

# Women in International Ministry: Doreen M. McFarlane—All Roads Lead to China

By Ana Gobledale

FOR DOREEN MCFARLANE, life is summed up in Matthew 6:21, “*For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.*” She explains that this verse “reminds us to appreciate what is really important in life: our love, our faith, and the opportunity to be of service in this world.” Looking at Doreen’s life, I see a strong, passionate and faithful woman following the path of love, faith and service. Her passion for music, the church and adventure have found exciting and impressive expressions.

Accomplished as she is, Doreen knows her inspiration and encouragement come from God, “*O love that will not let me go.*” And her journey embodies the act of returning to God “*the life I owe, that in your ocean depths its flow may swell with ardor true,*” to quote one of her favorite hymns (by George Matheson, 1882, *The New Century Hymnal* #485).

As you follow Doreen on her life-journey, may you find inspiration and encouragement for your own journey along the path of love, faith and service.

Doreen’s life-journey commenced in Winnipeg, Canada, where she was active in the United Church of Canada. When asked who influenced her as a child, she recalls, “The Sunday School superintendent (a woman) at Home Street United Church in Winnipeg was so sweet and kind to me. I will never forget the attention she paid to me.”

The next step of her journey stemmed from Doreen’s love of music and led her to be an opera and concert singer touring the world. Then she and her husband, Michael, sang as a “duet team” for the Community Concert Association of New York, and together they sang their way across the oceans for a year on a cruise ship.

Doreen lives her life with enthusiasm and passion, evident in the next step of her journey—her leap into ministry, teaching and writing. She continues, “Then I went to seminary, got ordained in the UCC and pushed on and earned the Ph.D. [in Bible] while my husband Michael was getting his second masters

and getting ordained himself. I served as pastor in four churches over 15 years in Illinois, Florida, and Connecticut. During this time I always taught in seminaries (both online and face-to-face).” In the midst of this active life, Doreen has written three books: *The People are Holy: the History and Theology of Free Church Worship*, co-written with Graydon Snyder (Mercer Publishing 2005), *Weddings with Today’s Families in Mind* (Pilgrim Press 2007) and *Funerals with Today’s Families in Mind* (Pilgrim Press 2008).

In 2006, Doreen’s journey took another leap, this time with Global Ministries. “Michael and I were both considering a new challenge and thought about the various opportunities our church had to offer. International mission seemed just right.” So she and Michael crossed the ocean together, heading to China.

“Working in China has been an adventure,” Doreen exclaims. For three years Doreen taught Hebrew, Greek, and Biblical interpretation at Nanjing Union Theological Seminary, one of China’s eighteen Christian seminaries. She reflects, “I was happy to teach seminary courses in China because I was truly needed and was pleased to learn from the faith journeys of my students and fellow teachers.” Then she and Michael moved to Shanghai where Doreen taught American Religion and Culture in the Philosophy Department at Shanghai University and Michael worked for the Shanghai YMCA, where they both offered music related activities.

Reflecting on her year in Shanghai, Doreen says, “China is a very ancient place and has many layers of history. We thought we knew a bit after a year in China. After three years, we realize we know little or nothing. On the other hand, there is also much they do not know about our culture. I have the opportunity to teach Chinese graduate students about who we are as Americans—our faith, our hopes and our dreams. It is my prayer that my work will help build bridges between our nations as we hope for and dream of a world where there is peace for all.”

**"In mission,  
we learn  
and grow  
and become  
citizens of  
the world."**

**—Doreen M.  
McFarlane**



**What is the most rewarding part of your work?**

"The best part of my work is the people I meet and the many new and lasting friendships being made! The Chinese people are a joy—open, warm, sincere, and with a good sense of humor. The people here who are Christians really live their faith and I have learned much from them in this regard."

**What is the most challenging aspect of your work?**

"Mandarin is a very difficult language because of the written characters (each a work of art) and the tone system which means a word can have up to four or five meanings, depending on how it is pronounced. We get by somehow, but it is usually the simplest thing that becomes monumental: getting the taxi driver to actually stop, purchasing a carton of milk and trying to figure out if it's skim or whole, or making a phone call! You can imagine the rest."

Through the joy of relationships and the frustrations of limited language skills, what difference does Doreen's faith make? Crossing the oceans singing on cruise ships, writing a book on funerals for the modern family, or communicating with a taxi driver in Shanghai, what keeps Doreen on the path of love, faith and service?

**The Bible...**While Matthew 6:21 is Doreen's favorite New Testament verse, she remarks, "Being a Biblical scholar, of course I have two [favorite verses]: one from each testament! Old Testament (Hebrew Bible): Isaiah 55:1, 'Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come,

buy and eat!' The reason I love this verse is that everything we need can be found in God's word and, at the same time, God somehow provides not only for our needs but is generous beyond imagination!"

**Music...**"I am absolutely crazy about good hymns. I used to memorize them as a child, and know them as if they were Bible verses. They guided my life and still offer what I consider good theology. The Chinese sing many of our old favorites and also have magnificent hymns of their own that address many issues we in America do not think of such as 'Honor the Elderly' or 'Arduous though our work may be, it will glorify the Lord.' Michael and a soprano seminary student, Gloria Wang, recently made a CD of Chinese hymns sung in Chinese and English."

**Spiritual Disciplines...**"My dear father taught me that every breath can be a prayer. I try to remember that we are not alone, and my students remind me often that God has a plan for each of us. I like to think that I am doing my part in that good plan. I also try to remember that the people who are in our lives are sent by God, and I am called to love and serve them according to their needs. I am strengthened spiritually every time I have the opportunity to engage with Chinese people in conversations about faith and theology, in worship together, and in prayer with them. My faith journey has taught me that God is with us wherever we are. We are always teaching and learning from the people around us as we go through life together."

**Walking with Christ...**When asked to share a time when she met Christ/God face-to-face, Doreen responds: "In May 2008, there was a devastating earthquake in Sichuan province of China, about 1000 miles away from where we were living. The entire nation went into alert and also into mourning as they slowly began pulling people from the rubble. Thousands of school children were lost. In China, where couples are allowed to have only one child, this was beyond any suffering we could imagine. Our seminary mood changed that first day, and the pain was evident among students and teachers alike. On the second evening after the earthquake, we attended a special worship





*Doreen with her Hebrew class in Nanjing Seminary. See the Hebrew on the board!*

service led by our own students. Although we did not understand the language, we shared that night the language of deep suffering, of profound human love, and also of real trust. We, who gathered that night, knew Jesus Christ and experienced the power of the Holy Spirit and the trust that God would somehow, in time, 'wipe away every tear from our eyes.' It was a privilege beyond description to be with these precious people at this moment of crisis."

Today Doreen and Michael live in Canada where she continues to follow her path of love, faith and service. Currently, Doreen writes and sings professionally with her husband. Video streaming and upcoming concerts are posted at [www.parlordiscs.com](http://www.parlordiscs.com). To quote Doreen, "The two of us are open to whatever adventures life may bring our way."

### Prayer Points:

- Students at Nanjing Union Theological Seminary and Shanghai University
- Doreen and Michael and other Global Ministries missionaries transitioning back to North America after years of international service
- People in Sichuan province of China, Japan, New Zealand, and Haiti building new lives after horrific earthquake destruction

### Reflection & Discussion Questions:

- Doreen claims that love, faith and service are important in life. How are love, faith and service part of your life journey?
- Referring to Matthew 6:21, what is your treasure? Where is your heart?
- How has music been important in your life? What are your favorite hymns? Why?

### Opportunities for Action:

- Create a bulletin board to help your congregation learn about China and our mission connections there. Contact Xiaoling Zhu at Global Ministries to learn more.
- Print Mandarin characters for some key Christian concepts, e.g. love, peace, unity, and share them with your Sunday school.
- Contact Amnesty International and learn what human rights issues China is facing and how you can witness on behalf of justice.



Currently living in London, UK, Ana Goble Dale serves as co-pastor, with her husband Tod, at St. Andrew's United Reformed Church, Brockley. They are Mission Associates with Global Ministries, having previously served in Australia, Zimbabwe and South Africa.

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