

# *Mildred Moody Eakin: Master Teacher*



BY PAUL B. MAVES '39

"If I were a bit younger I would be a Vista volunteer. I'd like to work with communities helping to secure decent homes and schools and jobs for the deprived and the black."

Mildred Moody Eakin, Professor Emeritus, sits with her husband in the livingroom of their apartment in Lakeland, Florida, and talks about her recent experiences in helping a young black woman find a way to get to college to be trained as a teacher\* Indignation and concern light her face as she describes the ostracism endured by several others, including a Vista volunteer, who have been involved in working with the black community, and the vicious if petty harassment of blacks by whites.

"Very early in life I came to believe that prejudice was the cancer in American society. When you work with children you soon come to see that they have no natural prejudice. It has to be learned."

The snapping black eyes are slightly dimmed by the encroaching years, but a concern for children and a commitment to the ministry of reconciliation flame high. These two concerns running like golden threads across most of her eighty years pattern her career.

Concern for children and youth led Mildred Moody back to her home town of Wilson, New York, to teach in the local school system from 1910 to 1916 after graduation from Syracuse University with majors in English and history. It led from there to becoming assistant national secretary of the W.C.T.U. from 1916 to 1919, masterminding the Loyal Temperance Legion for children and youth. In this post she gained attention and became known particularly for creativity in teaching children. When the Methodist Episcopal Church began to develop regional staffs in Christian education she was called to join the group located in Kansas City, where from 1919 to 1921 she was responsible for children's work in seven states.

In 1921 she became the superintendent of the Department of Children's Work of the Sunday School Board of

\*Dr. and Mrs. Maves spent a day in November with Dr. and Mrs. Eakin in Lakeland.

the Methodist Episcopal Church, serving the entire denomination in this Chicago post until 1932. During this period she and her staff pioneered in experimental two-and-a-half hour church school sessions and in the integration of Sunday School and missionary education curricula.

Her colleagues on the Sunday School Board included Arlo Ayres Brown, superintendent of the Department of Leadership, and James V. Thompson of the Department of Youth. In 1929 Arlo Brown was called to the presidency of Drew. J. V. Thompson went from the Sunday School Board in 1925 to the First Methodist Church in Evanston as Director of Religious Education, then to Northwestern University as Assistant and then Associate Professor of Religious Education, and from there to Drew in 1930 as Professor of Administration of Religious Education and Director of the College of Religious Education and Missions. They were joined at Drew by Lynn Harold Hough who had been Professor of Historical Theology at Garrett Biblical Institute, 1914-1919, and president of Northwestern University, 1919-1920. After some years in the pastorate he came to Drew as Professor of Homiletics in 1929, becoming the Dean of the Seminary in 1934. These three men had been together as students at Drew, 1904-1905, richly complicating the dynamics of their relations.

Professor Eakin's route to Drew was a bit more involved. In 1931 she married Frank Eakin, a Biblical scholar with a Ph.D. magna cum laude from the University of Chicago, whose *Getting Acquainted with the New Testament* guided several generation of college and theological students. He soon accepted a position as one of the editors with the Macmillan Publishing Company in New York, which published his work. They lived in Millburn, New Jersey. Mrs. Eakin took a position as Director of Religious Education in Wyoming Presbyterian Church in Millburn and in 1932, at the urging of President Brown and Professor Thompson began to

teach courses in Drew Theological Seminary. Until 1941 she served both as director in a local church (going to Hillside Presbyterian Church in Orange in 1937) and as a teacher in the theological school. In 1937 she took on the additional responsibility of directing the demonstration school sponsored by the Division of Religious Education at Drew.

These constant contacts with people as director in a parish or in the demonstration school gave a refreshing sense of immediacy and concreteness to her teaching. In the demonstration school she pioneered in developing the model for the laboratory training of church school teachers and field education for theological school students. Those students privileged to work with her in the demonstration school will never forget her instant rapport with children or the way that tiny figure could dominate a roomful of boisterous youngsters. To her a disciplinary problem always offered an opportunity to help a child grow.

In her parish work Mrs. Eakin pioneered in helping young persons come to know and to understand the issues involved in racism. In the demonstration school she developed a program correlated with social studies in the public school and guided fourth-grade pupils in not only learning about but working with the religious and racial groups in their community.

The concern for children speaks in *Tales of Golden Deeds*, Abingdon, 1923; *Kindergarten Course for a Vacation Church School*, Abingdon, 1925; *Teaching Junior Boys and Girls*, the Methodist Book Concern, 1934; *Your Child's Religion*, Macmillan, 1942; *The Pastor and the Children*, Macmillan, 1947; and *The Church School Teacher's Job*, Macmillan, 1941.

The concern for the ministry of reconciliation speaks in *Exploring Our Neighborhood*, Abingdon, 1936; *In Anybody's Town*, Abingdon, 1937; *Junior Teacher's Guide on Negro Americans*, 1936; *Getting Acquainted with Jewish Neighbors*, Macmillan, 1945; and *The Sunday School Fights Prejudice*, Macmillan, 1953. All of her writings after 1934 were done collaboratively with her husband, whom she credits as the one who stimulated her to share her insights in writing and served as literary craftsman.

She was a moving spirit behind a local group of white and Negro Christians who came together to learn to communicate across the color line and to demonstrate the meaning of "They will know we are Christians by our love."

Professor Eakin was joined in the concern for prejudice and racism by J. V. Thompson and Everett Ross Clinchy who, after receiving a doctorate from Drew, went on to become the head of the National Conference of Christians and Jews. Under a grant from the American Jewish Committee they developed an analysis of Protes-

tant denominational church school curriculum materials for prejudiced teaching. *The Sunday School Fights Prejudice* grew out of this research. The project was moved to Yale University in the 1950's and carried on brilliantly under Dr. Bernhard Olson, who had been one of their students at Drew.

Mrs. Eakin also introduced courses on intercultural and intergroup education into the curriculum of the theological school over considerable opposition from most of the faculty at a time when the emergency of Barthian theology and the neo-orthodox movement tended to reinforce Christian particularity and exclusivism in religion and authoritative and highly directive approaches in education. Being a woman in a man's world with a master's degree, she became an assistant professor only in 1948 when Fred Holloway became the dean.

Her thinking was molded by graduate study at Syracuse University and the University of Chicago and a master's degree from New York University, by liberal theology, by progressive education, more by her study and involvement with children themselves and, in her own judgment, most by close fellowship with her far-sighted liberal husband. During much of her tenure at Drew this liberal tradition was under constant attack and with it the profession of religious education. With integrity she stayed true to her own vision of life.

The hot drafts of the black revolution and the sweet winds of ecumenicity now blowing across the nation are regarded by her as neither strange nor surprising. The research of Piaget in Switzerland and of Goldman in England, among others, vindicate her deeply felt insights into how children learn. She would be much at home amid the currents of contemporary theological thought and social criticism. Deeper study of the history of the church as ministry now supports her commitment to teaching.

Mildred Moody Eakin retired from Drew in 1954 and moved with her husband to Florida. As she sees it retirement gave her three gifts. She says, "It relieved me of a demanding job that was increasingly difficult to carry. It enabled me to spend full time at last with my husband whom I dearly love. It made possible for me to work in the community as a volunteer as well as to work in my garden."

Loving life, she likes to help things grow.

(This is the Fourth in a series of Feature articles on the Emeriti Professors of Drew Theological School. Paul Maves, a colleague of Mildred Eakin in The Religious Education Division at Drew, was George T. Cobb Professor of Religious Education from 1949 to 1968. He is now Associate Executive Director of the Department of Educational Development of The National Council of Churches. — Ed.)