



Elizabeth "Betsy" Howard Russell

October 11, 1940 - September 21, 2025

Elizabeth (Betsy) Howard Russell died peacefully in her sleep in her home in Asheville, NC at the age of 84 after a long struggle with Parkinson's disease. She is survived by her husband, the Rev. Dr. Rollin O. Russell, her children and their spouses, Bethany Baker (Joseph), Amy Russell (Michael Finch), and Stephen Russell (Scott Neeley), Joseph Hilliard (Lucy), as well as her five grandchildren: Margit Briggs (Jordan Samuels), Austin Baker (Savannah), Ryan Neeley Russell, Emma Finch and Benjamin Finch.

Betsy Russell was born in Mobile, Alabama, where she graduated from Murphy High School. She received a full scholarship and graduated Magna Cum Laude from Vanderbilt University with a major in English. While at Vanderbilt, she appeared in the play, *The Lady's Not for Burning*, and met her future husband, Rollin Russell, who took her on their first date to a Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. speech.

Betsy later completed her master's degree in French at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, TX. She taught AP English and French at Round Rock High School in Texas and at Williams High School in Burlington, North Carolina. She was a professor of English for 2 years at Elon University. Other notable contributions were that she was the Field Director on the Texas State Campaign for Jimmy Carter's presidential election and helped him win the state of Texas. She was a founding board member in the establishment of the Women's Resource Center in Burlington, North Carolina. Betsy served on the Alamance County Women's Political Caucus, and she was the Data

Manager for the Orange County Election Precinct. She served as president of the board of directors of Allied Churches of Alamance County, providing meals, shelter, and resources for the homeless and abuse victims.

Those who knew her best are thankful for her kindness, compassion, and hospitality, her excellence in teaching, and her fierce commitment to integrity, equality, and justice.

A memorial service to celebrate her life will be held on her 85th birthday, Saturday, October 11, at 1:30pm at First Congregational United Church of Christ of Asheville, NC. In lieu of flowers or gifts, we ask that donations be made in memory of Betsy Russell to the Women's Resource Center in Alamance County (<https://wrcac.org/>) or to First Congregational United Church of Christ of Asheville (<https://uccasheville.org>).

Previous Events

Celebration of Life

OCT 11. 1:30 PM (ET)

First Congregational Church
20 Oak Street
Asheville, NC
<http://www.uccasheville.org/>

Tribute Wall

“ I came to First Reformed UCC in Burlington as a youth pastor in September 1996. My grandmother died in December of that year. Betsy was the only person in that congregation to send me a card.

Once a Senior in High School asked me to proofread her three essays for a prestigious scholarship. Two essays were fine. One was awful. I asked her to start over. She started crying. This upset me so much that I cried all the way from Burlington to Browns Summit where we were meeting for Clergy Renewal. I ran into Betsy first thing and exclaimed "I made Emily cry!" Without missing a beat she said "Oh, Beth. Seniors in High School cry all the time." - That was great consolation to me. And funny as hell.

I must mention Betsy's faithful friendship to Betty Lawrie who, at the age of 96, declined to make the trip to Asheville.

Rollin and Betsy graciously escorted to and from Emily's Memorial Service. I sat in the back of their car and told them about my post-divorce experiences in ministry in Baltimore. I knew that it was an eventful little place but everyone normalized it. With every progressively demanding (or outrageous) story, Betsy would whip her head to the left to look at Rollin who was driving. When I finally added "Then a 27-year old man named Kenny living with schizophrenia pitched a tent on the back lawn, of the church" it's amazing Betsy didn't get whiplash looking at Rollin in the driver's seat. I thought I was seeing an extraordinary amount of trouble at that church, but it was Betsy's knowing, hilarious head that helped me enormously in confirming my perspective.

What can I say about Betsy's intelligence, kindness, centeredness in the Spirit? But it's her unflinching mirth I miss most. JRR Tolkien calls it "unquenchable Hobbit" because they speak lightly in fatigue and in dark places. (No, I'm not calling her a Hobbit. It's that distinctive characteristic of "unquenchable" to which I refer. I like the phrase and it's a perfect notion here.) Biblically to me, Betsy's best character is that her heart knew how to speak lightly and sing

hymns in midnight prisons. This cheer, this uncanny strength, kept my knees from buckling and filled my heart with joy. I'm grateful that I have known this precious woman who knows no pretense about this sorry world, but she engaged it with a perspective of joy and humor.

My heart is with all of the Russell family. So much with Rollin. I am grateful to God for all the ways and times my life intersected Betsy Russell.

Elizabeth (Beth) Cantrell - October 09, 2025 at 05:21 AM



“*Roland, I am saddened to learn of Betsy's death. Such a dear person! I am remembering the year we shared as young teachers at Albemarle High School. I was advisor to the yearbook and took this picture in her classroom.*



Richard McBride - October 05, 2025 at 07:25 AM

DJ

Betsy was such a light in our Williams High School family! She was thoughtful, clever, funny and caring. I remember a sweet wedding in the Russell backyard of a couple very much in love. Such a touching service!

Betsy was a wonderful leader. Her comments and suggestions were always well thought out and on the money. She was loved and respected by everyone who knew her.

Betsy could light up a room; she was a glowing example in the world. Her spirit lives on in her beautiful family.

Debbie Johnson - October 10, 2025 at 01:09 PM

JK

“ *My love to Rollin and family. I loved Betsy. She was so warm and kind and a marvelous hostess.*

I am honored to have spent time working together with Rollin & Betsy on important causes.

Much love and my condolences to Rollin and his family,

Jesse Kaufmann Hillsborough, NC

Jesse Kaufmann - October 03, 2025 at 02:37 PM

LS

“ *Dear Roland, My condolences, prayers and love to you and your family. Leslie Sladky-Hillman*

Leslie Sladky-Hillman - September 27, 2025 at 09:21 AM

DR

Roland and family. I so saddened to hear this news. Betsy has always held a special place in my heart. She was one of the most thoughtful, kind, intelligent, and spiritual woman I've known. Sending you all my love and prayers!

Duane Romberger - September 27, 2025 at 07:00 PM