



Left: Heuresse Kaj (Wesley Seminary 2017-2018 intern, left) and Lauren Bennett (right). **Top Center:** (l to r) 2019 summer interns, Kennedy Thedford (Agnes Scott College), Melissa Feito (2016 summer intern), Claire Coker (Wesley Seminary), Kali Lo-Ng (Beloit College), and Emily Neufeld (Mennonite Voluntary Service, 2018-2019) gather around the table to enjoy afternoon tea and conversation. **Top Right:** (l to r), Mary E. Hunt, Theresa Kane RSM, and Diann L. Neu at Sisters of Mercy final vow ceremony in Philadelphia, PA. **Bottom Center and Right:** Pastors for Peace bus in Cuba.

Support The WATER Internship Program! Join Us!

Through this program, Mary and Diann have mentored over 85 interns. This summer WATER welcomed three new interns Kali Lo-Ng, Kennedy Thedford, and Claire Coker (pictured above). With your support, the interns have had the opportunity to have experiences that will shine a light on their future endeavors and go way beyond their time at WATER.

Here are three takeaways from the 2019 summer interns:

- They attended museum talks, documentary premieres, and marched for Pride in DC.
- They immersed themselves in feminist theological literature, and wrote book reviews.
- They conversed daily about current events, feminist history, and networks of social justice workers.

Thank you for supporting the WATER internship program. These women are developing themselves as scholars, leaders, and social justice seekers, inspired by the brilliant women who ventured before them.

WATER internships for Fall 2019 and Spring 2020 applications are open now on our website. Join us!



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Who We Are

WATER is a global interreligious network, an educational and spiritual space, a center for dialogue on feminism, faith, and justice. We connect activists, religious leaders, students, scholars, and allies who are using feminist religious values to create social and religious change. Founded in 1983 by Mary E. Hunt and Diann L. Neu, we have been empowering people to address structural violence for over thirty-five years—making WATER one of the oldest feminist religious non-profit organizations in the world.

Join the WATER community as we work toward inclusive theologies and rituals, push for social and religious change, and collaborate from inclusive perspectives. To learn more about what we do, visit us at www.waterwomensalliance.org.

Mary E. Hunt, Diann L. Neu: Co-directors | Emily Neufeld: Staff Associate | Kali Lo-Ng, Kennedy Thedford, Claire Coker: Interns | Joe Scinto: Volunteer

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Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics, and Ritual • NEWSLETTER

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Congratulations, Ofelia Miriam Ortega By Mary E. Hunt

Even a cab driver in Havana several hours away knew that “an excellent woman from Matanzas,” as the Rev. Dr. Ofelia Miriam Ortega was described on the Cuban national news, had earned her Doctorate in Ministry at San Francisco Theological Seminary in California. She is the only woman appointed as Rector of the *Seminario Evangélico de Teología* (SET) in Matanzas. Dr. Ortega served on the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches, and worked for the World Council on education as well as at the Ecumenical Institute at Bossey in Geneva. She has served in ordained ministry for 52 years including time on the Cuban Council of Churches. Ofelia has been a member of the National Assembly of Cuba, and—oh by the way—she’s now in her 80s and very active in empowering women. No wonder the driver paid attention to the news clip.

Ofelia’s graduation was the reason a dozen U.S. colleagues, including three from WATER, went to Cuba to join the festivities. Diann Neu, Mennonite pastor Cindy Lapp, and I were part of a seminar during which 45 participants explored the work of the late feminist theologian Dr. Letty Russell. Letty, with her partner Shannon Clarkson who spoke at the event, founded the DMin program in the area of feminist theology. With Cuban theologians, pastors, and students we projected next steps for feminist work in religion. It was a powerful day with both historical reflections and future directions emerging. A display of Letty’s books was unveiled at the seminary library, underscoring the importance of her work for women on many continents.

We learned about Cuban women ministers’ struggles and successes. We saw their creativity, especially in a liturgy when one woman embodied the woman in Hebrew scripture about whom she preached. We experienced a depth of creativity and hospitality born of the many economic difficulties that the U.S. trade embargo has created. We were impressed by women’s faith, especially by those who combine their Christian and Santeria beliefs (see Cindy Lapp’s article on p. 2). We visited their homes and were welcomed warmly. How gracious they are to people who come from a country whose government oppresses them.

The graduation ceremony took place in Cuba because the United States government no longer has a functioning visa-granting embassy/consulate in Cuba. Cubans must go to Mexico or Guyana to apply, and then not be sure they will receive a visa. Ofelia refused to do so. In turn, the president, dean, and

director of the SFTS DMin program offered to go to Cuba for a formal and delightful ceremony to honor one of their most distinguished graduates.

Ofelia’s longtime friend and colleague Cherie White, who had lived at SET in her childhood when her father taught there, presented Ofelia’s curriculum vitae with panache. Ofelia’s remarks were the evening’s highlight as she joyfully recounted her road to the doctorate, including a community of friends near and far who helped her compile her many writings into the doctoral thesis, *A Theology from the Praxis and Vision of a Cuban Woman*. It will be published in Spanish soon, and, hopefully, in English as well.

WATER folks visited our friends at *La Casa de Cariño*, a social and educational center on the beach at Varadero. It provides lodging for visiting groups, lovely hospitality and a conducive spot for reflection and renewal. Revenues generated by those stays in season allow *La Casa* to receive in the off-season Cuban children with cancer, elders, folks with disabilities, and other Cubans who otherwise could not enjoy a beach holiday.

WATER thanks our many friends in Cuba, especially Ofelia and Clarita Luz Ajo, Vice Rector at the SET, for the warm welcome, insightful conversations, and longtime friendships and solidarity. We look forward to many more years of continued collaboration. To Ofelia Ortega we say, “*Felicitaciones!* Well done, dear sister, well done.” ■

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Ofelia Miriam Ortega joyfully accepts her Doctorate in Ministry diploma in Matanzas, Cuba, from San Francisco Theological Seminary.



Cuba Reflections

By Cindy Lapp

Growing up in the Mennonite church, I recall stories from missionaries about people in other countries who combined their indigenous religion with new Christian beliefs and practices. It was labeled syncretism, and described as a very bad thing indeed. In order to be faithful, we were to call people to turn their backs to culture and tradition and embrace Jesus wholeheartedly. WATER's latest delegation to Cuba gave me an opportunity to revise and renew my understandings of syncretism as well as see the power of women defining religion for themselves.

Theologian Clara Luz Ajo often speaks about her congregation in Cuba: an Episcopal church that is primarily Afro-Cuban women (and three men) that celebrate Mass on Sundays and practice Santeria in their homes. On the May trip to Cuba we had an opportunity to visit the church with Clara Luz and the women as our guides.

Arriving in Limonar at 10am on a Thursday morning, the dusty streets were not busy except for a few horse drawn carts that act as taxis, people on motorcycles, and pedestrians. By noon the streets were filled with uniformed school children heading home for lunch.

The historic if tiny Anglican church reminds us that the church is people not buildings. Most of the building was destroyed over the years with only parts of the roof remaining. This church of older women does not have a lot of institutional support but they understand their purpose, so they are rebuilding as they have funds. There is currently one room, used for Mass, meetings and morning gatherings, and a restroom. The sanctuary is well underway - four walls awaiting a roof. There are also the outlines of a kitchen and a room for craft work.

Ten women of the church came to the building to meet us that Thursday morning. They told us about their life together as a congregation. We saw the obvious dedication of the women and the strength that they have as a community. They shared with us the importance that the church and spirituality have in their lives. Besides meeting on Sunday for Mass, any who can gather each morning at 9 am to check in and offer support to each other.



The women talked about syncretism without apology - and they were clear that the Eucharist table is at church and Santeria altars are at home. They explained that in order to be initiated into Santeria, one must first be baptized into the church. Each of the Orichas in Santeria has a counterpart in the saints of Christianity. We saw that the two traditions are not at odds but fit together to create meaning, support, healing, and hope for the women who gather. After looking around the church, we were invited to walk several blocks to the Santeria altars the women have created in their homes.

What a privilege to catch a glimpse of these altars created with devotion and faithfulness. The colorful fabrics, beads, and artifacts started in a corner and expanded across the room. In one home the altar was situated in the center of the room with a picture of the Last Supper on one end and a crucifix on the other. There was no explanation nor did it seem there was any contradiction. Here were the visible symbols of a lived faith. Women have always had to find a way to make meaning when things look dim and drear. These Cuban women have preserved, developed, and enhanced religious traditions that give them life, pull them together, and help them keep on. If you would like to contribute to help with the rebuilding of the church, please contact WATER. ■

Cynthia Lapp is pastor of Hyattsville, MD Mennonite Church and former WATER intern and staff associate.

Spring WATER Program Highlights

You can find audio of programs, notes, and ritual scripts at www.waterwomensalliance.org. Register for upcoming events on our website or email waterstaff@hers.com. Join us at WATER or by phone.

WATERtalks

In April, **Rev. M Barclay and Mary E. Hunt**, discussed what happens to people when churches like the Catholic and the Methodist undergo significant changes brought about by oppression. Rev. M Barclay is a provisional deacon in The United Methodist Church and Mary E. Hunt is a Catholic feminist theologian.

In June, **Su Yon Pak and Jung Ha Kim**, discussed the purpose and process of their book *Leading Wisdom: Asian and Asian North American Women Leaders*. Presenting stories of Asian and Asian North American Women who found their ways, sometimes circuitously, sometimes unexpectedly, into leadership.

WATERrituals

In the April ritual, *Listen to the Cries for Justice*, **Diann L. Neu and the WATER Staff** listened to why many people are weeping for justice. In the midst of Holy Week the group contemplated how to create communities of struggle that address the injustices that cause us to weep.

For the May ritual, *You Are the Salt of the Earth*, **Diann and the WATER Staff** gathered to explore the healing properties of salt. We blessed ourselves and Earth with salt water.

In the June ritual, *Pride and Equality Month: Grateful, Proud, and Connected*, **Diann and the WATER Staff** celebrated the impact that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer people and allies continue to have on culture and history.

WATERmeditations

In April, **Kate Stoltzfus** led a reflection entitled *Spring Cleaning*, making room for springtime renewal and reflection.

In May, **Cheryl Nichols** led the circle in a meditation entitled *Standing at the Wall: The Ministry of Accompaniment*. It was a time to contemplate the lives of those at the U.S.-Mexico border and our role in accompanying them.

In June, **Emily Neufeld** shared the poem “*When I Am Among the Trees*” by Mary Oliver as a stepping stone to communal reflection on how trees can impact our lives physically, mentally, and spiritually.

WATERcounseling

Diann L. Neu does spiritual direction, psychotherapy, clergy supervision, and pastoral counseling at WATER for individuals, couples, and groups. Call 301.589.2509 to make an appointment.

In the News

“On Pride and Against Prejudice” in the *Sisters of Mercy Blog* by **Mary E. Hunt**, June 25, 2019.

“Vatican's 'Dumbed Down Version of an Old Argument' on Gender Can't Stop Changes in Catholicism” in *Religion Dispatches* by **Mary E. Hunt**, June 25, 2019.

“Feminist Theologians Bring Wisdom to Fiction” in the *National Catholic Reporter* by **Mary E. Hunt**, May 3, 2019.

Ritual: Bless Me with Creative Hope

By Diann L. Neu

Many are weary from illness, inequality, abuse, lies, war, and injustices of all forms. They yearn for signs of creative hope.

This ritual invites you to think hopefully about the future and make your visions concrete. You can share it with your family, community, or other group of friends at the beginning of a holiday meal or special time of sharing.

Centering Prayer

Light a candle.

God of Many Names,
Yahweh, Allah, Holy One, Divine Wisdom,
Bless me with creative hope for my weary journey.
Bless people in every nation with mercy, love, and justice.

Listen to Hope

“Hope is a song in a weary throat.”
- Pauli Murray, title poem, *Dark Testament*, 1970

“Hope is a very unruly emotion.”
- Gloria Steinem, *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions*, 2019

“Hope is the thing with feathers | That perches in the soul |
And sings the tune without the words | And never stops at all.”
- Emily Dickinson, 1861, in T.W. Higginson and Mabel Loomis Todd, eds. *Poems by Emily Dickinson*, (1861)

Reflect | Meditate | Journal

What are my sources of hope? What are my hopes and dreams for the future? What creative action will I do to bring creative hope to my weary journey and a weary world?

Closing Prayer

God of Many Names,
Yahweh, Allah, Holy One, Divine Wisdom,
Thank you for your promise of hope.
Empower me to be helpful as I act justly, love tenderly,
and walk with you.

Take Action

~Listen to the story of someone who is different than you.
~Find your hope, hold on to it, and share it.

© 2019 Diann Neu is Co-founder and Co-director of Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics, and Ritual (WATER), dneu@hers.com.

Photo: Cuban Mariposa flower.



WATER Thanks Dignity for 50 Years of Inclusive Faith

The Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics, and Ritual (WATER) applauds DignityUSA on the fiftieth anniversary of its founding.

The global LGBTIQ+ community, and especially the Catholic community, owe DignityUSA a deep debt of gratitude for creating new spiritual, intellectual, and physical space. Fresh insights into the holy, renewed theological wisdom, and diverse communities of worship and fellowship are Dignity's legacy.

All of this was on display at DIGNITY's 50th anniversary celebration, July 2019 in Chicago, where Dignity also hosted the third gathering of the Global Network of Rainbow Catholics, representatives of its sibling organizations around the world.

We lift up the prophetic imagination of the founders who created Dignity in the face of hideous discrimination. We give thanks for Dignity's steadfast ministry especially during the HIV/AIDS pandemic when so many companions were lost.

We herald the faithful sacramental, educational, and social justice work of Dignity chapters around the country. We take joy in being part of those efforts as we work together particularly with the Women of Dignity in retreats and conferences, and as part of the Women-Church Convergence.

Ad multos annos, friends! Ad multos annos.



Mary E. Hunt and Nickie Valdez embrace after Nickie introduced Mary before her Keynote at Dignity's 50th Anniversary celebration.