

Episcopal priestesses

by [Mark Oppenheimer](#) in the [January 2, 2002](#) issue

For many years, Suzanne Hiatt taught a course on “Death and Dying” to seminarians. When she got sick last year, she got to see how the actual experience compared to her class notes. “What I never thought of was how clergy behaved on a hospital visit. What I learned when I was in the hospital allegedly dying is: they’re terrible at it. They don’t want to talk about the illness. They say, ‘How are you? Isn’t the weather lovely?’”

I talked to Hiatt in October in a Cambridge hospice, where she is dying of thyroid cancer. One of Hiatt’s vocal chords is paralyzed and has collapsed on top of her larynx, so her voice was raspy. But she looked happy as she began to tell me about the day in 1974 when she and ten other women, “the Philadelphia Eleven,” were ordained Episcopal priests at the Church of the Advocate in Philadelphia. Defying church hierarchy, three retired bishops laid hands on these 11 women, who thenceforth were the first American women to be Episcopal priests. The “irregular ordinations,” as they were called, forced the issue, putting the Episcopal Church in a vise that threatened to crack it in two: Were these women priests or not? The church resolved the issue two years later when it changed its canons to permit ordination regardless of gender.

The Philadelphia Eleven were all white, and either middle class or rich. Several were lesbians. One, Jeannette Piccard, was a famous balloonist who had once held the world record for highest altitude achieved by a human being. At the time of the Philadelphia ordination, she was 79.

Almost all of them had some experience with the civil rights movement. Hiatt had begun working with an all-black Girl Scout troop soon after graduating from Radcliffe. Carter Heyward had worked at the Henry Street Settlement House on the Lower East Side of New York, an experience that had forced this North Carolina girl to think about her “black maid’s exclusion from our dining room table,” as she later wrote. Betty Bone Schiess had lived with her husband in Algiers for a year. Alla Bozarth-Campbell wrote a poem about the parallel between women’s rights and civil

rights: “When they call me libber/I hear nigger.”

In the 1970s, when the issue of women’s ordination was loosening Episcopalians’ girdles, the Philadelphia Eleven were a touchy subject. A woman named Mary Ann Peters wrote in 1975, “The women’s movement within the Church no longer needs screaming, protesting, button-wearing suffragettes who merely antagonize others within a seemingly Christian community.” Nancy Hatch Wittig, one of the Philadelphia Eleven, had a cool answer: “I heard the gospel long before I heard of the women’s movement.”

Certainly that was true for Hiatt, who told me that she had always wanted to be a priest. “I thought it would be fun to march up and down that aisle, talking to people, being helpful to people. But as a child I put it out of my head and thought about other things girls could do, none of which sounded like much fun. I was baptized at age 11, because my parents had never got around to it in Hartford, where we lived before Minneapolis. So [my brother] John and I were baptized with all these infants. John at 14 was acutely embarrassed, but I, at 11, thought it was fun, and I was moved by it.

“We went home and had a party—being Episcopalians, we had a drink. I went out on a neighbor’s swing and thought, ‘Wheeeee! Now I’m a member of the church, now I’m a Christian. Now we’ll see who gets to walk down aisles.’”

As a teenager, Hiatt drifted from religion. Before leaving for her freshman year at Wellesley, she received a letter from the college asking what religion she was. “I was offended by the letter. I figured they asked because they had a bad habit of putting all the Jews together. And in some parts of the world, Hiatt is a Jewish name. I said I didn’t have a religion, but sent in a late-adolescent pantheistic letter. They gave me a Quaker roommate. I think they thought Quakerism was so exotic they put us together to let us fight it out.” But the roommate told her, “I wrote a pantheistic letter just like you did!”

Hiatt later transferred to Radcliffe. After college and her job with the Girl Scouts, she worked with the Episcopal Church’s Indian mission efforts, then studied English literature in Edinburgh. One day she walked into St. Giles Cathedral, “frankly to get warm. It was a medieval cathedral. It had the beautiful painted statues. It was empty, and it was a workday. I wandered around, and then sat down on a radiator. I thought, ‘What am I going to do with my life?’ And a voice said, ‘You’re going to be a

priest. It's what you've always been called to do.' And I thought, 'No, this is a Presbyterian church.' And the voice said, 'That's true, but you're called to be a priest.' That's what you'd say is a true call to the priesthood."

Episcopal Theological School in Cambridge (now Episcopal Divinity School) admitted women for study, even though the church would not ordain them as priests. "There were five women," Hiatt said. "Only the young ones would admit they were called to the priesthood. The kind of thing blacks have to put up with forever, we put up with—being called 'Sugar' and 'Sweetie' and 'Honey.' They'd come out and say offensive things, like 'Why don't you go home?'" One administrator told a female student that one reason women had been admitted was to keep the male students from using foul language. Hiatt would eventually join the faculty of the school.

After seminary, she worked for a Presbyterian church, then on a welfare-rights project funded jointly by the Episcopal Church and the federal government. In April 1970 she and about 60 Episcopal women met at the Graymoor estate, an ecumenical retreat center on the Hudson River. The conference was organized to talk about women's issues, not ordination specifically.

"We'd been working on the ordination of women," Hiatt said, "but we hadn't seen it as a feminist issue, believe it or not. But in a lot of civil rights groups, women complained that they did nothing but make the coffee. And some of the women up front in the Episcopal Peace Fellowship sent a letter around to everyone on the list, saying, 'Why don't women have more of a place in the peace movement? And furthermore, when we look at our sponsor, the Episcopal Church, women have no rights there either.'"

At Graymoor, one group of women, from St. Mark's-in-the-Bowery in New York, identified themselves as radical lesbians. They were joined by more moderate feminists, clergy wives searching for a role, religious education workers, and the idly curious.

"A lot of people were timid about saying bad things about the church because they were afraid it might be construed as feminist or communist or whatever. Jeannette Piccard was there. She got up and said, 'We've been saying a lot of bad things about the church and especially about men. And there are men who believe in the ordination of women, they love us, and want to help us.' And this voice cracks out across the room from one of the St. Mark's women, 'That's a crock of shit!' And

everybody looked around and said, 'You know, it *is* a crock of shit!' And everybody started clapping, and that broke the ice and allowed us to speak about being feminists."

The ordination movement began in earnest, and that July the House of Bishops, one half of the bicameral Episcopal General Convention, voted to permit women's ordination. The House of Deputies refused to concur, as it would again refuse in 1973. Ordination activists became impatient, and in 1974 the Philadelphia Eleven—all of them already deacons —were ordained. Two months later, four more women were ordained in Washington, D.C. After the canons were changed in 1976, all 15 priests were accepted as priests by the church.

If you read some books about the U.S. from 1965 to 1975, you might think that the entire country was moving to LSD and the Grateful Dead and that the nation was full of willowy women with long, center-parted hair, twirling like dervishes and siring Aquarian children. You'd think that all religion was Eastern and mystical. It's true that the mainline churches were bleeding membership; vocations to the Catholic priesthood were crashing; and Jewish elders worried that their sons and daughters of Israel were becoming Hare Krishnas. But some people were trying desperately to be accepted by these traditional churches. Some people, even some very liberal people, didn't want to create new, unscrubbed religions. They wanted to be loved by their mother churches.

Hiatt paused in the midst of a story and looked over at me. "I've gotten very loquacious since I'm on my way out," she said, with a hint of apology. She resumed speaking of visits from friends and family. I looked at the get-well cards fastened to her wall with masking tape. A West Indian nurse came in to clear the lunch dishes. As I rose to leave, I remembered that in 1948 the devout Anglican C. S. Lewis had been worried about the movement to allow "priestesses." "We men may often make very bad priests. That is because we are insufficiently masculine. It is no cure to call in those who are not masculine at all," he wrote. Hiatt, and the 2,000 other Episcopal priestesses, would not agree.