

**Martha C. Highsmith**  
**Biography for the Presbytery of Coastal Carolina**

I grew up on our family's farm in southeastern North Carolina, and that experience of living close to the land has shaped my whole life. We all worked together, worried about the weather together, worshipped together --we made a living together. Ours is a close-knit family. Because I was always loved, I learned how to love. Farm, family, and faith were always central in my growing up, and continue to be formative today.

In our small church, I had my first experiences of leading worship and teaching. There were opportunities to read scripture, play the piano, write Christmas programs, and teach Bible School. Sunday after Sunday, the Bible soaked into me -- I am often surprised at how much scripture I know "by heart" from the King James!

My family believed strongly in education. My mother was a teacher and assistant superintendent and my grandmother and great-aunt were teachers. There was never a question for me about going to college. I loved learning! I pursued degrees in child development and taught nursery school for a number of years. Working with two-year-olds proved invaluable for many later experiences! After I moved to New England, I worked in public service and also went back to school, completing my doctoral studies at Harvard.

No matter where I was living or working, the thread running through it all was ministry. I was finally pushed by the Holy Spirit into seminary and ordination. Although I came later to pastoral ministry, I knew for a long time that I wanted to combine work in the church with work in education. What I didn't know is that I would find ministry in all my work. In fact, I was ordained to my work at Yale in 1998 by PC(USA) to a non-traditional call that was nonetheless seen as ministry. In addition to providing wonderful and challenging experiences, having a "day job" at Yale gave me the freedom to work in small churches with limited resources. For the past twenty-plus years, I combined my work at Yale with part-time pastorates in churches in Connecticut and Massachusetts. Now that I am semi-retired from Yale and have relocated to North Carolina, I am hoping to continue working with small churches.

At Yale, I was often described as a utility infielder. I was able to take on a variety of very different assignments, including overseeing sustainability initiatives, broadcast services, and public safety; working with trustees, alumni, and board committees; managing budgets and personnel in a climate of cutbacks; teaching, working with students, and handling a range of crisis and emergency situations; and being engaged in religious life and spiritual formation.

In returning to my roots on our farm, I am relishing working with my hands: gardening, quilting, and cooking. The kitchen has long been a kind of daily parable of my ministry. I am often called to those places behind the scenes, places and events where a lot of the work necessary to keep things going and to sustain people gets done. My ministry is not the formal "living room" kind but rather where folks stand around talking. Yes, I have worked in churches, but these have almost always been temporary positions. I have done substitute preaching, stated supply, interims, and transitional pastorates. I have stayed as long as several years in a church and as short as one Sunday. I have gone for extended stretches with no church to call home. But I have always had ministry. It has been messy sometimes, I have known failure and disappointment, and there have been times when the work was simply exhausting. I have hungered for substance when there was nothing but staleness and leftovers. But every now and then, I have put my heart into something new and challenging and have had it all come together in ways far better than I could have envisioned. And often this ministry of mine is a source of serenity and light.

As a "Martha," I am at home in this kitchen that is my ministry. I love creating a place of hospitality. I love feeding people with the Word. I love doing the work needed to prepare for the visit of Jesus. And I have also struggled sometimes with resentment against my sisters, and brothers, who are in the living room doing the formal entertaining. But I also claim this gospel truth as my own: "... Jesus loved Martha ..." (John 11.5). I remember that the one whose name I bear recognized and understood his calling when almost no one else did, and I am sustained and nourished by my own recognition of the Christ who comes to me.