

# TWO WOMEN OF FAITH FOR WOMEN OF BIRMINGHAM & BEYOND

BY HANNA SCHOCK



**She was full of good works and acts of charity.**  
(Acts 9:36b, about Tabitha aka Dorcas)

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**...they took him aside and explained the Way of God to him more accurately.**  
(Acts 18:26b, about Priscilla & Aquila)

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Louise Branscomb, MD, (1901-1999) and Ethel Gibson (1927-2019) knew well the stories of Tabitha and Priscilla. They embodied those stories of godly devotion and wise correction to church leaders. Their biblical orientations to Christian community have blessed FUMC and the Kingdom of God long before and far beyond us. Truly they were God's servants whose loving legacies are now our good fortune and future.



Described as poised and polished, tenacious but tender, soft-spoken but sure, warm and welcoming, both women are remembered as great persuaders who were a privilege to know. They were life-long Methodists and graduates of Huntington College in Montgomery (Branscomb 28 years before Gibson).

These faithful heroes were oriented to social justice, particularly for women, people of color, and marginalized persons. Their biblical grounding, intelligence, integrity, and unflinching professionalism sometimes resulted in deference to Christ rather than clergy, men, or those of wealth. Humbly guided by faith, they bent rules. We are a better church and city because of them. Despite neither giving birth, they mothered us all!

In the Birmingham of 1931, **Louise Branscomb** became the first female OB/GYN in private practice and later the first female surgeon. She was a strong advocate for female agency, particularly regarding gender equality and birth control. Racial equality was another passion; she was the first white doctor to serve Black women. Her dedicated civic service is exemplified by membership on the board of the Birmingham Housing Authority and the Jefferson County Mental Health Association. An active member of the National Organization for Women, she was a strong proponent of the Equal Rights Amendment, appearing on TV to promote the ERA. Upon retirement in 1975, she honed her attention to global Methodism, the women's movement, and mental health advocacy.

In her 20s, **Ethel Gibson** became Executive Director of the YWCA (the YW) for 23 of Birmingham's most turbulent years (1956 to 1979), managing dramatic economic changes downtown and racial integration of the YW. Because of her leadership, the YW stayed in the building they still inhabit, despite pressures to move to the suburbs and the loss of significant funding. Her devotion to the YW was fitting. The YW had been "prayed into being" at her (our) church in 1901 by the Maybelle Sloss Sunday School Class. They gave \$100 of seed money.



In its early decades, the YW was a "starting off point" for young single women of some means offering a "safety net of services." It evolved into a "starting over point" for women who were no longer of means or who never had been, offering a "trampoline of opportunity" to better futures. Presently, the YW's overriding missions are "to empower women and eliminate racism." Regarding both missions, Ethel Gibson was a great influencer. Suzanne Durham, her successor at the YW, said, "Future generations of women owe much to Ethel for her stamina and fortitude.... The YW would not be here now if not for Ethel."



As righteous role-models, Branscomb and Gibson represented well John Wesley's principles of Methodism. Louise Branscomb was an internationally known activist, sometimes called "Madam Methodist." Both women were crucial to our church conference and our church's recent history. Ethel Gibson served on every FUMC committee of her time, often in leadership positions and proactively mentoring young women for church leadership. Both women were skilled at moving group dynamics back to center; that center was an orientation to Southern Christian Progressivism informed by the loving gospel of Jesus Christ.

The legacies of these two women are strong in our city! Ethel Gibson's great influences are in life-altering positive impacts upon women at the YW during her time and since. Because of Louise Branscomb's Wesleyan frugality and generosity, her estate of multiple millions of dollars supports our church, Birmingham-Southern College, and Greater Birmingham Ministries. Five of her robust values inform the use of these funds: racial, gender, & economic justice, downtown church ministry, and peace.

## ETHEL GIBSON

50+ Year Member Of Our Church

- Was the defining catalyst in 2002 for New Feast worship (The Loft) when she said, "Let's quit talking about it and just do it."
- Served as chairperson of our lay leadership board (the 2nd woman to do so), Lay Leader, Stewardship Leader, etc. (Younger women watched in awe and were inspired to serve.)
- Hosted integrated (therefore unlawful) leadership meetings at the YW (A YW Executive Director from Charleston who was Black said he'd never forget her bravery.)
- Had an informal following of "Ms. Gibson's Girls" who helped lead the twice-weekly chapel services at the YW
- Was honored with the naming of the Ethel Ellis Gibson Room at the YW
- Upon retirement, became the 1st president of the YW's Maybelle Sloss Foundation, providing critical links for former board members and donors

## LOUISE BRANSCOMB

A Member Of Our Church Late In Her Life After McCoy UMC Closed

- In 1989, became namesake & 1st recipient of the Barrier Breaker Award, given annually by our conference's Commission on the Status and Role of Women (COSROW) to honor a Methodist willing to "take risks and stand up" for the rights of women & people of color
- While in medical school at Johns Hopkins in the 1920s, studied in London & at Oxford University
- In the 1930s, worked in family planning clinics
- During WWII, suspended her medical practice to volunteer as a major in the United States Public Health Service in North Africa, Italy, & Greece
- In 1986, named by United Methodist Women as being among 100 Outstanding Methodist Women in Global Christian Missions
- Deposited her journals (written ages 12-90) and other papers at the Duke University Library, a major center for research on women, Christianity, and medicine (documenting the women's movement, global Methodism, & civil rights struggles)

STORIES FROM

150  
YEARS

**Please join our story collecting project!** If you know a member with a great story or if you can help collect and write our stories, please reach out to Betsy McGuire at [betsyhunter@gmail.com](mailto:betsyhunter@gmail.com). On Sept 11 there will be a grand story collecting event after church in the dining room. Please come!