

# Phyllis Wallace: The woman behind *Woman to Woman*

## Encouraging the weary with words

By Beth Foreman, Features Editor

Tighten your seat belts and keep your arms and legs inside the vehicle as we take a ride into Phyllis Wallace's high-energy, colorful world. The host of The Lutheran Hour's *Woman to Woman* radio show, Phyllis talks fast, thinks faster, and jets around the country encouraging women and men wherever she lands. She's a wife, mother of four, grandmother (Oma) to nine. "I mainly think of myself as a wife, a mom, and an Oma with a radio show on the side!" Yet when it comes to serving the Lord, she pauses frequently — and takes a stand.

### **You are so filled with energy, what's your "secret"?**

I start my day the Jewish way — at night! I had four children, and every night I'd go to bed thinking, "I'm gonna die!" But I thought, no, I'm just going to spend a little time with Jesus because it's quiet. And so I did. And it worked so well because it energized me! It gave me a great night's sleep. I begin in the Word; I'm quiet, of course, and I'm listening through that Word and thanking God for the restoration through the gift of sleep into which I drift! I sometimes fall asleep before my head hits the feathers.

When I wake up, I do the Martin Luther thing: I make the sign of the cross on the forehead and the breast to remind myself of whose I am and in whose power I will be and move today. And then I add, "Please help me make room in my busyness." Because if Satan can't make you bad, he makes you busy.



The perfect day is when I'm organized enough to grab the carrots, throw them in the juicer with a fresh apple and some fresh parsley, and have carrot juice and oatmeal with Michigan honey. It's great chemistry for me! And then I go off to encourage the weary with words — His!

### **So you really are like every other woman trying to juggle a busy schedule.**

Yes! I used to pride myself on keeping so many plates in the air. It's a badge of honor for women today to say, "Oh! I'm so exhausted! If you knew what I had on my schedule for today!" And we sort of play, "Poor me!" But we really are bragging about it.

I'm a too-much-never-enough-more-is-always-better person. I learned about "busy" from feeding six people three meals a day. That's eighteen meals a day! Four kids help you order your life, and you learn to die to self, just for openers. And I frankly thought the 200 diapers a week were going to last forever. I thought, "There's got to be more than this! I'm so exhausted!"

So, I prayed, "Something more, please! Something else!" And out of the blue, I got two invitations. One

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was to be in a women's tennis league. I was an avid singles player. It was so much fun! I got energized!

And then a neighbor invited me to a Bible study in her home. There were eight of us sitting around a table, and it was so encouraging. That planted a seed for me to start a Bible study in my home. The rest is history.

### **S**o tell us a little about that history.

I hit the busy button with four kids and segued into a Bible study that I started at church called "Wednesday Women" in Collinsville, Illinois, the Horseradish Capital of the World, where there's a hot time in the old town every night!

And I did that for ten years. One hundred women came from 14 different church backgrounds.

I was learning how to juggle. I was still making everything from scratch because I just have this thing about good food and cooking. I love it! So I was very busy. Actually too busy, but I didn't see that then.

I didn't know that God was growing me all along through this Bible study for what I ended up doing later in life, having this radio show. Writing the lessons and teaching, these things strengthened my faith and taught me about balancing my life. Eventually.

### **A**nd how did you start speaking outside of the Horseradish Capital?

That's what was so amazing about this Wednesday women's group. I was a family therapist and worked in counseling, but I began seeing results I'd never seen before. Once I started pulling in the Word of God through this Bible study and using the counseling, I saw a lot of healing, and I thought, "Wow! God, You are so great!"

I started telling stories and giving talks about issues for women. And one day, in the 1980s, I was invited to speak at an LWML convention where there were at least a thousand people! I was so nervous because I wasn't used to such a huge group! I didn't exactly have eye contact, but they were out there, and they laughed at the right times and encouraged me. At the end, I looked out and they were standing up and clapping. And many of them were crying. When I got home, I started getting letters from people who had been there asking for the title of my book.

Well, I didn't have a book.

And you know what? It's interesting how Satan totally corrupts whatever's good. I was quite famil-

iar with that. I know him pretty well! When you are on the front lines for Jesus Christ, Satan goes around your bed twice at night. Well, an interesting thing happened to teach me that again. Every session at that LWML convention was recorded so women could buy them. One session didn't get recorded. Mine.

I thought, oh boy, I've really got some opposition from Satan here. Whew! So what do I do with that? I dove into the Word some more.

That LWML experience helped me hear another call in my life. So I wrapped up my Wednesday women's group. Passed the reins on.

### **A**nd then you started juggling some new plates?

I was invited to talk to people at KFUE radio, the oldest continuous, Christian broadcasting station in America. They wanted to start women's programming. I told them I didn't know anything about radio and I talk too fast!

And now 1,400 shows later ...

That's where I really learned to juggle. I did a *daily* show for 600 programs. Then I went over to Lutheran Hour Ministries. After a year, LHM said, "Let's try for 36 stations."

I said, "Yeah, right. I'm on one station. Thirty-six? Impossible!"

Eventually, at our peak, we were on 420 stations, and now we are on XM Radio and the Web around the world. I used to go out and speak 55 times a year, and I'd say "no" to 55 opportunities. I could never have imagined that!

### **T**hat's serious juggling. How do you do it?

Well, I have learned to toss all the plates in the air and grab onto the ones that go with my mission, which is to encourage the weary with words. That helps sort through all the interruptions and helps me receive affirmation that I'm on the right track for the day.

I always ask God to make me tenderhearted so I can hear if somebody needs me who is not in my plans for the day. And I say that particular prayer for a very big reason. Years ago, a neighbor woman said, "I would give anything to talk with you today. I would scrub floors just to talk to you!" This was when my children were little and I had no time to breathe! But I did not hear her cry for help. And then she killed herself. I didn't hear her cry.

**Many women can relate to situations like this. We get so busy; we don't take time to see where we can take a stand for Him and be there for someone else.**

The flip side of that is a tendency to say “bring it on” and, with open arms, embrace the endless opportunities to say “yes” — to love being needed and useful and sometimes used. I have a black belt in co-dependency, so for the last 15 years I've had to seek the Lord's guidance to think twice about wanting to fix you, whether you want me to or not.

Taking a stand for Christ is not seeing every need as a call from God on your life! It's knowing Jesus, standing for what He stands for, and finding the ways He matches you up with His gifts to serve the Body of Christ and the world.

God's Word emboldened me with the verse on which I began the *Woman to Woman* show, Acts 4:29: *Now Lord, consider their threats and enable your servant to speak your Word with great boldness.* My knees may tremble and my voice quiver, but I beg the Holy Spirit to help me stand and not waver on the things that break His heart. That helps determine the topics, the guests, and the direction the radio show takes.

Every woman has things going on in her life, and our heavenly Father wants to be there as part of it, to allow us to feel that tug from Him. That's where we take a stand and clearly articulate God's offer of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

**Tell us more about how *Woman to Woman* takes a stand.**

I want to communicate a 1<sup>st</sup> Century faith to a 21<sup>st</sup> Century woman! *Woman to Woman* (W2W) is real-life talk, so the listener can put herself into the story. Topics are chosen so she'll answer the question, “Do I care?” with a “Yes!”

Women want their pain acknowledged, not dismissed or downsized. Enter W2W, not to play “poor me” but to teach her to be proactive versus reactive. W2W notices where she's hurting, puzzled — reaching out by reaching back with “talk you can trust!”

The W2W show always has to keep the focus on “What difference does it make if you're a Christian or not?” — or there's no reason to do the show. To get great ideas from well-known personalities simply rearranges the furniture in hell. Every woman has things going on in her life, and our heavenly Father wants to be there as part of it, to allow us

to feel that tug from Him. That's where we take a stand and clearly articulate God's offer of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

**What have you learned about yourself through your radio show?**

Having interviewed over 1,400 people, you can imagine the insights that God's Word has let come through my brain and my heart and take for myself. Life has become one huge counseling session for me. I've learned that every stumbling block God allows in my life can be a stepping-stone.

I remember writing a Bible study on 1 Peter and realizing, “Boy, that's cool!” It was clear that Satan throws us a stumbling block to trip us. We couldn't possibly stand in our strength when that stumbling block is in our way. But God says to us, “Step up on that stumbling block! It's all going somewhere!” Knowing this has helped me take a stand for Him, especially during the rough times.

When I see the impossible things He has done with me professionally and personally — I have so many stories! — I realize that I'm just reporting for duty; I let Him do the math. And then it all adds up to a life of service that counts for something.

When something bad happens, and it always does, I ask Him for the strength and wisdom to get through it, totally aware that He is at my side and that this season of my life is going to end up in a show or a talk or a book someday! That's how His grace is at work in me.

And I'm learning a lot about resting in the stand that Jesus took for me when He hung on the cross. It didn't look like He was standing. It looked like it was all over. And sometimes for me, it looks like it's all over in this situation or that. And yet, I'm standing because He stood for truth and eternity and for me!

**Tell us about your background.**

My heritage is rich, in terms of those who took a stand for Christ. My great-grandfather, many times removed, was the Reverend Ernst Kyle who fled Germany for religious freedom, on one of three ships headed for the USA. One sank in transit. Pastor Kyle was the Lutheran chaplain on the *Johann Jorge*. When they landed in New Orleans, he asked every passenger to kneel on the ground. He thanked God for safe passage and asked for strength to stand firm on the Word as they shared it in this new land. He

prayed for me and what I do today. This models for me to pray for generations that follow, to stand up for Jesus!

**You are a radio “personality,” so you must have always been outgoing.**

No! I was very shy as a child. I literally hung on my mother’s skirts. And in high school [New Trier High School in Winnetka, Illinois], I prayed for the confidence to speak with more than two people at a time. I didn’t raise my hand in class. I had no social life. I didn’t go to proms or on dates.

I finally came out of that. I think that’s true for a lot of women. I wasn’t comfortable in my own skin because I compared myself with others. Well, that makes you fall down frequently! Pretty tough to take a stand then!

I always imagined that others had the beauty, the bucks, and the brains! But God replaced my yearning for self-confidence with Christ-confidence. He took a slow-learner and transformed her into an encourager.

It was a natural transition for me. God has this way of teaching us and then speaking through us to teach our lessons to others. We do that 2 Corinthians 1:4 thing, where He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others with the comfort we received from God. So we just pass it on! I love that passing on part because once you get it, you’ve got something to share. And people are hungry for it!

You don’t have to have the beauty, bucks, and brains. It’s not that you check your brains at the door to be a Christian, but you don’t need what the world says counts. God is counting on you to take a stand. And that’s all He needs.

**Which one of your interviews best illustrates someone taking a stand?**

I thank God that in every show someone takes a stand for Him. I cannot single out one show as an example because that’s not fair to the others. A fly-by of that would be Debbye Turner, Miss America 1990, who at the age of 15 decided that anyone who met her would meet Jesus Christ in her! Dick Swenson, Ph.D., M.D. wrote several incredible books, including *In Search of Balance*, and spells out how each of us can take a stand that makes a difference in living productive lives and for eternity. Programs about abuse teach listeners how to take a stand against that evil. Adam



Francisco, Ph.D., and others speak brilliantly and convincingly about how Easter Freedom is different from Islam. The list goes on. Stay tuned! [The last two years of W2W interviews can be heard online at [womantowomanradio.com](http://womantowomanradio.com).]

**If you had to live your life over again, what one thing would you do differently?**

I’d stand up and speak up sooner for Jesus than I did!

**What’s one of your daily challenges?**

I’m easily distracted, line up too many projects at one time, and think I can pull it off. Now that we know multi-tasking is really a myth, that the brain can only do ONE thing at a time, I hope to stop fooling myself. For example, I’ll be writing a *Woman to Woman* interview on my computer, really into it, and plan for a “recovery break.” I should wear a sign that reads, “This woman breaks for *any* excuse at all!” because I break also when I remember to answer an e-mail, or to check the best flight deals for an upcoming personal appearance, or to write down an idea that pops into my head. I have to monitor my distractions all the time or I’d never finish a thing. I sometimes think that without deadlines, I might never get anything done!

**If you could do anything right now, money or time is no object, what would you do?**

Ah, I’d go to our fourth-generation family cottage on Lake Michigan for several weeks and write a book — a collection of my never-before-written Jesus stories — requested by publishing houses and individuals. Thanks for the reminder!

## What is the price of taking a stand?

Standing firm comes with benefits, some of which take us way out of our comfort zones! Remember, Satan circles our beds twice when we volunteer for the front lines in the battle for the soul. I have found it frightening, boring, tedious, impossible. I also find it miraculous that God will use my life successes and failures to reveal Himself to me and to others.

I expect opposition, and still it catches me by surprise. I realize everything that happens to me, at some point, will be fair game for inclusion in a show, a written piece, a talk, or personal counsel. Even in the worst moments, that realization helps me step aside and watch expectantly to see how God will work it out. After all, standing firm is His work in and through me. Through it ALL, He strengthens my faith.

## And what has been the gift?

Joy! I am keenly aware I occupy sacred space on this earth, standing here in Jesus' Name, created for His sake. As a result, the spin that "this is all about me" fades away. I feel the tug on my roots, grounded in Christ through my Baptism, that calls me to trust My Savior to be stronger in me than the winds that prevail against me. In that encounter, whether I move on triumphantly or defeated and alone, my heavenly Father's grip steadies me, carries me through.

And slowly, the joy of tomorrows in His name, whether here or on the other side, become piercing, powerful, and peaceful — all at once. That joy is never more evident than when we take a stand for Him.

## Lydia Spoke Up — and You?

Lydia [Acts 16] stood out in the marketplace as the top seller of purple. Today, her Fortune 500 Company headlines would highlight her extravagance and focus. How fascinating that God chose Lydia as the **first** Christian convert in Europe! Lydia worshipped God, but she worked with people who worshipped other gods. She was drawn to Christ through the Holy Spirit in Paul, who was called to Macedonia in a vision to take a stand and speak up! Even without a temple, on the Sabbath, Paul and Silas didn't say, "Oops, wrong place, we're outa here!" They witnessed to women. Not exactly the way men and women hung out in those days. But it was exactly what God called them to do.

The Lord opened Lydia's heart to respond to Paul's message (Acts 16:14). She put aside, "Will other merchants think I'm weird? Will purple cloth sales go down? Let me check with my broker!" She put Christ first and stood firm to speak up. Lydia was baptized with her household and said to Paul, "If you consider me a believer in the Lord, come and stay at my house!" She wanted more **message** from the messengers. She helped encourage new converts. This busy woman booked time in her daily planner and took time from a thriving business for a few missionaries. The Holy Spirit was feeding her spirit so the Light of Christ would not go out on these new shores.

God proves Himself, giving Lydia something to speak up about as He works through His servants to cast a spirit of divination out of the slave girl who told fortunes for money for her owners. The consequences: Paul and Silas were tossed into jail for that one. But theirs was not a typical response to being put in stocks. Locked in one position, they spoke up and sang out their "firm stand" in Christ!

Then an earthquake. Stocks went down that day! The jailer would kill himself to avoid certain death for fleeing prisoners. But Paul and Silas witnessed to him in his hysteria. When he said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" we hear my favorite sound byte as a broadcaster, Acts 16:31b: *Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, you and your household!* That's speaking up!

Next a police escort out of town. Where do they go? To Lydia's for lunch. The LWML response — Lunch With Me at Lydia's — the open-door invitation to take a stand with others who speak up! Lydia becomes a spiritual leader Paul never forgets!

How does God get your attention to speak up, as you stand firm on His Word? Do you feel that nudge to say something to your husband, sister, child, neighbor, or boss? That's God's "speak up, we stand in this together" tug!

We can't predict how people will respond to Jesus Christ through our firm stand. Is it ever a waste of time? Is it always worth the risk? Christ with you, a great way to speak up and find out!

*Phyllis was born in Pittsburgh to Carl and Agnes Muhlenbruch, and raised in Wilmette, Illinois. She holds a BA in Sociology and a Master's degree in Educational Psychology. An author of devotional materials, Phyllis sits on the LCFS of Illinois Board of Trustees and the Grace Place Advisory Board and keynotes retreats and seminars. Married to attorney Richard Wallace, they enjoy four adult children and nine grandchildren, all of whom contribute to the way she takes a stand!*

To read additional excerpts from this interview with Phyllis Wallace, go to the Quarterly page at [www.lwml.org](http://www.lwml.org).

