

MAGNOLIA MINDS: One of many

By Laura Lee Leathers

Many years ago, I received a phone call from Dr. Edna Ellison, the WMU leader at the Mississippi Baptist Convention Board at the time. She wanted to know if I was interested in catering a tea at Broadmoor Church, Madison, for a conference.

Dr. Rhonda H. Kelley, whom I did not know, would be one of the guest speakers. Dr. Ellison knew Rhonda loved "tea." It was my first introduction to the then First Lady of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary.

Little did I know or realize how much this godly woman would pour into my life in the years to come.

Women's Ministry

At the conference, Dr. Kelley told me about the women's ministry certificate program and encouraged me to enroll. It was brand new. I thought, *how can I, as a wife and mother of four children living on a busy farm, possibly find a way to enroll in the program?*

Yet, I knew God had called me to women's ministry. Still, I did not fully understand what that might entail. I was curious, checked into the program, and enrolled. God supplied everything needed, including the funds for a babysitter. Driving to New Orleans frightened this woman who rarely left her home in the country, but I braved the drive.

In every class I attended, as we opened the Scriptures, I was challenged to pray and grow deeper in my knowledge of God's Word. I can still remember Dr. Kelley saying, "Scripture interprets Scripture." I had never heard anyone say that before.

One day in class, Dr. Kelley mentioned a magazine that would

be an excellent resource for women ministry leaders. Several months later, I attended a workshop on writing magazine articles. An idea came to me. What about doing an article on Dr. Kelley and women's ministry for the magazine she mentioned in class?

I emailed the magazine editor and received a resounding "yes." They wanted an article with pictures. What in the world had I done? I knew nothing about writing an article for publication. Furthermore, I had never done this before.

The idea now needed to come to fruition. Dr. Kelley and I set up a phone interview. I wrote the article and emailed it to her. She did the editing, made suggestions, and helped me rewrite and rewrite. I remember her patience and her graciousness. I always told her that she was the one who made me look good. That article was later used for the magazine's promotional materials, from postcards to a trifold.

The Tea Connection

Dr. Kelley and I connected in another way: tea parties and biblical hospitality. After a class was completed, Dr. Kelley often hosted an afternoon tea for the class members in her home. I witnessed a gracious hostess sharing the joy of Jesus in fellowship. Laughter filled the room, and she made each woman feel welcomed and special.

I loved the tea corner in her sunroom. Sometimes, as we shared a cup, we talked about using tea as a tool for women's ministry. Rhonda would offer suggestions or ministry ideas. Sometimes I would receive a note from her about a new tea blend, accoutrement, tearoom, or even a quote about tea.

Hanging on my office wall is an eight-by-twelve-inch painting, a copy of the original. Rhonda told her friend, Joy Dent, about my ministry and asked her to draw something. I didn't ask. Intuitively, she knew of creative ways to encourage and give. I was only one of many.

Reaching the World

Today, I am eternally grateful for the many ways Dr. Kelley poured into my life. In God's sovereignty, He allowed our lives to touch, weaving and working for His kingdom purposes. It seems she knew what you could do, the potential, and pushed you to "climb higher."

Dr. Kelley touched the lives of individuals around the world. Try to comprehend all the women who attended classes at NOBTS, the women's conferences she spoke at, the books she wrote, The Woman's Study Bibles, her work as a professor and speech pathologist, and then the additional facets of her ministry with her husband, Dr. Chuck Kelley.

I've read the testimonies of others and how they experienced the same godly influence, encouragement, support, and giving. Dr. Kelley invested in the lives of others by sharing Jesus, teaching the importance of loving and living God's Word, and extending biblical hospitality. We, especially as seasoned women, must continue to set the example – one home, one woman, and into the world.

I am only one among the many!

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