



Persistent Grace

By Warren Swenson



Hargis, T'15, delivers hot chocolate and cookies to the Dodge City Police Department with parishioners Elizabeth and Danny Linke, Vanessa Carlos, and Terri Trent.

From the commissioning of the first deaconesses to women's ordination, The Episcopal Church has been a leader in breaking down the gender barriers in the clergy. Even after the first woman has served as the Church's presiding bishop, however,

women continue to face challenges on the path to ordination with regards to equal opportunities.

We turn now from a national view of women's challenges in The Episcopal Church to its impact on the lives of some of our female graduates. Their stories pull us into the uncomfortable reality of a world in which they have chosen to serve, but one that has not always been completely comfortable with them in a collar.

Five alumni of the School of Theology from various decades of life were asked what it has been like to be a woman priest in The Episcopal Church. Their responses unmask women's experience in an institution typically dominated by a male figure. *From the Mountain* wants to thank each of the women who participated in this article for their courage and honesty.

The contributors include: Katie Har-

gis, T'15, in her second year as the rector of St. Cornelius parish in Dodge City, Kansas, is in her late 20s. Laurel Mathewson, T'13, is in her 30s and serves as co-vicar along with her husband, Colin, at St. Luke's Episcopal Church in North Park, California, a primarily Sudanese-American congregation. Sharon Heirs, T'07, in her 40s, is the senior associate rector at the Church of the Epiphany in Atlanta, Georgia. Nikki Mathis, T'08, is the former dean for community life at the School of Theology and currently serves as the associate rector at St. Peter's in Rome, Georgia. Nikki is in her 50s. And lastly, Suzanne Warner, a 2010 graduate, serves as priest-in-charge of St. Peter's parish in Louisville, Kentucky.

While their stories illuminate the truth that God calls both men and women to ordained ministry, they also show the some-

times dark reality that one is still more privileged than the other, to say nothing of other limiting factors a woman might face on her up-hill march toward ordained employment, such as race, age, or marital status. These stories raise our awareness of the damaging consequences of people's assumptions, and their responses weave together common themes of the struggle, persistence, achievement, and ultimately, grace demonstrated by ordained women.

What excites you about being a priest? What gets you up in the morning?

Katie: Honestly my first answer is coffee. Coffee gets me up in the morning. But really what gets me excited about being a priest is the unique opportunity to be part of the important moments in people's lives from the beginning to the end. Last year, on Ash Wednesday, I had the opportunity to put ashes on our youngest member, a six-month old child, and then on our oldest member—96! There was something really holy and special in that moment when we come face-to-face with our own mortality and share that moment with

someone at the beginning and end of their lives. And it's not just my parishioners' lives, but other people as well. I can't tell you how many times I have been stopped in the grocery store or while at a restaurant and asked why I'm wearing a collar. I simply explain that I'm a priest in The Episcopal Church and that yes, we do in fact ordain women to the priesthood. Then I often say a quick prayer with the person asking or in some cases, get told I'm a heretic because women can't be priests!

Another thing that excites me is that we get to empower people in their own ministries, whether that's collecting food for the food bank, starting a book club, or expanding the after-school arts program at one of the local elementary schools in town.

Nikki: I love praying, preaching, celebrating, and working with my parishioners. All that, on most days, is fun for me. I love what I do. I believe I'm qualified for other positions within the Church, and I'm aware that this is a belief that I may or may not get to test, but I do intend to keep trying.

Laurel: For me it's the grand and worthy challenge of playing some small (and often unexpected!) part in the mission of the Church: in my own words, to create conditions of possibility for people to form or restore a relationship with God, and with other human beings, through the grace of Christ and with the help of the Spirit.

Suzanne: I enjoy being a priest in the Diocese of Kentucky at this point in my life. I have been serving in parishes with an international Episcopal/Anglican community since my ordination in 2010.

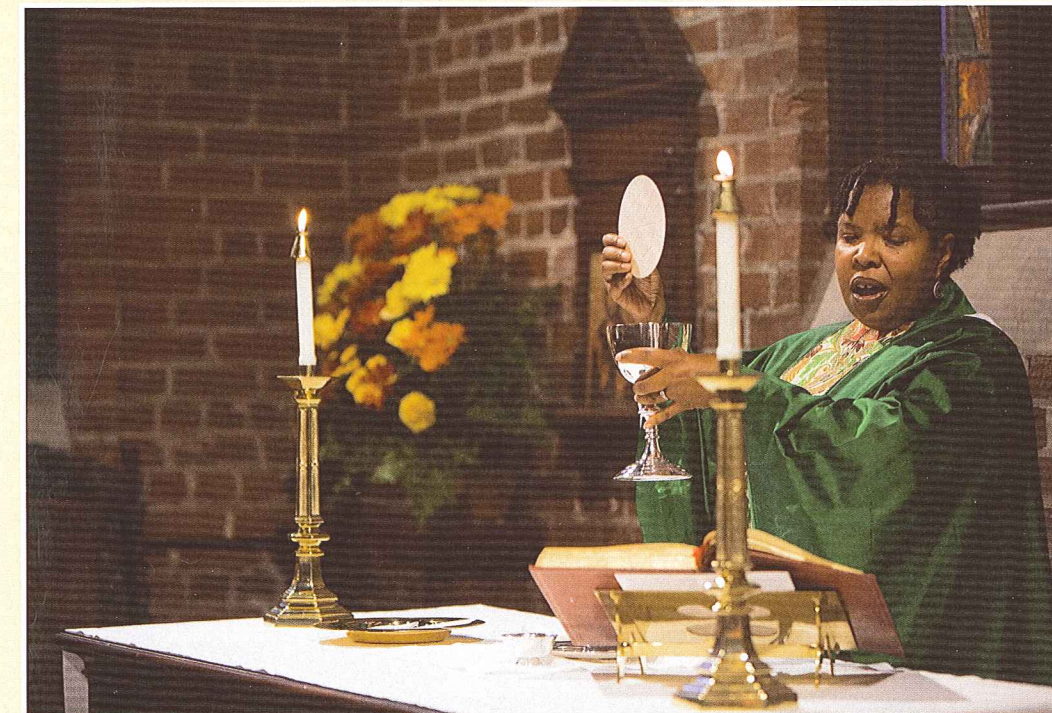
Sharon: What excites me most about being a priest is being in holy spaces with people each day. Knowing I will be with someone in the joys and sorrows of their lives, and how often I am freely let into those sacred spaces, is such an honor. Being a vessel to hold the stories of others and then take them to the altar together is the most amazing experience.

Why did you decide to enter the priesthood? Who were your clergy role models? What do you love about church?

Katie: I entered the priesthood because no matter where I turned in my life, the Church was always there calling me back. And no matter where I worked, people were turning to me for their spiritual needs, even when I was at Home Depot. I tried my hardest to run away from this calling after college, but even then I was called to a full-time youth director position. I've had a couple of clergy role models that have meant a lot to me. When I was at the University of Oklahoma I attended St. Anselm's of Canterbury. The Rev. Hal Greenwood, our priest while I

ing for me. The Rev. Jeff Huston, one of our chaplains at the camp, modeled for me what it means to love your neighbor and your enemies. Once in seminary, I was lucky to have had two new clergy role models in the Rev. Kammy Young and the Rev. Carolyn Coleman. Both of these women have taught me what it means to welcome all into the Church.

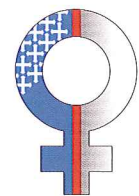
Nikki: I had a sense that this was my vocation back when I was 13, but that was before women could be ordained, so I jettisoned the idea as not a real possibility, and thought instead about becoming a nun. I didn't see a woman in any pulpit until my college years. At that time, the diocese in which I attended college was ordaining



Mathis, T'08, celebrates the Eucharist in her church, St. Peter's, in Rome, Georgia.

was there, was just the kind of guy we needed at that moment in time. He was one of the first people to help me realize that priests are people too. He never acted like he was better than us. He was there for us after we had big tests, took us out for lunch after finals, and was always able to preach to us on our level. While at St. Crispin's Summer Camp in Oklahoma, I was able to worship with a female priest for the very first time, which was eye-open-

women, but my home diocese was not. As far as the physical act of celebrating the Eucharist, my role model was male, as he was the priest with whom I grew up. Most of the preachers I had access to were male as well. I loved the study, the intricacies of pastoral care, the liturgy, and most of all the mechanics and art of preaching. But I loved reading the women mystics, (I am not one) and imagining (again, since the age of 13) I could attain the intimacy



that Teresa de Avila or Julian of Norwich shared with the Divine. When I became older, Pauli Murray and Renita J. Weems did more to round out my idea of what a real relationship with Jesus looked like inside ecclesial systems, focusing on deep love, deep difficulty, and deep work. I suspect I'll add more perspectives as I continue spiritual growth while leading others to do the same.

Laurel: I entered the priesthood because it seemed like the vocation where I could most fully exercise the gifts God had given me: I wanted to help interpret texts in a way that brought insight, and also be pres-

ent as a peacemaker with individuals and groups. One Sunday morning at St. Stephen and the Incarnation Church in Washington, D.C., I watched the female priest move from reading the Gospel to standing in the pulpit, and it was like a veil lifted on my vocational angst: here was a woman whose work required that she engage both those gifts every single week! That was the beginning of my discernment journey. Because St. Stephen's and the Incarnation had many priests serving at that time, I'm still not certain who first "embodied" my call, but I'll never forget that moment.

Suzanne: Most of my life has included

work and worship within The Episcopal Church, with friendships and ministry to others. This included challenges and discipline in learning and working together and also the joy of music and liturgy. In my youth I moved toward a deeper knowledge of God and God's presence with us and in creation. Ellen Correll, a lay leader at St. Mary's Cathedral in Memphis, Tennessee, was influential in my life. She lived her faith and was as knowledgeable as any priest I knew. At that time, "girl-acolytes" were not permitted; much less were women priests something to consider!

Why did I enter the priesthood? I ultimately did not believe I had a choice

not to do so. When my youngest of three sons was in seventh grade, I went back to school, received my degree, and practiced as an attorney until retirement in 2000. When I "retired" much of my time was redirected into teaching and learning more about Scripture, church tradition, and spirituality including views and beliefs outside Christianity. I became more and more aware that I was preparing for a closer life with God and started on the road to formation and discovering God's plan. During the process I prepared for and became a licensed spiritual director. With the bishop's encouragement I began the discussion with our Commission on Ministry. As far as

conventional wisdom was concerned, I was "too old" to start the path to priesthood, but, nevertheless, I was approved to begin formal preparation as a postulant and to enter the School of Theology at Sewanee. After graduation in 2010, I was ordained to the priesthood on July 8, 2010.

Sharon: Thankfully, there is no quick or easy answer to why I entered into the priesthood. It is a complex story. I feel like God had been working on my heart and my life for years to call me to this work in the Church. When I turned 30, I found a note I had written to myself when I was 15. In it, I noted that I thought God wanted me to be a priest/pastor, but between those years I had forgotten/needed God to do more work. So, when I found it at 30, I knew it was time—God's time. I had been terribly hurt by the church that rejected me, specifically a pastor who told me I wasn't welcomed because I came out to him as gay. I knew, through many years of personal work, that I never wanted another teenager to experience that sort of rejection from the church.

One of my role models is the Rev. Beth Kearney, a Lutheran pastor who guided me with deep grace through a very rocky discernment path in both the Lutheran and Episcopal Church. She supported me and was completely honest each step of the way about how things would unfold. I am grateful for her life, her witness, and her ministry.

What I love about the Church is her ability to hold joy and brokenness in tension. I love liturgy, and I love that we gather over and over to hear familiar words, and brand new ones, to sing favorite hymns and new songs of praise. I love that we are made up of a bunch of messy, broken people who gather at the foot of the cross to pray.

What are some of the obstacles you have experienced as a female priest and a) how did you overcome them? or b) how did those obstacles hinder you?

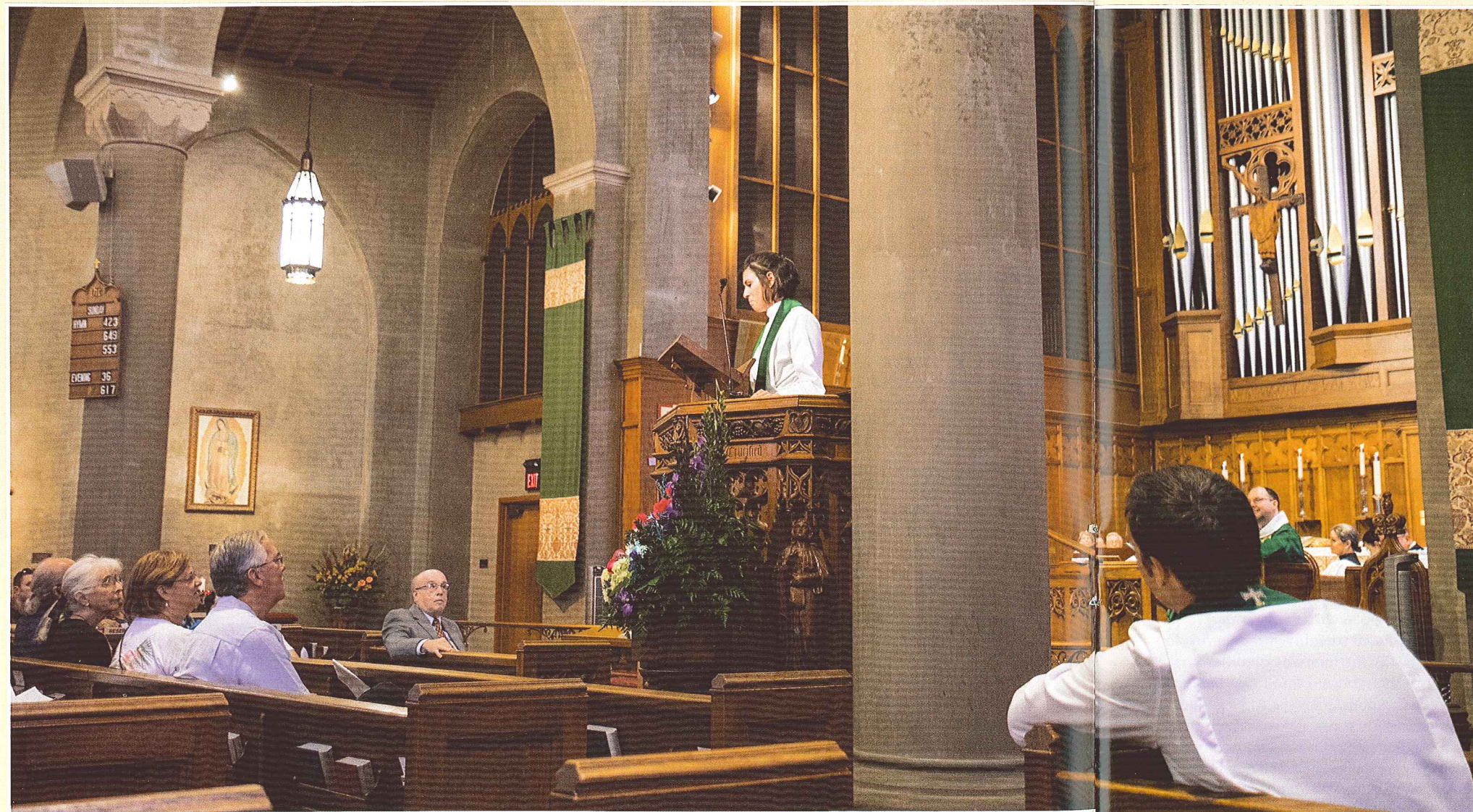
Katie: I'm currently in my first call in Dodge City, and was called as this parish's rector right out of seminary. I am also their first female priest. I never imagined that after leaving seminary in 2015, I would be

up against the same gender battles that my female professors had fought and that the first female clergy had fought. On my first Sunday at the church, I had a couple of parishioners declare that they were quitting because of my gender. Eventually people came back and the person who was my biggest opponent is now one of my biggest allies. It's amazing what finding common ground can do to help change someone's mind about a women priest. For example, we both happen to be big fans of the University of Oklahoma football team.

When out and about in Dodge City, I was told on a weekly basis that women couldn't be priests. I was called a lot of names, was told to stop pretending to be a priest, and would get random notes on scraps of paper on my car in the parking lot at the grocery store. I would even receive anonymous letters at the church. You have to laugh when things like this happen. It's interesting how people react to something they aren't used to. I've learned to not take any of these interactions personally. And the file I kept of the anonymous notes make for a good laugh every once in awhile.

We have a large Latino population in Dodge City, and in return, a large Roman Catholic population. The school where I volunteer twice a week is mostly Latino. The first time I showed up at P.O.P. Art, an after school program, a lot of the kids gave me really funny looks and asked why a woman would be wearing a collar. I've had several little girls now tell me that when they grow up they want to be like me and be a priest, which I think is the biggest compliment you can get from elementary school kids. It's also heartwarming to walk down the halls of the school and hear the kids yell "Hi Miss Reverend Katie!" So while I've experienced negative things because of my gender, I've also had some really good, positive experiences.

Nikki: I'm sure others will speak about this, but since my femininity is not my only marginalized identity, I can't with certainty and consistency point out what challenges might have stemmed from my being a woman and which ones from being African American—and what might have been from a combination of the two—unless the persons/systems with which I



Mathewson, T'13, delivers a sermon to her parishioners in St. Paul's Cathedral in San Diego, California.



Warner, T'10, (far left), stands in front of Resurrection Episcopal Church with several members of the congregation.

was contending called one or the other out. On occasion, I've been assumed to be the sexton and the parish administrator. Congregation members, especially when I was younger, felt free to comment on, and occasionally tried to dictate, my weight, hairstyle, clothing, and make up in ways in which they had never, and probably would never, approach the male rector. (This was confirmed by the rector when I reported what was happening.) I've had overtly racist comments made, although I'm certain that 90 percent of the time, the person speaking in the church didn't realize that what they were saying was offensive. I've been paid less than male colleagues who didn't have my seniority in the organization, but held my same job title. All this is sort of standard stuff that's been a disappointment, but has never stopped me from doing my job.

Laurel: It's difficult for me to disentangle the challenges that come from being a female priest from those that come from being a relatively young priest. My general sense is that before I was ordained, my youth was an asset, and since ordination it is more often perceived as a liability. A

few younger male priests have shared this sense of challenge, but I do think there are still some dynamics that are quite specific to gender. When moving to a new parish where the custom had been to call the priests "Father N." or "Mother N.," there was no anxiety in the congregation about what to call my husband, who is not much older than me. He would "obviously" be Father Colin. But more than one person said to me, "it's hard to call you mother, because you're so young!" Thankfully, a few key lay leaders led the way and within a couple of weeks it wasn't an issue.

Suzanne: In responding, I must say that I find it difficult to label what happens "because I am a female priest." Behavior is governed by multiple reasons, assumptions, and biases. So my answers are offered with this caveat. In one parish my duties were confined to addressing pastoral issues, supporting women's organizations, and "serving" at the bidding of the male priest—helping with his general duties to accommodate his schedule and priorities. I was careful to plan ahead and comply with all of the above when I could and respectfully decline when I could not. I felt con-

flicted about this because there were real needs involved. I wanted to serve Christ and the Church without being a doormat.

Please share a specific example of how being a woman priest has held you back or given you an advantage. Do you have any examples of inequity within the hiring process or with a parish?

Katie: I was lucky in that my bishop encouraged me to break through the "Episcopal Glass Ceiling." He has always encouraged me to dream big and to not hold myself back. But I saw some of my female seminary classmates not receiving the same backing and support.

After my first baptism, wedding, and funeral, I had people tell me that they really appreciated or enjoyed the service and specifically the feminine qualities I brought to the service. I think that being a woman makes it easy for me to be gentle and connected in those situations.

Nikki: No one has ever said in any interview that I've had, "We're not looking for a woman, or we're not comfortable with your race." Have I heard stories from my

women colleagues when this has occurred? Yes, of course, but not often. Part and parcel of systemic 'isms' is that oftentimes they work well when hiding behind other more overtly stated values. I have been interviewed for positions in which the congregation flat out stated that because they didn't want to pay as much as they would 'normally' for a rector, so they were looking for a woman. In that case, it was both a difficulty and an advantage, I guess.

Suzanne: I am a mother whose children hold diverse interests and talents. Having practiced those nurturing and interdependent skills was an advantage in worship and community building. Over the years, I have worked with a lot of immigrant families, and I marveled at these individuals' concerns and delights, as well as the unique communities' commitment to work toward establishing a better life for everyone. I listened to many voices. I heard and appreciated the diverse concerns and experiences. I became more aware of rich experiences as well as unbelievable hardships and peril experienced to take care of each other. They fled invading forces that destroyed lives and homes forever. I listened with a maternal background. I believe I heard more clearly with this fine-tuning developed over the years. I understood about looking out for immediate family and others.

Sharon: I was one of two finalists for a rector position in a church with a deep history of wrestling with women clergy. I knew this history, and yet the process seemed to be open to allowing deep discernment. That is until the final interview with the search committee. We were all gathered together in a circle one evening, and I felt the interview was going well, feeling a deep presence of Christ among us. Then, in what felt a bit like an explosion, a member of the committee blurted out "If we hire her, I'm leaving this parish!" To that, another member yelled "Well, if we don't hire her, I'm leaving!" And for the next hour the committee wrestled with each other about a conversation they apparently should have had long before my interview.

But, I think this is also where my perspective as a woman, as someone who had a rocky history with the institutional

church, was also an advantage. We had a deep theological conversation about the merits of who should be a priest and who shouldn't be. We talked about the history of who was called to this order and who wasn't, of the church's history of wrestling with the ordination of women, of the validity of the sacrament and the piety, or gender, of the priest. It was almost as if they had never heard these things before.

When the chair of the search committee called to tell me I didn't get the call to be their next rector, he did it with a deep gratitude for the experience. And while it might not matter at all to me, he believed it helped them move their discussion and that the next rector they call might have a much better chance if she is a woman since I was willing to "go there" with them in such a gentle way.

What is your vision for women in the Church and do you think TEC is on a path consistent with your vision?

Katie: My vision for women in the church is to continue to live into our callings whether that is as a lay person or clergy. While there are definitely still challenges out there for women in the Church, I do believe that we are working towards equality more and more every day.

Nikki: Parity in pay, positions, and opportunity. And I don't know if one can say that *any* human institution is on a path consistent with a full equality that allows for all marginalized persons of whatever stripe, but I do know that God leads us to continue working to that end.

Laurel: I pray women might be treated with full and equal dignity. It's a word we Episcopalians throw around a lot, but I think for good reason, especially in vision statements: moving toward equal dignity would move us away from a whole host of sins. I think we're moving in that direction, with the help of the Holy Spirit acting as a true "comforter," which is to say, as one mentor mentioned, as a holy cattle prod!

Suzanne: Historically wisdom has been portrayed often as feminine—gathering knowledge together realistically and transparently rather than selectively and

rigidly. Patience has also been touted as a feminine virtue as has been humility rather than personalized embellishment. Many, male and female, identify the Holy Spirit with the feminine, giving life to newborn and frail souls, empowering, nurturing. Many women understand these things at a different level, neither better nor worse than men for the difference. My vision for the Church is to put aside comparisons on male/female terms and move into recognition of complementary roles putting aside "better or worse" judgments. We are all valued, endowed with different gifts and strengths to work together for the welfare of all humanity and creation. More importantly, I believe the structure and hierarchy of The Episcopal Church must go beyond concepts to the actuality of working together for everyone.

As to whether The Episcopal Church reflects my "vision," I wonder. Our Church is great on forming concepts and rhetoric. After all, we are the "people of the Book" and masters of language—for which I am thankful. The question is whether we move to concrete expressions of our high concepts. Money, time, and attention can be found and provided for superior training and public displays of compassion. That is commendable and important. However, little tangible or moral support is available for the basics of outreach and struggling churches where resources are stretched to breaking unless, for whatever reason, these issues are brought to the public eye.

Sharon: My vision is for women to be seen as valuable as men in this holy order, for women to be considered equals to our male counterparts, and for women to be paid as much as men are paid for the same exact work. I also hope to see men willing to relinquish their own power to benefit women who have had to fight far too long already.

I do think The Episcopal Church is striving for this vision. And yet I think there is so much more our church can do. We must not be afraid or make apologies for raising women up, for only putting females on slates for bishops, or sending names to a parish. We must not let the fact that we ordain women be the crutch to allow women to not be taken seriously for any position of leadership in our church.