

Nicole Garcia: The journey of one transgender Latina in the church

by [Becky Garrison](#)

July 8, 2015

c. 2015 Religion News Service

(RNS) Nicole Garcia looks more like a well-heeled church lady than a radical—but her faith journey over the past 55 years reflects a radical shift in mainline Christian denominations' acceptance of transgender people as leaders in the church.

A self-professed church nerd, Garcia says she was “a good Catholic boy” when she was in her teens. Today, she is a candidate for ordination in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Last year, the ELCA welcomed its first openly transgender clergy person, Megan Rohrer, pastor at Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church in San Francisco. When Garcia is ordained and called to a church, she will be the denomination's first transgender clergy person of color.

A lot has changed in U.S. churches since 2009, when United Methodist pastor David Weekley came out to his congregation as transgender. TV shows and movies have told the stories of transgender people, and the extensive news coverage surrounding reality TV star and Olympic gold medalist Caitlyn (formerly Bruce) Jenner has done even more to raise public awareness and acceptance.

While some denominations are moving faster than others—the Episcopal Church in 2012 passed resolutions protecting its lay and ordained employees from discrimination on the basis of gender identity, for example—churches do continue to move forward on transgender inclusiveness.

Transgender people bring to ministry “a deep understanding of what it is to live in a world that refuses to let you be who you are,” observed Gregory H. Rickel, Episcopal bishop of Olympia, Washington.

“Pastorally, they are especially adept at walking people through the valley of exclusion that so many walk, for so many different reasons, as well as helping others look deeply into self,” Rickel said. “I have now come to know and work in ministry

with several transgender priests and I consider them all a blessing to the church.”

But it has not been an easy journey, for Garcia or others. After years of trying to lose herself in alcohol and then seeking to be “macho” with a career in law enforcement, she connected eventually with the Gender Identity Center of Colorado.

“When I heard the stories of others . . . I realized I had to transition,” said Garcia, a certified counselor with her own practice in Longmont, Colo.

In 2003, she began her journey to embrace her gender identity, as well as reconnect with her faith. Garcia joined the Lutheran Church, where she became an advocate for LGBT rights. By 2008, she had been appointed transgender representative to the national board of directors of ReconcilingWorks: Lutherans for Full Participation. She is now vice chair of the board.

“Nicole is a wonderful example of the way in which changing attitudes and policies in the church are expanding horizons for ministry,” said Ron Roschke, assistant to the bishop of the Rocky Mountain Synod ELCA. “It has been a joy to work with her as she prepares to become an ordained pastor. Nicole brings specific gifts through her background as a counselor. This, combined with her own experience as a transgender woman, provides special assets that continue to enliven Nicole’s ministry.”

Roschke acknowledged that “LGBTQ candidates can encounter unique challenges in finding a call within the church, but as Nicole continues to work toward ordination she will offer the church a gracious and powerful example of the gifts transgender rostered leaders can offer to the world and to the people of God.”

It is difficult to estimate the number of transgender clergy now serving in churches or in the pipeline to do so because many trans people choose not to go public out of concern that the revelation will put them at risk for discrimination in housing, employment, and other areas.

Louis Mitchell, co-chair of the board of the Trans People of Color Coalition, and a United Church of Christ minister in Springfield, Massachusetts, said that over the past five years, he has seen an increase in the number of trans people enrolled in seminaries.

Yet despite recent advances, transgender people know that they still risk being misunderstood.

“People can wrap their heads more easily around sexual orientation than gender identity,” Mitchell said.

During his studies at Union Theological Seminary, one of the most liberal seminaries in the country, Shannon T. L. Kearns said he felt he still had to advocate for himself and educate everyone, including his educators, about his transition. “This made my experience exhausting, even as I was mostly supported and encouraged.” Kearns said he is an ordained priest in the Apostolic Catholic Church of America.

The report *Injustice at Every Turn: A Report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey* found that while discrimination against transgender individuals was pervasive, “people of color in general fare worse than white participants across the board, with African American transgender respondents faring far worse than all others in most areas examined.”

For example, while transgender people are twice as likely to lose their jobs as the general population, transgender people of color are four times more likely to face unemployment, the report says. The majority of those killed in transgender hate crimes are transgender women of color, according to Transgender Day of Remembrance.

“We didn’t stop being black, Latino, Asian, or Native American just because we became trans,” noted Kylar Broadus, executive director of the Trans People of Color Coalition.

On a grassroots level, Garcia said she has experienced a wonderful welcome at Mount Calvary Lutheran in Boulder, Colorado, where she serves currently as a seminarian. And two other Colorado churches, St. Paul Lutheran in Denver and Christ the Servant Lutheran in Louisville, have given her funds toward tuition.

Yet Garcia still wonders if a congregation will accept her as a minister just as she is.

“How can I feel comfortable as a Latina with dark skin in a denomination where inevitably at least 90 percent of the congregants in any ELCA church will be white?”

Garcia is very aware that when she graduates, she will have up to \$25,000 in student loans. “Even though I have church credentials as a national church leader

and a background in counseling, who will hire a 58-year-old Latina trans clergyperson?”