartet boys also loved working with Ruth, in part because of her outgoing personality and physical attractiveness, but mainly because of her musicianship. As accompanist, she saw her role as essentially supportive and responsive to her singers, putting them in the spotlight and herself in the shadows. This was especially true when she was accompanying her soloists: she brought out in them the best in their vocal abilities, following their lead, and accenting their particular strengths with her graceful ornamentation. Her accompaniment was more than simply an embellishment of the singer's interpretation; it was integral to the total performance, elevating it to a higher spiritual plane.

One of the chief obstacles Ruth encountered in building her quartets was the constant turnover in personnel. This occurred mainly because Percy always advertised his organization as youth-oriented, and consequently wanted his team members to present a youthful appearance. Another reason for this trend was that Percy thought nothing of firing his employees if they violated in any way his code of conduct, or even if he thought they were being "disloyal" to him. Ruth found herself having to find replacements for some very fine and long-standing quartet members who were let go for seemingly minor offenses. Charlie Jewett, who had sung with the same quartet and traveled with Percy and Ruth for four years (1934-38), was fired on the spot for piling a bunch of Pinebrook teenagers into his new car and taking them into town for ice cream. Bob Brooks, baritone in the quartet (1949-52) who helped Ruth with the essential task of taking her arrangements and writing scores for the various instrumental parts, was fired when he was caught smoking.<sup>22</sup> The only upside coming out of this unfortunate pattern for Ruth was that she had to learn how to adapt to these sudden shifts in personnel, and to always be on the lookout for fresh talent.

Nonetheless, throughout most of the 1940s when the radio broadcast was at its peak, Ruth was blessed with perhaps her all-time best quartet, composed of first tenor Alan Forbes, lead tenor Ray Pritz, baritone Ken Brown, and bass Joe Springer, who sang together for almost eight years. This was the quartet I experienced growing up, their repertoire and their four-part harmony deeply embedded in my musical DNA. Fortunately, there are many very good recordings of the radio broadcast from this period in which this quartet and its individual members take the leading roles.<sup>23</sup> Ruth's quartets always produced

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<sup>22</sup> In this case, however, Ruth insisted on keeping Bob on the payroll. At Pinebrook, after he was let go, while she was preparing her programs for the coming season of broadcasts, Bob took a room in nearby Stroudsburg and continued to help Ruth with her arranging; (and his former quartet companions quietly fraternized with him off-campus).

<sup>23</sup> I have made digital copies of 73 of these half-hour broadcasts, dating from 1945-47, originally recorded live on 15" disks. They can be found at the Percy Crawford website, <http://percycrawford.com/radio-broadcasts/>. Many of the songs mentioned in this essay appear in these programs.

some outstanding soloists, and in this one, Ken Brown (“Out of the Depths,” “In His Presence”) Joe Springer (“Only One Drop of Jesus’ Blood,” “Lead Me Gently Home”) and Ray Pritz (“What Will You Do with My Jesus?”) stand out as among her very best. One hears in their voices, as in so many of her soloists over the years, a sincerity and a genuine feeling of devotion and thankfulness to the Lord that touches the heart.

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It was in the decade of the 1940s that Ruth’s musical productions for the radio broadcast reached their highest level. The format of the program remained essentially unchanged, with the quartet opening the musical segment with a lively number aimed at attracting listeners, and closing it with a more somber, prayerful piece, setting the stage for Percy’s sermon. In between was a medley of songs in which the entire cast—brass quartet, men’s chorus, and orchestra—participated, with individual quartet members contributing moving solos. The medleys were always organized around a theme, such as Christ’s love, the cross, the name of Jesus, hands, garden, sea, harvest, yoke, trust, and many more.

In these years, too, Ruth was changing the composition of the ensemble by giving women a more prominent role. To be sure, women had always played an important part in Ruth’s programs. In the early years, although greatly outnumbered by men, women vocalists regularly performed solos and duets, and Ruth used women’s voices in angelic three-part harmony as back-up for the men’s chorus, and to modulate key changes in between numbers.<sup>24</sup> But by the early 1940s, the background women’s voices had been turned into a “girl’s trio,” that had their own separate songs on almost every program.<sup>25</sup> Gradually, Ruth was giving women a greater role in the program and a greater share of program time. This was not, I believe, a conscious decision on her part—she was simply rebalancing her forces. In her experience at First Church in Collingswood, this was the way it had always been done: women were given opportunities to express whatever talents they possessed.

But the missing piece in this formula was that she had not yet found the female soloist who was the equal of her quartet soloists. This gap was finally filled, however, toward the end of the decade when she discovered twenty-five-year-old Hilda Schmeiser. As soloist, Hilda would become the star performer on

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<sup>24</sup> Unfortunately, these women who added so much to the overall quality of the YPCA broadcasts were rarely identified by name. Occasionally their identities came to light in Percy’s introductions of the songs, but for the most part, they are, and always will be, anonymous servants who considered it a privilege to be contributing in this way to the Lord’s work.

<sup>25</sup> In forming the girl’s trio, Ruth was no doubt influenced by the growing popularity in the secular sphere of close harmony trios such as the Boswell Sisters (active 1925-36) and the sensational Andrews Sisters (1937-1948).

the coming television show, and the catalyst that raised the women's part in the program to parity with the men's.

Finally, it was in the 1940s that Ruth enlarged the instrumental side of her ensemble into what became a full-size orchestra. She collaborated in this project with a talented Philadelphia boy, Alfred Black, who had auditioned for the men's chorus at age thirteen and then worked his way up to earn a spot in the regular quartet. Ruth had always favored strings and woodwinds over brass and tympani to convey the warm quality of her songs, but together, she and Al recruited additional players in all the sections needed to make a full orchestral sound.<sup>26</sup> At the time, there was nothing on the East coast in the evangelical realm that compared with this orchestra, although in the West, Ralph Carmichael had built an orchestra with a large string component and arranged some beautiful music for it.<sup>27</sup>

Building up the numbers of her musicians meant that Percy and Ruth could conduct larger evangelistic rallies without having to assemble mass choirs and huge bands, as their counterparts, Jack Wyrzten, Billy Graham, and Torrey Johnson, were forced to do for their ventures in mass evangelism. Percy had been down that road already with rallies at Convention Hall in Philadelphia that drew audiences as large as twelve thousand; but he and Ruth finally settled into a pattern of conducting medium-size rallies in smaller venues such as the Academy of Music in Philadelphia and Carnegie Hall in New York which they could manage more efficiently using their own musical forces.

At a Carnegie Hall rally in 1948, Percy and Ruth put on a program that was quintessentially the *Young People's Church of the Air*, full of the distinctive brand of soft gospel music my mother had cultivated over the years. The twenty-six-piece orchestra conducted by Al Black opened the service with a "prelude" of five numbers, old and new: "Have Thine Own Way Lord," "'Tis So Sweet to Trust in Jesus," "Near the Cross," "Marvelous Grace," and Norman Clayton's "Now I Belong to Jesus." There followed several medleys performed by the vocal quartet, the brass quartet, the twelve-voice men's chorus, and

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<sup>26</sup> Over the years, Ruth attracted some very fine instrumentalists into her assembly of musicians. Violinist Herb Ballion, and trumpet player Sam Ayling held down their sections for a number of years. One outstanding player who joined the organization in the early 1940s was Al Zahlout, a master violinist who contributed the unique sound of his "singing violin" to Ruth's productions. Al had traveled world-wide with several "big name" musical organizations before his conversion and commitment to full-time service. For several years, Al was a regular on the broadcast and traveled to some meetings with Percy's evangelistic team, and in 1943 even accompanied them on one of their cross-country tours.

<sup>27</sup> In this venture, Ruth was keeping pace with the popularity of large string sections in groups such as the George Melachrino Orchestra, formed in 1945 and known for its lush string arrangements. Later, in 1962, Ralph Carmichael put out a recording of religious gems titled "102 Strings," one-upping popular recordings featuring the famous 101 Strings Orchestra. (Thanks to David Kay for bringing this to my attention.)

the orchestra, which contributed another Clayton favorite, “We Shall See His Lovely Face.” Solos were done by soprano Hilda Schmeiser (“Yes, There Is Comfort”), tenor Mel Peterkin (“Saviour Like a Shepherd Lead Us”), and bass Danny Bartkow (“A Great Calm”), all three of whom had a remarkable ability to express the warm, heartfelt quality of Ruth’s selections.

This superb cast and musical format developed by Ruth and her associates was by then a proven quantity and was making the YPCA broadcast and these spin-off rallies into first-rate productions with wide popular appeal. It was at this time that a new horizon for evangelism was opening up with the coming of television, and Percy soon realized that the program Ruth had formed could readily be adapted to this new medium. He saw the possibilities that television afforded for reaching another audience with the gospel, and he and Ruth moved quickly to convert their existing program to a television format.

### Pinebrook

No account of Ruth’s lifelong ministry in music would be complete if it did not include her contribution to Pinebrook Bible Conference during the summer months. Over the same period of time that Ruth was helping to bring the radio broadcast to national prominence, she was also building a distinctive music program at Pinebrook. Ruth had what was in effect a twelve-month contract with the YPCA. At Pinebrook, she worked continuously seven days a week, for 10 weeks without a break. But she loved being there. Pinebrook was for her a haven—a place that gave her respite from the rigorous demands of meetings and rallies and broadcasts, and where she could focus her attention almost exclusively on what she loved most—making music.

Since its founding in 1933, Pinebrook was rapidly becoming one of the most popular and sought-after conferences in the Northeast. As we have seen, Ruth’s job at Pinebrook consisted of organizing the entire music program, which meant, first, coordinating the music for the three daily services and the more formal Sunday morning and afternoon services each week. (She put her best effort into the Sunday afternoon service which for many years was broadcast live from the tabernacle at Pinebrook to a national audience.) In addition, Ruth was responsible for providing the music every weekday morning at 8 o’clock for the half-hour devotional radio program, *Pinebrook Praises*, that Percy started in 1943, and which aired from Pinebrook in the summer months and from our home in Philadelphia throughout the year.

As singing was becoming the hallmark of the Pinebrook experience, Percy and Ruth began to include song leaders on the “speakers” roster by the second year. All the meetings at Pinebrook started with a “song service” with lots of congregational singing; with Ruth at the piano, the song leader was always free to switch to any song at any time in any key. But the main attraction of the week musically was the half hour of “special music” that Ruth put together for the evening and Sunday services. She relied mostly on her quartet and the soloists in the quartet to provide this special music, although later on she built up a supporting cast of various singers and instrumentalists, many of them drawn from the Pinebrook staff.

An indispensable part of her overall program, however, were the guest artists coming through Pinebrook on a weekly basis. Without these guest musicians, the music at Pinebrook would have been only a scaled-down version of the radio broadcast, but with them, it took on a uniqueness and flavor all its own, the whole being more than the sum of its parts.

Bass-baritone Beverly Shea was on the roster at Pinebrook in the early years, and in a real sense got the big break there that launched his stellar career. In 1938 he was paired with speaker Will Houghton, then the president of Moody Bible Institute. At that time, Bev Shea was working for an insurance firm in New York City, but on the side, had often sung with Percy and Ruth on the radio and at Pinebrook banquets. In his memoir, *Then Sings My Soul*, Shea recalls an encounter with Houghton one afternoon when he and his wife Erma were out walking: “There under those towering pines, we talked. I can still find the spot.”<sup>28</sup> Houghton asked him to consider filling an opening at Moody’s radio station WMBI. The singer was hesitant at first, but did finally accept the offer, quit his insurance job, and headed to Chicago for full-time service and eventually a long singing career with Billy Graham.

But Bev Shea at the beginning of his career was not typical of the guest musicians who passed through Pinebrook, most of whom were well-known performers making their annual rounds of Bible conferences and camp meetings all over the land. These included Peter Slack, who arrived in 1937 “with sixteen instruments” and Hammond organ, and soon became the regular organist at Pinebrook. In 1940 Grace and Lester Place came on the scene playing

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<sup>28</sup> George Beverly Shea, *Then Sings My Soul* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1968), 60-61.

marimba, bells, and the magnificent triple octave chimes. Also in that year, former dance band saxophonist Jake Sheetz started a long tenure at Pinebrook.

In the 1940s and 50s, other outstanding musicians were the Claus Indian Family, The Wigden Trio, who delighted audiences with their acted-out rendition of “I Just Got to Heaven and I Can’t Sit Down,” Anton Marco, who had sung with the San Carlo Opera Company, The Ohman Trumpet Trio with brothers Chuck, Bill, and George, instrumentalists Neil and Pat Macauley, and singer Theron Spurr. Song leaders who contributed significantly to the musical ethos at Pinebrook were former stage comedian Walter “Mac” MacDonald in the 1930s and 40s, and in the 1950s, John DeBrine, founder of *Youthtime* rallies in Boston, and the radio program *Songtime*.

Ruth and Percy were constantly on the lookout for fresh talent and occasionally found it among members of the staff. One such singer who should be mentioned was the African-American, Jimmy McDonald, who was a dishwasher on the staff when he was not doing stirring solos in the tabernacle. His rendition of “I Stood at Calvary” stands out in my memory.<sup>29</sup>

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Pinebrook was where Ruth did most of the work on the 12 songbooks she compiled for the YPCA with over 1500 published songs in all. With help from her associate musicians, Ruth tried out thousands of songs submitted by well-known and lesser-known composers in making her final selections. The payoff, however, was a rich harvest of new gospel hymns and choruses that greatly enriched her performances.<sup>30</sup>

Over these years, Ruth and Percy cultivated a new breed of composers who wrote both lively, easy-to-learn choruses and songs that had a more inspirational and moving quality, appropriate for solos or duets. A few of the main contributors to the songbooks, such as George Schuler, Harry Dixon Loes, and Merrill Dunlop had already made their reputation as gospel songwriters; while others, like Wendell Loveless, Norman Clayton, John Peterson, and Arlene Barnes either launched their careers or established themselves through working with Ruth and the YPCA.

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<sup>29</sup> Jimmy McDonald would move on in the organization to become a star soloist in the “Youtharama” rallies that Percy started in 1957 (see below).

<sup>30</sup> See *Thirst for Souls* for a complete list of Ruth’s songbooks, 349-50.

Ruth also encouraged Pinebrook speakers and team members to contribute songs, and some wrote lovely pieces, including quartet members Fenton Duvall (“I Will Guide Thee”) and Paul White (“Jesus, Wonderful Lord”); and Almeda Pearce, the wife of speaker Rowan Pearce and mother of trombonist Bill Pearce, wrote the music and words of the triumphant “When He Shall Come,” a favorite of all the quartets.<sup>31</sup>

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Pinebrook was a magnet for young musicians all over the Northeast who wanted to participate in some way in Ruth’s creative programing. One of these was Jean Bruce from Ithaca, New York, who came to Pinebrook in the summer of 1943 to audition for a place in Ruth’s ensemble. The seventeen-year-old soprano had been asked by Edward Johnson, general manager of the Metropolitan Opera, to come to New York, to train as a protégée with the Met. Jean recalled that Ruth asked her to sing something, and she did “Summertime” from *Porgy and Bess*. Ruth then gave her one of John Abnett’s songs from the latest songbook, “Love Never Fails,”<sup>32</sup> and asked her to sing in the evening service. She was welcomed onto Ruth’s team, moved to Philadelphia, and became a soloist on the radio broadcasts and a regular with the girl’s trio. She wrote to me that she “remembered how we girls doing those ‘fred waring type ooh’s’ often had to be able to pick our notes out of the air—it was off-putting at times—and what a look we’d get from your mother if we missed our notes.”<sup>33</sup>

Ruth lived in the tabernacle. She spent many hours of her free afternoons there, rehearsing numbers for the evening service with her singers, and often these rehearsals turned into jam sessions and the casual singing of favorite songs and learning of new ones. Pinebrook became a

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<sup>31</sup> R. Fenton Duvall, “I Will Guide Thee” in *Pinebrook Praises* (Wheaton, Ill.: Van Kampen Press, 1943), 174. Paul White, “Jesus, Wonderful Lord,” in *The King’s Songs* (Philadelphia: n.p., 1939), 161. Almeda J. Pearce, “When He Shall Come,” in *Pinebrook Choruses* (Philadelphia: n.p., 1934), 197.

<sup>32</sup> John E. Abnett, “Love Never Fails,” in *Pinebrook Praises* (Wheaton, Ill.: Van Kampen Press, 1943), 170.

<sup>33</sup> Email from Jean (Bruce) Yeaworth to Dan Crawford, 9/4/2014. While at Pinebrook that summer, Jean met (and soon married) another young musician, Irwin “Shorty” Yeaworth, a waiter in the dining hall at the time, who went on to sing in the quartet and, six years later, to become the floor manager for Percy’s television program, *Youth on the March*. Shorty did everything for the telecasts from writing scripts and building sets to leading the men’s chorus and helping Ruth with arrangements. But in the second year of working closely with Percy on production, he and Jean left the organization over a relatively minor disagreement Shorty had with his boss—two more casualties of Percy’s impulsive dealings with his employees that impacted Ruth’s program. (See *Thirst for Souls*, 238-40, for more about this incident.)

kind of laboratory for Ruth where she could experiment with new songs and arrangements, and find the numbers that best fit her unique style, and that matched the voices of her various singing groups and soloists. It was also the place where she could improve her own piano skills, as for example, when she worked up and performed arrangements for piano duets with the resident organist. Clayton Erb was the last of a long line of gifted organists at Pinebrook, who worked with Ruth from 1956 to 1962. In a recent conversation, Clayton recalled that his piano duets with Ruth ranged from the march-like “On To Victory” to the softer “There’s No Disappointment in Jesus.” He noted that they never played in unison, but arranged what was essentially music for four hands, requiring quite a bit of rehearsal time. Clayton moved on to a long and productive career in church music, serving for 41 years as the Minister of Music of the large and influential Grace Community Church in Sun Valley, CA.<sup>34</sup>

Clayton freely admitted that he “copied” Ruth’s style of playing; and he was by no means the only one. Gail (Detweiler) Mininger, who ministered throughout her life as a pianist and church organist, came to Pinebrook as a teenager with her church youth group, and (she wrote) “always sat in the front rows of the tabernacle on the piano side; . . . and I can still see Ruth Crawford quietly sliding onto the piano bench and accompanying all the music with her delicate flowing touch.” Gail added that the “gentle touch” in her own playing that others had commented on “probably came unconsciously from watching Ruth play.”<sup>35</sup>

In a similar vein, George Wesner, the principal organist at Radio City Music Hall (New York City), who was influenced by Ruth’s performance style as it was passed to him by his teacher Fred Davies, another Pinebrook organist who worked closely with Ruth, remarked: “One of the things Ruth taught Fred, and I learned, was the lightness of touch at the keyboard.” He went on to say of Ruth: “There was really no other person who played exactly like her although many tried to imitate the style.”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Phone call with Dan Crawford, 12/3/2016.

<sup>35</sup> Email from Gail Mininger to Dan Crawford, 6/11/2021.

<sup>36</sup> Email from George Wesner to Dan Crawford, 5/30/2021. Wesner added an insightful comment about Ruth’s technique: “In terms of her arrangements and style, she was able to access popular music in ways that most evangelicals were not, and she picked up harmonic progressions from the world of Broadway. In particular, she would add 2nds to chords among other things. There is no doubt that she had a very special and unique gift of incorporating what she heard and making it her own.”

Ruth's music program also provided aspiring musicians with the opportunity to develop their musical interests and be initiated into the gospel music scene. Ruth was not a piano teacher in the usual sense of giving piano instruction or lessons, but she taught by example, and many young artists learned from her simply by being a part of her concerts and performances. Linda (Marsh) McKechnie is a pianist who joined the Pinebrook staff as a teenager in the late 1950s and participated in Ruth's concerts. Linda went on to forge a unique career in Christian music as a concert pianist, playing with symphony orchestras and performing world-wide before audiences numbering in the thousands. She wrote to me that Ruth was for her "an encouraging role model" and "a strong motivator who gave us inexperienced musicians the opportunity to flourish." She continued: "I remember playing one of the twin pianos at Pinebrook with her, and she would introduce me to some new chords. To this day, as I sit at the piano, there are times I feel I am holding my hands like she did, and with the same feeling and creative touch."<sup>37</sup>

Don Marsh was another budding musician—a trombonist—who came to Pinebrook as a staff member and was inspired to pursue a music ministry through his involvement in the music program. He wrote that Ruth "encouraged me to continue to explore my arranging interests while at Pinebrook and that was the beginning of a lifelong career for me writing arrangements, orchestrations, and doing recordings for the church; . . . and Ruth helped to create the atmosphere and opportunity for experimentation and experience in music for me."<sup>38</sup>

These individuals I have quoted are only a fraction of the many musicians who passed through Pinebrook and went on to active careers in evangelistic work or in the church. Each of them carried with them some aspect of Ruth's style of music, and their performances were made more artistic, more skillful, and more meaningful because of their interactions with her.

Pinebrook was the place where Ruth could retreat from the routines and responsibilities of her life in Philadelphia and make music with friends and colleagues in a more relaxed setting. In what was a kind of workshop environment, she was able to develop new repertoire and recruit new talent. It was also comfortable for her to be performing daily before the same audience, in

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Wesner currently serves as organist and Director of Music at the historic St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Teaneck, NJ.

<sup>37</sup> Email from Linda McKechnie to Dan Crawford, 6/12/2021.

<sup>38</sup> Email from Don Marsh to Dan Crawford, 6/8/2021.

the same place, for an entire week's time. In close cooperation with the song leader, Ruth could take the random group of Pinebrookers, young and old, and raise them to great heights of choral singing. It was a throwback for Ruth to the camp meeting experience of her youth. Working with a different combination of musical talent, and mixing in the robust congregational singing of hymns and choruses, Ruth created another variation of inspiring gospel music, appropriate to the Bible Conference. This was her offering for thirty-three years to the people of this region.

### Family

Pinebrook Bible Conference had been running for five years and the radio broadcast was in its seventh year when Ruth and Percy had their first child—Donald Bruce Crawford, born November 16, 1937. Ruth was 21 and Percy 35. We may speculate as to why the couple waited this long to start a family. My guess is that Percy wanted to wait because he had something to lose by having children. He had gained his reputation as a youth leader by conducting a ministry that was directed almost entirely toward young people, so it was very important to him that his entourage consist of young people—including himself. Moreover, staff members with children were more likely to have family obligations and loyalties that would conflict with their commitment to the YPCA work. Percy was the model: he had stayed a bachelor until he was 30 and waited to become a dad until 35.

On the other hand, there was a good reason why he didn't want to wait to start a family: he always had it in mind that he would bring up children who would have the same zeal that he had for soul-saving work, and who would carry on his various enterprises after his death. In fact, practically everything he did relating to his sons was done in the light of this overarching plan for succession. In a 1944 newsletter (under a photo of Percy, Ruth, and three boys), he wrote: "We want the three of them to be good soldiers of Jesus Christ. I'll be disappointed if they become Presidents of Banks or even President of the U.S. I want them to be soul winners and do the will of God."

Ruth's desire for children was not so pragmatic—she just wanted a family; and she hoped, and fully expected, that her family would reflect the same love and mutual support that she had experienced in her childhood.

I doubt whether either parent thought very much about whether having a family and creating the kind of nurturing environment that their children would need was even possible given their commitment to evangelism and the pace that Percy was setting. They simply assumed that they would be able to manage children and full-time work at the same time, and do it well. If need be, they could always call on Nana Duvall to stay with the children. It was relatively easy for them to take care of just one child, finding babysitters from the vast pool of young people surrounding them. But as their ministry expanded, and more children followed—four in the next twelve years<sup>39</sup>—it became more difficult to give their children—to give *us* kids—the time and attention we needed as children of celebrity parents.

Ruth inevitably fell in with the patriarchal norms of her evangelical community regarding gender roles and family values, which were also predominant in the wider culture. In her own evangelical world, a married woman's role was first and foremost to create a home environment in which the husband was the spiritual head of the household and which fostered in the children the sorts of values and habits that were deemed essential to their faith. It was permissible for a wife to support her husband's ministry and mission—as Ruth was doing so successfully—but only if her work did not interfere with her primary duty of homemaking and tending to their children's upbringing.

Ruth Graham, Ruth Crawford's lifetime friend, perfectly exemplified this ideal for evangelical women, making her top priority the home and her children, even to the point of not involving herself at all in her husband's ministries. "I just don't approve of the working wife," she counseled.<sup>40</sup> But in truth, both Ruth and her husband Billy did approve wholeheartedly of Ruth's full-time commitment to Percy's work. Billy made this clear in the remembrances he delivered at my father's memorial service in which he described their marriage as God-ordained: It was "an ideal marriage," he said. "God gave him his Ruth; I heard him say he could not have done his work without her; Ruth at the piano, at his side; What an example they have set! When he

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<sup>39</sup> Richard Torrey Crawford, March 6, 1939; Dan Duvall Crawford, October 30, 1941; Dean Alan Crawford, August 26, 1944; and Donna Lee Crawford, December 10, 1949.

<sup>40</sup> Gay Pauley, "Mrs. Billy Graham Deplores Rise in Number of Working Housewives," *Los Angeles Times*, May 19, 1957; cited in Matthew Sutton, *American Apocalypse: A History of Modern Evangelicalism* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014), 333.

found Ruth Crawford, I believe that marriage was formed in heaven.” Graham went on to extol our family in similar terms: it “has been a mighty witness as they worked together to rear a family for Christ.”<sup>41</sup>

Billy Graham was right on the first point: Percy and Ruth’s marriage was ideal—at least when viewed from the standpoint of how Ruth’s musical talent supported and enhanced Percy’s evangelistic ministry. But on the second point—that our family life had been “a mighty witness,” he was sadly mistaken.

Ruth Crawford fulfilled the first part of the aforementioned requirements for evangelical wives: she ceded spiritual authority to Percy regarding all the important child-rearing matters, such as where we would attend school and church, and how to conduct our religious training and discipline. And there was never any question about the extent of our involvement in the work: I began being interviewed and singing solos on the morning broadcast when I was three; and we four boys sang at meetings and on the telecasts, billed as the “Junior Quartet” and the “4 D’s: Don, Dick, Dan, & Dean.”

But Ruth certainly did *not* make the home and the care of her children her chief goal in life. She was so caught up in the work, so intent on keeping up with Percy and meeting the new challenges she was constantly presented with, that she never really faced up to the fact that she needed to set priorities and admit that she might not be able to meet all of her life goals. At some level, Ruth knew she was neglecting her children, and this created a tension in her life that she never fully resolved.

This dissonance was exacerbated by the fact that Percy created an image of Ruth not only as devoted wife (which meant for him devoted to his ministry), but also as exemplary *mother*. For instance, in the 1950 calendar, under her picture he wrote: “Now the mother of four children, she is kept busy. Besides cooking and raising children, she trains Glee Clubs, arranges orchestrations, travels 40,000 miles a year to meetings and does it all humbly to the glory of her Saviour.” He put the same point a little differently in the 1960 calendar: “Her . . . unusual talent

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<sup>41</sup> Billy Graham, “Memorial Service for Dr. Percy Crawford” (printed address), November 6, 1960, Philadelphia Town Hall.

in playing the piano, and her training of her family to sing the praise of their Lord, have made Mrs. Crawford an ideal helpmeet in this evangelistic ministry.”

But in one of his newsletters, Percy acknowledges his and Ruth’s demanding schedule and seems to admit that we children had had to make sacrifices. He queries: “How do you account for the fact the Crawford children all love the Lord?” and then tries to explain what he and Ruth had done to bring this about: “They have seen Christ is a reality to us. They know that we have denied ourselves in serving Him.” His idea was that when we saw the extent of our parents’ personal sacrifice, we would naturally want to follow their example and deny ourselves to the same degree.

It is true that we all sensed the importance and urgency of our parents’ mission and cooperated in their great work to the best of our abilities. But they demanded a lot from us. We children were called upon to participate in hundreds of services and broadcasts, perform on cue before audiences large and small, and spend endless hours in the car going to and from meetings. We forfeited good sleep, good health, and a normal school day with our peers at Percy’s bidding.

Our parents were away at meetings usually four or five nights a week, and practically every weekend. In the early years, we had a succession of babysitters, but as we got older, our parents were increasingly comfortable with leaving us to look after ourselves. Our chief caregiver was our grandmother, “Nan,” who lived with us for months at a time and took on the main burdens of caring for us; in fact, it’s probably fair to say that she raised us. I adored my grandmother and remember her as the one who cooked for me, read me bedtime stories, and protected me from my older brothers.

But there was only so much that our aging grandmother could do for our family, and there were long stretches when she was gone, visiting the families of her other children. During these times, we were often left by ourselves with no one there to cook the evening meal and keep order in the house. Things could get out of hand pretty easily among four brothers who didn’t get along with each other all that well. There were strong rivalries between us that often erupted into nastiness and sometimes out-and-out fights. Worse still, from my father’s point of

view, all of us boys were beginning to act and think in ways that tended to stray from the strict rules and doctrines of our fundamentalist faith.

It must be said, however, that from our point of view, there was an upside to our parents' being away from home so often. Without their close supervision, we were on our own, learning how to fend for ourselves. Whether consciously or not, our parents were teaching us to be independent, to think and act on our own behalf. This self-assertive quality served us well in the process of charting our own course of life as adults, but at the time, it was causing both parents considerable pain—Percy, because he thought he had “lost us”<sup>42</sup>; Ruth, because the atmosphere of dissension in her own household was so different from the one she had grown up in.

Ruth simply had to suffer these misbehaviors and fractured relations. Indeed, having relinquished her parental rights to Percy, there was little she could do about them other than try to mitigate their ill-effects on family life,

To be fair to my mother, she did try to do as much mothering as time and work would permit. When she was not away at meetings she managed the household, preparing some family dinners, cleaning (with only minimal help), and I can recall her ironing our shirts after dinner, seated at her modern pressing machine, while all of us sat around the television watching our favorite shows. What is remarkable to me is that she was able to combine her role as full-time worker with her duties as mother and wife to the extent that she did.

There were even occasions when her fondness for her children took precedence over her ministry. In looking through her datebooks, I found in one of them a surprising entry in which she acknowledges committing an offense I would not have thought possible—missing a meeting. On October 30, 1953, my twelfth birthday, she wrote: “St. Albans, N.Y. I didn't go—stayed home with Dan on his birthday”—truly an act of love . . . and yet, the fact that she recorded this one case in her datebook indicates to me how exceptional it was.

My mother's love and affection for her children was genuine and constant, but always somehow distorted by being channeled through the work. It was as if she was raising us to sing the praises of our Lord (as Percy put it). She did this because her primary commitment was to Percy's evangelism and to her musical ministry in the YPCA organization. And she did it, too,

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<sup>42</sup> For an explanation of why my father thought this to be the case, see *Thirst For Souls*, 181-83.

because of her passion for music and music making. She never tired of traveling with Percy and the quartet to another venue to present her music to another audience. She loved being in the company of her quartets and other musicians—they were like her own children to her. And she was completely at ease on the platform, orchestrating an entire musical program from her piano bench. Ruth had chosen career over home. This was the role that allowed her to express herself, to be who she was, and to find fulfillment in her life. And who can blame her?

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There were other ways in which Ruth's ceding authority to her husband over all matters relating to the Lord's work adversely affected her family ties. Ruth was strongly devoted to her Duvall family—her mother and four siblings—and would not have been able to give herself to Percy's work if it meant being cut off from them. Her sister Esther and brother Fenton were her favorites and she remained very close to them throughout her life. She had brought Fenton with her into Percy's work as a quartet member and he remained a key ally of Percy's for the next fourteen years.

Percy was sensitive to Ruth's need to maintain close family relations and I believe his affections for her family members were sincere, even if they were always somehow tied to his work. Nana Duvall came to Pinebrook every summer for many years, tending the beautiful flower gardens. And Percy showed trust and confidence in his brother-in-law Fenton when he asked him to be, effectively, the chief officer of the Christian college he founded in 1938, The King's College, in Belmar, New Jersey. Fenton had been singing in the quartet for seven years while earning his bachelor's degree from Temple University and a master's degree in history at Penn. He was then given the opportunity at Penn to begin a doctoral program, but turned down this offer in order to take up Percy's challenge of starting a college from scratch. He and his wife Hannah took up residence in Belmar, and for the next seven years at King's, Fenton did just about everything administratively that needed to be done to keep a small college running, while teaching a full load of courses and taking on numerous extra-curricular assignments (including conducting the college's men's chorus, which performed regularly on the radio broadcast). Hannah handled all the secretarial duties of the fledgling college. It is hard to see how Fenton

could have been more faithful in carrying out Percy's vision of establishing a Christian liberal arts college.

But after these seven years of exhaustive work, Percy fired Fenton after a conversation in which he took Fenton to be criticizing him for not giving over more control of the college to the board of trustees. And suddenly, Fenton, his wife, and their two children were out on the street looking for work and a new home.<sup>43</sup>

I have no doubt that Ruth was devastated when she learned that Percy had dismissed her brother. She had depended emotionally on Fenton's close, loving affection to make up for Percy's lack of this same quality, and now it was suddenly torn from her. But there was nothing to be done; her tears were in vain. Percy had made the decision to replace Fenton with a faculty member whose credentials, he thought, would better serve the college, and that was the end of it. As a later quartet member said to me once, in an understatement: "For Percy, the work was more important than people," and I would add, even if one of those people was his wife.

Ruth put up with Percy's impulsive and insensitive actions and continued to be a faithful partner in their ministry, apparently without harboring any deep resentment or anger toward him. She was able to react in this way not only because of her own dedication to furthering the Lord's work, but also because of her naturally kind and forgiving disposition and her strong aversion to conflict.

### Ruth's Message

We have seen that Ruth and her entire cast viewed the musical portion of the broadcasts as subsidiary to the evangelist's all-important mission of saving souls. Its main purpose, they believed, was to "melt hearts" (as Percy put it), and thus prepare the listeners emotionally for the sermon and invitation that followed.

I believe, however, that this conception of the role of Ruth's musical productions misrepresents and undervalues what she and her ensemble were actually doing and how it contributed to the larger goal of changing hearts and winning souls. Ruth's music did more than work on the emotions of its listeners by arousing in them feelings of sympathy and thus weakening their resistance to the gospel message, (although it certainly had this effect). Her

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<sup>43</sup> For a full account of this incident, see *Thirst for Souls*, 194.

music also conveyed a *message* of its own with a definite theological content—albeit one that differed sharply from Percy’s message of sin-guilt-punishment-remission of sin—and one that evoked a very different response in the listener.

Ruth’s message was steeped in the Methodist-Holiness tradition she experienced growing up in a closely-knit family whose entire life revolved around the services and activities at First Methodist Church. This tradition placed a strong emphasis on piety and living for Christ, making him the master and ruler of one’s life, and as such, it diverged from the revivalist movement of that time that focused almost exclusively on the (Calvinist) doctrines of sin and salvation through Christ’s atoning death on the cross. Both of these theological perspectives, however, stressed the importance of evangelism and missionary work at home and abroad; and we have seen that First Church had no problem aligning itself with revivalism and regularly opening its doors to itinerant evangelists.

Further, Ruth’s message was communicated entirely in and through the performances of her musicians. Her own creative role in shaping this message was expressed in her *selection* of songs and the musicians who would perform them, her *arrangements* of much of this music, and her piano *accompaniment* of the singers and players in performance.

The vast repertoire of hymns and choruses that Ruth brought to the YPCA broadcasts ranged over many of the themes and doctrines of the evangelical faith. Some of the more prominent ones that I found in reviewing these programs were *God’s redeeming love* (epitomized in the YPCA signature song, “Love, Wonderful Love”<sup>44</sup>); *heaven* as our home and destination, leaving behind this world’s cares and woes; the Christian’s *assurance* of salvation; and the *joy and peace* that comes with a commitment to Christ. Notably absent from her long list were themes relating to human sin, God’s wrathful punishment of sin, hell, and Christ as our sin-bearer. There is, however, one recurring theme that stands out in the hundreds of programs she produced, namely *the possibility for the believer of experiencing a close, personal relationship with Jesus as Lord and Savior*.

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<sup>44</sup> “Love Wonderful Love,” by Seth Sykes in *The Young People’s Church of the Air Hymn Book* (Philadelphia, PA: Copyright 1932 by Percy Crawford), 1.

What emerges from this strand of her music is a theology that centers on the person of Jesus as a human being who attracts us, and invites us to enter into an intimate relationship with him. In this portrayal of Jesus—so different from Percy’s muscular depiction of him—there are three main features:

--Jesus is physically present to us; we walk with him and talk with him, we feel the touch of his hand, we see his lovely face, hear his gentle voice.

--Jesus understands and cares for us; he is a friend and comforter in times of sorrow and sadness; he brings peace and calm to those who put their trust in him.

--Jesus invites us to let him into our hearts and lives, to be like him; he calls us to follow him, let him be our leader and guide, make him Master of our lives.

Ruth’s message is also evangelistic in that it calls upon the listeners to respond, to actively and knowingly redirect their lives, to make Jesus the center of their lives and follow his example; and if they are already on this path, to resolve to follow him more closely, serve him more faithfully.

But her message does not lead naturally to the kind of decision that Percy urged upon his listeners. Whereas Ruth’s idea of conversion is *relational*, his is *transactional*: bringing men and women to Christ meant for him bringing them to a conviction of their sin and the realization that they were “lost” and in need of a Savior. To be *saved*, the sinner only has to make a decision to *receive* God’s free gift of his only Son’s sacrificial death on the cross as payment for his or her sin. In return, the recipient is given forgiveness, a changed nature, and eternal life. The convert’s decision is supposed to be a once-and-for-all act that determines her or his final destiny in heaven or hell.

This idea of conversion as occurring all at once was one that had dominated evangelicalism in America at least since the time of Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), and would hold sway in America through the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the Billy Graham era. No one questioned it. The way in which one measured success in evangelism was by tallying the number of “professions for Christ.”

Ruth acceded to this model of conversion because she, like most evangelicals, did not know any other. Moreover, she would have viewed her appeal to enter into a *relationship* with the

person of Christ as complementing Percy's message and thus enhancing its effectiveness—which it certainly did.

But there was an alternative model of conversion, another way of changing hearts and leading men and women to Christ, one in fact that was implicit in Ruth's message and ministry. According to this model, conversion is a process, a pilgrimage, that does not occur in a single, time-specific act, but in a series of acts by which the Christian strives to attain moral and spiritual purity, and thereby draw closer to God. Although Ruth certainly did not see herself—could not have seen herself—as offering a rival model of call-and-response to Percy's, I am suggesting that this is another way of interpreting the effect her music and her ministry had on many of her listeners. And we may wonder how many of them left her services and concerts without having made an all-out decision, but having been drawn to the Lord, and having resolved to draw close, or closer, to him.<sup>45</sup>

#### The Move to Television: Youth on the March

Percy and Ruth took their show on the ABC television network on Sunday evening at 10:30, October 9, 1949 with the first broadcast of *Youth on the March* from the WFIL-TV studio at 46<sup>th</sup> and Market Streets, Philadelphia.<sup>46</sup> The advertising card announcing the program proclaimed;

ON TELEVISION!  
The Young People's Church of the Air Presents  
"Youth on the March"  
Pioneering Again on THE FIRST GOSPEL PROGRAM  
Televised Coast-to-Coast.

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<sup>45</sup>Historian David Hall traces this idea of salvation as a process to the very beginnings of the Puritan movement in 16<sup>th</sup> century England and Scotland, then passed on to the first Puritan settlers in New England. Citing multiple sources from this early period, he writes: "Every description of this sequence [of stages of redemption] made the point that 'the conversion of a sinner is not wrought all at one instance, but in continuance of time and that by certain measures and degrees.'" (quotation from Richard Rogers' *The Practice of Christianity* (London, 1627)). Hall continues: "In general, lay people . . . did not experience the shattering rebirth that became characteristic in eighteenth and nineteenth century Anglo-American revivalism. Instead, conversion was a lifelong process." (*The Puritans: A Transatlantic History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019) 116; see also 411 n.33.)

<sup>46</sup> The previous year, 1948, was the year television began its explosive growth: coaxial cables for network relays between cities became available in the Midwest, as it had been on the East Coast for two years, and regular network service began. By the end of that year, forty-eight television stations were serving twenty-three cities.

### Look and listen Every Sunday

Percy was delighted to begin broadcasting on the ABC network, which took the program into eleven major cities—four in the Northeast (Philadelphia, New York, Baltimore, Washington D.C.), six in the Midwest (Chicago, Detroit, Grand Rapids, Columbus, Indianapolis, Minneapolis), and one on the West Coast (Los Angeles). The program would air nationally for four consecutive years (1949-1953),<sup>47</sup> and after that locally in Philadelphia (1955-1958) and in New York City for one season (1956-57). During all these years, the soundtrack of the telecast was aired on hundreds of radio stations where television did not go.

Ruth would not have been at all surprised that Percy, in his pioneering spirit, wanted to be the *first* religious organization to move into this new market and accomplish his goal of getting the gospel out to “unsaved and unchurched” souls. And, as we have seen, her musical cast was, at this moment, at its peak and ready to go.

*Youth on the March* appealed to a wide spectrum of the viewing public. As Ben Armstrong notes in his 1979 book *The Electric Church*: “With secular variety shows making the TV screen the equivalent of the old vaudeville stage, there was a demand for programs that featured musical productions. Percy Crawford had just that type of program. . . . [T]he visual dimension made the attractive young musicians and speakers even more appealing and their testimony of the Christian life more compelling than could be achieved through radio alone.”<sup>48</sup> (Of course, those musical productions Armstrong was referring to were Ruth’s creations, not Percy’s.) Ruth realized intuitively that the television camera could enhance the presentation of her performers and their ability to convey her message, and she moved quickly to develop a format that would exploit the new medium to its fullest advantage.

The lineup for each telecast consisted of 50 or more musicians—evenly divided between vocalists and instrumentalists—including the quartet, the King’s Singers (10-12 men),<sup>49</sup> a girl’s

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<sup>47</sup> In the fourth season (1952-53), Percy switched from ABC to the Dumont network.

<sup>48</sup> Armstrong, *Electric Church*, (New York: Nelson, 1975), 89.

<sup>49</sup> The men’s chorus was named the King’s Singers in the early 1940s because it consisted mostly of students from The King’s College (which had by this time moved from Belmar, New Jersey to New Castle, Delaware). Ruth’s brother, Fenton, who was the chief administrator of the college and director of the Singers, worked with Ruth on programing for the weekly broadcast.

trio, a full orchestra, plus two new acts: a trumpet trio (replacing the brass quartet), and the Crawford children, Don, Dick, Dan, and Dean, dubbed “the 4 D’s.”

The King’s College Trumpet Trio, led by brothers Chuck and Bill Ohman (and later joined by younger brother George), brought a distinctively contemporary sound to the program with its jazzy arrangements of old and new gospel songs, such as “Sound the Battle Cry,” “Love Lifted Me,” “Power in the Blood,” and “He Lives.” And the four D’s, ages 12, 10, 8, and 5, singing in three-part harmony added a light, bouncy touch to the program with songs such as “Give Me Oil in My Lamp,” “On My Journey Home,” and “I’m a Trampin’.” We four boys, later joined by our baby sister Donna Lee, had bright faces and clear voices that blended well. One magazine article said of us “They sing praises to the Lord with grins on their faces and fervor in their hearts. . . their shining faces, telling of their joy in the Lord, preach as eloquently as their father’s sermons.”<sup>50</sup>

Perhaps the most significant change Ruth made in the programing was the prominent role she assigned to women. She did this, first, by introducing her new female soloist, Hilda Schmeiser, whose pure soprano voice and calm demeanor were perfectly suited to express the empathic sentiment of Ruth’s style and message. Ruth had recruited Hilda in the late 1940s to sing on the broadcast and at rallies, but she proved to be an even greater asset to the television format and soon became Ruth’s star performer.

In addition, she increased the number of female voices, expanding the girl’s trio into larger ensembles of up to eight voices, and featuring their close-harmony songs in every program. Also, Ruth herself, who must be counted among the “young attractive musicians” of whom Armstrong spoke, took a more active vocal role, occasionally joining the women’s ensembles, and frequently singing duets with quartet members—most often with tenor Sam Seymour, whose light, lyrical voice blended well with Ruth’s.

The heart of the musical program continued to be the medley of songs, always centering on a theme. Her medleys typically featured Hilda as lead soloist, followed by selections by the men’s and women’s groups elaborating on the theme, with the orchestra doing backup and

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<sup>50</sup> *Christian Newsette* (October 18, 1951): 21. Quoted from *Hymn Lovers Magazine* (with no citation).

interludes. Some of the more beautiful medleys are exemplified in this sampling of Hilda's solos: "Follow I will Follow Thee," "He Put a New Song in my Heart," "Trust in the Lord," "Could I Have Held His Nail-Pierced Hands?" "Give Me Jesus," "Through my Window Stars in the Night," and "In the Garden."

The male quartet continued in their usual role of bookending the program with a lively opening number ("I Got Shoes," "Ride the Chariot") and a more somber closing piece, setting the stage for Percy's sermon ("My New Life I Owe to Thee"). Also, quartet members Mel Peterkin, Jerry Harrison, Sam Seymour, and Bob Straton contributed moving solos. It was not until the arrival of the outstanding young bass Steve Musto in the fourth season that Ruth was able to form another stellar quartet in Bob Straton, Sam Seymour, and Steve Musto, (later joined by baritone Don Crawford), that performed and traveled with Ruth and Percy in the final phase of their ministry.

### World Tour

After four seasons on national television, Percy saw that *Youth on the March* was losing its freshness and appeal to youth. Yes, his had been the *first* coast-to-coast television program, but now there was competition as his two chief rivals, Jack Wyrzten and Billy Graham, had followed him in the second year with their own television programs, and were taking their share of the viewing audience. Percy began to think of how he might change course and find new avenues for spreading the gospel.

But he also realized that this was an opportune moment in his ministry to pause from TV and take on a very different mission. As one of the foremost evangelists of his time, Percy was under some pressure to conduct a world tour—to "go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature." (Mark 16:15) The YPCA broadcast had been heard around the world on short-wave radio during and after the war, and now was the time, he thought, to capitalize on that exposure and on the connections with Army chaplains and missionaries he had cultivated over the years. And so, he announced plans for an eighteen-week tour overseas (November 1953-April 1954) that would take his team first to the Far East (ten weeks), the Holy Land and Mediterranean countries (three weeks), and finally through Europe to the British Isles (four

weeks). The evangelistic party he would take with him consisted of Ruth and three of the quartet members, who had been singing together on the television program—Bob Straton, Sam Seymour, and Steve Musto.

As always, for Percy, the whole point of this tour was to win lost souls to Christ. Ruth and the quartet members, for their part, would have been excited for the adventure of experiencing foreign lands and societies, while at the same time fulfilling the important mission of supporting Percy in this far-reaching evangelistic effort. Of course there was never any question that Ruth would go on this trip, even though it meant leaving her four boys—ages 16, 14, 12, and 9—at our home, with an elderly, stern woman who never had a chance of controlling two fun-loving teenage boys.

The team began its trip with a ten-day mini-tour across the United States by car, with stops for meetings in Pittsburgh, St. Louis, and Denver before coming into California, where they held their last meeting stateside for “thousands of servicemen” at Camp Stoneman near San Francisco.<sup>51</sup> This meeting set the stage for the entire tour, a great part of which would be conducted at military bases and outposts around the world, particularly in Korea where an armistice had just been signed with communist China after three years of fighting.

As they were setting out, my mother had the best one-liner; when Sam Seymour admitted he had forgotten to pack his Bible, she commented wryly: “You’re going on this tour to save the world, and you forgot your Bible?”

We can get an idea of what it was like for Ruth and “the boys” to be living out this mission for four and a half months by looking in some detail at the schedule in just one of the many countries they visited—Korea, which they all expected to be the high point of the tour. Percy asked his supporters back home to pray that God would give them “health and strength, as we have a very heavy schedule and we are anticipating His rich blessing among the GI’s as well as the Korean People.”<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> *Christian Newsette* (November 26, 1953): 38.

<sup>52</sup> *Christian Newsette* (January 21, 1954).

Along with these concerns, Ruth was thinking of more practical matters. Shortly after their arrival in Korea (from Tokyo), she wrote to her sister Esther:

You don't know how wonderful it is to be able to take a hot bath every day, or a shower, when you get away from home and don't have the accommodations lots of places. I don't expect to get a hot bath for three weeks in Korea. . . . The poor boys stayed at a mission in Japan and haven't had a bath for over a week now. . . . So they'll be good and dirty in a month's time.<sup>53</sup>

On the first full day in Pusan, December 24, with Pocket Testament League's (PTL) Don Robertson as their guide, the team held evangelistic meetings all day—at schools and hospitals (with Ruth singing with the boys and playing the guitar they had brought with them) and Percy giving a short message in each ward, and at two GI chapels on Christmas eve. Robertson would be with them for the entire three weeks and would write the final report that appeared as “Operation Korea” in Percy's magazine, *Christian Newsette*. Christmas day started with services for hundreds of wounded Korean soldiers lying in hospital wards, two meetings at the local prison for 100 women and 1,700 men (Ruth wrote: “Practically all of them responded”), a turkey dinner at the officers' mess hall, and a “Baptist Hour” service for 600 Koreans and soldiers.<sup>54</sup>

There were six services in all in Pusan for American troops—the largest at the Thirty-fourth Infantry regiment, where 450 soldiers packed the chapel, and 40 responded to the invitation. Five hundred soldiers filled a theater on the nearby island of Koje and “75 moved out boldly as the invitation to accept Christ was given.” In Taigu, they held four meetings for 5,000 Koreans, and another for 1,200 prisoners at the local jail; additional services were held at two Air Strip chapels.

A long train trip brought the party to Seoul and near the front lines, where Vic Springer, a PTL worker and brother of former quartet member Joe Springer had set up “an intense itinerary.” In Seoul, the team had the use of a sound truck that took them “over bumpy, dusty, and frozen roads from the capital right up to the front.” On the first day out of Seoul, the party

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<sup>53</sup> Ruth Crawford letter to Esther Eden. This letter was copied (typed) and sent to Percy's office staff.

<sup>54</sup> Details of the Korean trip and quotations are from Don Robertson's report, “Operation Korea,” *Christian Newsette* (February 4, 1954): 22-31.

of seven moved up to an outpost, where (as Robertson told it) “the Crawfords and boys sang and preached from the stage of an open theater. Dr. Crawford, coatless and cold, urged the men to face the reality of death and judgment, and to place their trust in Christ who took their judgment.”

Later in the week, the head Protestant chaplain of the Second Marine Division invited the team back to the front lines to conduct services for his men. Again, Robertson captured the mood:

I wish you could have seen these young, rugged, hardened soldiers crowd into a mess hall, Chapel dugout, and a dugout made of sandbags, to hear the program. With guns in hand, they listened and grasped every word, they applauded as the boys sang, and they responded to the invitation. . . .

Returning to Seoul late, the weary team held an evening service for seventeen hundred Koreans at the beautiful Yongnok Presbyterian Church; and the next day, they visited the hospital ship *Repose*, anchored in the port of Inchon, going from ward to ward.

Operation Korea had been exhausting and exhilarating. My mother reported the results in a letter to her sister: “We spoke to 10,000 Koreans—with several thousand decisions, and 3800 GI’s—450 professed Christ as Saviour.”<sup>55</sup> Unacknowledged in her summary was the impact her own message, through song, may have had on their audiences—a message of hope that in their present dangerous circumstances, they could depend on the person of Jesus to be with them, as companion, comforter, and guide.

When they returned to Tokyo for a few days of rest and relaxation (they were all nursing colds), Percy expressed his gratitude for their sacrifice and endurance by opening his wallet and putting them up in a first-class hotel as they prepared for twelve more weeks of touring that would take them to twenty more countries in the Middle East, Asia Minor, and Europe. The gesture was greatly appreciated by Ruth (who finally got her hot bath) and the uncomplaining boys (who were indeed good and dirty).

### The Final Act

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<sup>55</sup> Ruth Crawford letter to Mrs. Thomas Eden, January 13, 1954.

Upon their return to the United States in the spring of 1954, Percy and Ruth went straight to work getting the YPCA organization back into operation—no rest for the weary. They would resume their schedule of nightly meetings at churches in the region; they would continue the daily morning broadcast, *Pinebrook Praises*, from their home; and they would finalize the list of speakers, song leaders, and staff for Pinebrook Bible Conference, opening in June.

Further, Percy had to make some critical decisions about how to restart his nationwide ministry, and specifically, what to do about television for the coming 1954-55 season. On the one hand, he wanted to maintain his image as a leading television evangelist, but he still had doubts about whether his television show, which had been so successful, was any longer the most effective way of reaching the youth.

In the end, he found a way to keep both television and radio going. In the fall of 1954, he signed with the ABC network to put *Youth on the March* on two hundred radio stations. And in the following spring, (May, 1955), he started a live television program locally on WDEL, Wilmington Delaware, (which adequately covered Philadelphia), and aired the soundtrack of the telecast on the national radio hookup. This move to a smaller-scale TV production eased the burden on Ruth somewhat, but importantly, it allowed her to maintain contact with her musicians and continue her creative programming. Her trimmed-down cast included the veteran trio that had accompanied Ruth and Percy on the world tour, a smaller orchestra, as well as the 4 D's, and Donna Lee, age five, who sang solos and became a television celebrity in her own right in this series.

After another year of this arrangement, it seems Percy could not resist the lure of a full-production television show and decided to extend his coverage by contracting with ABC-TV in New York, for a 1:00 p.m. Sunday program in the 1956-57 season. Ruth willingly signed on to a full-scale television program, perhaps realizing that she had at her disposal the musical forces that would enable her to revive her unique style of music, and bring it to its fullest expression. She let out all the stops, bringing together her entire musical cast, including quartet, organist Clayton Erb, soloists Hilda Schmeiser and Steve Musto, a full orchestra, The King's Singers, trumpet trio, girl's trio, and the five D's. The program ran for twenty-six weeks and reached the same high standard of performance as the original national program. It was Ruth's best work,

and yet, as the currents of evangelical music were shifting, it would prove to be the concluding act of her twenty-six years of musical performance and productivity with the YPCA organization.

Ruth's ministry had always been tied to Percy's as complementing and supporting his soul-stirring style of preaching, just as his had always depended on her distinctive musical offerings and graceful presence. But at this juncture in their partnership, Percy was deliberately moving in a new direction—away from preaching, and toward the more entrepreneurial role of building a Christian Broadcasting Network. Hence, in the last four years of his life—he died in 1960—he was consumed with the business of acquiring AM and FM radio stations and a UHF television station in Philadelphia. This important shift meant that the radio and television broadcast, which had been the driving force of the entire YPCA ministry since its founding in 1931, had run its course and was being given a place of lesser importance. It also meant that henceforth Ruth would be deprived of the main outlet for her musical expression. At the very peak of her music career, Ruth would soon have to face the fact that her joint ministry with Percy was winding down.

There were other factors pushing against her ministry that she may not have recognized, but Percy did. He sensed correctly that young people were no longer responding to the format and the brand of music that had made his broadcast so popular, and were being lured into the night clubs and dance halls by new musical styles and forms of entertainment—jazz, swing, and rock and roll—much of it popularized on the radio.

Wanting to adapt his message to these changing tastes and trends, Percy imagined a new type of program, geared to young people, that would be large-scale and attention-grabbing, but also entertaining and fun. As in the past, music would be the main attraction, so he reached out to a former employee, Chuck Pugh, a gifted musician who had studied at Juilliard and was at that time Minister of Music at Grace Chapel in nearby Havertown, Pennsylvania. Percy wanted Pugh to produce the music for a series of rallies to be held the first and third Saturdays of each month in Philadelphia's Town Hall. It would be called *Youtharama*, after the popular wide-screen film sensation, Cinerama, that had opened on Broadway in 1952.

Percy opened the *Youtharama* rallies in October 1956, (the very same month that he and Ruth were restarting the *Youth on the March* telecast in New York). Pugh's musical productions for orchestra and chorus over a four-year period were impressive in their scale and richness and added a new dimension to the musical side of Percy's ministry. Although the repertoire of gospel songs was the same, it sounded different. Ruth's smooth, *legato* sound, lifted by violins, flutes, and harp was replaced by one more upbeat and *marcato*, making heavy use of brass and tympani. Ruth did participate in the *Youtharama* programs, but mainly as piano accompanist for the quartet—the only carryover from her ensemble, and even for that, she and her piano were placed below the stage, on the same level as the audience. Ruth was clearly being sidelined.

As far as I remember, my mother never complained about her reduced role. She was busy enough at the time with her own weekly programs for television, and content to let *Youtharama* go its own way without her. But there is no mistaking it, the world of evangelical gospel music was moving on. Alternative styles of music were coming on the scene: praise and worship bands, with their guitars, drums, and electric piano, were finding a place in church services, with multiple forms of Contemporary Christian Music on the horizon—all appealing to the younger crowd. Moreover, the theology of a close relationship with Jesus as Lord and Master embedded in her music was giving way to that of a personal (and casual) relationship with a “mighty big,” awesome God, and a God-man, Jesus, who could be your best friend and closest buddy. It would have been hard for Ruth to admit (or even see) that, by the late 1940s, her music and her message were already passé.<sup>56</sup>

### Conclusion

After Percy canceled his contract with WDEL in March 1958, Ruth continued to do her part for what Percy was now calling the YPCA “enterprises.” With the closing out of the weekly radio and television broadcast—in anticipation of starting it up again as soon as a license for the Philadelphia television station was granted<sup>57</sup>—the primary venue for Ruth's performances over

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<sup>56</sup> Anson Cassell Mills made me aware of this fact in her review of my biography *A Thirst for Souls*. (Amazon Books, May 25, 2011.)

<sup>57</sup> Percy did obtain the license for the UHF station WPCA-TV, channel 17, in Philadelphia, and persuaded his twenty-two-year-old son, Donald, to take on the management of the station. On July 17, 1960, Percy Crawford and the Young People's Church of the Air began operating the first religious television station in

the last three years before Percy's death became the tabernacle at Pinebrook Bible Conference. By that time, Ruth had developed a devoted following among evangelicals, and many of them flocked to Pinebrook to hear and be a part of her uplifting evening services and concerts. I was lucky to have finally reached the age when I could fill a vacancy in the regular quartet at Pinebrook, singing bass along with my brothers Don and Dick Crawford, and tenor Neil Fichthorn. In what would prove to be Ruth's last quartet, we four proudly carried on the rich tradition of gospel quartet music at Pinebrook. I loved singing my mother's quartet arrangements with their robust harmonies ranging in style from old-fashioned hymn-like ("Man of Sorrows," "Still Still with Thee") to upbeat camp meeting ("The Old Account Was Settled," "Meeting in the Air") to more modern ("Salvation Time," "Day and Night").<sup>58</sup>

Ruth never abandoned her softer settings of old and new gospel songs—how could she? In fact, in these last years, she added to them by adopting into her repertoire (and her last YPCA songbook<sup>59</sup>) many of the sentiment-laden poems written by her sister Esther, and set to music by Esther's associate, singer and songwriter Blanche Osborn.

But even if the romantic style of music that Ruth perfected was fading from the larger scene, her individual expression of that style in her various musical performances left a definite mark on evangelical gospel music. Her music and artistry was perpetuated by the hundreds of singers and players she worked with and developed over the years, many of whom continued in lifelong musical ministries of their own; by the many pianists and accompanists, who heard and watched her play and tried to imitate her special touch; by the unnumbered church musicians, choir directors, and song leaders, who found in her programs and songbooks new gospel songs, and new renditions of old ones, that they used to revitalize their programs; and by the

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the nation (and the world), a critical turning point in the history of evangelicalism in the use of the media for the cause of evangelism. The *Youth on the March* broadcast was scheduled to go on the air in the fall season, 1960, but Percy died suddenly on October 31, shortly before the program was to be aired, and unfortunately never got to experience the fruit of all his efforts.

<sup>58</sup> C. H. Brudenell composed the words and music of "Salvation Time," published in *Songs of Heaven* (1959). Norman Johnson wrote the words and music of "Day and Night," published in *Mountainbrook Melodies* (1956).

<sup>59</sup> *Songs of Heaven*, 72 songs compiled by Ruth D. Crawford & Percy B. Crawford (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1959). 17 of these songs were contributed by Eden and Osborn.

thousands of churchgoers who participated in the congregation singing at Pinebrook, and learned new, simple gospel choruses they took back to their home churches and youth groups.

Finally, Ruth carved out an identity as a woman and a working wife and mother that was path-breaking in evangelical circles. She succeeded in doing original evangelistic work through music at a national level that not only supported and augmented the ministry of her male partner, but in itself comprised a ministry, with a message capable of changing hearts and transforming lives. In this regard, Ruth Duvall Crawford must be recognized as a pioneer in her use of music as a vehicle for communicating the gospel and bringing men and women to Christ.

### Epilogue: A Second Life

Ruth's immediate reaction to Percy's passing—repeated on several occasions on which she spoke publicly about him—revealed how deeply committed she had been to his soul-winning mission: “Oh, think of the souls that will never be saved now—that only he could have reached.” But now, her partnership with Percy having ended, she must have felt as if her musical ministry was at an end. There would be no more calls for her to assemble her musicians, no platform from which to express her multiple talents as arranger, producer, and performer, no new ventures thrust upon her.

Of course, Ruth wanted to continue in active service. She was 44 years young, attractive, and still had much to offer the evangelical world musically. The question was how to go on? and with whom? To be sure, there were many potential suitors who would have found her a very desirable companion and aid in their evangelistic work. But Ruth chose not to go down that path. Was it because 29 years of work and travel with Percy had wearied her of this form of life? Or did she perhaps surmise that none of the opportunities that were opening for her would be as challenging and rewarding as her life with Percy had been? Whatever her motives, Ruth found herself being pulled in new directions by needs and interests that had long been neglected or suppressed for all those years she had devoted herself fully and faithfully to evangelistic work.

Fortunately for Ruth, Percy's work was carried on for several more years by her two eldest children. Don kept the Philadelphia television station going with programs on which Ruth accompanied her former quartet members, Bob, Sam, and Steve. He also continued the daily

devotional broadcast through 1967, with Ruth providing the music. And Dick kept Pinebrook going for a number of years, giving Ruth the opportunity to put together music for services and a weekly concert program, supplemented by guest musicians. But this was a holding operation from the start and Dick was finally forced to sell the camp in 1968.

As these various platforms faded, Ruth was thrown back on her own resources and had to find new outlets for her ministry. In 1965, she teamed up with her sister Esther to produce a short radio program, “Bible Women Speak Today,” which aired primarily on the radio stations that remained from Percy’s Christian Broadcasting Network, the most significant of which were WMUZ-FM in Detroit, WYCA-FM in Hammond/Chicago, and WDAC-FM in Lancaster, PA. The program consisted of Ruth singing and playing, along with Esther’s short Bible lesson. On station WDAC in Lancaster, the program was on the air five days a week for 15 years—a 15-minute program for the first eight years, then reduced to 5 minutes.

Ruth’s repertoire for these programs included many of the Eden-Osborn songs that she continued to publish after Percy’s death in three new songbooks, *Sing My Heart* (1962), *Singing Through the Years* (1967), and *How Wonderful* (1973).<sup>60</sup> And when Blanche Osborn stopped writing settings for Esther’s poems, Ruth stepped in and filled this gap with her own compositions, also published in two more songbooks, *Hearts in Harmony* (1973), and *Singing and Making Melodies* (1982)—titles that captured her lifelong joy in making music.<sup>61</sup> The process of working together on these broadcasts was undoubtedly a rewarding experience for the two sisters; (Ruth announced once that they had made 195 programs in seven days). It was rewarding because they were partnering in a new type of ministry focusing on women, in which each of them could express her own special artistic gift, and through which they were getting their messages out to a wide and receptive audience. Although Ruth received many letters from

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<sup>60</sup> *Sing My Heart*, 64 songs compiled by Ruth D. Crawford, Singspiration, Inc. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House (1962). 17 of these are Eden/Osborn songs. *Singing Through the Years*, 65 songs compiled by Ruth D. Crawford, published by The Estate of Percy B. Crawford (1967). 30 of these are Eden/Osborn songs. *How Wonderful and other songs by Esther Eden & Blanche Osborn*, 71 songs compiled and published by Ruth Crawford Porter (1973). 62 of these are Eden/Osborn songs; the other 9 are Eden/Eden.

<sup>61</sup> *Hearts in Harmony and other songs by Ruth Crawford Porter & Esther Eden*, n.p. (1973); and *Singing and Making Melodies* (Copyright 1982, 1983 by Ruth Crawford Porter).

fans, old and new, praising the program, and sent out hundreds of her songbooks to listeners, it is difficult even to estimate the overall effect the program had in the scattered markets where it was broadcast.

But as her musical ministry waxed and waned, Ruth was attending to other aspects of herself and her personality that had been unexpressed for much of her life. The first was the romantic. After being courted for four years, she finally agreed to marry a man who made it very clear from the start that she would be first in his life. Robert Porter had been Ruth's chiropractor for the years that she and Percy lived in Westchester County, New York. And for the next 22 years, Ruth and "Doc" Porter built a loving relationship that was truly an equal partnership (or, if not, Ruth had the edge). They lived for most of the year in Pennsylvania in the "barn" that Doc reconstructed for her, and spent winters in Florida. They traveled the world over, but mostly to Europe, where Bob introduced her to skiing (in Austria), and she introduced him to musical theater (in London).

At home, Ruth revived her tennis game and became an avid player for the rest of her life. She renewed her interest in a variety of musical genres, attending opera and classical concerts; but none of these matched her love for musical theater. She made frequent trips into New York City, where she would attend as many as three shows in a single day.

Ruth was outgoing and sociable, and loved being in the company of friends and family. She maintained the strong relationships she had formed with her musicians and other associates in her first life, while building new friendships in her second. She had a zest for life, a good sense of humor, and was always fun to be with.

All the while, Ruth availed herself of every opportunity to play piano or organ in public or in private. One memorable occasion was when George Wesner, the organist at Radio City Music Hall, invited her to play the organ at the Music Hall—"which she did (he reported) without hesitation and with great confidence." This was no small feat: the organ she confronted is a 58 rank Wurlitzer pipe organ—the largest organ Wurlitzer ever built—with a massive console. George was surprised that Ruth was not intimidated at all, "and just wanted to 'dig in.'"<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Emails from George Wesner to Dan Crawford, 5/30/21, 8/18/21.

On another occasion, while dining with friends at the Plaza Hotel in New York, she was given permission to play a number on the piano, after which the virtuoso Van Cliburn, who was present, commented that her fingers were as light as “feathers on the keyboard.”

The most significant change in my mother’s life, however, lay in her deliberate and determined effort to reconnect with her children and her extended Duvall family. She visited with her four siblings as often as she could, and took them and their spouses on several trips to Europe and Scandinavia—one of them to see the Passion Play in Oberammergau. Also, she renewed what had been close relationships in childhood with her cousins living in Virginia by attending the annual Duvall reunions, and hosted several of these herself at the barn. These family gatherings always included relaxed dinners, lots of games and laughter, and usually ended up in the living room around the piano singing hymns and old favorites. Her goal was always to bring people together, to resolve tensions, to unite and bring harmony to whatever company she was in.

Ruth wanted above all to reestablish a loving relationship with her children. To this end, she and Bob hosted many holiday gatherings for us and our families that were fun times, filled with sports, board games, and some great home-cooked meals. My mother showered affection on us in every way, even joking (or half-joking) that her children came first in her life before Doc. I believe this was her way of making up for having neglected us in our early years. She had no trouble forming a close mother-daughter relationship with Donna Lee, whom she raised from the age of 10 after Percy’s death. But we four boys were more challenging, in large part because each of us, in different ways, was working through residual issues with our authoritarian father, and Ruth had to endure some of the fallout from our rebellion. But my mother had her own debt to pay, and, as I believe, she did succeed in reaching each of us with a genuine love, and holding us together in her orbit; and this gave her great satisfaction.

During these years, Ruth continued to nourish the simple faith in God and Christ that had anchored her life and given it consistency. She gave expression to this faith in the way that was most natural to her, through her ongoing musical ministry. In addition, she began to attend church regularly, a practice she had given up because of her full-time commitment to evangelism and to the “church of the air.” While living in the Philadelphia area, she found a

church home at the historic First Presbyterian Church of Germantown, where she formed a close pastoral relationship with its dynamic Welsh pastor, D. Reginald Thomas. We may speculate as to what drew her to this church: was it the dramatic and lyrical quality of Thomas' sermons (he had had training as a Shakespearean actor)? Or was it that Thomas became widely recognized through his active radio ministry? Or that during his pastorate, First Church received wide recognition for its outstanding music program under the direction of Robert Carwithen? No doubt it was a combination of these things that made her receptive to these services and so enriched her spiritual life.

And finally, Ruth expressed her faith in her *manner of living*. She reflected in her life, and in her loving relationships with others, the “wonderful love of Christ” that she had proclaimed thousands of times in the opening chorus of the YPCA broadcasts:

*Love wonderful love, The love of Christ to me;  
Love wonderful love, So rich, so full, so free.*

Ruth lived this message every day of her life . . . so rich, so full, so free.

Ruth Duvall Crawford Porter was a kind and gentle person, but she was also a driver—entering into the various activities of her second life with the same energy and passion she had shown in the first, always on the go, running to the next event or social gathering. It was a full life, but a strenuous one. So, when illness and age finally caught up to her—she was 70 years old—and the cancer and chemotherapy were sapping her strength, she could not fend it off and finally had to come to terms with the ending of her life. On the one hand (as she told me) she was thankful that she had reached the age of “three score and ten” promised in the Psalms. But at the same time, this feeling of relief was tinged with a sense of sorrow and regret that she was passing before her time and thus being robbed of opportunities for more living and laughter in the company of friends and loved ones.

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