

A United Methodist minister chronicles his life journey from rural Kentucky roots to a controversial urban ministry focused on civil rights and social justice. This memoir provides insights into one minister's struggle with the institutional church as it resisted change.

### **I Did What I Could: A Memoir**

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*I Did What I Could*  
*A Memoir*

*by Gilbert Schroerlucke*

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For more information about the church, see:  
<http://www.fourthavenue.us>

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# Foreword

When I was in high school, the Louisville Conference of the Methodist Church held a youth event in Owensboro at Kentucky Wesleyan College. Some members of our youth group from Fourth Avenue Church went to it. Although I do not remember the title of the workshop I attended, I will never forget my first encounter with the leader. He had a funny last name and a message about our responsibilities as people of faith to do justice. I knew that day that I had heard a gifted minister with an important message. But I did not see him again until my last year in college when I chaired Students and Faculty for Open Housing at the University of Louisville and he was one of a handful of white clergy who spoke, marched and worked tirelessly for racial justice. I don't think Gil remembers me from those days but I would never forget him.

A few years later, I was attending law school at night, working as a social worker by day, and teaching junior high Sunday School at Fourth Avenue United Methodist Church. Our church youth group held a retreat with the West Broadway youth and there I met lots of Schroerlukes. Soon thereafter, Judy Harden, one of my social work colleagues who was living with the Schroerlukes, invited me to worship at West Broadway. It is fun, over thirty years later, to recall the innovative worship that Gil celebrated every week at West Broadway:

- providing relevant social justice music combined with traditional hymns;
- using guitars, piano and organ complementing each other;
- enhancing worship with multi-media presentations;
- laity serving as liturgists; and,
- making children welcome as participants.

Some church leaders think they recently invented some of these innovations and others seem determined not to embrace any changes. But more important than all these innovations, Gil's sermons were prophetic preaching of the gospel's radical call to justice, peace, and equity. What I did not expect was that my plan (that I had from the time I could talk) to be a lawyer would be turned upside-down following my decision to join West Broadway United Methodist Church.

When Gil and the West Broadway congregation invited Angela Davis to speak and all hell broke loose among the United Methodists in Louisville, I was out of the country at the time, and upon my return, I was stunned by the outcry. I prepared a statement for Metropolitan Ministries and the Louisville District, using Romans 12 as my text: "be not conformed to this world but be transformed." On each issue that Gil has addressed, he has had to endure the stubborn need on the part of church bureaucrats to conform, and to assure that "the boat not be rocked." Their attitudes helped create a sad reality that the church too often is silent when it should be leading the struggles to bring freedom and equality. As a parishioner, colleague, and friend, Gil and I have argued and disagreed over many things, particularly theology and strategy. But as I, a fairly radical feminist, reflect on the most positive influences in my life in addition to my parents, topping the list is the prophetic trinity of Martin Luther King, Jr., George R. Edwards and Gilbert Schroerlücke.

As you read this memoir, you will learn about Gil's childhood and youth, his military days, college, seminary, and his courtship with Bettye. But as he reflects on his ministry and his work for justice, you will also be challenged to do more, to continue the struggles in spite of the frustrations. Faith, family, and fairness are hallmarks of Gil's journey. Through the years, Gil and Bettye have worked unceasingly for justice in virtually every arena that oppression has manifested itself, most notably racial justice, peace (from Vietnam to Iraq), reproductive rights and fairness for sexual minorities. They have risked economic security and physical safety to live their faith. Over the years of their journey, they have reared an incredible family, children and grandchildren, who have continued their parents' commitments to live their values. What a wonderful legacy is celebrated in these pages.

Donna Morton, J.D., M.Div., D.Min.  
Louisville, Kentucky

# Author's Introduction to the Second Printing

Because of a favorable response to the first printing of *I Did What I Could*, I am making this second printing available. Printing my memoirs continues to be a non-profit venture for me, so all proceeds over and above expenses will be donated to the Open Door Ministry of the Fourth Avenue United Methodist Church in Louisville, Kentucky. I appreciate the many positive responses I have received from those who have read this memoir. It's been an uplifting experience.

I stay active in social justice issues mainly through the work of the Kentucky Religious Coalition For Reproductive Choice as well as participating in the life and ministry of the Fourth Avenue United Methodist Church.

I was disappointed that the Kentucky Conference of the United Methodist Church defeated the "All Means All" resolution this year. I was equally dismayed by the same results in the entire denomination.

The resolution was an effort to make the church constitution more inclusive and not exclude people based on gender, sexual orientation or physical or mental abilities.

Currently, the church constitution says "all persons are of sacred worth," but then goes on to identify the categories of inclusion: "without regard to race, color, national origin, status, or economic condition." The 2008 General Conference passed a constitutional amendment that simply reads: "The United Methodist Church acknowledges that **all** persons are of sacred worth and that we are in ministry to all. **All** persons shall be eligible to attend its worship services, participate in its programs, receive the sacraments, and upon Baptism, be admitted as baptized members." The simplified language clearly states that **ALL MEANS ALL**, no exclusions.

Following the General Conference's approval, the amendment had to be ratified by a majority of the individual churches and clergy. The vote took place this year, and sadly, the resolution failed.

I have not the slightest doubt and I fully believe that God is moving us in the direction of full inclusivity and that one day all will mean all. If we United Methodists continue to resist God's call for the full acceptance of all people, United Methodism will fade and some day be little more than a misty memory. I'm praying that prophets will rise up and lead us toward a future filled with promise, hope and love for ALL.

Gilbert Schroerlucke  
November, 2009

# Preface

Approximately three years ago, after years of being encouraged and chastised by members of my family to write my memoirs, I finally said, “OK, I’ll do it!” But I did not realize what I was getting myself into. What followed were long hours at my computer, taxing my memory and my computer skills, as I tried to accurately describe the events in my life’s journey or at least get the events in their proper sequence. Then there were months of pouring over newspaper clippings, letters, photographs and other artifacts that I had saved over the years. It was a daunting task but I said I would do it so I could not turn back, and soon I learned I was not alone in the task.

My family jumped in and did their part. All my children, Keith, Kaye, Kathy, Kim, and Kelly read the first draft and offered suggestions on how to organize the information and improve the readability of the book. As I worked and re-worked the material, my wife, Bettye was by my side, helping me remember details and offering improved wording. Kaye did the final editing, putting the commas where they belonged, and she designed the book cover depicting aspects of my life’s journey. But the main prize goes to Kathy, who not only did her share of editing but also produced the copy that went to the printer. Without all this help, this project would never have been completed.

I have tried to create a document that will help the reader experience something akin to what I experienced. Thus, I have tried to do more than tell my story in words. I have tried to make it possible for you to join with me in the journey. That’s the rationale for the use of newspaper articles, pictures, letters, and other documents. Hopefully, these will help you enter the times and circumstances in which I lived. So put yourself in my shoes and join with me in my journey. It is my hope that my experience may spark dialogue.

I mention by name only a few individuals whose paths intersected with mine. Many individuals are important to my life and my life’s stories, and there are too many to name. I believe the writer of the *Gospel of John* said it best when he wrote: “If they were all written down one by one, I suppose that the whole world could not hold the books that would be written.” (*Good News Bible*) That’s the way I feel. There isn’t enough paper to list the names of all those who stood with me. So, though their names do not appear within these pages, they were there, standing by my side or in the crowds that paid witness to my life, my work, and my faith.

I begin each chapter with a quotation that I’ve used in sermons, writings and conversations over the years. I offer them here to provoke thought. They are not meant to introduce the chapter.

Although I saved many newspaper and magazine clippings over the years, I did not always record the date. Thus, you will find many articles that are not adequately identified or dated. It will have to suffice the reader to know that the newspaper articles were all taken from the *Louisville Courier-Journal* or the *Louisville Times* around the time period being discussed.

I invite you to read my story, *I Did What I Could*.

Gilbert Schroerlucke, January, 2008

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