

# Notes from the Round Table

April 30, 2006

*The Round Table is a quarterly forum to exchange news, ideas, issues and to celebrate life in community with FCCB's older members and friends. The purpose is to enhance communication among all ages and to highlight opportunities for intergenerational experiences.*



## The Life and Faith Journeys of Frances & Charles Townes

By Jan Stecher

It seems appropriate that Frances and Charles Townes met in New York City, somehow indicative of the extraordinary sixty-four years of marriage that have followed.

Frances Brown grew up in Berlin, New Hampshire, the daughter of a Southern mother and a Northern father. Her father, an early conservationist, ran the paper mill started by his father and raised Arabian horses to sell. As a child, she had the wonderful opportunities afforded the well-to-do, however her family lost their wealth in the depression. Frances went to Smith College, helping pay her way by working in one of the first self-help houses at Smith. After graduation, with no money, she went to New York and, with characteristic resilience and determination, found work as the program director of International House, located near Riverside Church and Union Theological Seminary.

Although his father was a lawyer, Charles was raised on a farm in Greenville, South Carolina. He attended Furman University, Duke and received his Ph.D. in Physics from the California Institute of Technology at the age of twenty-four. He went to New York to begin a job with Bell Telephone Laboratories, found an apartment close to Riverside Church, and began voice lessons at Julliard.

They met when Frances planned a ski trip for the residents of International House. She had one va-



cancy and, on the recommendation of a friend, filled it with Charles Townes. The vacant seat on the bus was next to Frances. They courted for a year and married in 1941.

They have resided in New York City, New Jersey, Washington, D.C., Cambridge, Paris, Tokyo and Berkeley, and are world travelers.

Charles has taught at Columbia, MIT, and University of California at Berkeley, was Provost at MIT, and still teaches at the UCB Graduate School. He is the inventor of the maser and with his brother-in-law, Arthur Schawlow, co-inventor of the laser, for which they received the Nobel Prize in Physics in 1964. He recently received the Templeton Prize, awarded by Sir John Templeton to the individual who has shown extraordinary originality in advancing humanity's understanding of God/or spirituality and the convergence of science and spirituality. This interest began when he was asked to give a talk about science and religion at Riverside Church. He has been an advisor to four presidents and holds other recognitions and awards too numerous to include.

Frances, not one to languish in the glow

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of Charles' achievements, has often been recognized for her unwavering advocacy for those in need. In 1986 she founded the Berkeley Ecumenical Chaplaincy to the Homeless and also started the Oakland Museum docent program.

*I asked Frances and Charles some questions about their lives.*

**Q: What was the most valuable things your parents gave you?**

**Frances:** Love, nurture, extraordinary opportunities to travel and be exposed to culture, and the sense of noblesse oblige. I had a fine childhood, influenced by both Northern and Southern traditions.

**Charles:** Moral and ethical values, the confidence to stand behind one's own opinion, not to necessarily run with the gang nor flinch in the face of disbelief or skepticism. Also the opportunity to grow up on a farm, not just for the love of the outdoors but also for the chance to work and tinker with farm equipment, which with my



parent's intellectual interests laid the groundwork for my curiosity and creativity.

**Q: What was your initial attraction to your spouse?**

**Frances:** We had a good time together exploring. We laughed a lot. We both loved the outdoors. We were also opposites, an introvert and an extrovert. I loved his mother.

**Charles:** She was athletic, beautiful, friendly, and open-minded. I liked her family.

**Q: To what do you attribute your long and successful marriage?**

**Frances:** Commitment, love, spiritual yearnings, a good sex life, and an awareness and desire for social justice.



We also pray together.

**Charles:** I thought carefully about marriage. We have very different personalities.

**Q: Which of the teachings of Jesus has most influenced your life?**

**Frances:** That he believed in social justice and saw God in everyone.

**Charles:** Love and consideration of others, dedication to the principles of God, and the willingness to sacrifice for them.

**Q: What in life has given you the greatest joy?**

**Frances:** Being a woman, mother and wife. Being involved in women's issues. The feeling that God has worked through my life.

**Charles:** Science and family.

Frances and Charles have four daughters and six grandchildren. They are both still very active at FCCB and involved in church ministries. They feel lucky and blessed to have led their lives. They love hiking, birding, music and theater. Frances especially loves art and is a collector of turtles.

It is wonderful to talk with Frances and Charles. As they exchanged ideas and listened, their mutual affection was obvious. I feel that they are people who live their lives with great hope, great faith and great charity, people who felt they could, and indeed have, made a difference.