

Finest Kind

A Profile of the Bishop-elect, the Rev. Samuel Rodman

By Summerlee Walter

The Rev. Canon Libby Berman has worked closely with the Rev. Samuel Rodman on the staff of the Diocese of Massachusetts for many years: while he led the \$20 million Together Now campaign to fund collaborative local and global ministries; while he launched the Mission Hub initiative, which established eight new or expanded ministries over the course of several years; and while as interim chief of staff he advised the Rt. Rev. Alan Gates and cared for his colleagues during a comprehensive diocesan staff reorganization.

But Berman first knew Rodman as a member of the Commission on Ministry while she was going through the ordination process. As one of her interviewers, Rodman asked a question that has stayed with her ever since.

What vision of Jesus' resurrection most resonates with you? Can you paint a picture for me?

"That image of him as a person of faith, and a person with delight in Jesus, has really stayed with me ever since he asked that question," Berman said. "He asks questions and lives out of that kind of thinking about Jesus, always, even now."

As his resume indicates, Rodman, elected the XII Bishop Diocesan of North Carolina during the Diocese's March 4 Special Electing Convention, has an impressive background in fundraising, organizational dynamics and long-range planning. Listen just to his colleagues' initial descriptions of him, however, and you wouldn't necessarily suspect the depths of strategic acumen Rodman brings to his professional life. Instead, the people who know Sam personally invariably use the same words to describe him:

faithful, trustworthy, kind, funny, steady, deeply spiritual, humble, thoughtful, pastoral.

Asked for a story that illustrates those qualities, though, his colleagues pause.

"Faithful is one of the most appropriate words that comes to me – faithful and steady – and I think that's perhaps the reason that no one thing stands out for me because it's just many years of a wonderful relationship that's always warm and faithful and built on trust," said Lynd Matt, Massachusetts' director of development.

"Honestly I feel like one of his greatest gifts is the way he accompanies people," said Steven Matthews, executive director of Massachusetts' South Coast Mission Hub. "And so it's just been steadfast. I've had a sense that I can call on him, that he was there and that he was praying with us....I can't think of a particular thing; I just know that I enjoyed being in his company."

In person, Rodman is as engaging and warm as those who know him promise he will be. During our interview in preparation for this article, he asked me nearly as many questions as I asked him. As for his answers, Rodman's storytelling is positively Southern: elliptical, anecdotal, peppered with asides and explanations of how people and places intertwine. Before answering a question, he circles back to describe location, history and context, apologizing for the length of his answer as he continues onto the main narrative. Rodman provides a mini-biography of each character in his stories: his high school chaplain and mentor, the Rev. Dick Aiken, now retired and living by the Cape; the crew coach who attended Springfield College

and loved basketball; his 13-and-a-half-year-old dog, Neo, who is all black save for the white spot in the middle of his chest.

By all accounts, this focus on individuals and their stories is a Rodman trademark, born of a lifelong emphasis on relationships.

GROWING UP IN COMMUNITY

Nestled in the foothills of the Berkshires in rural western Massachusetts is the small summer community of Blandford, where Rodman's family vacationed throughout his childhood. The family's vacation home in the town, which became their year-round home when Rodman was in fifth grade, had first belonged to his father's parents, who then sold it to his mother's parents before Rodman's parents met. At the top of the hill presides the local landmark, a white Congregationalist summer church with a tall steeple that can be seen from all the neighboring towns. It was in this church Rodman was baptized at four years old.

While they were members of All Saints' Episcopal Church in South Hadley, Rodman's parents decided to wait to have all three of their children baptized in Blandford at the same time so both sets of grandparents could drive up from Florida to be present.

"I remember standing up front with my two sisters and being baptized," Rodman explained "It was a family

event but also a community event because we knew a lot of people in the community. As a four year old, I don't remember the ritual as much as I remember who we were surrounded by."

As a third grader, Rodman received his first Bible, a personalized copy imprinted with a misspelling of his middle name, Sewall.

"I loved the stories of King David, but not just the David and Goliath story, which is obviously the better-known one," said Rodman, "but also the story of David as a shepherd, slaying a lion to protect his sheep, and the deep friendship that David and Jonathan had."

After 10 years of public school, Rodman transferred before his junior year to South Kent, an Episcopal boarding school in Connecticut with required daily chapel. By the end of his first year, Rodman was voted president of the senior class — he is quick to point out the position was not at the top of the student government hierarchy, an honor reserved for prefects — because he "made some good relationships." He picked up rowing and experienced success, though he attributes that to being the right size for the sport.

While at South Kent, a school with a hockey rink and crew team but no gym, Rodman initiated a pick-up basketball team that eventually improved enough to participate in the intramural league at the much larger Kent School. During Rodman's senior year, his team won the

Photos courtesy of St. Michael's, Milton



The Rev. Samuel Rodman blesses a pet during a St. Francis celebration at St. Michael's, Milton. The congregation of St. Michael's, Milton, gathers for a group photo during a bishop's visitation in 1998.

league. The team continued after he graduated, eventually raising enough money to build a gym, hire a good coach and recruit players like the Boston Celtics' Isaiah Thomas, who played at South Kent for a year. Rodman does (jokingly) take credit for Thomas' professional success.

After graduating from high school, Rodman spent his undergraduate years at Bates College in Lewiston, Maine, where he graduated with a B.A. in English in 1981. His senior thesis explored the effects of isolation on the human psyche in the works of novelist Joseph Conrad. He seemed genuinely delighted to be asked about the project.

"I was fascinated by the contrast between community and the absence of community and what that did to a person's heart, mind, soul and well-being," Rodman said of his capstone work.

It seems fitting, then, that Rodman's call to the Church grew not only out of a deep faith, but also from a desire to help communities form their identities around mission among and with their neighbors.

DEEPLY FORMED

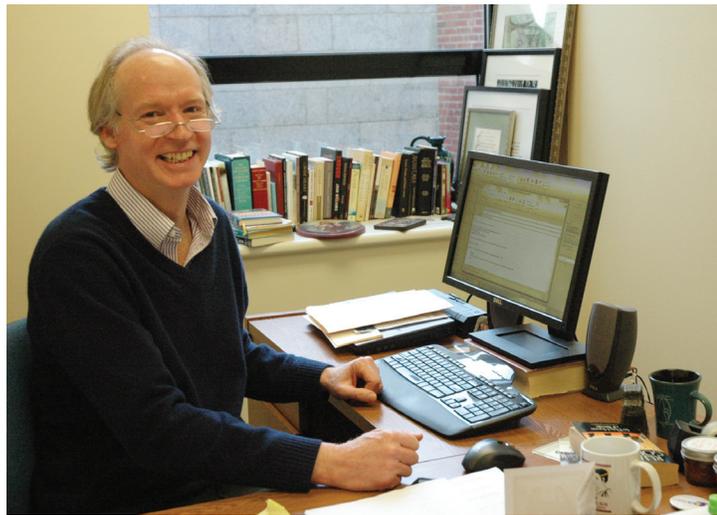
In the Q&A Rodman submitted to the Nominating Committee as part of the bishop search, he wrote, "My love for the [Church] grew out of a strong identification with the work of evangelism and mission." He attributes his evangelical heart to an early experience with a Baptist church in South Hadley. While his family attended Eucharists at All Saints', the Episcopal parish offered little outside of Sunday morning. Nine-year-old Rodman occasionally tagged along with his parents when they started attending a Wednesday evening Bible study led by a local Baptist church and held in a pizza parlor.

"I just really took to it," Rodman remembered. "I remember people sharing not only their love of the biblical story but connecting it with their own lives."

While he adopted into his spiritual perspective the evangelical bent of the Baptists he knew in his youth, Rodman is deeply formed in the Episcopal tradition. When church was cancelled one summer Sunday, nine-year-old Sam wrote a prayer and selected a reading for the Episcopal service he hosted in his family's living room. Rodman acknowledges the anecdote doesn't represent only prescient childish make-believe — he did feel a very early call to the priesthood.

Years later, his first job out of college was as a secretary in The Episcopal Church's Office of Evangelism and Congregational Development, where he worked with Wayne Schwab and Arlin Rothauge, two more people he considers mentors. One of Rodman's early claims to fame is typing the manuscript for Rothauge's extremely popular booklet about church growth and new member recruitment, "Sizing Up the Congregation for New Member Ministry."

Photos by Tracy Sukraw



The Rev. Samuel Rodman works at his desk in the diocesan offices of the Diocese of Massachusetts. Rodman presents a Mission Title Grant to El Hogar in Honduras during the 2014 Diocesan Convention as part of the Together Now campaign.

"Which was something of a feat because I never learned to type," Rodman laughed, "and if it hadn't been for the IBM Selectric with the Correcto tape, it never would have gotten done."

While working for the Episcopal Church, Rodman also met and fell in love with Deborah Nedurian at Grace Church, an Episcopal parish in New York City. The pair have now been married for 32 years.

Soon, though, Rodman decided to pursue the call to the priesthood he had felt since childhood. He remembers his time at Virginia Theological Seminary most fondly for the seminary's emphasis on preaching. At the time, VTS required students to deliver a sermon without notes in order to get a grade in their homiletics course. As a rector at St. Michael's, Milton, where he served from 1994 until 2012, Rodman continued the practice of preaching without notes when the occasion allowed it.



The Rev. Samuel Rodman with his wife, Debbie, during his tenure at St. Michael's, Milton. "He and Deb are an awesome duo," according to parishioner Heather Putnam.

"His sermons and prayers, all of it was just outstanding," said Ted Daiber, a parishioner who served as both a junior and senior warden under Rodman.

During his time leading St. Michael's, Rodman walked the congregation through a parish self-study every four or five years, according to the Rev. Hall Kirkham. Kirkham, now the church's rector, served there as a seminarian for a year during Rodman's tenure. Noting that most parishes conduct such a study only in the context of a rector search, Kirkham believes this dedication to self-evaluation demonstrates that Rodman is "not adverse to rolling up his sleeves and really working with a vestry and parish to decide where they need to go."

"He's not content to just sit still," Kirkham explained.

Rodman thinks congregations, like individuals, have vocations, vocations that shift over time. When he arrived at St. Michael's, he, with the help of the church's previous rector, discerned the congregation's vocation was to help its members understand what it means to be a community of faith. After several years of concentrating on formation for every age group and focusing attention on liturgy as a means of deepening their understanding of faith, the congregation felt well-grounded in their collective and individual spiritual lives. Then, according to Rodman, a shift happened.

"The community had become a community of

faith, and their next iteration, it became really clear, was to discover what it meant to be a community of faith engaged in mission," he said. That mission evolved to include work with Epiphany School, a tuition-free middle school for families living below the poverty line, and parish pilgrimages to Israel, Turkey, Greece and Italy.

What his parishioners remember most, though, is the confidence, respect and love Rodman inspired.

"People still talk about how it seemed like within a week or two of being rector, he knew everyone," Daiber reminisced. "He would say each person's name at the Communion rail. Everyone was kind of astounded, but he made a point of knowing everyone and knowing about everyone."

PRAY WITHOUT CEASING

According to Berman, canon in the Diocese of Massachusetts, Rodman still makes a point of engaging people in genuine ways she says honors the Baptismal Covenant's call to "respect the dignity of every human being." She regularly encounters Rodman standing in the lobby of the diocesan offices, speaking with people from outside of the diocesan community, many of whom appear to be members of the unhoused population from the neighborhood. It is also not uncommon for Berman to see the same people riding up in the elevator with Rodman or leaving his office after prayer.

"It is a very stark and beautiful reminder of our call to respect the dignity of every human being regardless of who we are," Berman said.

As a clergy member of the diocesan staff, Rodman takes seriously the commitment to celebrate the weekly Eucharist held in diocesan house and to fill in at the attached cathedral when an emergency precludes one of their priests from leading a midweek service. Until recently, he dedicated one half-day a month to serving as a prayer partner with a member of an intentional community of young adults. According to Berman, though, these visible acts of prayer are only one part of Rodman's regular daily practice.

"In terms of intercessory prayer, my guess is that there is a very long list of people that he prays for regularly and earnestly and seriously," Berman said.

Rodman doesn't serve people only through his intercessions, however. He also provides tangible help and encouragement. Matthews — who was the runner-up for the mission hub job the first time it posted — remembers running into Rodman two years after his initial interview at an event hosted by Massachusetts' camp and conference center. Rodman, whom Matthews had never met face-to-face, told him the position was open again and encouraged him to apply.

"Sam really is 'finest kind,'" Matthews said, delivering

one of the highest compliments the Northeast has to offer.

“He’s one of the most thoughtful, capable, quiet leaders that I’ve ever met,” said Matt, who worked closely with Rodman during the Together Now campaign and earlier on the diocese’s volunteer Development Council. “And I don’t mean quiet like he’s in the background. He’s just always so grounded and leading from within. I think that comes from a very grounded sense of who he is, what his role is, what he’s capable of, and it also comes from a deep, deep prayer life.”

It is clear from listening to Rodman’s own theology that Matt’s assessment is true.

“To have the energy and to be able to sustain the work that we’re trying to do in the world — work that’s often challenging and difficult and often takes us into new territory outside of our comfort zones — we need that spiritual center to feed, energize and equip us, so in that sense there is a natural sort of ebb and flow — or continuity or connection — between mission and liturgy, prayer and action,” Rodman explained during our interview, echoing something he said during the whistle stop at St. Augustine’s University.

“There’s a line in the consecration service that says the bishop is charged to pray without ceasing for the people. That’s only possible if we have a more integrated understanding of how every breath we take becomes prayer and how every action we take is prayerful and how every action of our congregation is a worshipful action, and what that means in terms of the way it reshapes the mission. And vice versa, every time we worship we’re somehow engaged in connecting with the community around us in ways that we don’t maybe pay enough attention to yet.”

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The Rev. Samuel Rodman celebrates Eucharist in Ephesus, Turkey, and by the Sea of Galilee during pilgrimages with St. Michael’s, Milton.



Photos by Heather Putnam

Your Questions, Answered

We put out the call on social media for your questions for the bishop-elect. Here are his answers.

Everyone is very concerned about your ACC affiliation.

I’d like to dodge it and say the UConn Huskies, who are not in the ACC, but I think at the start I have to go with Duke because Duke is hosting the consecration service. It seems only fair that I start there, but I’m not making a long-term commitment.

Bojangles or Cook-Out?

Cook-Out

What are three things that can always be found in your refrigerator?

Orange juice – I drink it every morning instead of coffee. There’s always eggs because I don’t eat enough of them. There’s always a jar of strawberry jam. I do still eat peanut butter and jelly occasionally.

Who would play you in a movie?

When I had hair, Julian Sands because people used to tell me I look like him. (Editor’s note: I googled Julian Sands, and he legitimately does look like Rodman.)

What are you currently bingeing on Netflix?

I don’t watch very much TV, other than sports. I really loved the PBS series about Gerald Durrell – *The Durrells in Corfu* – based on Durrell’s book, *My Family and Other Animals*. And we were big fans of *Downton Abbey*.

What are you currently reading?

I just finished *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates. I’m about to start *Apostle: Travels Among the Tombs of the Twelve* by Tom Bissell. I will probably start reading a book written by a woman in my writer’s group – Louie Cronin – called *Everyone Loves You Back*, her first novel.

Do you have any pets?

I have a black lab-Brittany Spaniel mix who’s 13 and a half. He looks like a black lab with a longer coat. He’s all black except for one white spot in the middle of his chest. His name is Neo after the character in the *Matrix*. My daughters named him.