

Biography of Dr. Alice Wonders

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Dr. Alice Rosetta Wallace Wonders was born on November 19, 1910 in Waterbury, Vermont to William Wallace and Florence Richardson.¹ She was “a direct descendant of the Pilgrim fathers.”² At the age of 18, as a senior in high school, she earned a license to preach as a lay minister in the Methodist Church. Church officials at that time stated she was the youngest person to ever become a licensed lay minister in the Methodist Church.³ Throughout the remainder of her life, Wonders dedicated herself to serving the church and educating others about the Christian faith. While not considered a feminist, she broke many barriers for women along the way.

Education

Dr. Wonders earned her Bachelor of Arts degree from Ohio Northern University in 1934. She then went on to earn an M.A. from Texas Christian University in 1950 and an Ed.D from North Texas State in 1961.⁴

Early Career, Marriage, and Family

Early in her career Dr. Wonders worked as a Director of Christian Education in Grand Isle, Vermont and as a Religious Education Worker in Warren, Ohio.⁵ In addition, while

attending Ohio Northern University, she helped work her way through school by serving as a lay minister in several churches.⁶

While in Ohio, Alice Wallace met Paul Wonders. They married in 1934.⁷ Circa 1950, Mr. Wonders was enrolled at Texas Wesleyan College as a Social Science major, though it is unclear if he graduated.⁸ By 1955, he was working at Bill Reproductions Company as a photographic engineer.⁹ Sadly, the marriage did not last. Together, the Wonders had two daughters. Their oldest daughter, Carol Jo, was born around 1937.¹⁰ She attended Texas Wesleyan College from 1955-1959 and graduated with a degree in Music Education. By the time she was a senior at TWC, Carol had married, as she was listed as Carol Wonders Heiden in the 1959 TXWECO.¹¹ The Wonders' other daughter, Gayle, was born around 1940.¹² After graduating from high school, she went on to study Speech-Drama at North Texas State University.¹³ Gayle and Dr. Wonders graduated from North Texas State on the same day, January 27, 1961. The very next day, January 28, 1961, Gayle married Mr. Al Conant of Waco, who was also a student at North Texas State University in a ceremony at Polytechnic Methodist Church.¹⁴

Sometime in 1942, the Wonders moved to Texas and Dr. Wonders began teaching at Polytechnic High School.¹⁵ In the fall of 1943, Dr. Wonders began teaching at Texas Wesleyan College as an instructor in Bible and stayed for two academic years.¹⁶ After this, the Wonders family moved to Cleveland, Ohio in 1945 so Dr. Wonders could become the director of education at the First Methodist Church.¹⁷ In 1946, while in Cleveland, she wrote a Christmas pageant titled "*Bethlehem Cave*," which was staged that holiday season at the First Methodist Church; about 2,000 people saw it. This pageant was staged again at Polytechnic Methodist Church during the 1947 holiday season with around 700 people in attendance.¹⁸

Dr. Wonders Comes to Texas Wesleyan

Dr. Wonders and her family returned to Texas in 1947 so she could resume teaching at Texas Wesleyan College as an instructor in religion, and this time she stayed.¹⁹ During her time at Wesleyan, Wonders served as the academic advisor for all of the ministerial students.²⁰ In 1956, Dr. Wonders was named the Acting Chairman of the Division of Philosophy and Religion, becoming one of the first women in the United States to chair a religion department.²¹ She was named the permanent head of the division in 1961 and held that post until her retirement in 1976.²² She was a very demanding instructor but was popular with students over the course of her career.²³ The freshman class awarded her the Order of the Golden in 1952, 1954, 1962, 1963 and 1967.²⁴ The Order of the Golden Rule was established by the Freshman Class of 1947-48 “for the purpose of fostering better relations between the faculty and the student body” by recognizing faculty members who were helpful to students.²⁵ In addition, the senior class dedicated the TXWECO to her in 1954, and again, along with Dr. Gertrude Van Zandt, in 1976.²⁶

Apparently one of Dr. Wonders’ pet peeves was tardiness. She had a piggy bank named Elmer which she always brought with her to her classes. Students who arrived to class late were required to feed Elmer a penny for every minute they were late. Dr. Wonders usually returned the money to her students, directly or indirectly at the end of the term. Sometimes she would have a party for the students. One year, she used some of the money to send flowers to the hospitalized wife of one of her students. There was one semester, however, when the money was

not returned. In the fall of 1952, Elmer had been fed particularly well. Sometime on November 9 of that year, someone went into Dr. Wonder's office in Polytechnic Methodist Church and took all of the money out of Elmer. Dr. Wonders was appalled.²⁷

Wonders traveled to the Bible lands on two separate occasions to gain additional knowledge.²⁸ It is unclear when she made her visit to the Holy Land. Her second trip, which lasted three months, took place in the summer of 1962, accompanied by Mrs. Marie Glick, the widow of Dr. Walter Glick, a former Dean of the College. That summer, she spent one month studying at the American School of Oriental Research in Jerusalem.²⁹ While there in the Holy Land, she visited archeological sites and lived with the people of the land.³⁰ She then went on to visit sites in Greece, Italy, Switzerland, and England before returning home.³¹ While traveling, she took lots of photographs, returning home with about 1,000 slides which she used as visual aids in her classes and her presentations to churches to help her listeners understand the culture and the way of life in the Holy Land.³²

Campus Involvement

During her tenure at Texas Wesleyan, Dr. Wonders was involved with numerous campus organizations and events. She served as the faculty sponsor and organizer of both the annual Old Student-New Student Wedding and the annual May Fete from 1952-1961; both of these long-standing traditions ended with the 1960-1961 academic year.

Dr. Wonders served on the Religious Life Council as well, 1961—1967. The Religious Life Council, which was formed in 1961 by combining the Student Council of Religious

Activities and the Faculty Committee on Religious Activities, organized the annual Religious Emphasis Week and other campus activities.³³

Dr. Wonders delivered the Wilson Lectures, October 21-22, 1963, on the topic of “The Role of the Changing Family.” Her lecture on October 21 was titled “Family Portraits in the Bible.” Her concluding lecture on October 22 was titled “Family Portraits in the Nuclear Age.”³⁴

Student Organizations

Dr. Wonders organized a new Religion Department club, Chi Rho Life Service Volunteers, after chapel on October 18, 1951. The club was created to foster cooperation among and organization of religion students on campus. Membership in the organization was open to all ministerial students, life service volunteers and religious education majors on campus.³⁵ Dr. Wonders served as sponsor of this organization from 1951-1957.

A few years later, during the 1957-58 academic year, another Religion Department club, Omega Chi, was founded by merging Chi Rho and the Student Ministerial Association. Membership in this group was open to all religion majors, all religion minors, and all life service workers.³⁶ Dr. Wonders was the sponsor of this organization from the fall of 1959 until her retirement in 1976. In the fall of 1970, Omega Chi initiated a Christmas project for needy families in cooperation with a number of other campus organizations in hopes it would become a tradition.³⁷ Thus began the Omega Chi Christmas Party, which remained a holiday tradition for many years on the Texas Wesleyan campus. Throughout her time sponsoring Omega Chi, she opened her home to host various club events.

Dr. Wonders served as the sponsor for the Methodist Student Movement (MSM) from 1953-1955. The club thrived during her time as sponsor, Wonders and six students attended the 5th Quadrennial Conference of the Methodist Student Movement at the University of Kansas in Lawrence during the 1953 Christmas holiday break.³⁸ During the summer of 1954, she supervised a group MSM members as they worked to convert an old storage room into a new MSM Center which opened that fall for student use as well as the MSM's weekly worship programs.³⁹ This center was formally dedicated on Sunday October 24, 1954.⁴⁰ Wonders accompanied 23 students when they attended the annual Thanksgiving Conference of the Texas Methodist Student Movement the following month.⁴¹ In 1955, she again accompanied a group of students on trip to Mt Sequoyah, Arkansas to attend the Regional Workshop of the Methodist Student Movement; TWC had the largest delegation (15 people, including Dr. Wonders) in attendance.⁴² By fall of 1955, the MSM had a new full-time director, but Dr. Wonders still maintained an interest in the organization.

One MSM event which must have given Dr. Wonders some pleasure was the "Bible Bowl" held on April 1, 1964 in conjunction with the clubs weekly vespers program. The event was modeled after the "GE College Bowl" a weekly TV game show popular at that time. Dr. Wonders served as moderator of this event, which pitted the "Methodist 'Quiz Kids,'" composed of Spurgeon Dunnam, George Black and Jim Reutler, against the "Bible Baptist Boys," composed of Robert Wood, Art Fowler, and Homsy Homsy. The "Methodist 'Quiz Kids'" won the game by a score of 132 to 90.⁴³

Dr. Wonders sponsored several other student organizations as well at various times during her career at Texas Wesleyan. These include:

- The Student Christian Association, which she sponsored in 1947-1948⁴⁴

- The Senior Class of 1954, which she sponsored from 1951-1954.⁴⁵
- The Senior Class of 1956⁴⁶
- The Quadrangle Honor Society, a local honor society for women, which she co-sponsored from 1967-1969. This organization later became co-educational in the 1970s. It is now affiliated with Mortar Board.

Other Campus Organizations

Dr. Wonders was also active in faculty social organizations. She was a member of the Faculty Women's Club, from its founding in 1956-1976; She served as the first president of this organization in 1956 and then again in 1974.⁴⁷ She was also a member of the Faculty Club Board of governors for a time after it was founded just before the end of the spring semester in 1967.⁴⁸

Professional Organizations

Dr. Wonders was the first woman elected to membership in, and was a charter member of, the Southwestern Section of the Society of Biblical Literature and Exegesis, which includes scholars from Texas, Oklahoma, Louisiana, Arkansas, New Mexico and Kansas.⁴⁹ The Society of Biblical Literature and Exegesis was founded in 1880 when a group of Bible scholars met "in New York at the study of Rev. Dr. Washburn, Rector of Cavalry Church" June 4-5 of that year.⁵⁰ In 1962, a majority of the membership voted to shorten the name of the group to Society of Biblical Literature.⁵¹ The membership of the society grew rapidly during the early 20th century and expanded well beyond the northeastern United States where it was originally concentrated.

In response to this growth, regional groups of the society began to be organized in 1936 “to provide further opportunities for scholarly exchange and to open the possibility for a larger number of people to share the results of their work for critical appraisal by colleagues.”⁵² The Southwestern Region was organized in 1957.⁵³ Dr. Wonders served as the Secretary-Treasurer for the section from its founding in 1957-1962. In 1962, she was elected Vice President of the section and then elected President of the organization in 1963.⁵⁴

Dr. Wonders was also a member of the National Association of Biblical Instructors, an affiliate organization of the Society of Biblical Literature and Exegesis which was founded in 1909 by some members of SBL. At first the sessions for the larger society included two or three sessions related to this group as part of its larger meeting, but by 1941 they began having full joint meetings with the Society of Biblical Literature and Exegesis. In 1963, the National Association of Biblical Instructors was reorganized, and the name was changed to the American Academy of Religion. The Society of Biblical Literature and the American Academy of Religion continue to hold joint meetings to this day.

Other organizations Dr. Wonders was a member of include:

Alpha Kappa Delta International Honor Society of Sociology

Delta Kappa Gamma International Society for Key Women Educators

American Association of University Women

Listed in Who's Who of American Women⁵⁵

Listed in Who's Who in Methodism

Listed in Who's Who in Women of the World

Daughters of the American Revolution

The Directors of the American Scholars⁵⁶

Community Involvement

Dr. Wonders served as a panelist on, and the moderator for, the television program “Planning for Tomorrow,” which aired on WBAP Channel 5 from 1961-1975. This 30-minute award-winning program, which aired on Saturday morning, reviewed the weekly *International Lesson Series for Church School Classes* and offered instruction to Sunday School teachers who were preparing to teach the lesson the next day. Other panelists on the program included Rev. Jack Pritchard, Pastor of Churchill Way Presbyterian Church in Dallas; Dr. Noell Keith, professor of religion at Texas Christian University; and Dr. Milton Ferguson, professor of Christian philosophy at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. Dr. Wonders, Dr. Keith, and Rev. Pritchard were part of the panel from the beginning in 1961; Dr. Ferguson joined them in 1966. The four panel members had over 100 years of combined experience teaching the Bible. During the first seven years the program aired, the panel discussed and taught the complete text of the Bible. This program featured a video first in 1962 when TCU conferred an honorary degree on Rev. Pritchard before a television audience.⁵⁷

In addition to all of her involvement at Texas Wesleyan and in professional organizations, Dr. Wonders also actively served as a minister, fulfilling the calling she had discovered at age 18. Her Preacher’s license was renewed by the Fort Worth District of the Central Texas Conference of the Methodist Church in the fall of 1949. She was ordained a Local Deacon by the Central Texas Conference in June 1950. This allowed her to perform marriages

and baptisms, and to assist with the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.⁵⁸ Later, in 1976, she was consecrated as a Diaconal Minister by the same conference.⁵⁹ She retained her status as a lay minister throughout her ministry. While at Texas Wesleyan, Dr. Wonders spent considerable time speaking at area churches and to local organizations as well. One of her great pleasures was going to the churches her students and her "Preacher boys" attended and filling their pulpits on Sundays⁶⁰ She would, on occasion, preach at revivals, as she did in 1962 at Britton Methodist Church in Britton, Texas, along with Dr. Maggart Howell, pastor of Polytechnic Methodist Church; Rev. Richard Millsap, pastor of Riverside Methodist Church; Rev. Bob Carter of Cleburne; and Rev. Erving Gathings, pastor of First Methodist Church in Waxahachie.⁶¹ In 1965, Dr. Wonders spent a month on a preaching mission to South America which was sponsored by the Board of Missions of the Methodist Church.⁶² Finally, she was also actively involved in the ministries of Polytechnic United Methodist Church, where she served in just about every office. Her ministry continued on at a brisk pace into her retirement years.⁶³

At the time of her death on July 31, 1980, Wonders was serving as the Lay Leader at Poly Methodist, the first woman to serve in that role. She had only recently been appointed to serve on the Board of Higher Education and Ministry of the United Methodist Church, which is the United Methodist Church's policy making body.⁶⁴ She had also participated in the UMC's 1980 General Conference in Indianapolis only a short time before.⁶⁵ At the time of her death, she was also serving as the chair of the Committee on Aging of the Tarrant Area Community of Churches and was serving on the Governor's Committee on Aging as well. She was survived by her daughters, Gayle Carr of Germantown, Tennessee, and Carol Wolverton of Salem Oregon, and four grandchildren.⁶⁶

During her long and distinguished career, Dr. Wonders quietly broke many barriers for women, but perhaps her most lasting contribution was found in the education of her “Preacher boys.” Over the course of her career, Wonders educated most of the ministers in the Central Texas Conference. In their preaching, her influence is still felt today.

¹ Debra A. Felger. “Alice Rosetta Wallace Wonders,” Find a Grave, February 23, 2020, accessed July 21, 2021, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/207367638/alice-rosetta-wonders>; Kenneth Bledsoe, “Alice Wonders, Religion Instructor, is Licensed Methodist Minister,” *Rambler* (Fort Worth, TX), January 8, 1952.

² “Thanksgiving Interpretations Are Expressed by Faculty, Students,” *Rambler* (Fort Worth, TX), November 27, 1956.

³ Jim Jones, “31-year TWC Teacher Found Dead,” *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, August 1, 1980.

⁴ *Eighty-Fifth Annual Bulletin of Texas Wesleyan College, Fort Worth, Texas, Founded 1891: General Catalogue With Announcements for 1975-1976*, (Fort Worth: Texas Wesleyan College, 1975), 151.

⁵ “Newcomers on Faculty List,” *Rambler* (Fort Worth, TX), September 15, 1947.

⁶ Jones, “31-year TWC Teacher Found Dead.”

⁷ See note 1 above

⁸ Kenneth Bledsoe, “Alice Wonders, Religion Instructor, is Licensed Methodist Minister,” *Rambler* (Fort Worth, TX), January 8, 1952

⁹ “‘ABCs of Thanksgiving’ Topic of Wonders’ Talk,” *Rambler* (Fort Worth, TX), November 22, 1955.

¹⁰ “Religion Instructor is Local Deacon, Ordained,” *Rambler* (Fort Worth, TX), November 22, 1949.

¹¹ *TXWECO*. (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Wesleyan College, 1956), 152; *TXWECO* (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Wesleyan College, 1959), 67.

¹² “Religion Instructor is Local Deacon, Ordained.”

¹³ “Rambling Around: Mr. Forston Compares Elections,” *Rambler* (Fort Worth, TX), November 8, 1960.

¹⁴ “Wonders Celebrate Memorable Event,” *Rambler* (Fort Worth, TX), January 24, 1961.

¹⁵ Bledsoe, “Alice Wonders, Religion Instructor, is Licensed Methodist Minister.”

¹⁶ “Newcomers on Faculty List.”

¹⁷ Bledsoe, “Alice Wonders, Religion Instructor, is Licensed Methodist Minister.”

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- ¹⁸ "Bible Teacher's Pageant Staged," *Rambler* (Fort Worth, TX), January 5, 1948.
- ¹⁹ Bledsoe, "Alice Wonders, Religion Instructor, is Licensed Methodist Minister."
- ²⁰ "Dr. Alice Wonders Concludes Wilson Lectures Today," *Rambler* (Fort Worth, TX), October 22, 1963.
- ²¹ Larue Barnes, "Religion Chairman Has Varied Responsibilities," *Rambler* (Fort Worth, TX), October 22, 1957; Jones, "31-year TWC Teacher Found Dead."
- ²² Don M. Pike, "Dr. Alice W. Wonders," in *Official Journal, 1981 Central Texas Conference* (Dallas, TX: TM/UMR Printing, 1981), 205.
- ²³ "Rites Set For Ex-Chairwoman of Religion Division at TWC," *Dallas Morning News* (TX), August 2, 1980.
- ²⁴ "Professor of Religion is Honored by Receiving Award of Golden Rule," *Rambler* (Fort Worth, TX), January 15, 1952; "Freshmen Honor Woman Minister and Teacher," *Rambler* (Fort Worth, TX), November 9, 1954; *TXWECO*. (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Wesleyan College, 1962), 101; *TXWECO*. (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Wesleyan College, 1963), 101; *TXWECO* (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Wesleyan College, 1967), 113.
- ²⁵ *TXWECO* (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Wesleyan College, 1949), 115.
- ²⁶ *TXWECO* (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Wesleyan College, 1954), 4; *TXWECO* (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Wesleyan College, 1976), 7.
- ²⁷ "Elmer is Robbed: An Inside Job?," *Rambler* (Fort Worth, TX), November 18, 1952.
- ²⁸ "Dr. Wonders' WBAP Program Celebrates Tenth Anniversary," *Rambler* (Fort Worth, TX), February 17, 1971.
- ²⁹ "Rambling Around," *Rambler* (Fort Worth, TX), July 12, 1962.
- ³⁰ "Dr. Alice Wonders Concludes Wilson Lectures Today"
- ³¹ "Rambling Around."
- ³² "Dr. Alice Wonders Concludes Wilson Lectures Today."
- ³³ *TXWECO* (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Wesleyan College, 1962), 80.
- ³⁴ "Dr. Alice Wonders Concludes Wilson Lectures Today."
- ³⁵ "New Departmental Clubs Organized on TW Campus," *Rambler* (Fort Worth, TX), October 23, 1951.
- ³⁶ *TXWECO* (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Wesleyan College, 1960), 76.
- ³⁷ "Club Invites All to Join in Project," *Rambler* (Fort Worth, TX), October 21, 1971.
- ³⁸ "Alice Wonders, Seven Students Attend National Meeting," *Rambler* (Fort Worth, TX), January 12, 1954.
- ³⁹ "Methodist Students Open Campus Center," *Rambler* (Fort Worth, TX), September 13, 1954.
- ⁴⁰ "Methodist Student Center Formally Dedicated Sunday," *Rambler* (Fort Worth, TX), October 26, 1954.

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- ⁴¹ "MSM Members to Attend Conference," *Rambler* (Fort Worth, TX), November 23, 1954.
- ⁴² "Students Attend MYF Meets, Direct Planning, Hold Office," *Rambler* (Fort Worth, TX), September 13, 1955.
- ⁴³ "Methodists Defeat Baptists in Contest," *Rambler* (Fort Worth, TX), April 7, 1964.
- ⁴⁴ *TXWECO* (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Wesleyan College, 1948), 98.
- ⁴⁵ *TXWECO* (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Wesleyan College, 1954), 4.
- ⁴⁶ "Student Council Officers Installed at Awards-Promotion Day Program," *Rambler* (Fort Worth, TX), May 22, 1956.
- ⁴⁷ "Dr. Wonders Elected New FWC President," *Rambler* (Fort Worth, TX), April 30, 1974.
- ⁴⁸ Ada Jane Kirbo, "Faculty Members Find 'Home' in New Lounge," *Rambler* (Fort Worth, TX), July 12, 1967.
- ⁴⁹ "Dr. Wonders Named Bible Society Head," *Rambler* (Fort Worth, TX), January 22, 1963.
- ⁵⁰ Ernest W. Saunders, *Searching the Scriptures: A History of the Society of Biblical Literature, 1880-1980* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982), 4.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 53.
- ⁵² *Ibid.*, 51.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, 113.
- ⁵⁴ "Dr. Wonders Named Bible Society Head."
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁶ Pike, "Dr. Alice W. Wonders," 206.
- ⁵⁷ "Dr. Wonders' WBAP Program Celebrates Tenth Anniversary," *Rambler* (Fort Worth, TX), February 17, 1971.
- ⁵⁸ "Religion Instructor is Local Deacon, Ordained."
- ⁵⁹ Pike, "Dr. Alice W. Wonders," 205.
- ⁶⁰ "Professor of *Religion* is Honored by Receiving Award of Golden Rule," *Rambler* (Fort Worth, TX), January 15, 1952.
- ⁶¹ TWC Personalities Featured in Revival," *Rambler* (Fort Worth, TX), April 10, 1962.
- ⁶² "Dr. Wonders Returns From Month-Long Preaching Mission in South America," *Rambler* (Fort Worth, TX), November 16, 1965.
- ⁶³ Jones, "31-Year TWC Teacher Found Dead."
- ⁶⁴ Pike, "Dr. Alice W. Wonders", 205.

⁶⁵ Jones, "31-Year TWC Teacher Found Dead."

⁶⁶ Pike, "Dr. Alice W. Wonders," 206.