



The Rev. Dr. Letty Mandeville Russell

submitted by Shannon Clarkson

The Rev. Dr. Letty Mandeville Russell was ordained in the Presbyterian Church in 1958 upon her graduation from Harvard Divinity School. She had been serving as the Christian Education Director of the East Harlem Protestant Parish from 1953-55, before beginning her theological education. Following her ordination, she continued serving as a pastor in the Parish until 1968 when she completed her doctorate in Mission Theology and Ecumenics.

Through the years she continued to serve the church on numerous committees and studies, both in the US and with the World Council of Churches. During her tenure at Yale Divinity School she was an advisor of Presbyterian students planning to enter ordained ministry. When she retired from teaching, she began receiving the pension she had earned for her years in the parish and her continued ministry and her participation in the pension plan.

Upon her death in 2007, I, as her civil union partner, received a letter from the Board of Pensions requesting that I return the most recent pension check that had been sent to her. I was told I would not be eligible to receive her pension, as the Presbyterian Church at that time did not recognize gay marriage for preaching elders. In 2013, following the Supreme Court decision in the Windsor case, the US Government ruled that same sex partners were eligible to receive their partner's pension.

In March of 2015 the Presbyterian Church approved the marriage of same sex partners. Not long thereafter, they also approved awarding pensions to spouses of same sex pastors. When I read this, I inquired with the Board of Pensions if this ruling would be applicable to those surviving partners whose pastor spouses had died earlier. The response was that only those persons whose spouses died after the ruling would be eligible, unlike the Federal Government, which did approve the right of spouses to receive their partner's social security payment, retroactive to the date of the Windsor declaration. Despite numerous appeals, the Presbyterian Pension Board would not change their ruling.

That the Federal Government would take a more merciful stance on this issue than the Presbyterian Church seems quite ironic. One might suppose that the church was afraid aligning their policy with the Windsor ruling would cost too much money, with the presumption that many gay and lesbian pastors had died since 2015, but this was not the case. Although Letty's life of service to the Presbyterian Church was recognized when she was alive, her wish to provide for her spouse was not granted in death. Had I been a male, this story would have a different ending.

Respectfully submitted,
Shannon Clarkson