



In a world where people often are treated unfairly, Mary Ann Neevel always seemed to notice.

She didn't sigh and silently hope the situation would get better somehow for people who were marginalized, her friends and family said. Instead, they said, Neevel, who spent three decades as a pastor at Milwaukee's Plymouth United Church of Christ, walked with them as an advocate.

"The risks she took and the courage she showed in making a path for herself and others — courage would be the quality I've seen so much of in Mary Ann's life," said Rev. Andrew Warner, who succeeded her as senior pastor of the church after she retired in 2005.

Neevel, of Shorewood, died Oct. 12 after a long fight with cancer. She was 76.

Neevel had an early interest in social justice. Born Mary Ann Wilner in Fargo, N.D., Neevel at age 18 participated in a work camp that helped renovate a Native American church. Reflecting on the experience, she wrote: "Seeing how a people, supposedly different from me, lived, was an educational experience. I found that differences amounted to nothing, while the things in which we were alike were great in number."

Neevel studied sociology and history at North Dakota State, said Walter Neevel, her husband of 53 years. After graduating, she went to Yale University Divinity School, where she met Walter as both sought master of divinity degrees.

At that time, Warner said, the church wasn't ordaining many women. When it did, it normally was to put them on the religious education track, not to lead a local church.

"At Yale, she had to make an argument as to why she should be in the regular master of divinity program instead of the religious educator track," Warner said.

Warner said Neevel was a "trailblazer."

Mary Ann Neevel served as a pastor and teacher at Plymouth UUC from 1975 to 2005. She was senior pastor for more than 20 years.

"Frankly, as one would expect, she put up with a lot of sexism, a lot of expectations about who she would be and what she would do," said Warner.

In the late 1960s, Neevel traveled to India with her husband, an expert in Hinduism who taught for more than three decades in the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's philosophy department.

"That really sparked, I think, a love of being engaged in interfaith dialogue and in the ecumenical movement," Warner said.

Neevel was a founding member of the Milwaukee Association for Interfaith Relations, now the Committee for Interfaith Understanding of the Interfaith Conference of Greater Milwaukee. She

was a member of MICAHA, the Milwaukee Inner-City Churches Allied for Hope. She also served on various boards and committees for Aurora Health Care.

She was involved with the United Church of Christ at a statewide and national levels. And she was a delegate to World Council of Churches assemblies, including one at which her family said she had the cherished memory of shaking the hand of Nelson Mandela.

According to her family, she attended the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, a seminal moment in the American civil rights movement. As pastor, she guided Plymouth Church in its decision to welcome and affirm lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, one of the earliest UCC churches to do so. She was among the first UCC pastors to confer blessings on same-sex couples, her husband said. She helped other churches through that transition and advocated for marriage equality within the church nationally.

"Mary Ann served her church community with an open-minded leadership," they said in an obituary. "She committed her ministry to the dream of equality and justice for all, creating space for and standing with marginalized communities and survivors of abuse."

Walter Neevel described her as "a modest person, probably soft-spoken."

"But she had a lot of courage, and when something arose, she didn't pass the buck."

Said Warner: "She saw injustice and then was moved to figure out what she could do. She left our church better than she found it, and she left our world better than she found it."

*In addition to her husband, Mary Ann Neevel is survived by children David Neevel and Neeve Neevel. Brother L. Bruce Wilner and sister Laura Wahl. She was preceded in death by her brother Stanley.*

A memorial service celebrating her life will be on Oct. 29 at 11 a.m., at Plymouth United Church of Christ, 2717 E. Hampshire St., Milwaukee. The family will greet friends at a reception following the service. Interment will be private.

Memorials may be made to Plymouth Church Mission Fund, the Interfaith Conference of Greater Milwaukee, 5409 W. Vliet Street, Milwaukee, WI 53208; or the Blood Center of Wisconsin, P.O. Box 2178, Milwaukee, WI 53201, for research on acute myeloid leukemia.