

“A memorial service for Dr. Velma Ruch, longtime Graceland faculty member, will be held at 2:30 on Saturday, October 7, at the Lamoni Community of Christ. In lieu of flowers, memorial contributions may be directed to the Velma N. Ruch Memorial Scholarship Fund at Graceland University.”

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Velma Naomi Ruch was born on Feb. 28, 1921 in Lamoni, Iowa, to Verner D. Ruch and Zella Mae Vanderbeck. She was blessed in the old brick church in Lamoni on April 3, 1921 by C. E. Wight and Peter Muceus. She spent her first five months at Graceland College while her parents were continuing to take classes in religious education in preparation for going on a mission to Scandinavia. Before her father was asked to go under church appointment, he was a coal miner with very little formal education. As it turned out, he and his wife spent 40 years under church appointment, 12 of them in Scandinavia.

At the age of 20 months, on Nov. 16, 1922, Velma, accompanied by her parents, set sail for Norway on the S/S/ United States. The family lived in Porsgrunn, Norway, for three years and then moved to the little town of Bon, where there was a small one-room church building, the first such building owned by the RLDS (now Community of Christ) church in Europe.

After five years in the Scandinavian Mission, the family moved to Independence, Missouri, for a few months. They lived across from the Community of Christ auditorium, which, at that time, was under construction. Their home was on the site now occupied by the Speakes Funeral home. Velma attended the first grade at the old Columbian School in Independence. Before returning to Norway, each member of the family received a special blessing at a service in the Stone Church. Velma's blessing was given by Elbert A. Smith, who was then a member of the First Presidency. Under the influence of the Spirit, he gave Velma assurance that in the changes of languages, schools and culture, she would have no difficulty and would find her life significantly enhanced. That came to pass in remarkable ways.

On Dec. 12, 1928, the family left New York for what was to be another five-year stay in Norway. As it turned out, it stretched into seven years because of meager church finances during the depression. The family lived in Bon for a while, and it was there that Velma was baptized by her father on July 23, 1929. Velma's parents had established a Sunday School in Bon attended by over 100 non-member children ages six to 14, all of whom Velma's mother taught in one class. While singing “Vi vandrer til Sion” (We're marching to Zion), they walked with Velma down to the river for her baptism. Because Norway had a law that no one could begin schooling before age seven, Velma had the unusual privilege of attending the first grade twice; once in America and once in Norway.

After completing the third grade, Velma, with her parents, moved to Kjelsaas, a suburb of Oslo, since the church had just been established in Oslo. She completed elementary school there and graduated from the seventh grade, the first in her class. After this second period of seven years, the family returned to the United States in November 1935. In January of 1936, Velma enrolled in the second semester of the ninth grade in junior high in Independence. Though she knew little English at the time and had to make up the first semester of the ninth grade while taking the

second, she was richly blessed in her schoolwork. It was in April 1936 at the age of 15 that Velma received her patriarchal blessing from Richard Baldwin. It became for her a principal guiding force in her life.

In June 1936, the family moved to Tulsa, Oklahoma, where .D. Ruch had just been appointed pastor. Velma began her sophomore year there and after graduating from Central High School, entered Graceland College that fall. It was the fulfillment of a lifelong dream. After graduating in 1941 with an AA degree, she attended the University of Iowa and graduated from there in 1943 with a BA in English and Secondary Education. That same year, the family moved to Council Bluffs, Iowa, where V.D. Ruch served as pastor from 1943 to 1954.

Velma received a teaching position in the Glidden, Iowa, high school and taught there for two years. At the end of the two years, she was appointed as a teacher at Abraham Lincoln High School in Council Bluffs. Shortly after beginning her teaching there, she received a call from Graceland's president, asking her to resign her position at the end of the first semester and begin work on her master's degree in anticipation of coming to Graceland the next fall. She did that and began her work at the University of Michigan in February 1946 and started teaching at Graceland in the fall of 1946 at the age of 25. It was the year of the "bulge" at Graceland with the G.I.s returning from the second world war. Most of Velma's students were older than she.

In 1947, she completed her master's degree and in 1949, at the request of President Edmund Gleazer, Jr., began work on her PhD. That work was completed at the University of Wisconsin in 1957 with Velma becoming the first woman on Graceland's faculty to have earned a doctorate degree.

In 1965, Velma was awarded a Fulbright grant to study in India for eight weeks. This was the result of a course she initiated at Graceland called Religion in the World's Great Literature, a course she considered her signature course at Graceland. The course later provided the foundation for her book, "Signature of God," published in 1986. During the time in India, Velma also had the unusual privilege of being the second member of the RLDS church to visit the newly established congregation in Madras. Five more members were baptized into the church that day, and the work in India has continued to prosper.

It was also in 1965 that Velma was appointed chairperson of the newly-formed Division of Language and Literature, a position she held for 20 years. In 1974, at the time of President William Higdon's appointment to the Council of Twelve, Velma was asked to serve as Acting President for the year 1974-75, Graceland's first woman president. At the end of that year, she was awarded the title of Distinguished Professor of English. In 1983, she received the excellence in teaching award and in 1984 held the F. Henry Edwards' Chair of Religions Studies. It was that year that she completed her book, "Signature of God."

After 40 rich and fulfilling years, Velma retired from Graceland with the title Distinguished Professor Emerita. In her last semester at Graceland, Velma was ordained an elder in the RLDS

church on Feb. 23, 1986. The next year, she was ordained a high priest/evangelist on Nov. 15, 1987.

In August 1986, after her retirement from Graceland, she was asked by the church to return to Norway as a contractual appointee. She did that and served for a year and a half with one interlude of a few weeks in the United States. During the following several years, she returned to Norway regularly to attend reunions and serve in various ways. Her major work in Scandinavia was to compile and edit a new Norwegian hymn book, "De Helliges Salmer" (Hymns of the Saints). In December 1989, she led a contingent of 28 persons, including President Wallace B. Smith and his wife, Anne, for the dedication of the new hymnal. It was the first new hymnal for the Scandinavian church since 1924, a little brown book, which her father had helped edit.

In the years following her time in Scandinavia, Velma was kept busy with retreats and teaching and writing for the church. Her second book, "Summoned to Pilgrimage," was centered on the Temple, then in process of being built. Though it was published in 1994, it was really not until 10 years later it came into its own as further studies were being made about the use of the Temple. In 1999, the two volumes of "The Transforming Power of Prayer" were published. During these years, Velma also served on two important church committees: The Temple Project Committee that had the responsibility for making plans for the new Temple and the Spiritual Formation Committee established by President Grant McMurray for leadership in the spiritual development of the church.

During the 1980s and 90s, another of Velma's great joys was leading several educational tours to various parts of the world: The British Isles, Greece, Turkey and Scandinavia. As she grew older, Velma continued to live in Lamoni in a house she bought in 1948. In her latter years, Velma was very active in the Lamoni congregation and other congregations in Lamoni Stake. She served for nine years as an evangelist to the Chariton congregation. She was also a member of the Spiritual Formation committee for the Stake and, at the age of 84, she surprised herself by beginning to write a book of Lenten and Easter meditations. It was published by Herald House under the title, "We Journey with Christ." She did not stop there but went on to write a second book, "Transformation," meditations from Easter through Pentecost and, finally, "Finding Home," meditations from Advent to Ash Wednesday. All three books were written and published in 2006.

In her latter years, Velma's hearing and eyesight were failing, but she was still able, when asked, to take on a few major assignments for the church. This was the joy of her life. She has no family of her own but is supported and loved by many good friends.