**A Tribute to Rosemarie Freeney Harding: Healer and Prophet**

**by Jim Wallis**

Sometimes a memorial service turns into a camp meeting, with testimonies that simply can’t be stopped. That’s what happened at the service last Saturday in Denver for Rosemarie Freeney Harding, who died on March 1, 2004, at age 74, of complications from diabetes. Rose was a teacher, activist, social worker, counselor, writer, wife, mother, and friend to untold numbers of people. Hundreds of them gathered in the Great Hall at Iliff School of Theology to remember and celebrate an extraordinary life. With her husband, Vincent Harding, Rosemarie was deeply involved in the freedom movement in the South and continued at the center of struggles for social justice, peace, democracy, and racial reconciliation for the next 40 years. Yet it was her deep spirituality – which undergirded virtually everything she did – that made Rosemarie beam with life, faith, and hope. Most recently, Rose and Vincent were the co-founders of the Veterans of Hope Project, recording the living stories of leading figures from the civil rights movement and other freedom struggles around the world.

Rosemarie Freeney Harding was a healer and a prophet to multitudes of people. I am blessed also to have known Rose as an elder and spiritual guide for the Sojourners community and me. She and Vincent often came to lead us in retreat and to literally help shape who we are. And I would often stay or visit with the Hardings when I was in Denver. Rose was one of the most intuitive and attentive people I have ever met. Her gift of spiritual discernment was rare indeed. She would always seem to sense what was going on in a meeting, in a conversation, in a room. She seemed to know what was happening in people’s hearts and souls, because that was the level on which she always operated. Rose was so deeply caring of people that her compassion almost seemed stunning.

The most common words of the four-hour service were, “I thought I was the only one.” So many felt the love of this woman, yet each one felt they were special to her. They were. Rose had a way of making everyone feel that they were the only one. Greeting the world and many of us in it with that amazing smile, those dancing eyes, and always open arms made everybody want to run into Rosemarie as often as possible. To witness such an outpouring of love and gratitude for a life well-lived makes each of us examine our own lives and the legacies we will leave.

I remember a little thing, but such a Rose thing, one night in the Harding home. I was staying there, speaking at Iliff and other places around town. The schedule was very demanding. Vincent and I were discussing many issues one night, but Rose seemed to be worried about me. “You need a massage,” she insisted. I felt awkward getting a massage from an elder! But we all know how determined Rose is. She laid me down on the living room floor and began a healing massage that so utterly calmed and relaxed me that it put me to sleep. I woke up warm and peaceful with soft music surrounding me. I felt at the time, but never said so until now, that it was like being a disciple who just had his feet washed by Jesus. Rose’s heart was so big it would have healed the world if it could.

The truth is, she healed more of it and more of us than she ever knew.