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Episcopal church celebrates 40 years of women in the priesthood

by Bill Tammeus

Forty years after the first women were ordained to be priests in the Episcopal church, its presiding bishop is uncertain where her -- yes, her -- spiritual home would be if the church still refused to ordain females.

"I don't know if I'd still be an Episcopalian," Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori said in an interview with *NCR*. "That's a good question."

The church at first declared those ordinations -- 11 women in Philadelphia on July 29, 1974, and four the next year in Washington, D.C. -- to be both "irregular" and "invalid," but eventually labeled them valid though irregular. In 1976, the church's national governing body, pressured by wide acceptance of those irregular ordinations, changed the rules and allowed for the ordination of women as priests, not just as deacons. It also "regularized" the Philadelphia and Washington ordinations.

Without that rules change, "I'd be fishing in other seas," said Jefferts Schori, who holds a master's degree and a doctorate* in oceanography. It's a good guess that religious sea would not be where she spent the first eight years of her life, in Catholicism with its all-male priesthood.

The 40th anniversary of the ordination of the Philadelphia 11, as the women became known, is turning into an occasion for considerable introspection about how it all came about and what difference it has made for the Episcopal church, for the worldwide Anglican communion, and for the broader church. (Meet the Philadelphia 11.)

Because of this anniversary, there's a spirit of festivity in the Episcopal church, which today has just over 2 million members in the U.S. and another 170,000 or so in dioceses abroad. There are plans for a July 26 celebration at Church of the Advocate in Philadelphia, where the ordinations took place, and three new

books related to those ordinations have been published.

But there's also a sorrowful recognition that women in the church still experience informal barriers to advancement, as well as occasional outright misogyny. (Indeed, it wasn't until 2010 that the last Episcopal diocese in the U.S. -- Quincy, Ill. -- finally ordained its first female priest. That diocese since has merged into the Chicago diocese.)

One of the Philadelphia 11, Carter Heyward, now retired from teaching at the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Mass., told *NCR* that there is "kind of a glass ceiling effect in the church." That, she said, has to do with a common attitude that, "yes, there can be women priests in the Episcopal church, but how many do we actually want?" Beyond that, she said, some congregations worry that they'll become known as places who hire only female priests.

Indeed, Heyward said, having a female presiding bishop "misleads people. It's like having President Obama, quite frankly, and thinking that racism is beyond us."

As Bishop Barbara C. Harris, a retired suffragan (meaning subordinate to a diocesan bishop), wrote recently, "While I am gratified that we have reached this forty-year milestone, I am not sure we have reached any maturity in the reality of this living witness and phenomenon."

Today, women make up almost half of those ordained to the priesthood each year in the Episcopal church. Roughly one-third of all Episcopal priests now are female. But males still predominate in the higher echelons of church leadership, although that situation seems not to have led women priests and bishops to protect Jefferts Schori from criticism. As she said, "I have no shortage of people who disagree with me -- of both genders and all inclinations. And I think that's a sign of health."

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Still, some female priests can feel isolated.

"For me personally, the struggle is not over," said the Rev. Gail Greenwell, dean of Christ Church Cathedral in Cincinnati. "As a cathedral dean, I am just one of six or seven women throughout the Episcopal church who hold that office. I have also served as rector of a large ? parish, another anomaly for women in the Episcopal church. Women are actually losing ground in the House of Bishops. We few are the 'irregulars' of our day."

When Jefferts Schori heard what Greenwell had said, she acknowledged the problem: "We continue to elect women bishops but they're almost all suffragan bishops. We are losing ground in terms of diocesan bishops who are women. At the same time, that door is now opening around the Anglican communion. There are now two women bishops in Africa, there are women bishops in Australia and New Zealand and Canada, and there have been two in Cuba. There's one in Ireland now, and the door is open in Scotland and Wales, and we hope and pray that it will be open in England." (As Jefferts Schori hoped, the Church of England this month approved the ordination of females as bishops.)

So just as neither the Emancipation Proclamation nor Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech immediately liberated African-Americans and integrated them fully into American life, so those ordinations of women 40 years ago on a steamy summer day in Philadelphia did not do away with barriers to their full inclusion in the Episcopal church.

Still, the changes brought about by 11 brave women deacons and a handful of risk-taking bishops willing to ordain them as priests during that boisterous three-hour service have been remarkable. Perhaps none has been so obvious as the 2006 election of a female presiding bishop. Heyward has written that the election of Jefferts Schori was "unimaginable to any Episcopalian in 1974, a bit like imagining a female pope from where we stand in 2014."

Another of the Philadelphia 11, Alison Cheek, now in her 80s, told *NCR* she believes that "women, by and large, as far as I can see, have done a really good job in the church, although some are hard to distinguish from the men."

Novelist and teacher Darlene O'Dell has captured the struggle for women's equality in the Episcopal church well in *The Story of the Philadelphia Eleven*, a 250-page book just published by Seabury Press. Another book published in response to the 40th anniversary is *Looking Forward, Looking Backward: Forty Years of Women's Ordination*, edited by Fredrica Harris Thompsett. It includes more than a dozen essays, including one by Jefferts Schori. Finally, there is *The Spirit of the Lord Is Upon Me: The Writings of Suzanne Hiatt*, edited by Heyward and Janine Lehane. Heyward calls Hiatt, one of the Philadelphia 11, "the driving force" behind the 1974 ordinations. Hiatt died in 2002.

Although, as O'Dell writes, Heyward considered the ordination the "most extraordinary and finest day" of her life, she and other surviving members of the Philadelphia 11, as well as women ordained later, have not remained frozen in that turbulent time of Watergate just before Richard Nixon's resignation. Rather, they have continued to respond to changing theological ideas and needs in a church that's often been near the front of such social movements as equal rights for the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community.

Christianity necessarily requires continuity and respect for its own history, Heyward told *NCR*, but it "needs to always be empowering us to do what is just and compassionate and promotes human dignity and the well-being of creation. So one of the places of discontinuity that I believe we have to take seriously and work on today is the domination -- the violent domination -- of creation by human beings. ... This is right now in our face all the time. Another area of discontinuity is the ongoingness of patriarchal assumptions about God and the world." The idea that men were born to "run the world," she said, "needs to be challenged nonviolently but very firmly."

Heyward praises much of the tone and approach Pope Francis has set. But when it comes to women's issues, she said, "he does not seem to be all that -- I don't know what word to use but I'm going to use the word -- aware that there really are significant problems in Christian tradition and especially in Catholic tradition when it comes to the role and place of women."

This lack of awareness has not been helped by what eventually many of the Philadelphia 11 experienced once Episcopal women's ordination became a routine event -- something of a disinterest in their pioneering work.

For instance, Greenwell, who didn't enter college until several years after the Philadelphia ordinations, attended a conference about 10 years ago in which organizers brought in as many of the Philadelphia 11 as possible.

"As they shared their stories," she told *NCR*, "there was an audible restlessness in the audience. Several of the younger women clergy felt the struggle of women on the panel was not their story, not their struggle and not relevant to their own ministry. They felt men were being demonized as the enemy while their own experience (and mine) was of men who had often been their champions. I sat there realizing I was

somehow in the ambivalent middle -- grateful for the courage and pioneering spirit of the 'irregulars,' but also sympathetic with the idea that it was time to move on from a conversation centered on strife. I was struck by what a generation gap had arisen in just 30 short years."

Yet it's intriguing to imagine what the Episcopal church would look like today and how the lives of countless women would be different had ordination of women never taken place.

- Carter Heyward, for instance, said that even if she hadn't been ordained, she'd have been a teacher "because that was really at the bottom of my vocation. I was called to a teaching ministry with a kind of priestly edge to it." So that edge would have been dulled, at the very least.
- Jefferts Schori likely would have stayed in the sciences.
- As for Greenwell, she wondered: "Would I be the energetic Episcopal church lady that my mother had been, content with teaching Sunday school and organizing the food pantry? Or would I have left the church altogether? I don't really know." What the church does know is that Greenwell has been a persistent advocate for those whose ministry has not been welcomed. As she says, "For 20-some years I've fought for the full inclusion of our LGBTQ brothers and sisters in holy orders."
- Cheek doesn't know whether she'd still be an Episcopalian today if it had an all-male priesthood. For one thing, her immediate worry after the 1974 ordinations -- and, indeed, what she expected to happen -- was that she and the others would be "deposed," meaning their ordinations as priests and as deacons nullified.

"I think it was the press that saved us," she said, noting how the media, including the *National Catholic Reporter*, refused to let the ordinations story drop.

The experiences of these women raise the question of what women have brought to the ministry that is different from what men have brought.

Because the Presbyterian Church (USA), as it is known today, began ordaining women in 1956, I asked that question of the Rev. Margaret E. Towner, now 89, the first Presbyterian woman ordained.

"I think they have brought a perspective of real caring, patience," said Towner, still active in regional church governing bodies in Florida. "Most of them have an awful lot of patience. I think they have brought a perspective of real openness and understanding of what [the New Testament meant] by visiting the prisoner etc. It's a different kind of compassion than some of the men have. I do think that lots of times women clergy have good, deeper insights sooner than a lot of the male clergy do. From the women I've heard preach, they bring a humanness to the sermons, to the meditations, that lots of times I don't see men bringing."

Jefferts Schori said she believes women have brought "collegial ways of exercising ministry and collaborative leadership" that wasn't as fully developed when the priesthood was exclusively male. "I think women as well have brought a sense of what it's like to live on the margins, not to be the norm in the larger culture, and that's a gift in that it opens our eyes to seeing the poor and children, immigrants, people who do not live in the center."

Heyward credits women with bringing experiences to the priesthood "that have largely been socialized into us in terms of caring, hospitality and the dailyness of what keeps people going. ... We have inherited a lot of this from our mothers and grandmothers."

Like Towner, Cheek said she thinks women have helped to "humanize" the ministry and the church in general. She noted, though, that some female priests have adopted some of the less admirable power-seeking approaches of some male priests.

But it's the church's organization, Cheek said, that has made it difficult for women to be all they can be in ministry: "With the structures we have in the church, it's really hard for women to make a considerable difference."

Indeed, it's the even more hierarchical structures of the Catholic church that causes Cheek to wonder whether Catholics will ever allow women priests.

"It has such a different polity from ours," she said, "that it's hard to imagine how it could." The change in Episcopal church law allowing ordination of women as priests was one that "the House of Deputies (half clergy, half laity) and the House of Bishops both voted for." Catholicism is missing that more democratic structure, she said, and thus it will be harder to make the change.

"But," she added, "if a pope were elected who was passionate about it, who knows what would happen?"

As Jefferts Schori looks toward the possibility of Catholic female priests, she has concluded, "I don't think it's going to happen in my lifetime. The Orthodox may get there before the Romans do."

There are, of course, women now who say they have been ordained as Catholic priests in connection with such organizations as Roman Catholic Womenpriests, though official church structures have refused to recognize the validity of such ordinations.

For now, it's likely that the closest thing the world will have to female Catholic priests are women Episcopal priests -- and they're busy celebrating the 40th anniversary of a crucial event that helped get them and their church to this point.

**This story has been updated to add Jefferts Schori's doctorate.*

[Bill Tammeus, a Presbyterian elder, writes a Web column, "A small c catholic," for *NCR* (NCRonline.org/blogs/small-c-catholic). His latest book is *Woodstock: A Story of Middle Americans.*]

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