
NAOMI SUNDBERG AND WINIFRED SWENSON

Rachel Hamilton Doyle recalls the life and witness of two remarkable women of God and their mission for the Covenant in the southern mountains of Virginia.

How often in life do we encounter individuals who are truly living out the Gospel of Jesus Christ? For me, Naomi Sundberg and Winifred Swenson are women to remember. I first met them when I was a child of seven, and their lives have influenced mine in more ways than I can count.

Naomi was born in Stanton, Iowa, on February 27, 1909. She attended North Park College, and in 1942 was sent by Covenant Home Missions to the Covenant Mountain Mission, located in the hills of southwestern Virginia near Cumberland Gap. She joined two other women who had come to Jonesville the previous year. At that time their work consisted of holding chapel services in several small rural schools.

In 1946 Winifred Swenson of Rockford, Illinois, arrived as part of the permanent staff. From then on, "Miss Naomi" and "Miss Winnie" were partners in the Lord's service. They worked so well together that the local people never mentioned one apart from the other. They were known as "the missionaries" or "the girls."

They worked with children by conducting Sunday schools, vacation Bible schools, and Saturday morning Bible classes. In 1950, the Covenant Mountain Mission summer Bible camp was started, along with three Covenant churches: Mt. Washington (located on the Bible camp grounds), Wallens Creek, and Mulberry Gap (near Sneedville, Tennessee).

Through the years, various pastors and their families came to staff the three churches. As these people came and went, Winnie and Naomi remained the constant that held the mission together.

My parents joined the Mountain Mission staff in 1954, arriving with four small children, of whom I was the oldest. My dad was to be pastor of the Mt. Washington church and also help run the Bible camp. Naomi and Winnie extended friendship and hospitality, and we felt a family kinship from the very first.

My first memories of Naomi and Winnie are of the Saturday morning Bible classes, when I was part of a group of children who came each week to learn and to have fun. They introduced us to a love for reading by using the Danny Orlis and Sugar Creek Gang books. By reading a chapter at a time, they kept us coming back week after week. The adventures were so exciting that we could hardly wait until the following week to find out what would happen next!

With the stories were lessons from the Bible, made simple and fun so that we could apply them to our daily lives. And then there was singing! Winnie and Naomi loved music and taught us many hymns and choruses. We children didn't realize that the Word of God was being "hidden in our hearts" through music. "The Windows of Heaven Are Open," "Let's Talk About Jesus," and "I'm Walking Up the King's Highway" are a few I especially remember.

The State of Virginia was part of the Bible Belt, and Naomi and Winnie were welcomed by the public elementary schools to conduct chapel services at all-school assemblies. They usually visited six schools a day—three in the morning and three in the afternoon.

I remember filing into the auditorium at Jonesville Elementary School, walking along the oiled wood floors and finding a flip-down wooden seat. Two

large easels were set up on stage. One had a big pad of paper with the words of Christian hymns and choruses carefully inscribed in large letters on each page. The other was the background for beautifully painted Scene-O-Felt—or flannelgraph, as we called it. Lovely scenes from the Bible were depicted in vibrant colors. Winnie or Naomi would deftly remove or add a piece of felt to change the scene as she narrated. They took turns leading the singing or telling the Bible story. In this way, many children were exposed to the Bible stories and to the message of Jesus Christ as Savior.

How different it all was from today, when so many fear the influence of religion in public schools. But God used Miss Naomi and Miss Winnie to tell his story and to introduce the idea of a personal relationship with Christ, the idea of prayer, and the worth of Scripture memorization to children (as well as their teachers), all of whom might never otherwise have heard.

During the 1950s and 1960s, Naomi taught the adult Sunday school class at Mt. Washington and was also the pianist for worship services. I still remember the sound of her voice. She played and sang with such feeling. She had been educated as a schoolteacher, so her lessons (and admonitions) were very clear and always related to the Word of God. She was also a consistent role model who lived what she taught. I saw this in her life week to week at church, at vacation Bible school, at Bible camp, and in her home.

Several miles down the valley, Winnie was attending and nurturing the Wallens Creek Covenant Church in similar ways.

Naomi and Winnie lived together, and we spent many happy times at their home. They helped raise us as children

in the Lord. They taught us the fun of board games and puzzles. As we grew older, they loaned us books they loved and thought we might enjoy. They fed us physically and spiritually.

They also took needy children into their home. The first was a little girl named Maudie, who was eventually adopted by a Christian family, known to Winnie, from Rockford. Then they invited Mary Helen to come and stay with them so that she could get to school regularly. Mary Helen's younger sisters, Sue and Doris, also joined the family, and these three foster children lived with Winnie and Naomi until they grew up and married. Their children became Winnie and Naomi's grandchildren, and what a precious heritage these little ones have!

In addition to the school and camp ministries, Winnie and Naomi drove a truck or van each week to pick up children for Sunday school. They went into the mountain "hollers" to visit elderly and ailing shut-ins. They administered a used-clothing distribution program for the poor. They organized Christmas packages for every family in each church. They invited missionaries from all over the world to come to the Mountain Mission to speak at Bible camps and special services. They hosted and entertained hundreds of visitors. In later years, they conducted chapel services at local nursing homes. Ministry to the elderly became just as important as their ministry to children. Winnie and Naomi eventually retired as Covenant missionaries, but they continued to volunteer as their health permitted.

Both women were good at developing and sustaining friendships. They seemed able to sense people's needs. When my little sister died, this sorrowing teenager found comfort in the dear, loving arms of Naomi and Winnie. When I left for college, they remembered me with birthday cards, Christmas cards, and letters. How did they find time in

their busy schedules to concentrate on me? I also know that they prayed for me often.

I remember so many good times—good food, hilarious laughter, warm hugs. But I think what influenced me the most is the essential goodness that was reflected in these two women whose lives intersected in Virginia's back hills. The word "mentor" wasn't popular as I was growing up, but when asked who had the greatest impact on me as a young person, the faces



NAOMI SUNDBERG



WINIFRED SWENSON

of Naomi Sundberg and Winnie Swenson immediately come to mind.

Recently, upon reading Corrie Ten Boom's autobiography, I realized that Naomi and Winnie were a lot like her, kindred spirits in having a great love and burden for youth, in organizing classes and camps, in seeing needs, and trying to help. I believe God has brought many people like them to the world who are our unsung heroes but who surely will receive great rewards in heaven.

Winnie still lives in the home she and Naomi built in 1962. It is a modest ranch-style frame house that sits on a hill, with a picture window looking out to Powell Mountain, with farms and meadows below, and Wallens Creek winding its way down the valley. It's a serene view that changes with the seasons and brings to mind the psalm of David: "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills . . . from whence does my help come? My help comes from the Lord. . . ." I remember a comfortable rocking chair near the window and a

table holding a well-worn Bible.

Naomi went to be with the Lord on March 18, 1988, after a long and painful illness. My mother phoned me with the news; we were stationed overseas at the time. I wept as my mind was flooded with memories of Naomi. I had a dream a few nights later. I was at Winnie's house and was crying because I hadn't had a chance to say goodbye to Naomi. In my dream, Naomi walked into the room and gave me a big hug, and she gave me a message about my dad who had died several years earlier. The dream was so clear and beautiful that tears come to my eyes as I write this.

God blessed me by providing Naomi Sundberg and Winnie Swenson in my growing years. I remember them from a child's viewpoint and loved them with a child's heart. Looking back, I realize that I know very little about their personal struggles and inner life. How did they encounter Jesus Christ? How were they called to mission work? What were their most difficult challenges?

I wish I could have known them on a deeper level, but, as I write, I realize that there is also value in looking at the externals. Naomi and Winnie were motivated by their love for Jesus Christ. This was evident in the way they lived. The things they accomplished are really amazing. The richness of their personal example as servants of God will be with me always.

"For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me. I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me" (Matthew 25:35-36, NIV).

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