

The Vintage Voice

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Women in the Church

Judy Wright Mathews

In my lifetime, the changing role of women in the Episcopal Church — both in and out of clerical collars — has brought forth joy, rage, satisfaction, and disappointment.

I have had some extraordinary experiences with lay women who acted and still act boldly and creatively — as Episcopalians, as Christians. I remember a woman who taught me in Sunday school in the '30s, the woman who directed the youth work in the Diocese of Alabama in the '40s, a white woman who went along with her African American housekeeper to integrate a restaurant in the South when the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed. More recently, one bold and creative laywoman celebrated her eightieth birthday by giving a party and asking friends to bring food to the parish food pantry as her gifts.

When a woman was first elected to the vestry in my parish in the '70s, I told an active woman in our congregation how happy that made me. But she worried that as more and more women started taking leadership roles in local churches, more and more men would abandon them. Has that happened? Perhaps in some parishes, though certainly not in all.

A strong laywoman, Margaret Graham Beers, known to many as Peggy, has served on a national level in addition to her parish activities in Washington, D.C. She assisted the first woman President of the House of Deputies, Pamela Chinnis, at General Conventions, hosting meetings and arranging for speakers to inform attendees about vital issues including “peace & justice” and canon law. She served for eleven years on the board (five as chair) of Forward Movement, an official, independent agency of our Church. During her tenure she was asked to produce a book of prayers by women. *Echoes of the Spirit*, a compendium of works by many recent female leaders of the Church, has been widely distributed.

Peggy Beers expressed her views on women in our Church: “During the last quarter-century I have watched women move from traditional supporting roles to positions of leadership in all aspects of church life. Today I feel fortunate to have been a part of the emerging presence of laywomen in the Episcopal Church, and intend to lend my name and my efforts to future needs. I believe women have the unique opportunity to heal the worldwide church through their own collaborative efforts.”

I grew up in our Church, and I have known a lot of fine clergymen. Yet, my experience with ordained women has only been since our Church began ordaining women in the late '70s. However, working for the Episcopal Church gave me the opportunity to worship as well as work with our deacons, priests, and bishops who are women. I was pleased to be a delegate when we elected the Rt. Rev. Catherine S. Roskam, the first woman bishop to serve in the Diocese of New York.

Many remember the first ordination of women as priests in Philadelphia. That event brought joy and rage. When a woman was first elected a bishop in our Church, we saw another change; again, joy and rage. Some experienced satisfaction, others disappointment. When male bishops began refusing to accept women ordained as deacons, priests, or bishops, we once again saw satisfaction in some, disappointment in others.

The long and sometimes discouraging journey of women seeking ordination reached a dramatic point on November 4, 2006. The Bishop of Nevada was invested as the Most Reverend Katharine Jefferts Schori, the twenty-sixth Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church. Episcopalians rejoiced that day and continue to support her strong leadership.

Asked to comment on the issue of “women in the Church” Bishop Jefferts Schori pointed out that “women have been important and vital leaders in the Church since Mary Magdalene became a disciple — she being the first to announce the good news of the Resurrection.” She added: “Mary Magdalene is, after all, called the ‘apostle to the apostles’ for her resurrection tidings — and in that sense was the first bishop.”

Before Presiding Bishop Jefferts Schori, the highest office was held by men for 217 years. Wives of the two Presiding Bishops preceding Bishop Jefferts Schori gave voice to feelings about what women can do and have done. Patti Browning, wife of former Presiding Bishop Edmond Browning, talked about two of the women she met in her travels, one in Japan, working for peace, another in Okinawa, teaching young children. “These women will never meet, but their common bond is the spirit of Christ, enabling each to share her ministry, a gift from God.”

Phoebe Griswold, wife of former Presiding Bishop Frank Griswold, said, “Women have the ability to foster connections throughout the Anglican Communion, to make that body more than merely a place for argument, but a place where caring relationships can flourish.”

The journey of women into ordination includes this account of a married couple who entered seminary together. With five children in their home, they divided the work between laundry and cooking. The husband was ordained, served a long and faithful ministry, and is now retired. His wife was ordained, then later elected the Bishop of Vermont, the first woman elected to be the diocesan bishop, rather than the suffragan or coadjutor. The Rt. Rev. Mary Adelia McLeod said, “Almost thirty-five years later, I cook and he still does laundry.” Bishop McLeod is now retired, and she has some delightful stories of the reaction to her episcopate.

Her grandson, age eleven, shared and described her role as bishop with his class at a parochial school. When another student said that her church doesn’t allow that, her grandson was “at a loss why his grandmother couldn’t do or be anything, anywhere.” She added: “Toward the end of my episcopate, a young boy received communion from me, turned and asked his mother, ‘When can boys be bishops?’ ”



Judy Wright Mathews, widow of the Rev. Lex S. Mathews, lives in Tallahassee, Florida, has two children, three grandchildren, and a great-granddaughter. She has lived in, and been active in, four dioceses and is a former employee of the Church Pension Fund and the Presiding Bishop’s Office.