

Calling and consecration

by Amber Carswell, Associate Rector



A common question folks ask when meeting a priest for the first time is, "Did you always know you wanted to be a priest?" When this question comes from someone outside of the church, it's when we've just met, and they're still reeling from the revelation; they land on this as a polite substitute for, "Have you always been like this?" For those inside the church, the question comes with a sense of the jargon that we bandy about: call, revelation, the declaration of "Here am I, send me" from Isaiah (minus the burning coal put into his mouth after said declaration.)

For me, if you had asked me before the age of 23 if I always knew I wanted to be a priest, I would have wondered what

you even meant by the word priest. The term had no real meaning to me as I wandered through an evangelical wilderness, disillusionment increasing with every step, despair escalating with every endless refrain of "Mighty to Save" (it was just me, y'all, you can like if you want to.)

Seeing a female priest at the altar wouldn't happen until seminary for me, and while I knew little of the battle to ordain women that had ended, at least canonically, in the 1970s for the Episcopal Church, I knew plenty about how women in ministry were still received. "I could never go to a church with a female pastor," an evangelical female friend confided in me, having no idea of the discernment process I had just begun at St.

Luke's Episcopal Church in Hot Springs, Arkansas.

Bishop Phoebe Roaf has answered the question about her call in similar terms of initial bewilderment. St. Paul, too, muses that one isn't able to believe without being told. St. Thomas might point out the importance of actually seeing.

Bishop Phoebe's consecration on Saturday, May 4, was a first for me even after 10 years in the Episcopal Church, having only read the words of the service out of the prayer book. But this was a first not only for late arrivals to our church but for every Episcopalian in that room: Bishop Phoebe, the first woman, the first African-American, her very self a glimpse into the reconciliation of all things in Christ.



ABOVE: Bishop Don Johnson, third bishop of the Diocese of West Tennessee, passes the crozier to the Rt. Rev. Phoebe Roaf, fourth bishop of the diocese. BELOW: Presiding Bishop Michael Curry presents newly ordained Bishop Phoebe Roaf to the congregation. Photos courtesy of Lisa Buser Photography.

As you are aware, any of us are far more than the demographics of majority or minority, the figures of power or oppression we represent in any given sphere. Any female priest I know wants to be known first as a good priest — the worst sort of dismissal echoing the childhood compliment of, "You throw well for a girl."

But between voicing support for a reality and living it, there are untold worlds of latent fear. The vision of May 4, 2019, will be forever etched in my memory of a great symbolic moment of Episcopalians at our best. It was an embodied reality of what so often seems a fleeting dream of equality and justice in our world. Even the sprawling, almost comical, megachurch setting

at Hope held something; for me, walking with our vestments and singing our ancient hymnody, there was something of a reconciliation even in my reluctant soul.

I'm proud to be a part of a diocese where this reality exists. Though you may not realize it, of what you're doing by attending church with your children is showing them what is possible; and someday, who knows? Maybe one of them will grow up and become a priest, and perhaps they won't look like the sort of priest everyone expected. And in that great day when they are faced with the awkward question of, "Did you always know?" they can answer, simply: "Yes."

