

I HAVE BEEN TO THE MOUNTAIN TOP



Photo: M. May

Marjorie S. May

L'auteure raconte ses démarches pour devenir prêtre de l'Eglise anglicane en Colombie-Britannique, et ce que cette expérience a signifié pour elle. Au synode diocésain de la province en 1982, deux-tiers des laïcs votèrent pour la décision du Synode national de 1975 d'accepter que les femmes deviennent diacres, prêtres et évêques: le clergé vota contre cette motion dans la même proportion. L'auteure donne également un aperçu des mouvements qui sont en faveur de l'ordination des femmes et discute de la position de l'Eglise anglicane. Bien que la Colombie-Britannique ait accepté l'ordination des femmes, et discute de la position de l'Eglise anglicane. Bien que la Colombie-Britannique ait accepté l'ordination des femmes, le clergé anglican du diocèse de Victoria s'y oppose: ils utilisent comme armes la suppression de l'information et les rumeurs diffamantes. En juillet 1983, le révérend May conduisit seule un service de prière un dimanche matin, et se sentit victorieuse. Elle est maintenant convaincue qu'un jour, il y aura une femme prêtre à Victoria.

"Let's face it. You'll die unordained on this island." All I noticed was the fist with pointed finger.

The voice and fist belonged to a young male Anglican priest who, like me, was attending the 1982 British Columbia Diocesan Synod (Vancouver Island and the adjacent Gulf Islands).

So that our bishop might be guided by the "mind" of his clergy and laity, this synod was voting on whether or not to reaffirm the 1975 National Synod's decision to accept women as deacons, priests and bishops in the Anglican Church of Canada.

The laity voted "yes" by a two-thirds majority. The clergy voted "no" by the same ratio. A small group of priests openly congratulated each other on their "victory."

The Bishop's Task Force on Women in Ministry circulated its questionnaires — attitudes toward women in varying roles of ministry. Priests chuckled to one another as they deliberately invalidated the questionnaires, for example, favouring women as bishops but not as deacons.

An attempt to depolarize the clergy and laity was agreed upon

by the bishop, and I stood before the delegates to present a motion to admit women as deacons, since the "touchy" areas of consecrating and giving blessing and absolution would not be involved. (Deacons usually perform pastoral functions, such as visiting the sick and working with young people.) As I spoke, a priest shouted, "She's trying to get her foot in the door! She's trying to get her foot in the door!"

A priest who knows my circumstances — husband, sons, and home in Victoria — bluntly declared, "If you really feel called to the priesthood, you know what you can do, don't you? You can leave the diocese, be ordained, and return after three years. Nobody can 'unpriest' you then." He knew that, even if I were to do this, there would be no place for me to exercise my ministry upon my return.

"*Vox populi non est vox dei* (The voice of the people is not the voice of God)," quipped a priest as he passed by. "*Vox sacerdotis non est vox dei* (The voice of the priests. . .)," I smiled back. Later I was advised to apologize to the man for offending him. Alice in

Wonderland could not have been more confused.

Distressed at why I was receiving so much negative attention, I asked what was going on. A priest informed me that the other women seeking ordination were not considered a threat; so the clergy had made me their target.

By the third morning of synod, I had had enough arrows hit me, as well as a migraine as violent as the first eruption of Mount St. Helen's. For several weeks after synod I was irritable, teary, and had trouble making even small decisions.

It had taken seven years for the priests of this diocese to break me. I was immobilized by self-doubt, fear, rage, and frustration.

In order to understand why these men would act with so little regard for another human being, we need some background on the emotionally charged complexity of ordaining a woman.

Movements to ordain women in various denominations are not recent offshoots of the secular feminist movement. The two have paralleled each other throughout this century, sharing many common areas of concern — for example, access to education and training, fuller participation in decision-making processes, wage and benefits parity with men, and maternity and childcare concerns.

However, the religious movements have had additional concerns which necessarily precede the more secular ones: (1) biblical and theological interpretations of God's intended "role" for women and (2) interpretations of the role of women's ministry in the history of the Church.

The Anglican church, like the Roman and Orthodox churches, has a further priority, preceding all of those listed above, and that is whether or not a woman can *validly* be incorporated into an historic ministry (Apostolic Succession). The Historic Ministry lays claim to an unbroken line of commissioning into service from Jesus to the Apostles, from the Apostles to the first bishops, and from them to each generation of bishops to

the present bishops of the church.

Neither Rome nor the Orthodox church has brought the issue of women's ordination to full debate; so we shall deal with recent decisions to ordain women in some national Anglican churches. Ironically, the work of Roman Catholic theologians has influenced these decisions greatly.

In simplest terms, before a woman could be ordained in the Anglican church, decisions had to be made about (1) biblical evidence for or against her inclusion in the Historic Ministry; (2) evidence from the history of the Christian Church which might include or exclude her; and (3) in light of the above, if she could validly be ordained (a) a deacon, (b) a priest, and (c) a bishop.

The Anglican Communion is composed of autonomous churches in about twenty-five countries, each with its own canon laws; there is no Anglican "norm" on women's ordination. The Archbishop of Canterbury is recognized as titular head of the Communion, and the bishops of member churches meet about every tenth year to discuss matters of common concern.

In 1978 the 370 bishops voted 85 per cent in favour of recognizing the validity of women's ordinations that had already occurred and voted *not* to impede further ordinations in other member churches.

About half of the member churches have either approved in principle or proceeded to ordination of women. Several churches have not yet addressed the question.

Women are deacons and priests in Hong Kong, New Zealand, the U.S. Episcopal church, Kenya, and Canada. Australia is in the process of ratifying full priesting of women. England has begun to ordain women as deacons (January, 1983).

In Canada, women were priested in 1976, following the National Synod's 1975 endorsement. Numbers change constantly, but over sixty women are deacons and priests in Canada, several of whom

are in neighbouring dioceses to this one.

The Ecclesiastical Province of British Columbia has six dioceses, including the Yukon, and the Diocese of British Columbia on Vancouver Island. Women priests in Vancouver (the Diocese of New Westminster) have been inducted as rectors of parishes. North of Vancouver, in the Diocese of Caledonia, a woman has been made a canon of the church. Vancouver School of Theology reports over 50 per cent of Anglicans studying for ordination are women, a figure consistent with other seminaries and denominations.

There are no women in ordained ministry on Vancouver Island. In fact, there are few women in lay ministry here, and most of them are in rural areas.

The Diocesan Executive Council had a ratio of eight men to each woman in 1982, and no women serving on the major decision-making subcommittees. The 1983 Licensed Lay Readers' roster showed no women licensed in the city of Victoria, although I was licensed within the city limits a few years ago. (I am now licensed in a rural parish.)

The Anglican church in Victoria is still a male stronghold.

Four women are seeking placement in ordained ministry on Vancouver Island. I am the only officially recognized postulant, because I was sponsored by the former bishop and have received national church funding for study under the present bishop. I was to have been ordained after being provincially approved in 1977, but priestly outrage was so intense that the bishop felt it necessary to withdraw my candidacy at that time.

A second woman has been provincially approved (in 1978) but was not sponsored by the bishop. A third woman was given permission to be provincially assessed last spring, but she too has not been sponsored. The fourth woman left the diocese and was priested in the Winnipeg area. Now she awaits an opportunity to return to her home diocese.

Since the rest of the Ecclesias-

tical Province has accepted ordained women, it is reasonable to wonder why this diocese has not. Most people blame the present bishop, but the truth is that he is caught between a rock and a hard place. His clergy refuse to accept ordination of women and his laity welcome anyone who serves them well, regardless of the shape of one's skin.

In the past eight years, I have worked in three parishes. No one has ever refused the chalice from me at Communion. People who were adamantly opposed to women's ordination have told me that seeing a woman "at work" has shown them that ministry has no gender.

Two powerful weapons to keep women's ordination from happening in this diocese are suppression of information and access to it, and operation of a rumour-laden grapevine. It is possible to find people in nearly every parish on this Island who do not know that the Anglican Church of Canada allows women to be ordained.

Requests — from individuals and from entire congregations — to hold open fora and study sessions have passed through the Diocesan Executive Council into subcommittee limbo. Parish rectors have forbidden debates or discussions in their churches.

The first open debate on women's ordination was held in June, 1981. The rector, opposed to ordination of women personally but in favour of freedom to discuss issues of concern, allowed me to present a background paper and make a personal position statement. Some of his fellow priests phoned to ask why he was allowing this "women's thing" to occur in his parish, and others accused him of "defecting" to the other side.

An experience like this has made priests reluctant to speak out or allow open discussions, but the laity have begun to seek information on their own. As they are becoming informed, they are demanding dialogue and action.

The second weapon, the Island grapevine, hums along, perpetuat-

ing misinformation and stories about aggressive feminists who want to be "priestesses" — a loaded word, smacking of pagan rites and, more importantly, of the illegitimacy of a woman's claim to ordination.

To illustrate how the grapevine works, it took only four days for a private conversation I had with the bishop to circulate up the Island and back. The story goes that I marched into the bishop's office, slammed my Lay Reader's licence on his desk, and demanded one of the Gulf Islands (as a hostage?). The priest who told me did so because he felt quite sure that I did not have a dual personality. I informed the bishop that his office was not a place of confidentiality. It is now!

One branch was severed on the grapevine.

After our 1982 synod (which is where this article began), we as a family decided that I should spend time away from the diocese; I spent the winter at Vancouver School of Theology. During the week, I worked through the anger by immersing myself in research and study. The weekends I spent on the Island. I have developed a distinct dislike for riding ferries.

The far-reaching grapevine reared its ugly head just often enough in Vancouver to keep me upset for most of the winter. I actually watched a male student tell a bishop from another diocese all about me, the militant feminist

priest to make mental notes on projection, gestures, or suitability of sermon topic.

On that morning I was taken to the mountain top and I saw the other side — the place where I feel God has called me to be, ministering to God's people and being validated and upheld in that ministry. At the end of the service, I dismissed the people, hands outstretched — something I have never done and did not intend to do until it happened. I was free and doing what I do best.

Some people continue trying to "win" priesting for women in this diocese. They are motivated by anger and are wasting precious energy by adding fuel to the fire. I hope that they will understand — and soon — that this is not a win-or-lose issue, but as much a journey as Moses and his people had to take in order to reach that land promised to them by God.

I find myself reading and rereading the Exodus Theology of Martin Luther King Jr., especially his last speech in Memphis on April 3, 1968. He was not afraid and was able to rejoice that others might enter the Promised Land, even if he did not make it there with them. The power of his faith helps me to be unafraid, and because I no longer am afraid of *not* being priested, I don't fear those who would try and stop me. If not me, someday some woman will be a priest here, and I will rejoice for her.

I have been to the mountain top and I have seen the other side. . . I may not get there with you, but I want you to know. . . we as a people will get to the Promised Land. So I am happy. . . I'm not worried. . . I'm not fearing any man.

Martin Luther King, Jr.

who was keeping the pot boiling on the Island — not even connecting me with the person he was describing!

The turning point came in July, 1983, when my rector asked me to conduct a morning-prayer service on a Sunday — alone — with no

Marjorie S. May (B.A., Scripps, Dipl. Adv., Oxon), of Victoria, B.C., is 43, a trained Lay Reader since age 15, an approved Anglican Postulant for Ordination since 1977, and currently completing her M. Div. (V.S.T.).