"I remember once when I was four years old, Bea rescued me from an accident that nearly burned up the house. I was playing with matches and set the living room drapes on fire. That's the first time I remember being rescued by Bea."

Charles Burgess, brother

Beatrice Burgess (1923-1993) spent her lifetime helping others. Born the eldest of seven children to an industrious mid-western family, she quickly learned the value of hard work and determination. She worked tirelessly helping her parents, Elsie and Chester Burgess; manage the chicken hatchery that served as the family business. Her relatives speak of a warm, intelligent woman whose greatest desire was to lend her voice to those who did not already have one.

Beatrice Burgess' life journey began in Crandall, Indiana, on September 13, 1923. As the young girl grew, she witnessed many changes in the world around her. Blessed with an adventurous willing spirit, ambition, and an innate desire to assist others, Bea honed her care taking skills within her own, large family. During the Great Depression, the Crandall, she followed her family as they moved across the country looking for work. The journey lead the family from Crandall to Bessemer, Alabama, back to Crandall and, finally, to Bowling Green, Kentucky, which became the site of the family home and the hatchery. The large family depended heavily on their eldest child, Beatrice, who did not disappoint them.

Her brother Charles remembers the important role that young Beatrice played within the family,

"Bea was involved as kind of a surrogate parent because my mother was always working with Dad in whatever he was doing, and so a lot of the child raising went to Beattie. I don't remember that my mother was ever not there, but that she was always busy."

Her brother Duane also remembers the generosity of his eldest sibling, noting that she provided trombone and voice lessons for her younger siblings and always tried to take care of them and provide them with new experiences and opportunities. It was through Beatrice that the younger Burgess' heard their first phonograph albums and encountered other cultures when Beatrice, then in college in Bowling Green, Kentucky, at Western Kentucky State College (WKSC); presently, West Kentucky University, brought home foreign missionaries. According to Duane, while their mother and father were gracious to the visitors,
the young children were fascinated and flabbergasted by their encounter with each different culture. It was the inquisitive Beatrice who provided such an opportunity. Always close to her family, Beatrice arranged for two of her younger siblings, Charles and Patricia, to attend her graduation from WKSC. This was quite an adventure for the younger Burgess' and allowed Beatrice to share her special day with family. That day in 1948, Beatrice Burgess graduated with a bachelor's degree in mathematics. This was no small feat, especially for a woman. The 1950 US Census shows that only 2.9% of females had completed four years of college.

Prior to receiving her bachelor's degree, Beatrice graduated from Bowling Green High School in Bowling Green, Kentucky. After her high school graduation, she worked at a Kenrad Radio plant in Owensboro, Kentucky. In 1944, after working for the radio company for about one year, she enlisted in the Women's Army Corp (WAC) to assist in the War effort. By the end of her military career, Beatrice Burgess had achieved the rank of sergeant. Directly after serving in the military, she went to work for the Reynolds Aluminum Company in Louisville, Kentucky. Always a wandering spirit, Beatrice soon left Kentucky to begin work in Wilkesboro, Pennsylvania, for the Girl Scouts of America as a professional Girl Scouts leader. Bea worked as an organizer and liaison between different Girl Scout groups and the Girl Scouts' home office. During her time with the Girl Scouts of America organization, Bea's adventurous side was fulfilled again with a bicycling trip to Canada. Her brother Charles remembers that she came back from that trip with new, exciting stories to share with her family. "She was very, very happy about that time in her life," he relates.

Soon after Bea stopped working for the Girl Scouts of America, she returned to the Louisville, Kentucky, area where she became intensely involved in church. These church experiences greatly influenced her, and she soon decided to become baptized. Charles Burgess relates the story of Bea's baptism.

"I remember it clearly because I was present. She was baptized in our neighbor's farm pond. With cattle and all the other things that you would not think of being a part of such a ceremony. But they were there. It was a very unusual kind of thing and both she and my next oldest sister were baptized at that time and in that place."

While her experiences in various small churches shaped her; her greatest influence came from the Broadway Methodist Church of Louisville. It was here that the work that would define her life began. While volunteering at the church, Beatrice became close friends with Mr. and Mrs. Walter Carter who were parishioners at the church. Family members relay how the couple took the young
woman under their wings, mentoring her; and, they believe, assisting her when she decided to return to college to pursue a masters degree in religious education from Scarritt College in Nashville, Tennessee. She obtained that degree in 1957.

Soon after graduating from Scarritt, Bea decided to dedicate herself full-time to the ministry of the United Methodist Church (UMC). From 1957-1968, she served as Director of Religious Education for the UMC at various churches throughout Virginia. It was also during this time that the UMC commissioned her as a Deaconess. From 1968-1971, she worked as the Dean of Women at Brevard College (a Christian liberal arts college) in Brevard, North Carolina. Spurred on by the persistent poverty in Appalachia during President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty, she soon found herself in Monroe County, southern West Virginia, in didactical ministry as a community worker for the Global Ministries of the UMC. This ministry allowed workers to delve into different communities, working within the community churches to learn first hand what the needs of the community were and to assist community members so they could be aware of what services were available to them. This type of ministry allowed the workers to help a community through basic empowerment, permitting the community to provide their own ideas for improvement. Reverend Violet Petso of Morgantown, West Virginia, was one of Bea's contemporaries and a fellow community worker. "She was concerned with every person in that kind of personal way," Reverend Petso remarks, noting that "Bea was a very religious person, a very honest, truthful, hardworking woman" with a "passion" for helping others. Reverend Paul Baldwin who knew Bea when she ministered in the Nitro-Sissonville, West Virginia, area, would concur.

"The things that she lived by were helping people…reaching out. She was always trying to reach out to people…. She wanted to get people to help themselves. I think that was her main goal - to help people, but help them to change so that they could help themselves."

As in her earlier family life, Bea was tenacious and tireless in her work for the church and for the people. Observers such as Rev. Baldwin noted the people in her churches "really depended on her." Members of her various churches tell of a diligent, hardworking person who quietly helped others. Patty Cottrell attended Humphreys United Methodist Church in Sissonville, West Virginia, during Bea's time there in the mid-1980s. Cottrell, who was a young widowed mother of two at the time remembers "Pastor Bea's" generosity and illustrated it through the following account.
"Wade Chapel had a picnic at Camden Park, and she invited my boys and me to go along. She would not take a penny and would not let me pay for anything for the boys. Did it all because, she said, 'you are doing a good job raising these young men. That's the least I could do to help.'"

Mrs. Cottrell also noted how Bea would "go that extra mile" to help people. She recounts how upon learning that Mrs. Cottrell was facing a possible grave illness; Bea was by her side the entire time. She notes that the special attention Bea lavished upon her and her family helped to bring the family closer to church; and Mrs. Cottrell always understood that in Reverend Beatrice Burgess, she knew a "sweet person [who] was there when I needed her." The influence that Bea had on the small community is immeasurable. Mrs. Cottrell remarked,

"You could tell that she had a very generous nature and that she loved people, and I just feel like that was one thing that went on to my children. They respected a pastor more after they knew Pastor Bea. They seemed to realize what a pastor was all about. You know, not only the teaching side of her but also personal side. And I just felt that she was someone that understood what I was going through."

Trent Shaffron attended the Gary United Methodist Church in Gary, West Virginia, when Bea served as minister there in the early 1990s. Like Mrs. Cottrell, Mrs. Shaffron commented on Bea's concern for her community and church members, "She was very good about visiting the sick. We have a continuous care place up here above Gary...and she would...go visit there." Mrs. Shaffron notes of Bea's preaching style, "She was a good preacher. Her delivery was good and she didn't read. Her sermons were pretty original. She was a very good speaker."

Bea's outgoing, giving nature extended beyond church members and her immediate community to her fellow ministers. Reverend Okey Harless of Nitro, West Virginia, spoke of his friendship with Bea.

"When I moved here she came to me and looked me up to tell me, 'Just want to welcome you as a neighbor and as a fellow pastor and [just let me know] if there's any way I can help.' I found [that] really special. I was at the largest church...and a lot of people...may not want to come over and do that because they would feel, 'He doesn't really need me. He's got all those people.' That's not the way she was. She knew more about the town and the area and she came over. She even had me preaching in her pulpit once. That takes a very confident person [to share the pulpit]."

He notes that Bea was not into competition but was "about caring for people and growing the spiritual life. [She was] very quiet, very gentle, but also very open...to learn, to grow. That's what makes people who they are - when you learn and you grow."
True to her community worker training, Bea was also very active outside her respective church charges. Monroe Mobil, Inc., a Monroe County Transportation System, owes a great debt to Bea's determination during the development stages of the System. Bea was also instrumental in the development of the Retired Senior Volunteer Program and the Hot Meals on Wheels Program in Monroe County. In June 1980, she received the Anise Floyd Memorial Award for her work with the Health Care Systems Agency in Monroe County where she served as vice-president of the board of directors.

In the last two decades of her life, Bea was also very active in the political arena. In addition to her pastoral duties, Bea served as the president of the Coalition on Legislation for the Aged which took her to Washington, DC, where she was invited to speak in front of congress during the Jimmy Carter administration about the health and welfare of the elderly in rural America. Bea also served on various governor appointed committees throughout the 1970s - the 1980s, including the Governor's Committee on Aging and the Governor's Committee on Transportation. She also served on the statewide Health Coordinating Council as the Governor's Council on Health Care.

Having spent her lifetime as a fierce advocate for others, Beatrice Burgess died on May 22, 1993. At the time of her death, she had spent more than four decades serving the church and advocating on the behalf of poor families, senior citizens, and the disabled. So respected were her years of advocacy that the West Virginia Senate passed a resolution recognizing her dedication, commitment, and diligence. Through it all, she remained a gentle spirit. Rev. Harless attests to Bea's hard work and the impact she had on others,

"She made a difference in the fact that she loved people and she demonstrated that love with her actions and sometimes that demonstration was with people that others would see as unlovable. I always think if when I leave this world, if people say some of the things about me that they say about her, the way she helped others and cared for people, than I would feel very much a success in what I do."

From the beginning of her life, Bea had been shaped by her years of care giving and had followed a path that would prepare her for a life of ministry and advocacy. The gentle spirit evolved into a fierce defender of the less fortunate. Never backing down and not afraid to face adversity were key characteristics of Bea. Capturing Bea's truest essence, her brother Duane surmises,
"She was willing to go to war with anybody for the people…to fight for the people who had no one to fight for them. It was quite a long transition before that could take place, but once it did, then she was willing to go to the mat with anybody over providing for the people. Spirituality is good, but not good enough when people are hungry or they are hurt…so that became her calling."

In the spring of 1994, the Burgess family established the Burgess Center for West Virginia Families and Communities through the Division of Social Work at West Virginia University. The Center serves the state of West Virginia through research, training, education, and development in order to better understand and address the problems and concerns of families and communities in West Virginia. Through the Center, Beatrice Burgess' legacy of advocacy and empowerment will continue for many years to come.

Shirley L. Stewart, MSW,
Ph.D. Candidate in Appalachian History at West Virginia University