

South of the Garden

The Newsletter for the Resource Center for Women and Ministry in the South

Volume 46, Number 4

December 2025

Winter

by Jeanette Stokes

It has been quite a year, in the country and at RCWMS. The USA has been subject to a series of disasters created by politicians. In response, many of us have organized and rallied and protested. At RCWMS we have offered beauty, community, and inspiration as an antidote to the harm and chaos caused by oligarchs.

In June, quilter Kimberley Pierce Cartwright led KINDRED SPIRITS, a gathering for African American quilters. Fifty people attended the conference and over 600 came to see the pop-up quilt exhibition. The STITCHING OUR STORIES quilt exhibition at Cassilhaus this summer was both beautiful and moving. If you weren't able to attend, a 360° tour is available online, along with a video of a panel with the three quilters. (See: cassilhaus.com/stitching-our-stories-exhibition)

In October, we drew together religious leaders for HOMEGROWN: NC Women's Preaching Festival. This year's theme was "Digging Deep, Rising Up," and together dozens of attendees celebrated the art of proclamation in all its forms. RCWMS trustee Rev. Dr. Chelsea Yarborough kicked off the festival with an insightful presentation about Black women preachers.

We have also been hard at work on the Jereann King Johnson documentary project, which is well underway, led by a phenomenal team of dedicated storytellers. Rafael Samanez and Leilani Clark of Elevate Media Films are shaping the story and filming Jereann. The film will pull on narrative threads from public media to Black land loss, the environmental justice movement, and quilting. We are inspired by Jereann's life and art, and we are thrilled to continue our work on this film. (Read more on this inside.)

As the seasons change, RCWMS is experiencing its own changes. We have been blessed with a wonderful staff. In May, Latifat Odetunde finished her internship with us. In August, intern Lara Struckman left us to spend five weeks abroad, mostly in Germany. Also in August, Margie Peeler joined our staff as an intern. Margie is serving a three-part internship for this academic year with part of her time at RCWMS, part at Farm Church, and part at Presbyterian Campus Ministry at UNC.

This fall, Rachel Sauls has returned to our staff after finishing a year of chaplaincy training in San Francisco. As Rachel says, the housing subsidized by the hospital may have provided her only opportunity to live in that beautiful, expensive city. Rachel is now living in Philadelphia, serving as a chaplain in the University of Pennsylvania Health System, and working for us in her extra time.

(Continued on back.)



Illustration by lovelylexxi13

No Kings

by Jeanette Stokes

I participated in a No Kings rally in Durham in October. Several thousand of us filled Durham Central Park just north of downtown. It was the largest crowd I've ever seen gather for a rally or protest in Durham. It was stunning and moving.

The next morning I read that there were seven or eight million people rallying around the country to say we do not want a king in the USA. We object to the guy in the White House who is behaving like a monarch.

The signs at the rally were fabulous: a monarch butterfly, a bright yellow swoosh with a little crown on top and a universal "no" sign across it (circle with a slash). Other signs said "Healthcare Not Wealthcare" and "Rejecting Kings since 1776." Some people wore blow-up costumes, including a dinosaur carrying a sign that said "Dinos Against ICE."

Seeing all the No Kings signs reminded of my ancestors. One branch of my family left Northern Ireland for North America in 1772. As Covenanter Presbyterians, they were discriminated against because they refused to pledge allegiance to any king but Jesus and certainly not to the King of England.

My ancestors landed in Charleston, SC, where they were given land grants. They settled first in Upper South Carolina and then across the state line in North Carolina just east of what is now Charlotte. They fought in the American Revolution in part because of their deep antipathy for the King.

The dreadful downside of this history is that they settled on land that had been stolen from the Native people who had lived on the land for a long time: Catawba, Waxhaw, Cheraw, and Sugaree. Later they would enslave African Americans, stealing their labor. Building on their capital, they eventually moved west to Arkansas, and then down into Texas, where my mother was born.

The sword of critique cuts both ways. Though my people fought tyrants in Great Britain and in North America, they mistreated others for their own gain. They were happy to have a president remove Indigenous people further west, and they treated captured Africans as less than human. ICE and Customs and Border Patrol agents were in Durham this week behaving that same way. Chasing and abducting people because of their brown skin is as reprehensible as stealing land and labor. When will we ever learn? No Kings! No one human being is of greater value than any other.

Calendar

* = RCWMS events. More info: rcwms.org/events.

*December 9, 2025, 11:30 am–1:30 pm (2nd & 4th Tues.)
ART OF CONSCIOUS AGING: A Group for Women
Newcomers welcome. No fee to attend. No need to register. (Via Zoom.) More info at: info@rcwms.org.

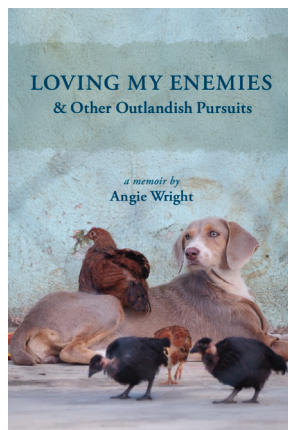
*December 11, 2025, 7:00 pm
BOOK LAUNCH: *Loving My Enemies & Other Outlandish Pursuits*, by Angie Wright
A reading and discussion with Angie Wright about her new memoir, just published by RCWMS. Free.
More on the book: rcwms.org/product/
Register: www.rcwms.org/events

*December 14, 2025, Sunday, 1:00–5:00 pm
RCWMS HOLIDAY SALE
RCWMS, 1202 Watts St, Durham, NC 27701
Come by the Resource Center to visit, experience local artwork, and purchase great gifts. Shop for locally made items such as handmade cards, books, jewelry, textiles, etc. RCWMS books will be on deep discount. Bring your neighbors, friends, and families. A portion of the proceeds will benefit RCWMS. Masks are encouraged.
Questions: info@rcwms.org

*December 17, 2025, 7:00–8:30 pm (each 3rd Wed.)
THE MINISTRY OF BLACK WOMEN'S SELF-CARE with Kim McCrae (via Zoom)
Self-care is a multi-generational, multicultural work of self-love, communal love, and Womanist ethicism. We offer practical tools for Black women doing all forms of ministry, personally, in church & community.
Leader: Kimberly McCrae is a lover of humanity and actively lives the self-care life.
Register: www.rcwms.org/events

December 18, 2025, 7:00 pm (each 3rd Thursday)
TARA PRACTICE: Practicing the Sadhanas of the Twenty-One Taras with Rachael Wooten (via Zoom)
Drawing from her book, *Tara: The Liberating Power of the Female Buddha*, Wooten will offer teachings about Tara and lead a guided meditation. Free.
Leader: Rachael Wooten, PhD, Jungian analyst, writer, and Tibetan Buddhist dharma teacher.
Join: rachaelwootenauthor.com/practices

December 21, 2025, Sunday, 3:00–9:00 pm
SEASONS WITHIN
Peace Hill @ Avila, Durham, NC
The darkness invites our curiosity to rest in what we don't yet know, and listen with compassion. On the longest night of the year, we'll gather to ground, breathe, and remember that faith lives in the body. We'll witness ourselves and each other, honoring this sacred pause as the light begins to return. Come as you are. Leave as you will. Seasons Within is a quarterly retreat series to celebrate the equinox and solstice sponsored by Peace Hill at Avila.
Leader: Licensed massage & bodywork therapist, Shakira Bethea is committed to embodied living. She supports individuals in reclaiming their rhythm, and embracing a life of connection and purpose.
Cost: \$35. Register: peacehillavila.org/event
Questions: Elaina Eakle, elaina@peacehillavila.org



Book cover by Bonnie Campbell

*January 2–9, 2026
WEEK OF QUIET & WRITING for Women
Trinity Center, near Morehead City, NC
Spend a week of quiet and writing with a supportive group of women at beautiful Trinity Center.
Leader: Jeanette Stokes
Cost: about \$1,000. Single room & meals included.
Contact: jeanette@rcwms.org

January 30–February 1, 2026, Friday– Sunday
STARLINGS IN WINTER
Well of Mercy Retreat Center, Hamptonville, NC
Join us for a women's weekend wintry mix of art activities, poetry, writing & fun using Mary Oliver's poem, "Starlings in Winter," as inspiration. We'll slow down, pay attention and respond to prompts and projects versus reacting to conditioned "rules." This year's theme, "Starlings in Winter," is a look at possibilities, real and imagined. What is it to "think of noble things," to "dip and rise," to be "a wheel of many parts," or even to be "light and frolicsome?" Through art and writing, small groups, sharing, and free time, we'll explore these concepts using creativity as our muse.
Leader: Claudia Fulshaw lives in Durham, NC and is an artist, wanderer, & leader of retreats that combine Art, Spirit, Nature & Rest.
Cost: \$540–600, all inclusive.
Register: artwanders.com/retreats/
Questions: claudia@artwanders.com

February 1, 2026
LECTURE: Dr. Donyelle McCray
First Presbyterian Church, Durham, NC
This year's annual McPherson Lectureship will be given by Donyelle McCray, Associate Professor of Homiletics at Yale Divinity School. Free

ONGOING

RCWMS's sister organization, Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics, and Ritual (WATER), offers several free monthly gatherings via Zoom. All are welcome. No charge, but you must register to receive a link. Info: www.waterwomensalliance.org

SOLO & SOCIAL WANDERINGS: Self-Guided Creative Retreats (ongoing, day or overnight)
The Stable, a private retreat in Durham, NC
Fun! Super creative! Wonderful space! Come experience a solo, creative retreat, or invite up to 5 friends for a group art retreat. Choose: Poetry & Art Journals, Vision Board Journals, Peace Poles, Labyrinths, Forest Bathing & Earth Art, or R&R&Art. Abundant materials, detailed instructions, beverages, and snacks included. Come experience a self-guided, relaxing, soul-smiling day (even add a night or two!) at The Stable.
Claudia will greet you and introduce you to your Wandering. For ages 12+.
Leader: Claudia Fulshaw, graphic designer, artist, and wanderer who leads creative retreats.
Cost: \$130 solo/\$90 additional person, plus room
Register: claudia@artwanders.com

*WEEKS OF QUIET & WRITING for Women
Trinity Center, near Morehead City, NC
January 2–9, 2026, led by Jeanette Stokes
May 3–10, 2026, led by Carol Henderson
May 10–17, 2026, led by Jeanette Stokes

Foremothers

by Jeanette Stokes

When I think of the grandmothers of feminist theology, I think of Phyllis Trible, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Letty Russell, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Nelle Morton, and Beverly Wildung Harrison. Other scholars who were just a bit younger include Katie Geneva Cannon, Carter Heyward, Mary Hunt, Judith Plaskow, and Emilie Townes. So many of the oldest group are now gone: Trible, Ruether, Morton, and Russell. And we lost Katie Cannon way too soon. Fortunately, they left us with their writings, works I read long ago and still refer to from time to time.

At Duke Divinity School, we had our own feminist on the faculty, Jill Raitt, who was already teaching when I enrolled in 1974. She was a Catholic medievalist, not a feminist theologian, at least not at first, but serving on an otherwise male faculty in the South turned her into a feminist quickly enough. She often said that she learned feminism along with her students. She taught one of the first classes on “women” in the Duke Divinity curriculum.

When it came time for her tenure review, Jill was treated badly by some of her male colleagues. Some of the men fought against granting her tenure and made life pretty miserable for her. Though she did receive tenure, she left Duke just a few years later, subsequently building the religion department at the University of Missouri and serving as the President of the American Academy of Religion. I was sad to hear that Jill died this year at the age of ninety-four. I feel fortunate to have known her.

In 2009, some of Jill's former students got together and created the Jill Raitt Lecture at Duke Divinity School. Dr. Teresa Berger from Yale Div. School was the inaugural speaker. Since then, the lecture has taken place each spring during Women's Week at the Divinity School. Jill attended the lectures for several years until she declared herself too old to travel and sent greetings to the later ones.

Two other feminists at Duke were important to me—Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite and Helen Gray Crotwell. Susan was a grad student in the Religion Department when I was at Duke and went on to be the President of Chicago Theological Seminary. Helen was a United Methodist minister and Associate Minister to Duke University. In their own way, they each influenced my developing world view and theological opinions, in part through their co-taught and groundbreaking course on women and ministry while I was a student. There was so little organized or intentional support for women in seminary in those days.

Helen Crotwell went on to be the first woman to run for Bishop in the Southeastern Jurisdiction of the UMC. Susan Thistlethwaite retired from academia and is now busy doing public theology (writing regular opinion pieces about current events) and writing mystery novels.

(Continued on back.)

Jereann

by Jeanette Stokes

We at RCWMS are excited to be working on the Jereann King Johnson project, because Johnson is an important North Carolina educator / artist / activist, who has spent the better part of her life in Warrenton, NC, serving her community and working for justice.

At this point in our nation's history, while climate deniers and racism deniers attack our civic, educational, and cultural institutions, it is important to collect and highlight the stories of Black women who have been doing grassroots work for decades. Jereann is one such woman. As filmmaker Lana Garland says, “Because there are so many stories that have gone missing, we now have been tasked with piecing those elements back together to be able to create some type of archive that we can then point back to.” This film will add to that archive of African American women artists and activists.

We have been working on this documentary project for nearly three years and have recently hired a professional film team. Rafael Samanez and Leilani Clark of Elevate Media Films live in Raleigh. They both have a background in community organizing, and are shaping Jereann's story with an eye to history and current events. They have decided to highlight WVSP, the Black-led public radio station where Jereann worked for a decade beginning in the mid-1970s. Hired to do children's programming, Jereann went on to host jazz programs, interviews, and series.

At the time, WVSP served as the eyes and ears for the Black community in Warren County, NC, and Southside Virginia. If the station received a report of a noteworthy incident, they went in person with their tape recorders. Not waiting around for AP or NPR to cover the story, they did it themselves.

For example, in 1982 they covered protests against a PCB waste dump in Warren County. While the protests did not succeed in stopping the toxic waste dump, they are widely recognized as the beginning of the environmental justice movement in this country. WVSP also aired a series about the problems of Black families and Black farmers losing their land.

The film will include interviews with people who were involved with the station, including Jim Lee and Valeria Lee who started WVSP. With a hunch that a radio station could help support organizing and justice work in the Warren County area, they jumped into creating a public broadcasting station. Though always a financial struggle, WVSP became an important source of entertainment, education, news, and information for over a decade.

A native of Bainbridge, GA, Jereann was born in 1952 and grew up in Southwest Georgia during the Jim Crow era. After college in Washington, DC, she moved to Warrenton to work for the radio station. She has since devoted her life to working for justice, equity, and freedom. Hence the film's working title: *Freedom Station*.



Jereann King Johnson
Photo by J. Stokes

Winter...

Bacarri Byrd, our communications and development officer for the past year, has relocated to South Carolina and taken a job at Benedict College in Columbia. She will finish up with us at the end of this calendar year. Most of the email communications you have received in the last year have come through Bacarri, and we will miss her!

Both our artist and theologian in residence will also be finishing their official terms with us at year's end. Photographer MJ Sharp, our Artist in Residence, has been with us for two years. During that time she mounted exhibitions at The Fruit, including her moon-lit images of standing stones in Great Britain. She has led several classes for us with art historian Elizabeth Howie, including one this fall that featured an exquisite photography exhibition at the Nasher at Duke. (*Coming into Focus*, on view at the Nasher until January 4, 2026.)

Racquel Gill, Theologian in Residence, has graced us by sharing her wisdom in blogs, inspiring the staff in meetings, winning games at our staff retreat, and leading the planning for HOMEGROWN this year. We will miss Racquel's wisdom, energy, and guidance. Together, she and intern Anna Holmes Blair amassed an impressive group of resource people for Homegrown and raised more money for the conference than ever before. The City of Raleigh is lucky to now have her on their staff.

We have enjoyed working with intern Anna Blair this year. She came on as an intern in January and proved herself to be so skillful at organizing people and data for Kindred Spirits that we asked her to stay on through the fall. An education policy major at UNC, Anna plans to graduate in May and attend graduate school in education or policy in the fall.

Intern Claire Hambrick is now leading the planning for our 50th Anniversary in 2027, and we now call her our curator. She is a professional photographer, after all, and beautifully documents many of our events.

Thank goodness Chloé Griffin, Programming Director, is not going anywhere. In the two plus years she has worked with us, she has become the backbone, cheerleader, and visionary for RCWMS. Among other tasks, Chloé did a brilliant job moderating the panel of quilters at the Cassilhaus exhibition and will be leading the Queer Divinity Students Cohort in the new year.



Jill Raitt
Photo by J. Stokes

Foremothers...

The Duke Divinity School Women's Center opened in the fall of 1974 just as I was entering as a student. The center offered a place for women and supportive men to meet and talk about the changing roles of women in the church and the evolving theologies inspired by the presence of women in the theological conversation.

The women's center sponsored what we called Inclusive Language Worship Services. We wanted to try out gender inclusive or gender neutral pronouns for God and for people, because we were tired of hearing about the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of all mankind.

The Women's Center sparked discussions among the female students. One discussion that I remember took place in the basement of the Divinity School building. A small group of us sat in a circle and asked one another what our actual functioning images of God might be. It was fascinating to hear the answers: a friend, a mother, a mountain. I've long thought that it was significant that we were in the lowest level of the building and actually sitting on the floor, as though we were physically trying to get to the bottom or the root of our questions. Many of us spent three years in seminary trying to do just that.



RCWMS is a 48-year-old nonprofit dedicated to weaving feminism and spirituality into a vision of justice for the world. RCWMS sponsors workshops, conferences, and retreats on women, religion, creativity, spirituality, and social justice. We mentor and encourage young women, religious leaders, writers, and activists.

RCWMS appreciates contributions of time, energy, money, and stock. To contribute, contact RCWMS or visit www.rcwms.org. We are especially grateful for support from E. Rhodes & Leona B. Carpenter Fdn., Emerald Isle Realty, Inavale Fdn., Paul Green Fdn., Triangle Community Fdn., and Durham Arts Council.

TRUSTEES: Liddy Grantland, Cris Rivera, Marion Thullberg, Angie Wright, and Chelsea Yarborough.

STAFF: Jeanette Stokes, Executive Director; Chloé Griffin, Programming; Bacarri Byrd, Communications & Development; Rachel Sauls, Manager; Beth Weiss, Data; MJ Sharp, Artist in Residence; Racquel Gill, Theologian in Residence; and interns: Anna Holmes Blair, Claire Hambrick, and Margie Peeler.



SUBSCRIPTIONS to South of the Garden cost \$20 and run for 12 months from the time placed. Foreign or First Class is \$25. A subscription is free to anyone for whom the subscription fee is a burden. Tax-deductible contributions over and above the subscription fee are appreciated. Please send a check to our office at: RCWMS, 1202 Watts Street, Durham, NC 27701, or go to www.rcwms.org.

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