

Nicole Garcia on her way to being ELCA's first transgender clergy person of color:
People

by [Becky Garrison](#) in the [August 5, 2015](#) issue

A self-professed church nerd, Nicole Garcia says she was “a good Catholic boy” in her teens. Today, she is a candidate for ordination in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and on her way to being the denomination’s first transgender clergy person of color.

Mainline denominations are shifting in acceptance of transgender leaders. The Episcopal Church in 2012 passed resolutions protecting its lay and ordained employees from discrimination on the basis of gender identity. Last year, the ELCA welcomed its first openly transgender clergy person, Megan Rohrer, pastor of Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church in San Francisco.

Garcia tried for years to lose herself in alcohol and then sought to be “macho” with a career in law enforcement. Finally, she connected 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, Colorado.

In 2003, she began to embrace her gender identity and reconnect with her faith.

“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,” said Ron Roschke, assistant to the bishop of the Rocky Mountain Synod ELCA.

The number of transgender clergy is difficult to estimate because many do not live openly.

“People can wrap their heads more easily around sexual orientation than gender identity,” said Louis Mitchell, cochair of the board of the Trans People of Color Coalition and a United Church of Christ minister in Springfield, Massachusetts.

Yet over the past five years, he has seen an increase in the number of transgender people enrolled in seminaries.

The report from the National Transgender Discrimination Survey found that “people of color in general fare worse than white participants across the board.” For example, transgender people of color are four times more likely to face unemployment than the general population. And the majority of those killed in transgender hate crimes are transgender women of color, according to Transgender Day of Remembrance.

Garcia said she has been welcomed at Mount Calvary Lutheran in Boulder, Colorado. Two other Colorado churches, St. Paul Lutheran in Denver and Christ the Servant Lutheran in Louisville, have given her funds for tuition.

Yet 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?” —Religion News Service