

# Faith on Sixteenth Street

## Carolyn McKinstry



**Carolyn McKinstry stands in front of a window given to Sixteenth Street Baptist Church by children from Wales. Right after the bombing of the church, McKinstry witnessed how another window in the church stayed intact except for the face of Christ. Today you can view the window in its restored state, [www.16thstreetbaptist.org](http://www.16thstreetbaptist.org). Meet McKinstry Feb. 19. See Calendar page 29.**

*"All along this Christian journey, I want Jesus to walk with me. I want Jesus to walk with me. All along this Christian journey, I want Jesus to walk with me. In my troubles, walk with me. When I'm dying, walk with me. All along this Christian journey, I want Jesus to walk with me. I want Jesus to walk with me."*

Song Carolyn McKinstry sang as a child on sleepless nights after the bombing and a song that remains a favorite today. Found in her new book, *While the World Watched* (Tyndale).



Photo: Birmingham, Ala. Public Library Archives, Cat. 85.1.9.

**F**aith in Christ is what Carolyn McKinstry says sustained her through some difficult life experiences which most of us cannot even imagine. McKinstry has not only survived, but she has also chosen to share the joy she finds when trusting God in the toughest challenges.

I recently had the opportunity to sit down with McKinstry in one of her favorite places, Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham. It's the church in which she grew up and still attends. It's the church she helped restore and obtain status as a National Historic Landmark. It's the church where she came close to losing her life on Sept. 15, 1963. Moments after she left her four friends in the restroom to attend to her church responsibility of collecting Sunday school reports, a bomb exploded and killed all four girls, including McKinstry's best friend Cynthia Wesley. The staircase 14-year-old Carolyn McKinstry had just climbed to enter the sanctuary was gone. The sense of security Sixteenth Street Baptist Church had given McKinstry vanished.

So how is this church still a favorite place? Carolyn McKinstry has chosen to hold fast to the good memories and share the bad one in hopes of helping others find the peace she has, and the security she now feels inside her church – not because of the building itself, but because of the Spirit of God that resides there.

### The WORD

McKinstry has seen God's Word speak directly to His children in their greatest time of need. On the day of the bombing, McKinstry saw posted on the board outside the church the title of the pastor's sermon, "A Love that Forgives," based on Luke 23:34. In her darkest moment, Carolyn heard God speak in Jesus' own words from the cross, "Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing," McKinstry explains, "In our darkest hour, here in the church or anywhere else, God requires us to forgive." She adds that if we are listening, God gives us the message we need, and it comes straight from His Word.

### Restoration

Because of what she witnessed, McKinstry is often asked to share her story. On the 25th and 30th Anniversary of the bombing, she appeared on *Oprah*. McKinstry has been interviewed by *USA Today*, *Life* magazine, *20/20*, CNN and MSNBC and spoken all across the country. "I think a lot of my healing came from being able to tell the story over and over. God has allowed me to see there are a lot of wonderful loving people out there in the world, and God can change hearts." McKinstry knew God had called her to share more than a recount of the bombing. "The reconciliation message is the message that is nailed to my heart so to speak... When I talk about the bombing, I always say, 'Here's what God says about it.'" McKinstry emphasizes, "Our greatest commandment is to love God and our second greatest is to love our neighbor. Our neighbor is anyone in need.

**Carolyn McKinstry lost four friends in the bombing of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, Denise McNair (11), Carole Robertson (14), Addie Mae Collins (14), and Cynthia Wesley (14).**

It says in Romans 13:9 'Love your neighbor as yourself;' followed by 'Love does no harm to its neighbor (13:10).'" Her words have healed



**McKinstry, age 2, poses in front of her home in North Birmingham. Less than a year after the church bombing, McKinstry was in her bed when her bedroom window was blown out by a bomb that exploded across the street. Carolyn's mom still lives in the home near ACIPCO.**

wounds, including her own. "I think that my faith in people was down in the dumps, and He knew I needed to see there were good people," recalls McKinstry. "And people aren't good because of what color they are."

A desire to restore the physical structure of the aging Sixteenth Street Baptist Church gave McKinstry further soul restoration. "Everybody I asked to help said yes," remembers McKinstry of the \$4 million dollar campaign she spearheaded with Dr. Neal Berte. "What I felt in my spirit was Birmingham was saying, 'You know that we never condoned what happened. We didn't know how to fix it, and we can't bring the girls back, but we can try to make things right.' When we

did that campaign, there was no way I could not acknowledge and know hearts had changed."

**Birmingham's Denise George authored with McKinstry, *While The World Watched* (Tyndale). "It was the hardest book I've ever written but the most rewarding and fulfilling," says George who has written 25 books. See a review of the book on page 14.**



## Rejuvenation

When McKinstry had the opportunity to retire early from her position as a program manager at BellSouth, she began to sense God calling her to learn even more about Him. In her late 50s McKinstry enrolled and obtained her Masters of Divinity from Beeson Divinity School. As a part of her studies, Carolyn revisited a painful place from her past, Princeton Hospital. At 9 years old, Carolyn was given the duty of watching over her dying grandmother in the basement of the hospital. At that time, this was the only place in the hospital black patients could receive medical care. At Beeson McKinstry chose to complete a chaplaincy internship at Princeton. "There was always this magnet, something pulling me back there. It felt like I was exactly where I was supposed to be. I almost had to do it to make my peace with it... What a joy to be able to reassure, watch over and pray for patients and families." After graduation, McKinstry returned to Princeton as a staff chaplain.



**Carolyn McKinstry with her husband Jerome, who she says was vital in her healing process, providing her with unconditional love. She adds he is particularly proud of her degree from Beeson. "I don't tell people I'm a minister but he does," says McKinstry.**

Over the past year, McKinstry has faced another life challenge, a battle with breast cancer. Even in illness, McKinstry finds gratitude. "I think God gave me this time really for me to sit down and look at all

**Continued on page 28.**



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**High School Standout: Grace Kyle**

**What sports are you involved in?** Cross Country, Soccer

**Who would you consider to be your spiritual mentors, and how have they influenced your life?**

First, I would definitely give credit to both my parents. From a very young age they taught me the importance of God in all that I do. I've been so blessed to have grown up in an environment where God is at the center. Secondly, I have found many spiritual mentors within my friends at youth group. It has been amazing to be surrounded by kids my age, with similar struggles and know that they are all striving for the same thing I am.



**Grace Kyle,  
Homewood  
High School**

**What are your favorite aspects of FCA?**

FCA is a great opportunity to grow in faith with my peers. I enjoy having wonderful speakers who take their experiences and share what they've learned and how they've been changed. It is inspiring to watch my fellow students worship the Lord with no restraints. I love the feeling of community in Christ that FCA provides for me weekly.

**What are your plans after high school?**

I plan to go to college and study foreign relations. I hope to travel throughout the U.S. and around the world doing mission work and learning about other cultures. I am excited to see what God has in store for me in the years to come!

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*Carolyn McKinstry* **Continued from page 17.**



**Carolyn (on right) with her grandfather, Rev. E.W. Burton and cousin Dolores. Burton was a huge faith influence on McKinstry's life, reminding her often of her strength in Christ.**

I had been doing. I've really asked God to give me the wisdom to choose those things that contribute to His Kingdom, help me distinguish between what is dead and what gives life and give me the courage to do that." It has also given her joy and thanksgiving to see her three adult children, all successful young professionals, love her so completely. "You know what you've tried to instill in your children and you hope you've been a good mother, but I was actually able to see it in action."

Carolyn McKinstry clearly and humbly demonstrates how faith is a gift and how faith is lived out. She plans to return to Princeton next fall as chaplain and continue to speak to audiences everywhere about the love of Christ.

— Laurie Stroud

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