Call waiting: A journey to ordination

by Lillian Daniel in the February 26, 2008 issue

As I was growing up, the church was my one constant in a changing world. I was six months old when my father, a foreign correspondent with United Press International, was called to cover the story that would dominate the next decade, the Vietnam War. My mother and I flew from South Carolina to join him in Tokyo, then in Thailand, India, the Philippines, Hong Kong and London before finally returning to the U. S. when I was in the ninth grade. By that time I had already lived in seven countries and attended 11 schools.

I loved the church as a child because it was steady. In all those countries we worshiped as Anglicans, and the ritual and rhythms of the Book of Common Prayer let each new church be old again, and as dependable as lukewarm tea after services and sandwiches with the crusts cut off. Church was a port of comfort in the stormy seas of expatriate life.

When people ask, “What made you want to be a minister?” my first response is, “I didn’t.” I didn’t want to be a minister because I hoped to be rich. After four years of capitalist reeducation at high school in the United States, I wanted to be a political science major with an economics minor; I also registered for Mandarin Chinese. I was going to take my international upbringing in a much more lucrative direction. As the 1980s stock market soared, I believed not only that my plan was impressive-sounding when parroted to my parents’ friends at cocktail parties, but that it really would make me rich. But just for fun, I allowed myself one course in the history of religion. Just one.

By the end of college, I was a religion major with an acceptance letter to Yale Divinity School. There had been no thunderbolt, but there had been the nurture of my church over the years, a church that encouraged me to think and to ask deep questions of God and the world. I’d been stimulated by courses on the history of Christianity taught through the lens of feminism and Marxism, and by bright students of all faiths and no faith duking it out with intellectual rigor. A rich undertow toward social justice in every class echoed the Sunday school lessons of my youth.

And the more I got caught up in that undertow of social justice, the more I seemed to be pulled back toward theological education.

I knew I wanted to study the church, but I had no inkling what it might mean to lead one. I could barely put together the words to name a call to ministry. The best I could articulate was a rather vague “call to divinity school.” Still, that acceptance letter gave me a new talking point at my parents’ cocktail parties.

That summer I had an internship at a national newsmagazine. Having been the editor of my college newspaper, I expected a plum assignment in the news section. I was shocked to hear that my spot would be in “advertising and marketing.”

“You mean, *writing about* advertising and marketing?” I asked.

“No, you won’t be doing any writing. You’ll be working in advertising and marketing, on the business side of the magazine.”

“I can’t believe you’re working with the bean counters,” my dad, the lifelong journalist, grumbled. In my romantic vision of myself, I wasn’t a bean counter but instead a summer sojourner in a strange land, like Jesus, who ate with the tax collectors and sinners. My father and his journalist friends were the Pharisees who complained, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” By now, you can guess who, in all my humility, I was in this narrative.

At the end of the summer, I spoke to a new interim priest at my father’s church and told him of my plans to attend divinity school. He responded with very little enthusiasm, pointing out that I had advanced upon all this without the help of my church, that I was venturing out to divinity school alone, and that I had skipped the ecclesiastical steps toward ordination. He asked me about my call to the ministry, and I could tell that what I said left him unimpressed. After our conversation, I called up Yale Divinity School to inform them I wasn’t coming. “Not coming?” the woman asked. “But what is your reason?”

“I realize I don’t know anything about real life. I’ve been in an ivory tower at college, and this summer I did work that I never knew existed except to disapprove of it. Furthermore, I have no idea what I would do after those three years at divinity school, and I’ve skipped all the appropriate ecclesiastical steps, and my priest hates me.”

“Oh, you don’t want to cancel,” she said. “In cases like this, one simply defers.”

“Defer? You mean, come later?”

“Of course,” she said. “We hold your place. For up to two years.”

“OK, put me down for that. But I can tell you right now, I’m definitely not coming.”

“Very good, Dear,” she said. “All the best, now.”

A few weeks later, when the newsmagazine called and offered me a job, I accepted. It was my shot at the young urban professional lifestyle. I got a new car, adopted three cats and acquired a working woman’s wardrobe. I was a grown-up.

A committee of lay leaders from my church, pulled together by the priest, agreed to meet monthly with me to discern my call. I met with the bishop, met with a psychologist to take some tests, and decided not to tell either of them that I was in a punk rock band. In this period of discernment, it became clearer and clearer to me that I had a real call to the ministry.

Yet I was never very good at expressing that call, at least in ways that the committee understood. I would talk about social justice and they would talk about the Eucharist. I would talk about the prophets and they would ask me about the prayer book. It was as if we were all having conversations with someone else, not with one another. They asked me why I wanted to serve a local parish; I responded that I wasn’t sure that I did. They asked me about obedience to the bishop; I said, “You’re kidding? We have to do that?” because that really was news to me. It was only after I’d left that I realized what it was that I should have said. I realized, for instance, that when they asked me about my call to preside over the sacrament each week, my answer of “Sure, I could do that” was wrong.

The chairperson delivered the news at the final meeting. Reading aloud from her notes, she said that the committee would not recommend me to go further in the process. I could not hear the sentences, but the phrases came through with clarity. “No discernible gifts for ordained ministry whatsoever.” “No appreciation of the sacramental ministry of the church.” “A thrill seeker.” “Issues with authority.” “Immature.”

When I asked them what they thought I should do with my life, they were surprisingly direct. Get an MBA, work in the nonprofit world and serve the wider

church as a lay leader committed to justice in the world. The chairperson even offered to serve as my mentor.

I took them and the authority of their words seriously. I quit the magazine job and took a job at a nonprofit organization that helped at-risk and homeless teenagers in Washington, D.C. My job was to recruit volunteers, but I begged for a caseload. In a compromise typical of a nonprofit, they agreed that I could do both.

In my new work, I learned how to work with families in crisis and discovered how hard life was for my fellow citizens in the nation's capital. The people who worked at this agency came from every background. Some had lived hard and in poverty; others were like me, recent college graduates fresh from the ivory tower. Social work veterans schooled us, and we bonded with one another in our lack of training and our desire to help a hurting world. We used secondhand desks crammed into shared offices and ate lunch on the run. We learned our way around public housing projects and police stations, and discovered where kids hid on the way to becoming homeless. I was downwardly mobile, but I was on the highest learning curve of my life.

It took a while before I discovered that three of my co-workers were Howard Divinity School students doing internships in theological education. I was shocked. "How can this be your divinity internship?" I asked. "Shouldn't you be working in a church, performing the sacraments and all that?"

"This is preparing us for the ministry," Roxanne explained.

"What kind of church would consider this preparation for the ministry?" I asked.

"What kind of church wouldn't?" she retorted. It was the first notion I had that there was more than one way of being the church.

The Episcopal Church had been so constant in my life that I had mistaken it for the whole. In fact, if you had asked me which was the largest Christian denomination in the world, I would have told you it was the Anglican Communion, simply because I had known no other. My conversations with the Baptist divinity students rocked my world. They listened to my story about canceled divinity school and having no discernible gifts for the ministry, and I listened to their stories about missionary appointments in Rwanda and preachers who could make you fall down.

Then, toward the end of my year at the agency, Roxanne pulled me aside. “We’ve been praying for you,” she said, speaking for the small group from Howard. “And something has come to us from the Lord.” I listened eagerly. Nobody had ever told me anything like this before in my life. I felt myself so blessed just to have been prayed for that the conversation could have stopped right there.

“You are meant to go to divinity school,” she said. “The one you deferred. You’re meant to go.”

“But I like working here,” I said. “I may get an MBA. Or maybe law school. I’ve been turned down for the ministry. I have no idea now what I would do with a divinity degree.”

“You’re meant to go. It came to us that when you get there, God will open the doors and the windows.”

“But my church told me not to go,” I said.

And Roxanne, who had never stepped away from the church of her childhood, said, “Maybe you’re in the wrong church.”

And in my heart, I said, “OK, God. I’ll go,” because suddenly, God looked a lot like Roxanne.

So far I had felt as if 99 people had told me no, and I had taken them at their word. I had told myself that the majority ruled. But when just one person told me yes, that was all it took. And in that moment, I felt that finally someone had sought me out and brought me back.

True to Roxanne’s vision, I had no idea why I was in divinity school that first year. I worshiped at smells-and-bells Episcopal churches that cared for the homeless with the same dignity with which they worshiped and represented the best of the tradition of my upbringing, but it was a miserable time. I often considered dropping out. I was ashamed to have been turned down for ministry by my church, and I carried that secret with me everywhere.

But then I wandered to the plain white walls of New England Congregationalism, a United Church of Christ church with large, clear windows where the concerns of the world were always visible from inside the church, and where the gospel light could always shine on the struggles on the streets.

When I joined my first UCC church, the pastor said he thought I had the gifts for ministry. I told him the truth. “I don’t want to be one of those people who gets bounced from one church that has standards, and then tries to get into one that doesn’t.”

Remarkably, he did not take offense, but suggested gently, “Maybe you were in the wrong church.”

Looking back now, I believe there are no wrong churches. There is only one church. But sometimes one wing says no so that another may say yes.

My story of being told no by the church of my upbringing gradually worked its way up out of my locked box of secrets. First I shared it only with those who knew me best. Then I found I was able to share it more easily once I’d been ordained, and when I had achieved something that looked like “success” in my calling, if there can be such a thing. To be honest, I also hoped that it would get the response that my lingering insecurity craved. “How *awful*,” close friends would say. “But look at you now.” Their responses brushed up against the empty hole inside me, but never filled it up.

Only after I had ministered and lived as a pastor over time did my story emerge from its secret box on its own terms. A realization came gradually, rained upon me by the rhythms of preaching, by my visits to parishioners and even by the act of performing the sacraments.

Gradually I came to know this: the Episcopalians were not wrong. Their ordination process actually worked. I wasn’t called to ordination in that tradition, and they saw that when I could not. I was immature. I do have issues with authority and obedience. I choke in hierarchies and thrive in independence. I love to preach long sermons and I hate homilies. I would have made a lousy Episcopal priest. But I was richly blessed by the Episcopal Church.

When my mother died, the priest from her church asked me what I wanted to do in the funeral service, because now I had been in the ministry for quite a while. When I answered “Nothing,” I realized that I trusted him. I trusted him as her pastor and, in that sad moment, as mine. The things I had left behind, from the wordy prayer book to the sacrament being served, were not things I would have chosen for the funeral. But on this occasion I did not need to be the chooser. The church had taught me that.

At the service, I could be embraced by a tradition that had embraced her. I could delight in watching her priest do exactly what he was meant to do, and then return to my community of faith and do what I was meant to do.

Just a few months ago the phone rang at my church, and it was the wonderful old priest who had kept me engaged in the suburban church of my high school years. He had sat in my mother’s living room when my grandmother died. He had defended me as a Sunday school teacher when my nursery kids ran wild. He had taken our three-person confirmation class on a beach trip, where we thanked him by breaking a motel television set. And later he had said the prayer at my ordination into another denomination.

He calls me periodically to check in on me, to see what I am up to. I count it as precious whenever he seeks me out. It is as if I am the one sheep he does not let get away.