

*Testimony to the grace of God in the life of Ruth Baker 11 Feb 1933 to 1 Jan 2019
Copied as information for MfB from OSAM Minutes:*

Ruth Baker was a remarkable member of a remarkable family. Her parents, scientists William and Hilda Sewell, worked for British Quakers in Chengdu in China, and Ruth grew up there. In 1942, when she was 9, the whole family was interned in Stanley prisoner of war camp in Hong Kong, and although it was physically hard, the children were protected by the love and resourcefulness of their parents, and of a community of Christians of many denominations. The experience shaped her world-view: her determination not to make mountains out of molehills, her passionate commitment to ecumenism, and her love of paradox, as well as her humility, her gentle wisdom, and her enjoyment of the simple pleasures of life.

On repatriation, Ruth attended Sidcot School and went on to take a First in Biochemistry at Oxford

In 1957 she married Roger Baker and after obtaining her doctorate in pharmacology she concentrated on providing a loving home for their 3 children, William, Judith and Richard, before returning to pharmacology as a tutor to medical students. Her incisive scientific mind was not wasted: Richard remembers visiting the lab with her when a young researcher brought a complex problem he could not solve. By listening intently, she was able to make a suggestion which clearly helped him. Afterwards, she turned to Richard and said, "You see! It's good to talk!"

Ruth cherished her contacts with China, taking an active role in the Quaker China Group, who valued her perceptiveness, constant support and hard work. She helped set up the non-denominational Friends of the Church in China, serving as General Secretary and organiser of conferences for many years. Ruth represented Quaker Peace and Service on the Churches Commission on Mission, and in 1983 was a member of the British Council of Churches delegation to China. Locally, she was involved in the creation of The Church in Abingdon, an ecumenical body. She served as Chair of its Christian Aid Committee and represented Friends for many years at the monthly Ministers' meeting, where she witnessed, and endeavoured to lessen, the tension between the evangelical and liberal wings of the church, and occasionally issued gentle but clear challenges.

For Ruth, the survival of the Quaker way of life and worship was paramount, and she was adept at interpreting Quakerism in an inclusive way. Her service to Quakers was exceptional and spirit-led. She and Roger were amongst those who re-started Abingdon Local Meeting in 1979. Ruth gradually became the heart of the Meeting, the person to ask for guidance on Quakerism and many other matters. Her presence and knowledge anchored the Meeting, and at the time of her death she was fulfilling numerous roles. Always welcoming to newcomers, she would be the first to provide empathy if needed. In Oxford & Swindon Area Meeting, her participation and contribution were valued highly. She always prioritised "what love requires of us" and was never afraid to break with tradition or to create a new one, serving as part of an experimental "clerking team" when in her eighties. In addition to her China interests, Ruth found herself being led to other national and international issues. She served on various committees for QPS for many years - peace work taking her to Sri Lanka and several other countries. Outside her Quaker service, Ruth gave active involvement as well as money to many other charities and causes.

Ruth's ministry, grounded in her own experience, added much to our Meetings for Worship. She found spiritual significance in ordinary events and had the capacity to draw together the threads of ministry which had gone before. There was a sense in her ministry that all was precious – people, relationships, the gathering, the room, nature, the planet. She acted on the promptings of love and truth in her heart: she recounted that once she had a dream in which she found herself hugging someone whose manner she had never found easy. When she met him the next day, she recounted her dream and then hugged him, much to his delight.

Ruth's scientist's mind did not allow her to accept things just because they were in the Bible or part of received wisdom: she was always exploring and testing them for herself, and this included her ideas about God. As a child, she believed that prayers were answered in practical ways. She described how, when the family was in a convoy crossing the Atlantic and her mother was extremely sea-sick, her fervent prayer for a storm to abate appeared to have been answered. Later she learned that another ship in the convoy had been sunk at that time, and she worried that the calm that she had prayed for had allowed the German U-boat to sink the ship, which was full of children. She decided never again to pray for specific consequences, but rather to pray for strength to cope with whatever happens. Late in life Ruth discovered that the U-boat had in fact attacked at the height of the storm, and that the calm had allowed many children to be rescued. Learning this was a relief but did not change this lifelong attitude to prayer.

Ruth said she needed Meeting for Worship to keep her on the right path and for recharging her batteries.

Few would know that she perceived herself as having many flaws in her character, as she always seemed to radiate calmness and peace. Her ready smile was genuine, her arms opening in a glorious and often needed welcome. She did not judge, but exuded a contented and accepting stillness. She had an openness to people with different world views, and great insight into the feelings behind people's words. She faced challenges with courage and a smile – offering both sense and solace. After the sudden death of her elder son William, Ruth coped with grief in a very active way, attending bereavement groups with others in Abingdon who had lost adult children, and allowing herself time to grieve.

Ruth enjoyed learning about new technology and trends from her grandchildren Daniel and Patrick. She could see the funny side and even absurdity in any situation. Although in the end her death came unexpectedly, she had often mused about death and looked forward to finding out what lay on the other side of it. Her faith in the essential goodness of God, the "infinite ocean of light and love" of Fox's vision, (QFP 19.03), made her unafraid. She was practical and down-to-earth and at the same time deeply spiritual.

Unassuming Brilliance" (for Ruth Baker) by Iain Strachan

Mourning your departure,
Allowing sadness to cut across the
chest
With that sudden ache of loss,
I also celebrate the gain
With gladness, of knowing you.
Your unassuming brilliance
Will never dim; your wisdom,
Kindness, humour, inspiration
The twinkle in your eye,

The generous joy in your voice,
Your amusement at the absurd
Without being enraged by it,
The many conversations,
Enriched by your keen scientist's mind
And the years of experience and giving
Will stay with me for ever.
I can't believe that this is all:
so I shall remember in silence,
and give thanks.