

Testimony to the Grace of God as shown in the life of (Doris) Ann Nichols  
Born 20 March 1922 ~ Died 30 September 2017

"May we whom the Spirit lights give light to others."  
*Anglican "Common Worship"*

Ann Nichols would never have claimed this for herself, but so many whose lives she touched, however briefly, would give testimony to this in Ann.

She was a woman of energy, enthusiasm, loving kindness, inventiveness, quiet support, determination, forthright common sense, generous with her wealth of gifts in the encouragement of others – and a great storyteller.

She was a nurturer – of family, children and staff in her schools, friends, neighbours, acquaintances, and of ideas. She made time for everyone, lovingly, tirelessly – she turned no one away -- not from a sense of duty, it was how she was, God's love expressed through her.

Three threads stand out in Ann's life – her family, her teaching, and the Quaker Tapestry.

Ann was raised in a strongly socialist and pacifist family in Leeds, a grounding that remained with her throughout her life. A particular influence was her maternal grandfather whom she described as "a political animal, an early socialist, a founder member of the Independent Labour Party in Leeds, a keen pacifist who worked with the Leeds Quakers during the first world war helping conscientious objectors and setting up branches of the Adult School Movement with the help and support of Leeds Quakers ... an independent thinker and I loved him dearly". Ann, it seems, was to inherit this drive and concern.

Her marriage to Harold was a real partnership. They shared so many ideals, working together for many causes, jointly bringing their gifts and interests to bear.

Around 1957, a sense of spiritual need and possibly their wartime experiences, Ann as a nurse, Harold in the RAF, led them to make contact with Quakers in Leeds. Here they found their spiritual home, first at Adel, then later in Roundhay Meeting.

The arrival of first a daughter, Gail, and then a son, Andrew, was a great joy to them. It was the beginning of what became an extended and close-knit family of three or more generations, as other elderly family members joined the family home, which occasioned their move to a large house in Whitkirk, Leeds, that accommodated 4 generations. Harold's grandmother, his mother and Ann's mother in turn came to live

with them through the years. Ann nursed them all through their final days, at home, both while she was working and after she retired.

The house move to Whitkirk also afforded Ann the opportunity to train as a primary school teacher. It was the beginning of a long and fruitful career. Education was extremely important to both Ann and Harold and, in due course, first Gail and later Andy were sent to Ackworth School.

When the war ended, Harold had resumed his career in librarianship, eventually becoming Reference Librarian at Leeds Library. In time, he was to take up an appointment as a lecturer in librarianship at Loughborough University, which saw them move from Leeds Roundhay Meeting to Nottingham.

The well-being of all their family was Ann's aim and she, with Harold, cherished them all – children, grandchildren, great grandchildren. Sons and daughters in law became sons and daughters. She embraced them all. They were her delight. With her wisdom and common-sense approach, she was lovingly accepted in the role of friend and mentor too.

The fortunes of their children were to shape the rest of their lives. In time their son, Andy, was to move with his wife Alison to Africa and then Canada in his profession as a mining engineer, which led to many happy and much-needed visits for Ann and Harold.

It became important to Ann and Harold to remain in close and regular contact with their family, especially their grandchildren, both in the UK and in Canada. So, when in 1979, Gail and her husband John moved to Wokingham to take up new jobs, Ann and Harold soon followed. Here, too, they became quickly embedded in Wokingham Meeting.

Then, in 1993, another move by Gail and John to take up new roles in Hull, found Ann and Harold, now retired, moving to Cherry Burton in the East Riding to join them. This time they brought their energy, commitment and experience to Beverley Meeting, becoming very quickly part of the lifeblood of the Meeting.

As with their family, Ann's teaching career was based on love and nurturing. She was an enabler, encouraging not just latent talents but a sense of worth, confidence and a positive approach to life. She was a great storyteller and her energy and enthusiasm were infectious. For her education meant the nurture and growth of the whole child, and also her staff.

"There was a warmth and sympathy in Ann which embraced so many people and was quickly apparent on our first meeting ... she was interviewing me for a post at her

school. Interview over, she put me at ease, telling me not to sit worrying – “I can’t say anything yet – but there are two applicants and two jobs”. That was the start of a long and enriching relationship. Ann was very hands-on and led her team by example and encouragement. There was no “them-and-us” between teaching and non-teaching staff. She was prepared to do anything, even seemingly menial tasks ... Ann would deal with it herself rather than pull a teacher from a class to do it. As a result, we all “worked our socks off” for Ann ... As the school grew, the whole spirit improved, thanks to Ann’s high standards, academic and otherwise. Children responded to the changed atmosphere and to her friendly encouragement. The parents were all part of the team. She retired in 1983 but she left the school well-grounded and flourishing ... Ann looked for and found the best in people, not least the children, the most important people in the school. And this enabled everyone to find the best in themselves”.

“She was the most loved and revered headmistress I ever had the fortune to work with. She exuded love where she felt it, for pupils and staff. This quality brought out the best in everyone who had contact with her in our school in Shepshed. This is not to say that she was a push-over. She ran her school with a firm but fair hand. As a result, she was regarded as a friend as well as a colleague”.

“I worked with quite a few headteachers over [the years] but she was the best. She was an inspiration, as a teacher, as a Head, but mainly as a person. She loved the children, she loved people, and she always acted out of kindness to others. She would have hated the education system of today, its overemphasis on targets and assessment; she wasn’t much good at the bureaucracy part of being a head, or rather, she preferred to put her efforts into the children and her colleagues. I feel so lucky to have met and worked with Ann, and would not be the person I am without having known her”.

“As the senior most experienced teacher she felt her day was best used teaching the most challenging children, thereby leaving their classroom teachers to teach the other students unimpeded. She left all the administration stuff until the children went home. Whether teaching chess, swimming, taking the year 5’s on their annual trip or school outings, she influenced her students in so many ways. When she retired after moving the school from portables [due to a fire at the old school] to the new modern circular school that she planned with Leicestershire Authority, the 1000’s of daffodils that the students planted in her honour and the students overseas who were sponsored so they could have an education were her legacy”.

Ann cherished the embroidered table cloth she received on her retirement, with the names of all the children and staff beautifully stitched in bright colours, a host of happy memories.

Her concern for the young was evidenced also elsewhere. She was a favourite with the children in Children's Meeting, always inventive with themes and activities, and her delightful way of bringing the Quaker stories to life for the children. And later, the contribution of children in the design of the Quaker tapestries was never to be forgotten.

The two threads – her ability as a teacher and storyteller and her love of embroidery and needlework – became entwined through her early involvement in the Quaker Tapestry. Together with Anne Wynne Wilson and Ann Castle - "the Three Ann(e)s" – Ann was one of the founders of the Quaker Tapestry, who gradually transformed an idea into what has become the 77 panels in the Quaker Tapestry at Kendal today. As one of the four teachers who taught the embroidery stitches and techniques, she enthused Quaker communities throughout the UK and farther afield. Friends of all ages, with experience or none, would be encouraged to share the creation of the tapestries, practising the stitches as Ann told their stories – and the sense of community within the Meetings was knit tighter through their joint task and learning. It was precious work.

An example was when Ann, with Harold, took the Canadian panel from West to East across Canada, involving Meetings along the way. The basic design, planned beforehand, left space for Canadian Friends to make additions, like the beautiful salmon, and with a particular space left to be completed by a Children's Meeting.

It was at their first Meeting, in British Columbia, that Ann found a Children's Meeting involved in a seeds and plants project with children in the SW of New Mexico. They drew and then sewed a bright sun with rays, two trees with many kinds of fruit and a donkey. "This piece of embroidery speaks of Ann's intuitiveness of planning a gap to involve children and then encouraging them to express themselves".

Of the several panels in which Ann played a significant role, the Quaker Botanists panel stands out. As she and Harold worked together to research the panel, before the design was created, they knew that one day they would write a book in this poorly researched area. Sadly, Harold died during the research, but with typical perseverance, Ann completed the book, *The Golden Age of Botanists*, using Harold's work. "Harold's attention to detail and Ann's story telling brought this book to life, a treasured publication in the Tapestry shop". This was the panel the four teachers kept for themselves, a break from their teaching.

Ann's contribution to the Quaker Tapestry didn't stop with the teaching and the stitching – she was an "enthusiast and ambassador for the Quaker Tapestry". In 2001, an exhibition of Quaker Tapestry panels came to Beverley and was held in Beverley Minster. The driving force behind the visit was Ann. She mustered help and support for months beforehand from Friends in Beverley Meeting and others in the Area

Meeting, arranging sessions in Beverley and elsewhere to teach the stitches and enthuse all ages with the stories, and providing the materials for practising. She and another Friend gave talks to all kinds of groups and societies in the area, raising awareness that the Tapestry was coming – and funds to help bring the Tapestry to the town. Ann created enthusiasm for stewarding and taught the stories. The exhibition was a huge success, built on Ann's conviction that it could be done and her energetic encouragement that brought many others to be involved.

Here again, she always had time for the children. A steward recalls: "One day we were visited by a primary school; Ann sat the children down and started to tell them stories of some of the panels on display. She was engrossed, the children were enchanted and no one noticed some grown-ups were also gathering round and also listening. A picture of pure story-telling that has remained with me ... For me the experience of working with Ann and hearing the stories is a blessing I hold with gladness and gratitude. The way she engaged herself and everyone else in her enthusiasm for the panels ... all of it inspired awe".

Ann was involved with the Tapestry for over 30 years, at Kendal and in Quaker communities at home and abroad. At Kendal, "Ann's skills as a communicator and enabler were invaluable. She was a great peace maker, always the one who gently stepped in the middle of any minor disagreement to bring back the calm. Her sense of humour and enthusiasm for life were incredibly infectious".

And, "In November 2014, it was at the embroidery workshop at the Museum in Beverley [at the time of a Quaker exhibition there by local Friends] when she came along to help me. Ann was in a wheelchair following a stroke and helped me guide the students through the stitches. Ann told the stories with the same mischievous glint in her eye. Her Tapestry life will always be here woven into the Tapestry itself with so much of her love and kindness".

Wherever she was, Ann enhanced the sense of community. From the time that Ann and Harold came into the Religious Society of Friends, they were fully committed and involved in the activities and concerns of their Quaker Meetings, first, just after the war, at Adel and Roundhay, Leeds, then Nottingham, Wokingham, and finally Beverley. Ann had a way of getting things done, not in a pushy way, but often quietly, with humour and a positive approach that energised others.

When difficult or problematic issues arose, Ann would often find a way to a solution or manage to quietly diffuse the situation, as when a new treasurer of a Meeting Peace Committee, carrying on the inherited "unofficial" system of dealing with the committee's finances, felt unfairly criticised by some members in the Meeting. Ann quietly suggested a way forward, which provided the committee and the treasurer with authority from the Meeting in the way it dealt with its finances. On another

occasion she defused a potential conflict about an all-age worship event that was organised. "She preferred conscientious and, if necessary, silent action before endless debate".

A group in Nottingham Meeting who wrote to prisoners abroad supported by Amnesty International were experiencing difficulties as a result of government restrictions on financial transactions. "Ann said she found the easiest way round the problem, when sending an occasional paperback book, was to slip a small banknote between the pages ... even if it didn't work and someone else pocketed the money, the money was needed by their families too, and it may have improved the likelihood of the book being delivered".

"Ann made a deep impression on us. She was accomplished in many ways, but was always reluctant to speak about her talents unless she felt they were required. Then she would simply put them to good use. I remember her as a model of kindness and a driver for change".

In Beverley Meeting, as in their previous meetings, Ann and Harold continued to give service in a variety of ways. Ann was a great befriender and always keen to promote activities that would bring Friends of all ages closer together, especially fun things. Brass band music was a favourite of Ann's since her West Riding days. The annual visit of the Hammonds Saltaire Band (formerly under other names) to the theatre in the round in Scarborough, became also, at Ann's instigation, an annual event for Beverley Friends, always preceded by a fish and chip tea! Happy memories of those occasions will always be associated with Ann.

Following their arrival to live in Cherry Burton, it wasn't long before Ann and Harold were involved with village matters, including the Friendship Circle. Still very much involved with the Quaker Tapestry, Ann offered to hold craft sessions in her home – "it was marvellous, a real eye-opener". "We wanted to do something to mark the Millennium in the village. It was Ann's idea to make a large collage depicting all aspects of the village and its people... she came up with ideas ... and even got the material and thread from her enormous store of craft materials. She oversaw the project. I feel myself fortunate to have met such a marvellous, talented and kind lady". The collage still adorns the Village Hall. Even as her health worsened in more recent years, Ann was still to be seen walking slowly round the village with her dog Raz, her lively companion after Harold died. Everyone stopped to talk.

Then, realising that she was no longer able to manage her own house, even with help, she made the decision to move into an Abbeyfield home in Beverley, which gave her independence with help – and the company still of her beloved dog, Raz. It was no surprise that life at Abbeyfield became suddenly livelier for residents and staff

with these new arrivals. Ann's gregariousness, humour and sense of fun – and Raz's friendliness – raised everyone's spirits.

Towards the end of her life, Ann was struck by a number of tragedies that challenged her resilience. Her loss first of Harold, her own health impaired while she looked after him for so long; then of her daughter, Gail, following a long and courageous struggle with cancer; soon followed by the loss of a beloved grandson-in-law to cancer; and finally, to suffer a cruel stroke herself - all took their toll.

And yet – her determination continued. Now in the nursing home, while her daughter was there too undergoing palliative care, she continued to be "a character". She survived her daughter by more than two years, remaining in the nursing home, largely confined to her wheelchair. The stroke left her "barely able to turn the page of a book" but she remained mentally bright and alert. She loved visits from family, friends and Friends. News of the children in her family and from the Meeting always brought a beaming smile, the measure of her delight at receiving their messages and their news.

Ann will remain for so many an inspiration. Her strong faith, simply expressed through her vocal ministry, was the grounding for her life, expressed and witnessed through her actions, lovingly, often quietly, and was the source of her determination and positive approach.

"Be patterns, be examples, in all countries, places, islands, nations, wherever you come, that your carriage and life may preach among all sorts of people, and to them ..." George Fox, 1656.

Signed,

Brenda Rigby  
Beverley Meeting

Alison V. Burnley  
South Edinburgh Meeting,  
South East Scotland Area Meeting