

Laywomen and Calling

By Lauren Graeber

In her essay, “Women and Vocation in the Episcopal Church: Reflections on Our History,” Sheryl Kujawa-Holbrook writes, “The subject of vocation is intimately autobiographical.”¹ In my research and writing about laywomen I have tried to construct an argument that isn’t ultimately about *my* autobiographical journey, but I can’t. My parents’ break with the Baptist church when I was 14 showed me that you could abandon a church and go find another. While I spent most of the next twenty years in the United Methodist Church, I was never rooted there. Four years ago, on my theological and ethical impulses, I joined the Episcopal Church. My Episcopal Studies certificate from Wake Forest School of Divinity was always about me grappling with that choice, measuring up the church to see if I can make it my home. In my coursework I was particularly taken with laywomen. Encountering them on the page and in person, I have interrogated them to quell my own fears, in the face of an often patriarchal and hierarchal church, of having chosen the wrong home. But these Episcopal churchwomen, these laywomen, are tough ladies and despite my stubborn hesitations, I keep finding myself drawing nearer to their witness and community.

Across the history of the Episcopal Church laywomen have been key to its growth and vitality. So, where I do start and end an account of their inclusion in and recognition by the Church? Is this just a movement for women to be seated in the House of Deputies? I don’t think so. Although that’s a convenient frame for a *piece* of the story, that frame is not broad enough to include how the Women’s Auxiliary formalized and structured the time, presence, and efforts of laywomen long before 1919 when the question of official recognition seemed first most promising and most dashed; how they continued to do so from 1946-64, when every General Convention rejected a reinterpretation of ‘laymen’ to include women; nor does it encompass the continued work of laywomen since they were seated in 1970. Neither is that frame flexible enough to account for the ways that laywomen were instrumental in the movement for women’s ordination. Finally, allowing the seating of women in the House of Deputies in 1970 to be a neat conclusion to the story risks closing down what ought to be an on-going, critical self-assessment among all Episcopalians about how the inclusion of women remains unfinished business.

Never mind that I find trying to define ‘laywoman’ increasingly difficult the more I read about them. In our current context the distinctions appear easier given that women can be and have been ordained and thus are officially distinct from non-ordained women. But when no woman could be ordained, women were still acting as ministers in the service of the Episcopal Church in roles as set apart as contemporary female priests, deacons, and bishops. I am thinking here of female missionaries, nuns, principals of Episcopal schools, religious educators within the Church none of whom were ordained but whose work sure looks similar to that of ordained women today.² The work of such women of the past, who intentionally fulfilled their vocation within and

¹ Kujawa-Holbrook, Sheryl A., “Women and Vocation in the Episcopal Church: Reflections on Our History,” *Anglican and Episcopal History* 79, no. 2 (June 2010): 105.

² In the charter for the Companions of the Holy Cross, Emily Morgan acknowledges a conscious distinction already present among Episcopal women in 1884. She writes, “We are an order of women living in the world with a desire for the stronger development of the spiritual life in ourselves and others,

through the institutional church, suggests to me that ‘laywoman’ is not an appropriate designation for them, even if that might have been their self-understanding.

Then whose story am I telling when I write about laywomen? Most simply, a whole host of generous and powerful women. Women who served in their branches of the Auxiliary, in their Guilds and eventually their vestries. Women who gave sacrificially of their time and money. Women who gathered at the Triennial Meetings. Women who now sit at diocesan and general conventions. Women who show up at every ECW event. These are women whose lives are not officially set apart by the Church and yet whose willingness to serve is in no way diminished by that fact.

You could say that the Women’s Auxiliary of the Episcopal Church is an obvious place to begin a story about laywomen. Formed in 1872 as the Women’s Association, Auxiliary to the Board of Missions with Mary Abbot Emery as its first General Secretary, the Women’s Auxiliary would work for the next century to provide structure and support for Episcopal women’s work.³ Emery wrote to her fellow churchwomen in an early Auxiliary publication, “Do what you can, and do it in just the way best suited to your individual tastes, to the circumstances of your parish, to the state of life in which God has placed you.”⁴ Her sentiment captures both what I most admire about laywomen and what most sets my teeth on edge. Her sentiment, her leadership, and that of her sister Julia Emery who followed her, is about faithfully working, assuming God has a call on your life. It is also about working within the institution *as it is*, accepting it *as it is*. Mary Donovan notes that, “In the period between 1850 and 1919, women developed a wide range of ministries, and yet neither they nor the Church recognized their work as ministry.”⁵ For Julia Emery in particular, this lack of recognition was no hindrance to her zeal and commitment to seeing the Women’s Auxiliary expand, both geographically and in its mission.

Just ten years after the formation of the national Women’s Auxiliary, the first NC branch was constituted in 1883⁶, and the women of NC began an unbroken history of devoted service to the

and we must develop that life along the lines of the world in which we live...Any pseudo-nunlike life would be at best but a weak imitation of those who possess a sacred vocation to which most of us have not been called.” qtd. in Donovan, 147 (see note 5)

³ Pamela W. Darling, *New Wine: The Story of Women Transforming Leadership and Power in the Episcopal Church* (Cambridge, Mass: Cowley Publications, 1994), 18.

⁴ qtd in Darling, 19.

⁵ Donovan, Mary Sudman, *A Different Call: Women’s Ministries in the Episcopal Church, 1850-1920* (Wilton, Conn: Morehouse-Barlow, 1986), 174.

⁶ Hoke, Lynn, Laywomen of the Diocese of NC, Phone, November 6, 2018.

Episcopal Church as fundraisers,⁷ hosts, caretakers of the church and services, social advocates,⁸ and faithful members. These were very busy people. Thus Donovan's description of the national landscape, which echoes in the records of NC laywomen, is where my resentment towards the institution roots:

Symbolically, the women were viewed as handmaidens, as those who prepared the way for the priests, the Church's authentic ministers. In local parishes they served as the altar guild – those who could set the table but not serve the meal. They instructed children in the fundamentals of the Christian faith but were not allowed to present those children to the bishop for confirmation.⁹

What appears obvious is women's second-class status, and thus my question for laywomen has been, *Why did you stay?*

That answer is complicated. Zoom out to a theoretical macro-level and you get Margaret Miles' answer that "The gratification to be earned from progressively learning how to engage, control, and reap the rewards of the social order are inextricably linked to women's self-insertion into society."¹⁰ Women, and I think the Emery sisters embodied this, maximized their roles within the institution and navigated that work in ways that utilized the institution to women's benefit. That navigation, in and of itself, required strategy and creativity, and was clearly rewarding given the time, travel and energy the Emerys gave the Church.

This pleasure in institutional work is echoed in an interview with Mrs. Scott Evans Hughes of NC who has served in nearly every available capacity for laywomen since the 1930s. Commenting about her time as diocesan vice president of the ECW in 1972 she says, "I came to enjoy this kind of work. *I really like the possibilities of what can happen.*"¹¹ Hughes, who served as diocesan ECW president in 1975 and then as a lay deputy to the General Convention in 1979, turned down the opportunity to return as a deputy in 1982. Why? Because, "after a family

⁷ In the recollections of Scott Evans Hughes (see note 10) in the archives of the NC Diocese is the following story that captures NC women's work: "I like sharing a wonderful story that Mrs. William Gordon, mother of Bill Gordon, the Bishop of Alaska, told about the organization of the women in her church, Trinity, Scotland Neck, North Carolina. The Woman's Auxiliary members got together on afternoon to allocate their money for mission. And they talked for two hours over how to spend this money that they had. And finally, they decided that they would give it to ten missionaries. And it was ten cents apiece, because they had a dollar. And to me, that is so wonderful. Sort of the widow's mite. Everybody needed to be helped. And maybe in those days, which was back in the 1920s, I guess, it's inspiring to see women who were so involved and wanted to help people. They didn't have much, but they wanted to give it all away."

⁸ Mrs. Hoke noted that Episcopal Women in NC were particularly interested in the welfare of mill workers. She reported that women would go talk to the mill owners to petition their right to minister to the workers. They'd say "look, you can put women in your male communities and it will be a financial advantage to you." She noted the cleverness of the women's strategy of appealing to profit.

⁹ Donovan, 174.

¹⁰ Miles, Margaret R, "Theory, Theology, and Episcopal Churchwomen," in *Episcopal Women: Gender, Spirituality, and Commitment in an American Mainline Denomination*, ed. Prelinger, Catherine M. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 333.

¹¹ "Draft Script for Oral History Video: Scott Evans Hughes" (Archives of the NC Diocese of the Episcopal Church, n.d.), 3.

discussion, I decided my ‘roots’ were with the women.”¹² Miles’ assessment rings true here for me. The Emery sisters, Scott Evan Hughes, and others who served in the structures of the Women’s Auxiliary and ECW show that institutional work was their service to the world and to the Church, work that made them useful, valuable and that rewarded them.

Donovan offers an alternative answer for why other kinds of laywomen stayed with the Episcopal Church. Writing about women who served as missionaries, educators, deaconesses and social activists, she says, “they thought of themselves as full members of the Church, as people called to proclaim Christ’s saving love to all the world. That call was empowering; it enabled them to scorn custom, to develop new ministries, to forge unusual lifestyles for themselves and their sisters.”¹³ I see this borne out in the stories of laywomen here in North Carolina. In “Miss Hall’s Monthly Letter” in the 1934 diocesan publication, *The Carolina Churchman*, Ms. Hall joyfully recounts a recent visit by women from the diocese serving as missionaries. They include “Miss Mary Wood McKenzie, our own missionary to Liberia, and Miss Bessie Blacknall, who also is one of North Carolina’s daughters in Alaska” as well as “Miss Laura Clark, of Scotland Neck, [who was] to be the secretary to the...Bishop of Anking” in Shanghai.¹⁴ It is 1934 and NC Episcopal women are traveling the world as missionaries!

Twenty years later (and still almost twenty years before their seated as lay deputies), in an annual report to the Women’s Auxiliary, the NC women note their continued desire to recruit “more women workers in the church.”¹⁵ They are hoping to find “College Workers, Directors of Religious Education, Parish Secretaries, Social Workers, Teachers, Nurses and Missionaries.”¹⁶ Nowhere in their records do I see them lamenting that the Church’s limited their official inclusion. They are responding to their sense of God’s calling, and I temper my astonishment that they didn’t give up by reading (and rereading) this note from Mrs. Eric Flannigan, the diocesan ECW president in 1974: “We are simply persons: frail, feeble, funny creatures who do great deeds out of mixed motives. In this world great happenings come out of the most incredible and unfitting circumstances. Should we be less than thankful for them?”¹⁷

I do not mean to suggest that women unconsciously accepted diminished membership in the Episcopal Church or that they did not actively petition and advocate for equal membership. All the gains that women made within the institution were driven by their own efforts. Kujawa-

¹² Ibid., 6.

¹³ Donovan, 170.

¹⁴ qtd. in “Quotes - Cumulative-Chronological” (Archives of the NC Diocese of the Episcopal Church, n.d.), 86. In order to share how adventurous and good-humored the women of the Diocese of NC apparently were, I have to include this anecdote that was included in a different edition of the *Churchman*. They recount Ms. Clark’s arrival in China, mentioning how “she describes her arrival there. Wuhu is under martial law due to civil disorders, and when she approached the gates of Lion Hill Compound, her new home, she was greeted by a series of explosions. She thought she was going to be shot before she even got started in her new work, but it proved to be only a friendly gateman welcoming her with firecrackers.”

¹⁵ qtd. in “Quotes - Cumulative-Chronological,” 98.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ qtd. in “Quotes - Cumulative-Chronological,” 100. I think it has to be pointed out that in the records of the Diocese, this woman, though she is the ECW President writing to other ECW Presidents, is identified only by her husband’s name!!!

Holbrook summarizes the story of Episcopal women this way: “She quietly, and with great dignity, persisted under difficult circumstances, until she prevailed. This pattern captures women’s vocation in the Church; the dignity, the persistence, and the refusal to go away.”¹⁸

Some of the earliest forceful petitioning by women of the Church came from an unlikely corner: the Companions of the Holy Cross, a society formed by and for laywomen. In their charter, their founder Emily Morgan identifies their aim “to meet the serious religious, educational, and social problems of our age, first by prayer and then by battle.”¹⁹ Though their activities extend far beyond this, some of their most important work in terms of expanding the voice for women was in their direct petitioning of the General Convention on social justice matters. They sent a proposal to the 1907 General Convention calling on the Church to address social and labor ills, a petition that successfully passed and led to the reappointment of what would become the Joint Commission on Social Service both in 1907 and again in 1910, a commission that included women members.²⁰ In 1916, the Companions petitioned the General Convention again, this time to address worker welfare, income inequality, and the Church’s obligation to be a witness and advocate in these areas.²¹ In taking these steps, the Companions were pushing at the edges of acceptable behaviors for women within the institution and demonstrating women’s desire for and ability to participate at the national level of Church governance.

While the 1919 General Convention’s defeat of the suffrage resolution showed what Donovan names as women’s “marginal position in the Church,”²² women quietly but persistently continued to push the Church for expanded leadership opportunities. One area in which this work continued was at the level of parish vestries. The Diocese of NC was roiled in 1935 by the election of women onto the vestry of St. Savior’s in Raleigh. As St. Savior’s reported in the *Carolina Churchman*:

On January 15th, we held our annual meeting of the congregation. The reports showed that very fine work had been done all along the line during the year. The congregation voted to do something a bit unusual – elect women on the Vestry. Some of us rather shook our heads a bit but we are willing to try some things at least once.²³

But that decision was not roundly celebrated; other parishes were vocal in their condemnation, pointing to the then canons of this diocese to prove that it was only baptized male members of a parish that should have been allowed on vestry.²⁴

¹⁸ Kujawa-Holbrook, Sheryl A., “Women and Vocation in the Episcopal Church: Reflections on Our History,” 104.

¹⁹ qtd. in Donovan, 147-8.

²⁰ Donovan, Mary Sudman, 151-152.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 152.

²² *Ibid.*, 171.

²³ qtd. in “Quotes - Cumulative-Chronological,” 88.

²⁴ *Ibid.* In the next month’s issue of the *Churchman* appears the following response: “In the first place, although as an organized mission of Christ Church, St. Saviour’s is entitled to representation at the Diocesan Convention, it may have no vestry technically except the vestry of its (parent) parish Church. Secondly, the canons of this Diocese (XXII.1, Convention Journal of 1930) provide – and this is the crux of the matter – that vestries are to be elected from among the ‘baptized *male* members of the parish of the age of twenty-one years.’ Of course, the ‘vestry’ at St. Saviour’s, strictly speaking, is only a kind of mission executive committee, upon which women have a perfect right to serve. But those who favor

Nationwide the election of women to vestries began in earnest in the 1950s, and was driven, as the NC example shows, by individual congregations and primarily by women within them. Joan Gundersen cites an example from St. Mary's Parish in Portsmouth, Rhode Island in which parishioner Kitty Sherman "announced at the annual meeting that it was time for a women to serve," resulting in the election of a woman, a trend that was never reversed in that state.²⁵ As Donovan writes, "Once women realized they would always be second-class citizens in an institution that limited its priesthood to men, they were able to confront the Church with its own claim of the equality of all people before God."²⁶ The persistence of Episcopal women in petitioning the Church on their own behalf throughout the twentieth century shows that no official vote or change of canon could deter them.

Yet the ambivalence Episcopal women felt about their changing position within the church is captured in the memories of Scott Evans Hughes. She reports how proud she was to address the changing role of women in the church at the start of her tenure in diocesan leadership.²⁷ She also recalls how moved she was by the vote at the 1976 General Convention for women's ordination, which she supported.²⁸ Her memories also include, however, her experience a year later at the 1977 Task Force on Women Conference where she notes, "In our meetings much of the anger was directed at the ECW, essentially because we hadn't done enough for change."²⁹ As she reflects on her experience of having been a direct witness and participant in the changing roles for women, she says it was "lonely, and the voice in the wilderness a lot of times. I felt that I was tokenly accepted, and I was never sure how much weight my remarks made. It was nothing overt. It was just the feeling that one had of, you were being, quote, 'tolerated.'"³⁰ Yet (!) she faithfully persisted³¹. Like so many other laywomen, she set aside frustration and setbacks and insisted on doing the work anyway.

I have discovered that asking laywomen *Why did you stay?* is not a helpful question. In asking that I had been projecting my own story onto others, and I had been missing wonderfully interesting biographies of sincere, stubborn, and creative women. I confess I am prone to being smitten by trailblazers, and the Episcopal Church has provided me a list of female heroines to motivate my Church membership, the Rt. Rev. Barbara Harris and the Rev. Dr. Carter Heyward among them. Research into laywomen, however, pointed me to a stream of women whose mostly quiet contributions to their Church offer me another narrative of what faithfulness across a lifetime can mean. In my conversation with Lynn Hoke, archivist for the Diocese of NC, I asked

equality for women in church governing bodies will have to turn elsewhere for a precedent in their cause."

²⁵ Gundersen, Joan R., "Women and the Parallel Church: A View from Congregations," in *Episcopal Women: Gender, Spirituality and Commitment in an American Mainline Denomination*, ed. Prelinger, Catherine M. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 123.

²⁶ Donovan, 174.

²⁷ "Draft Script for Oral History Video: Scott Evans Hughes," 4.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

³¹ from Hoke, Lynn, "Additional Documents." about Mrs. Hughes: "This year's diocesan convention next week will be the first one she has missed as a delegate from St. Stephen's, Durham, in the last 40 years."

her to characterize Episcopal women in this part of the world, and she commented that the “Churchwomen of the diocese of NC were quick and responsive when a need [was] put in front of them. . . If they heard of something, they wanted to help, even just a little bit.”³² That seems to me the pattern story of a great many laywomen in the Episcopal Church. They were *quick and responsive; they wanted to help*, and they didn’t insist that the work or their role in it had to be monumental. They understood - and I am trying to learn from them - that it could be *even just a little bit*.

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³² Hoke, Lynn, Laywomen of the Diocese of NC.