

**Ordaining the Disinherited:
What Women of Color Clergy Have to Teach Us About Discernment**

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	3
Conceptual Frame	5
The Episcopal Church	10
Methodology - Story as scripture	14
Data: Description and Deconstruction	17
Bishop Emma	18
Rev. Sarai	25
Rev. Isabella	31
Rev. Julian	37
Rev. Juanita	43
Lessons Learned	50
Proposed Next Steps: Construction	54
Universal Discernment	54
Public Priesthood	60
Works Cited	63
Interviews	63
Additional Texts.....	63

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This work is dedicated to Jennifer Veronica Carroll. I am so proud to be her daughter.

Abbreviations

BCP	Book of Common Prayer
BIPOC	Black, Indigenous, People of Color
COM	Commission on Ministry
TEC	The Episcopal Church

INTRODUCTION

In 2008, I sat upon a rock in Nelson pond. It was a gorgeous summer day. As the puffy clouds, grazing sheep and beauty of creation washed over me, I decided to follow God's call for my life. At the time, this meant becoming a priest in the Episcopal Church. Thirteen years later, I work for the church, but I am not ordained. I am a dedicated lay leader of the Episcopal branch of the Jesus movement and I find clergy quite frustrating. I have seen more than one person be ordained and move from imaginative to limited expressions of ministry. Perhaps the answer was in their formation, so I decided to attend seminary. My plan was to go to many of the same classes as those pursuing ordination and try to figure out what about the formation process yielded such problematic leaders. Based on what I have seen these past two years, I am beginning to understand the limitations that are experienced not just in formation, but throughout the discernment and ordination process. When I first started a discernment process every wise person told me the same thing: We make plans, God laughs. This past year has been strong proof of this concept. I am learning to let God's plan be at work through me regardless of my ordination status. And this thesis feels like a part of that plan.

The following is an academic opportunity to understand my own experience. Its epistemology is the lives and stories of Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) who identify as women. What I am learning through these interviews and further research is that the process of discernment (hearing God's call and what to do with that call) is too entangled with the formal processes for assessing qualifications for ordination. Vulnerable discovery is evaluated for one's "worthiness" for entrance into Holy Orders. Such an entanglement means that God's call, often rooted in a deep connection to a community of accountability, does not result in equitable, life-giving leadership. In fact, because of the oppressive legacy of the church's history, theology and culture, there are certain groups for whom ordination is not accessible. But God has made different plans. The disinherited have found a home in the Episcopal Church and become leaders despite oppressive institutional structures. "The Episcopal Church Welcomes You" signs can only remain in our churches if we develop a culture of discernment that supports a variety

of vocational calls and a formation/ordination process for clergy that invites them as God created them from the womb.

In order to offer suggestions for a more lifegiving, ethical and equitable process, I first offer conceptual frameworks that guided my thinking on this topic. Next, I provide a short explanation of the denomination and its legacy of oppression and liberation. Then I present the stories of five women of color currently ordained as priests in the Episcopal Church (TEC). From their stories, I will draw some larger implications about the discernment and ordination processes to offer pathways forward. Such movement is not merely for the sustenance of the Church institution, but for the sustenance of those who are called to participate in the building of God's dream for a more just and equitable world.

The focus on ordination processes matters because "attention to concrete practices is necessary to reveal the rehearsal of those subjugating assumptions within the patterns of our everyday lives."¹ Focusing on how the church forms and visions leadership has implications for how it can engage in the larger issues of justice and inequity today. This past year (2020-21) we experienced a global pandemic, racial reckoning, economic crisis and unprecedented natural disasters. All of us are carrying difficult theological questions and trauma, but the weight of what we are holding is disproportionately affecting those who have historically been marginalized in our society and the Episcopal Church. This paper seeks to explore the experience of the margins (the disinherited) and ask what they have to say about our mainstream processes. By centering the stories of women of color, we can begin to understand the practical ways unjust and disproportionate impacts of harm plays out in our church structures. And we can start to tease out survival tools so that more equitable and ethical processes can make such tools unnecessary for future generations.² Imagine what the Episcopal Church could do if, with all its privilege, it was led (at the congregational and community level) by clergy who could show up as authentic expressions of God's belovedness, unafraid with imaginative ministerial vision.

¹ Traci C. West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics: When Racism and Women's Lives Matter*, 1st ed (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 5/12/2021 11:24:00 PM, xvii.

² The idea of "survival tools" speaks to the theory of survival/quality of life that is outlined in: Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2013).

CONCEPTUAL FRAME

The term *disinherited* comes from Howard Thurman who defines the disinherited as those who live with their “backs against the wall” and in “need of profound succor and strength to enable them to live in the present with dignity and creativity.”³ Essentially, the disinherited are those who are marginalized and experience the diminishment of their personhood because of the temporal and spiritual harm placed upon them. The word disinherited reflects a Christianization of marginalization. It says that we, by default as God’s children are to be centered and valued. Systemic oppressive institutions and those who benefit from such institutions have engaged in a communal sin that placed certain “backs against the wall.” To be disinherited is not the fault of the disinherited. The work of the disinherited is to survive. The work of the other is to turn around (repent) and at a minimum reduce harm.

The concepts of mainstream and margins comes from my training with the organization Training for Change. Their activity on the topic highlights that we have all felt centered and decentered in various groupings regardless of our social identities (race, gender, etc...).⁴ This means that to be disinherited in one context does not mean that you remain in that position in another. One does not always have their “back up against the wall,” but some do more than others. What is important for our inquiry, is to understand that there are those who have had their personhood and dignity diminished for the maintenance of power for those that live in the mainstream. The mainstream is understood as those who benefit from an empire built upon White heteropatriarchal supremacy. All others are the margins and because we are an intersectional people, almost all of us move in and out of the margins and the mainstream. Therefore, understanding the experience of the margins and creating a system of equity for the disinherited to show up as their authentic selves means that the ordination process should be more life-giving and equitable for everyone.

As we will see later, there are times that entering the mainstream requires the practice of *covering* and following *covering demands*. I was first introduced to this term when I heard a lecture by Kenji

³ Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1996), 1.

⁴ “Mainstream & Margins,” Training for Change, https://www.trainingforchange.org/training_tools/mainstream-margin/ Accessed: 1/20/2021.

Yoshino. He defines covering as an adjective: “To cover is to tone down a disfavored identity to fit into the mainstream.”⁵ I have used “authentic leadership” or “authentic selves” several times throughout my introduction. What I mean by this is the development of a leadership model that does not replicate mainstream expressions of leadership, that doesn’t require one to *cover* their Latinidad, educational status or any other part of their social location. Yoshino, as a civil rights lawyer, strongly equates covering with an American assimilationist history. As we have developed more explicit laws and policies about equity in society, “covering demands direct themselves at the behavioral aspects of our personhood.”⁶ Such demands are not only harmful to the person forced to engage in covering, but for all of us. Even more, such demands are exhausting.

I will speak to the covering implications from a theological perspective later in this paper, but for now, we must understand that hiding one’s self from God is one of the first sins we read about in the Bible. In this second creation story, Adam and Eve know they have disobeyed and separated themselves from God. So they hide themselves. Covering is an act of disinheritance. It is a way of saying that there is something wrong about one’s personhood, something that is not acceptable. The Rev. Rachel K. Taber-Hamilton expresses it this way, “It has been my personal experience that every single person of color and white ally intending to work in ministry with communities of color is at some point asked by evaluators if they believe they are ‘sufficiently Anglican.’”⁷ She is outlining a frequent request by the Church for BIPOC communities or those who want to work with them, to practice the art of covering. Invoking such demands in a spiritual process is at minimum annoyance and at the extremes emotional and spiritual violence.

We must now turn to understanding some of the processes and polity of the Episcopal Church. According to the Book of Common Prayer (BCP), “the ministers of the Church are lay persons, bishops,

⁵ Kenji Yoshino, *Covering: The Hidden Assault on American Civil Rights* (New York: Random House, 2007), viiii.

⁶ *Ibid.*, xii.

⁷ The Rev. Rachel K. Taber-Hamilton, “The Meaning of a Priest: Racial Bias and White Privilege in The Episcopal Church,” *Greening Spirit* (blog), accessed December 17, 2020, <https://greeningspirit.com/2019/12/>.

priests, and deacons.”⁸ The lay persons are everyone in the church that hasn’t been ordained, bishops are in charge of and pastor a diocese (similar to a governor of a state), priests or presbyters are pastors of communities of people (similar to a city council person or Mayor), deacons are particularly charged with serving those in need (like the social workers).

The pursuit of an ordained role, also called Holy Orders, (bishop, priest, deacon) is initiated by a sense of call and a process of discernment. “The term calling or ‘call’ refers to a person’s experience of being grasped by a divine or other superhuman power and being taken into its service.”⁹ Responding to one’s call requires discernment. In the book *Listening Hearts*, “discernment is ‘sifting through’ our interior and exterior experiences to determine their origin.”¹⁰ Additionally, “discernment helps a person understand the source of a call, to whom it is directed, its content, and what response is appropriate.”¹¹ Call and discernment happen individually and communally. One cannot understand their call without their community because the goal is to use our gifts in service with and for others.

Call stories happen throughout the Bible. Let us use the story of Samuel (1 Sam 3) to understand discernment and call. Samuel hears a voice calling out to him, but he believes that it is his master Eli that is calling. Several times, he gets up saying to Eli, “Here I am., for you called me.” (1Sam 3:5) Eli helps Samuel to understand the actual source of his call, God, and helps him to respond by saying, “Speak Lord for your servant is listening.” (1Sam 3:10). Samuel then responds to God. God responds by making Samuel a prophet who has to deliver difficult news to his mentor Eli. Samuel is hesitant to share, but Eli insists and accepts what God has warned. Throughout Samuel’s life he speaks God’s truth and the wider community is healed.

⁸ The BCP is a core part of understanding the TEC. Episcopal Church. *The Book Of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church : Together with the Psalter or Psalms of David According to the Use of the Episcopal Church*. New York :Seabury Press, 1979, 855.

⁹ Hjelde, Sigurd, Waschke, Ernst-Joachim, Wilhelm Horn, Friedrich, Sparr, Walter and Martin Müller, Hans, “Calling”, in: Religion Past and Present. Consulted online on 18 January 2021
<http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/10.1163/1877-5888_rpp_COM_01840>

¹⁰ Joseph P. Gill, R. Taylor McLean, and Susan M. Ward, *Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community*, ed. Suzanne G. Farnham, Newly rev. ed (New York: Morehouse Pub, 2011), 21.

¹¹ Ibid, 21.

Samuel's call came from God, but he needed Eli to help him interpret that call and have the courage to respond. So it is with discernment, we need the support of others to understand where the call is coming from and how to respond. Eli's support centered God's call. And the message that his mentee offered was a message that did not feel good. But Eli, knowing that it was from God, could receive the truth from his mentee. What is beautiful about this discernment process between Eli and Samuel is how they are able to both be transformed by the experience. This is a wonderful way to think about the shared relationship that can happen when God's call and will for God's people is centered.

When I told a Deacon that I was thinking about priesthood she gave me Parker Palmer's, *Let Your Life Speak*. Palmer's work focuses on the discovery of one's true self, not out of selfish motivations, but for the purpose of being a good member of one's community. Palmer pushes us to reflect on how *call* is a glimpse into the possibility of a true self. When discernment of call is successful, ideally, "our deep gladness meets the world's deep need."¹² This is what I define as a life giving process - one that gets a person to discover how their authentic (true) self can be of service to a community for the purpose of God's mission.

Typically the pursuit of call towards ordination can take between 3-10+ years depending on your prior educational experiences. There are over 110 dioceses in The Episcopal Church, each with their own processes. However, a typical process starts with a *seeker* or *aspirant* speaking with their priest or local worship community leader to talk about their call. They then discern within their local worshipping context. If that community says yes, they are sent to a diocesan process. If the diocesan process confirms, and the Bishop concurs, they are made a *postulant*. The postulant often then goes to seminary for a Masters of Divinity (MDiv) and must pass the General Ordination Exams (GOEs). Once a person enters the diocesan process they are engaging with the Commission on Ministry (COM),¹³ the Standing Committee¹⁴ and the Bishop. Once all formation requirements are complete, the Bishop will invite

¹² Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000),36.

¹³ the diocesan group that is meant to support pursuit of ministerial call

¹⁴ Provides legislative oversight like the Executive Council on the denominational level.

postulants to be candidates for Holy Orders. Candidates interview with the Bishop and Standing Committee before being ordained to the diaconate as a *transitional deacon*. After at least a six month waiting period, this person is then ordained priest. At any time throughout the process, the COM or the standing committee can delay or even stop the process towards ordination. Regardless, the Bishop has the final word on who gets ordained. At the ordination service, the people must confirm the candidates call, but objections are rarely heard.¹⁵

The goal of the ordination process,¹⁶ is to figure out if one is truly experiencing a calling to ordained ministry. According to the BCP, a priest's duty is to "proclaim by word and deed the Gospel of Jesus Christ...love and serve the people (with) whom you work...to preach, to declare God's forgiveness..., to pronounce God's blessing, to share in the administration of the Holy Baptism and in the celebration of the mysteries of Christ's Body and Blood" and other duties as assigned.¹⁷ To be ordained priest is to be invited into a vocation and spiritual path of sacramental leadership. Ideally such leadership provides support to the many ministers of the church (lay and ordained) to do what they are called to do to participate in God's mission of reconciliation between God, humanity, and the rest of creation.

As you can see, the path to ordination is winding and complicated. It is difficult to become a priest because it should be. This is a lifetime appointment that comes with a great deal of responsibility. When you are ordained, you are following a call from God, but you are also demonstrating commitment to a particular denomination and representing the Church institution, whether you agree with all their practices or not. This thesis is particularly about the Episcopal Church. Therefore, we will now do a brief overview of the church structures and history.

¹⁵ For an interesting account of communal objection to ordination, you should read: Barbara C. Harris, *Hallelujah, Anyhow! A Memoir* (New York: Church Publishing Incorporated, 2018), 62-84. As the first woman ordained Bishop in TEC there were several that used her ordination to protest the ordination of women to the episcopate

¹⁶ I am defining the ordination process as everything that happens from an aspirant applying to be a postulant until hands are laid on them at their ordination service. Culturally, discernment is often used as a shorthand for the entire process, which is part of the problem.

¹⁷ Episcopal Church, *The Book Of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church : Together with the Psalter or Psalms of David According to the Use of the Episcopal Church*. New York :Seabury Press, 1979, 531.

THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH

The Episcopal Church is a part of the Anglican Communion. “Wherever the British crown sent explorers, the Church of England was an essential instrument for assimilating colonized peoples to imperial culture.”¹⁸ Such was the case for the colonies established in the Americas. The crown is the titular “head of the church.” The American Revolution meant that Anglican churches in the 13 Colonies needed to establish a church that would be loyal to the new government. This is where the Protestant Episcopal Church of the United States of America was born. Post-Revolutionary War, the Episcopal Church continued to be the Church of slaveholders and the elite. Even after the Civil War, the legacy of slavery had built wealth for Episcopal Churches in both North and South.¹⁹ These oppressive structures were reflected in the governance structures of the church.

The Episcopal Church’s governance structure echoes US government.²⁰ The Executive Council (governing board) membership comes from two governing bodies: House of Bishops (Senate) and House of Deputies (House of Representatives). The House of Deputies has equal representation from lay and ordained. These bodies meet every three years at the General Convention for legislative and administrative concerns. The General Convention is meant to set the larger course for denominational action. The Executive Council meets frequently to make sure that the Church is on course and adjusts budgetary and mission focus when necessary.

Much like the US, the Episcopal Church struggles with differences between denominational (Federal) and diocesan (State) power. What is enacted at the denominational level doesn’t always mandate changes at the diocesan level. This is important to note because so much of the struggle for justice and equity in the church is complicated by the representation, or lack thereof, in governance spaces. We have particularly seen this play out in the fights for equity around race, gender, and sexuality. Changes in these areas correlated with more diverse representation in governance spaces. And while some

¹⁸ Stephanie Spellers, *The Church Cracked Open: Disruption, Decline, and New Hope for Beloved Community* (New York, NY: Church Publishing, 2021), 55.

¹⁹ Spellers, *The Church Cracked Open*, 61-63.

²⁰ You can learn more about the history and formation of governance structures at this website. “History,” House of Deputies of the Episcopal Church, <https://houseofdeputies.org/history/>

powerful laity have made impactful change, we must be conscious of the oversized representation of clergy in governance. Therefore who is welcomed into Holy Orders will impact the governance of the church.

After emancipation many Black people left mainline denominations to form their own churches.²¹ Those who stayed began to find themselves relegated to separate and unequal spaces that locked them out of governance and ordination opportunities. From the 1880's through the first half of the 20th Century, we began to see the building of and push back upon racist structures.²² One strategy for entrance into governance was through ordination. According to Gardiner H. Shattuck Jr., Black people argued that “Christian theology taught that race had no bearing on the powers a man received at his ordination, and *black clergy*, at least, should be granted seats in the legislative assemblies of their dioceses.”²³ Two important pieces to note, 1) women were excluded from this conversation and 2) who is or is not ordained has always been linked to larger power implications, even if we believe in the priesthood of all believers.

Racial and gender segregation existed into the mid-20th Century. Racial segregation ended within diocesan legislative bodies, at least on paper, at South Carolina's diocesan convention in 1954.²⁴ What is now known as the Episcopal Church Women continues to have a separate governing body meeting at the same time as the General Convention because women could not be delegates in the House of Deputies. In 1970 twenty-eight women were welcomed into the House of Deputies when a constitutional amendment was ratified.²⁵ By 1977 women were allowed to be ordained priests. Today, we have a Black Presiding Bishop and an ordained woman as the President of the House of Deputies. We praise the representation at these higher positions and know that the disinherited have been here, making change for generations.

²¹ For example, the African Methodist Episcopal Church was started by Richard Allen who walked out of a White Church with his co-leader Absalom Jones (the first Black priest ordained in TEC). Allen left, But Jones stayed.

²² Gardiner H. Shattuck, *Episcopalians and Race: Civil War to Civil Rights*, Religion in the South (Lexington, Ky: University Press of Kentucky, 2000).

²³ *Ibid*, 17. Not all dioceses, particularly in the south allowed Black people to sit at diocesan conventions.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 55.

²⁵ Episcopal Archives, “Women Delegates: Post 1946,” accessed April 13, 2021, <https://www.episcopalarchives.org/house-of-deputies/women/delegates2>.

Bishop Michael Curry often tells the story of his parent's courtship and his father's entrance into the Episcopal Church. His father, who had grown up in the segregated south, went to his wife's predominantly White Episcopal Church and witnessed Black and White folks drink out of the same communion cup. His father said, "any church who would do that, must know something about Jesus." His father would become an Episcopal priest and his son the Presiding Bishop. There are many times when the Episcopal Church has "cast its lot with empire, established order, and Whiteness instead of the gospel of Jesus Christ."²⁶ And it has been a church where marginalized communities have found a home. Women have been ordained in this church my whole life. Ten years ago, I participated at the marriage ceremony of my lesbian friends who were legally and sacramentally married in this Church. We have not reached the eschaton of equity, but we have also made space for the margins even at our own detriment. It's complicated.

According to the latest Pew data on denominational demographics, 66% of its members are over the age of 50, 55% are women, 90% are White, 85% have lived in the US for three generations or more, 84% have at least some college or higher, 79% are not parents of children under 18.²⁷ This means that TEC is an older, White, US centric Church. And yet, I, a child of Black Jamaican immigrants, stays because I have hope for this church that has always been my spiritual home.

What I love and despise about my denomination, is its capacity to be both/and. It's theological center is "the unity of humankind, created by God, redeemed...by 'one Lord Jesus Christ,' and gathered by the Holy Spirit."²⁸ Desire for unity is honorable and is often used as a silencing tool of "divergent voices and concerns" that keeps the marginalized outside of "decision-making areas."²⁹ As a person raised with a Black Bishop, Black priests and the African diasporic faithful, I didn't really understand how White the church is, particularly at the decision-making levels. It wasn't until I came back to Long

²⁶ Spellars, *Cracked Open*, 14.

²⁷ Pew Research Center, "Members of the Episcopal Church," *Religious Landscape Study* (blog), 2014, <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/religious-denomination/episcopal-church/>.

²⁸ Shattuck, *Episcopalians and Race*, 3-4.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 4.

Island as a full adult and sat in a very Anglican evensong, surrounded by more White people than I was used to, that I fully got it in my body - this church is really White, literally and ontologically.

For those of us who have left our original mono-cultural worship homes, you come to understand that there is an assimilationist streak built on that desire for unity. It seems weird, but I can tell an Episcopalian from afar in the same way that I have been marked as a student of Union Theological Seminary by my God-talk. Our institutional realities must be held in tension with the lived experiences of the disinherited - those who have felt welcomed and those who don't, but still remain.

Kelly Brown Douglas explores this tension in her book *What's Faith Got To Do With It?* Here, she answers the challenge of a student who wonders how she can be a Black Woman and a Christian.³⁰ Douglas outlines the various legacies of Christianity as terrorizing and liberating. Ultimately, she concludes that it is not how she can be a Christian, but "to which Christian legacy [she] belongs."³¹ Centering herself and the community to which she is accountable, her "grandmothers and their faith," Douglas is able to also hold accountable the larger Christian community to which she belongs.³² Because her faith and call is rooted in an authentic expression of her true self, she is then able to operate within a structure that does not always align or recognize her personhood. But her existence and voice makes the institution have to respond.

Douglas demonstrates the connection between faith and justice, but such connection between clergy leadership and a push for equity was not always clear. Harold T. Lewis explains that the 1960's, particularly for Episcopalians whose voices were silenced during debates over slavery and segregation, became an opportunity where "a generation of clergy...believed that a minister of the gospel is an agent of social change."³³ This is not true for all those who seek ordination. In the 1960's or today. But my experience has been that those who are the disinherited and walk with disinherited communities, use their

³⁰ Kelly Brown Douglas, *What's Faith Got to Do with It? Black Bodies/Christian Souls* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2005). It should be noted here that The Very Rev. Dr. Kelly Brown Douglas is an ordained priest in the Episcopal Church.

³¹ Ibid, 221.

³² Ibid, 219.

³³ Harold T. Lewis., "Theology, Ministry, and Praxis: A Forty-Year Retrospective," *Anglican Theological Review* 93, no. 4 (2011): 619.

power and positionality to fight for freedom. Ultimately, this is why I care about the recruitment and formation of clergy. I love the Episcopal Church and I know that we can always do better. Therefore, I hold two concerns: 1) How is the church more welcoming of those that have been historically marginalized? 2) How do we raise up leadership that can lead liberative spaces and be agents of social change?

This thesis is focused on the institutional processes that support leaders who can be social change agents and engage liberative spaces effectively. I am proposing that clergy cannot lead liberative spaces unless they are formed out of liberative processes. Particularly, I am interested in the conflation of discernment and ordination processes in the formation of clergy. Many who pursue ordained ministry experience discernment as a part of their evaluation for priesthood. Legislative bodies decide who sits on the committees and commissions that make these ordination decisions. Such bodies have complicated legacies around race and gender. This is why I have chosen to speak with women of color who have been ordained. By centering their voices I seek to illuminate life limiting and life giving practices that may be present in many people's stories but more subtle in the experiences of mainstream clergy to offer new pathways forward.

METHODOLOGY - STORY AS SCRIPTURE

In the fall and Winter of 2020, I interviewed five women of color clergy ordained as priest in The Episcopal Church through recorded Zoom conversations. My goal was to utilize their stories as my epistemological base for the discernment and ordination process. The themes for this thesis and my main question would come from their words and my own experience. Following in the steps of womanist theologians and ethicists, it was important for me to center the lived experiences of the “historically silenced and naming their experiences as valid sources of theo-ethical inquiry.”³⁴ Melanie L. Harris’

³⁴ Melanie L. Harris, “A Path Set before Us: Womanist Virtue Method,” in *Gifts of Virtue, Alice Walker, and Womanist Ethics*, 1st ed, Black Religion/Womanist Thought/Social Justice (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 50.

“elements of womanist ethics -- deconstructive (critique), descriptive, and constructive” is my hermeneutic for exploring these interviews.³⁵ Centering the stories of the disinherited, “can hold accountable the ideas of dominant thinkers and traditions, ensuring that those dominant ideas are useful for the common good.”³⁶ In other words, if we are to build equitable, ethical, lifegiving discernment processes for our time, we have to center the voices of the margins which allows for “justice-oriented benefits for people across cultural groupings and with unequal status and power.”³⁷

Utilizing the Zoom platform, I recorded each interview and had two transcribed by an outside source not affiliated with The Church. I also auto generated transcripts from three interviews, correcting manually where the automatic transcript was inconsistent. I then read and listened to the interviews several times. Processing each interview, I highlighted areas of overlap between stories and focused on the most prevalent themes within each story.

My approach was more exegetical than a traditional coding approach. According to James Cone, “The Theologian is *before all else* an exegete, simultaneously of scripture and of existence...The task of the theologian is to probe the depths of Scripture exegetically for the purpose of relating that message to human existence.”³⁸ For this thesis, these women’s stories are both scripture and experience. The additional texts employed to illuminate their experiences become scriptural critique or additional scripture options that help with exploration. Following in the steps of Tracy West and other ethicists of the disinherited, we come to understand right action by centering the stories of those who have often been left out. The stories of these five women becomes the starting point for inquiry to build more liberative processes.

I chose participants based on who I knew, would be interesting to talk to, and would speak to me with candor. My goal was to have at least five participants that represented various polity and generational experiences. These women are meant to be representative of themselves. They offer a

³⁵ Ibid, 51.

³⁶ West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics*, 4.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, Rev. ed (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1997), 8.

glimpse into what it means for them to be a woman of color priests. Through my work as a Program Officer at Episcopal Relief & Development (an agency of the Episcopal Church), I have come to know and be connected to a variety of clergy leadership. I utilized my knowledge of this network to help in my recruitment. It is important to note that I tried as much as possible to separate my role with Episcopal Relief from that of a student when engaging these interviewees, but my own positionality must be recognized.

As a cradle to grave Black Episcopalian, I am fully aware of the Black-White dichotomy that happens in conversations about racial equity and justice. Further as a Black Episcopalian of Caribbean descent, I am fully aware of the issues that exist between those who have generational lineage in the US vs. those who have arrived here from former British colonies. Such dynamics are not always reflective of those who do not identify as either Black or White American. This work is intersectional as it addresses the ways race, gender, sexuality and class dynamics are at play in the lives of these women. However, it is important to note that “intersectionality theory” was grounded in the experiences of Black women and Black feminism.³⁹ Therefore, we must express “reservations about intersectionality’s usefulness as an analytic tool in addressing other marginalized communities and other manifestations of social power.”⁴⁰

I have tried to remain conscious of my identity as a Black woman researcher in the interview and analysis process. However, I am sure that I have made missteps and utilized Black women experiences ontologically where a more nuanced approach would be more appropriate. Importantly, I have tried to be as specific about racial identity as possible in order to truly mean women of color and not just use it as a euphemism for Black woman.

Having said this, I am a Black woman and a womanist scholar. My epistemological center is the lives, experiences and stories of Black women who raised me. And it has been my experience that a womanist approach, particularly in a very White denomination tends to reflect the lived experience of

³⁹ Sumi Cho, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, and Leslie McCall, “Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 38, no. 4 (June 2013): 788.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

folks across the BIPOC racial spectrum. The centrality of Whiteness within the denomination does limit space for us to talk about the complicated power dynamics that exist among the BIPOC community itself and how such divisions further complicate efforts toward freedom and justice. Further research on these more complicated aspects of race, gender, class and sexuality are needed.

In the following section, I outline the discernment and ordination experience of each woman interviewed. All but one participant was willing to be written about without pseudonyms. However, in accordance with IRB protocol all names have been changed and I have tried to eliminate identifiable information that is not relevant to this study.⁴¹ Having said this, The Episcopal Church is small and the number of women of color clergy are even smaller. Maintaining full anonymity without compromising their perspective is quite difficult. Interviewees were very aware of this and decided to participate anyway. Proving that these women are eager to have their unfiltered stories told. I am so grateful for the generosity of each participant. Our time together felt equal parts academic inquiry and sacred reflective space.

Having worked in the church and gone through the process myself, I knew that there was something going on that didn't feel right. These interviews were a way to start to tease out (deconstruct), describe and construct ways of discerning that avoided doing harm. These interviews and this thesis have become equal parts personal healing process and academic reflection. Utilizing the theological tools and ethical questions I have learned, I wanted to see what grew out of these women's God-talk. By centering these voices I will raise critical questions about how the legacy of misogyny and racism remain in our ordaining processes today and begin to offer some constructive responses to such a legacy.

DATA: DESCRIPTION AND DECONSTRUCTION

In this section I outline each interviewees story of call and ordination process. Where appropriate, I have integrated some literature to illuminate particularly important themes that came out of our

⁴¹ Each woman filled out a survey with information about their racial identity, current ministry context and ordination dates. I utilized this information to write the following profiles.

conversations. The interviews are ordered for cumulative affect so that themes from each would flow into the others.

BISHOP EMMA

Bishop Emma and I spoke on November 18, 2020 at 3:30 PM Eastern for approximately an hour and twenty minutes. To say that I was a little bit nervous is an understatement. Having been ordained for 40 years, she is a part of the first generation of women to be ordained in the church. We began our conversation with 60 seconds of silence - mostly so that I could get myself prepared and to invite in the Holy Spirit. Even more, her presence -- straight back, dignified and welcoming face--demanded something: a moment of reverence for all that she would share.

The Bishop was born in a major midwestern city and grew up in the 1950's and 1960's where "church was the only place where Black people were told that they were worth something, they were a child of God."⁴² Her mother was Baptist and her father was United Methodist, but her family "had a wide berth" of Christian denominations.⁴³ When the family moved to an all-white neighborhood she was harassed. Their next door neighbor, a Presbyterian minister, encouraged Bishop Emma's family to send her to Vacation Bible school at his church. There were two other Black girls attending who were around her age. And so Bishop Emma found herself attending a Presbyterian Church that was active in the Civil Rights movement through the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the fight to desegregate public schools in the area. Through this work she learned that, "who I was as a child of God meant that I could stand up for justice."⁴⁴

After College, Bishop Emma returned home. The Presbyterian church she attended was going through its own issues, so she started attending an Episcopal Church with her cousin. It was a mixed race congregation, but mostly Black with a new priest. There, she could embrace her multitudes: justice and God. She recounts, "the issue of justice, understanding liturgy that ties you to the mystery of God...the

⁴² Bishop Emma, Women of Color Discernment Stories, interview by Tamara Plummer, Zoom, November 18, 2020.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

irrationality of it, of belief, of holding something there that you cannot see or hold, or even prove, but yet is there, yet exists.”⁴⁵ There she felt “God trying to transform who I was into that which God called into being.”⁴⁶ She was confirmed six months after her arrival and found herself involved in everything from choir to youth ministry to the vestry. And it is from this parish that she would inevitably be ordained a Deacon almost seven years later. It was 1973 and women’s ordination was not yet.

The debates over women’s ordination really started to heat up in 1975 in her diocese as they held several forums on the topic. Bishop Emma was concentrating on getting into medical school, her priest was encouraging her to think about ordination to the priesthood. As a compromise she was willing to consider the diaconate. But one day, driving to a medical school interview, she heard God’s voice tell her to be a priest: “I felt both warm, relieved, at peace...And then I went into a sort of panic...I just sort of became filled with fear, I guess that God actually spoke to me.”⁴⁷ This panic, peace and fear prompted her to call her priest who took her to speak with the Bishop. The Bishop diocesan was supportive at the time, but they would need to wait for the 1976 General Convention. This bold twenty something woman was sure it would pass.

At the 1976 General Convention women were officially allowed to be ordained to the Holy Orders of Priest. With the support of her congregation and the Bishop, Bishop Emma was allowed to go to seminary and pursue ordination.⁴⁸ There were only two snags. First, the priest at her congregation had changed and he was not supportive of women’s ordination. So the Suffragan Bishop, a Black man, ended up being her sponsoring priest. Secondly, she hesitated, “I saw the door, [especially in my diocese] ‘For White men only, with a few exceptions for a few blacks’ was what the sign on the door to ordination

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ This was the only support needed at the time. The concept of Commission on Ministry wasn’t written into the canons until the 1970 Constitution and Canons. In this first iteration, it is clear that the commission is a consultative space that defers to the Bishop. By the 1980 Constitution - after women’s ordination has passed, there are many more regulations and the commission is described more as a collaborative, rather than, auxiliary entity. <https://www.episcopalarchives.org/governance-documents/constitution-and-canons>

looks like.”⁴⁹ But God spoke to her again, “You will be my priest.”⁵⁰ Bishop Emma was admitted to an Episcopal seminary with a clear message from the Dean that he was admitting her because she was a Black woman (and of course qualified) - he wanted to see things change and she was a part of that change.

She was one of three Black people in the entire institution, including staff and students. Camaraderie was found at the mailbox where the Black staff members would congregate with Bishop Emma just to see how others would react. Academically, she was challenged when placed in an advanced Greek class. She had no prior experience of learning Greek and she has dyslexia. The registrar refused to change her schedule which almost made her quit. Her father encouraged her and said, it would be ok if it didn't work out. With the option to come home, hard work and faith Bishop Emma graduated and successfully completed her General Ordination Exam (GOE's) with flying colors, except for one neutral comment on the ethics question. It was clear that the advice from her sponsoring Suffragan Black Bishop, that she would have to work twice as hard and be better than everyone else in her group of postulants, was coming true.

During breaks Bishop Emma would come home and attend her beloved parish, but with a new priest who was not supportive of women's ordination. One Easter she was seated in the congregation and not allowed to participate in any leadership role during worship. The choir made it clear that the rector had forgotten “whose church this is.”⁵¹ Each time she was snubbed by the new rector, the congregation stood up for her presence and call. Needless to say, this person didn't last long and his replacement, while also against women's ordination did allow Bishop Emma to wear his vestments and offered a meditation at her diaconal ordination.

Having completed the technical requirements, it was time for Bishop Emma to meet with the Standing Committee for final approval. The Bishop said, “I'm going to tell them you're being ordained.

⁴⁹ Bishop Emma, Women of Color Discernment Stories, Zoom, November 18, 2020.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

Okay. Now when are we going to do this?”⁵² She did go see the Standing Committee for official “approval” of her candidacy to the diaconate. It was clear that they hadn’t read her file and didn’t really care, the Bishop had already decided. However, “Because I was a woman, I had to be done separately. It would have been an affront to the men in the diocese for me to be ordained with them.”⁵³ But such a “punishment” was a blessing for Bishop Emma. The folks that raised her would be the ones to hold her up at this moment of institutional confirmation of her call.

Bishop Emma had been an active member of the Union of Black Episcopalians and felt slighted by Black male clergy who refused to attend her ordination. However, Bishop Chilton Knudsen, who at the time was an ordained priest in the diocese did show up, “She said, ‘My name is Chilton, you need to have a woman here with you.’” And so with the hand of her Bishop, the support of her spiritual home and Chilton, Emma became The Rev. Deacon Emma.

She was unemployable in her home diocese and found refuge, like many other disinherited, in the diocese of Newark with Bishop John Shelby Spong. Bishop Spong is well known for his more radical and liberative theological beliefs. While controversial, “he also has a heart for justice.”⁵⁴ Even before her six month waiting period was up Bishop Spong was ready to ordain her. Because she had gotten a neutral comment on her GOE’s she was required to meet with members from the newly formed Commission on Ministry.

As Bishop Emma sat in front of two White, suburban, male priests, she was praised for her writing, but they thought that she was a heretic because she made a statement that “Jesus was God, and Jesus is God.”⁵⁵ She justified her answers using a passage from Hebrews, but the committee members pressed on, “Well you have to understand, [Emma] you can’t use that liberation theology in the Episcopal Church. You have to be...able to talk with us White suburban priests, because that’s who the Episcopal

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

Church is.”⁵⁶ Bishop Emma continues, “And I stood up and said, ‘All you see in front of you is a Black woman. Let me tell you, the theology that you saw in my GOE’s came from John Macquarrie, you can’t get more Anglican than John Macquarrie. I didn’t use one word of liberation theology. Nor did I let it be known that I was Black in my GOE’s, how dare you!’ And I walked out.”⁵⁷ She went straight to the Bishop’s office and told him that the men who interviewed her were racist. She knew better than to use liberation theology in the GOEs and while it resonated with her, she knew her audience. Bishop Spong calmed her down and assured her that she had nothing to worry about.

Later in her career, the head of the commission became her Bishop in another diocese and also apologized for how she was treated during her process. This is just one example of how, during her career, Bishop Emma has not let her dignity be questioned and found vindication years later when others realized the harm they caused. While these stories lie outside of the scope of this thesis, it is important to note the sacrifices she has made in service of her call even after ordination. Bishop Emma held fast to the idea that the arch bends towards justice. She pushed against some inequities, others were left for God to work out. Like the first moment of wholeness in worship at her Episcopal Parish, her call was always and continues to be about God: God’s will, God’s justice.

On the day of her ordination to the priesthood, the service was delayed because her preacher was traveling through an ice storm with Bishop Barbara Harris (at the time a priest) and 40 people from Manhattan. Although they started the service a bit late, “My Bishop was really impressed, let me tell you. So he laid hands on me⁵⁸, and we had a grand party afterwards.”⁵⁹ When pressed to hear more about that moment she said:

It’s all about God. It really isn’t about me. It was God using me, working with me, lifting me up. I mean, would I have chosen this profession? No. But I know that if I didn’t follow God’s call, I’d be unhappy for the rest of my life...[Reflecting on the larger process] I was sorting out all those fears, not just fears, but the disillusionment I had with racism in our church, and in our society, not just our church, in our society, dealing with misogyny. And that’s a lot. And you’re only

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ And 35 others helped. At the moment of Ordination other priest gather around to lay hands on the candidate.

⁵⁹ Bishop Emma, Women of Color Discernment Stories, Zoom, November 18, 2020.

in your 20's. See I was ordained before I was 30. So it's not so much that I had the strength, but that God just was there with me, assuring me. Not with words, but by presence.⁶⁰

Notice the importance of God's call as the compass and strength that gets Bishop Emma through the difficulties that come from human ignorance. When one is being initiated into any vocation or spiritual calling, it will hurt. The problem is that some of that hurt comes from necessary change and growth because God is pushing us to try on new ways of being. But there are other hurts that come from racism and misogyny that are not of God. Part of discernment is understanding these different sources of harm and support, then learning how to respond. Bishop Emma utilized her deep God centeredness to discern what was of systemic oppression and what was assisting her in personal growth. She also had to discern what discrimination to ignore and what to confront. For those who continue to be formed in hostile environments, I am concerned for what this kind of discernment does to one's health and well-being.

Discerning a call should bring one to the expression of their true self. Palmer explains, "As I learn more about the seed of true self that was planted when I was born, I also learn more about the ecosystem in which I was planted -- the network of communal relations in which I am called to live responsively, accountably, and joyfully with beings of every sort."⁶¹ We can see in Bishop Emma's story that this is what ordination did for her - she was able to live into her true self in service of others. However, the ecosystem of TEC has not always been nourishing soil. Much like Hagar, she had to "obtain through [her] God-given faith *new vision* to see survival and quality-of-life resources where we have seen none before."⁶² In the midst of misogyny and racism she found God moving her to sacramental leadership. Such vision is a gift and comes with consequences. We must now look at one of those consequences.

A common resource employed by many Black women throughout history is what Chanequa Walker-Barnes calls the StrongBlackWoman: "the StrongBlackWoman is an adaptive response by Black

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak* 17.

⁶² Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 180.

women that, on the one hand enables them to cope with the very real pressures of their lives yet, on the other, places them at heightened risk for physical and psychological distress.”⁶³ Such a tool is extremely helpful for survival, but for women who are constantly trying to survive, when is the sabbath day? It would be quite interesting if the discernment process and ordination could be a “safe space where [women] can be liberated from the yoke of the ideology [of the StrongBlackWoman] and freed for authentic selfhood.”⁶⁴ Such space could provide nourishment to access the true self without caveats. Without such support, leaders will have limited energy that allows them to walk with parishioners who are carrying similar concerns.

Walker-Barnes invokes the Mary and Martha story (Lk. 10:38-42). She highlights that Martha’s rebuke from Jesus is not for her hospitality, but her choice to live so much in the doing that there isn’t space for nourishment like Mary is able to receive.⁶⁵ The goal of such a reading is not to condemn either character. Each utilizes her agency to get what she believes she needs. What is being proposed is that Martha could be hospitable and rest at Jesus’ feet. Mary can rest at Jesus’ feet and help in the kitchen. Or even better, the disciples who have had plenty of time at Jesus’ feet could help in the kitchen to make the experience more equitable for everyone. As we saw in Bishop Emma’s story, it took having allies in the mainstream to help her access this space and so it still is today.

This concept of the StrongBlackWoman is present in Bishop Emma’s story through the ways that she has managed discriminatory practices. Without judgement, the Church is called to provide space for women to choose their survival tools, knowing that there are several options. “Liberation means that African-American women have the power to choose for themselves when and how to embody--or not--the characteristics of the StrongBlackWoman.”⁶⁶ This is because there are times when we will choose to embody a Mary or a Martha and there will be other times when we can choose something else entirely.

⁶³ Chaneequa Walker-Barnes, *Too Heavy a Yoke: Black Women and the Burden of Strength* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2014), 7.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 146.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 157.

⁶⁶ Walker-Barnes, 171.

As we review Bishop Emma’s story, we can point to individuals or even larger communal networks like her home parish, other women, or her Bishops who stepped up to support her in her pursuit of call. And there are many who could not vision spiritual and theological leadership that looked like Bishop Emma. Bishop Emma’s strength to persevere came from God, but it also came from her accountability to her great grandmother, an enslaved person who told stories about how God showed up. It is this strength of the StrongBlackWomen who came before that Bishop Emma remembers and supports her ability to walk through the difficult paths of life today and face personal and institutional slights.

As an institution, the Church must grapple with the fact that there are those who feel supported in their racist and sexist approaches to discernment and leadership formation. As Charles V. Willie wrote about his resignation from the House of Deputies after a failed vote in support of women’s ordination, “The sin of the individual is easier to see and church people tend to attack it with glee, ignoring our collective practices and procedures that bring continuous harm to many.”⁶⁷ It is God’s grace and will that people conspire to advocate for and support the ministries of the disinherited. But it would be even better if such conspiring were not necessary. In some ways, the gift of being the first is that many of the blocks to ordination have not quite yet been institutionalized. This will not be the case as we explore other stories.

REV. SARAI

Rev. Sarai and I spoke on November 19, 2020 at 5:00 PM Eastern for about an hour and thirty minutes. I have known Rev. Sarai as a mentor and have had many conversations with her about Church polity and the role of clergy. When I was in recovery from my own pursuit of ordination, I reached out to her and had lunch. It was there that I asked Rev. Sarai to be in my “aunty tribe.” These are the wise women who give me solicited and at times unsolicited advice out of care and concern. As the work day closed, my aunty and I began our conversation.

⁶⁷Charles V. Willie, “An Open Memorandum of Explanation,” accessed April 8, 2021, https://www.episcopalarchives.org/sites/default/files/hod/HODW_19_web.pdf.

Rev. Sarai has been ordained for just over 20 years and identifies as a South Asian Queer woman. Her call story begins with a night of reading biblical criticism for a class on women in the Hebrew Bible. She came to two conclusions, “‘Oh God, I should be a priest.’... And in the same kind of moment, I had this thought of like, ‘Oh, God, I’m gay. That’s what it is.’...literally, it felt like I had just entered my body.”⁶⁸ This was a moment of “integration that came out of nowhere that really felt like a call.”⁶⁹ It was an opportunity where intellectual engagement led to embodied knowledge. Growing up in an immigrant home, attending an Orthodox church of her parents national origin, and being in the southern United States meant that being queer and a women priest was not an obvious combination. Additionally, Rev. Sarai notes that “because I think I had no...intellectual way, I had no path to imagine those things.”⁷⁰ Such connection between brain, body and spirit was a freeing moment. Rev. Sarai continued “I wasn’t un-free, but what is this feeling, you know? And I felt grounded, in my body, free.”⁷¹

At that wonderful moment, she wanted to call home and share her new sense of freedom with her family. But it was unclear if her family would be as happy as she was. Also, she had no idea if women were allowed to be priests. This was the early 90’s so she could be ordained in the Episcopal Church, but her childhood denomination was a bit more complicated. Rev. Sarai explains that in her cultural context men and women are separate and “so I saw priests and they did services. But I didn’t know [what priests did], women literally weren’t allowed in that part of church. I didn’t know what happened up there.”⁷² It was also a mono-lingual, non-English speaking church. Rev. Sarai could technically understand what was happening, but it was different enough from her American experience and her parent’s experience of church in their homeland, so much so, that by the time she thought about ordination “I had actually never met a priest that I thought was a person to admire.”⁷³

⁶⁸ Rev. Sarai, Women of Color Discernment Stories, Interviewed by Tamara Plummer, Zoom, November 19, 2020.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

With this flood of emotion, she couldn't call home and didn't quite know where to turn. Like many religious college youth, she turned to the college chaplain, an ordained Presbyterian minister. The Presbyterians had allowed women to be ordained since 1958⁷⁴ which meant that Sarai's inquiry was not unusual. The chaplain suggested that Rev. Sarai go to serve at a community center for unhoused and mentally ill persons, run by mostly White people. But Rev. Sarai never went, she explains: "I am not a white woman, I'm not from Atlanta. I don't know how to get there. I don't have a car...I don't know how to use public transportation in Atlanta, and I'm scared of this city because I'm scared for my safety because of how I look. And I didn't tell her."⁷⁵ This feeling of not being able to ask for help or express concerns comes out of the StrongBlackWoman narrative and a covering practice of invisibility. To be Queer and Asian was already a stumbling block to people's vision of Rev. Sarai's priesthood. To "not know" did not feel like an option.

The next year Sarai went back to home to finish her undergraduate degree. At the new institution, she continued to attend chaplaincy events and several times had coffee with the Episcopal chaplain. His theology and the diocese were more conservative and did not allow for the ordination of women. But chaplaincy support and worship became a core part of her college life. Reflecting back, it was the first time that she was able to worship in English which was part of what made it so exciting. In Spring of senior year, her chaplain wondered what she would be doing post-graduation. She was a religion major who had applied to the Peace Corp, but really didn't have a plan. He suggested that she call his sponsoring priest from the West Coast where she might be able to explore various mission interests. Rev. Sarai was able to connect with her new mentor Rev. G and join what was then called the Episcopal Urban Intern Program (EUIP). Today, it is called Episcopal Service Corps.

Upon her arrival, Rev. Sarai told Rev. G that she was interested in getting ordained. The congregation already had someone going through the discernment process so he asked that she wait until

⁷⁴Presbyterian Women, "History," accessed April 1, 2021, <https://www.presbyterianwomen.org/who-we-are/history/>.

⁷⁵ Rev. Sarai, Interview.

the end of the year. It was a congregation that had a lot of experience doing discernment with young people because of EUIP. Rev. Sarai reflects on how different this congregation, with a culture of discernment was from her childhood: “It was very confusing to me, you know, people not telling you what you could do better, but that they were interested in who you were. So I just ate it up and ran through the process, because I had never had an experience like that before.”⁷⁶ Here, Rev. Sarai began to discover and live into her true self.

Much of her process was life giving, including a ministry year where she served in a different parish than her discernment congregation. While her new clergy mentor did not perceive himself powerful, he was. As a child of the diocese and a powerful lay leader his privileges were passed on to Rev. Sarai. She was also given a mentor through the diocesan process that proved to be quite helpful in learning the inside language of pursuing ordination. However, such support did not save her when faced with the Commission on Ministry. The supportive communal discernment ended and ordination application process began.

Rev. Sarai was open about her sexuality at the same time that the Anglican Communion was debating this topic.⁷⁷ Being a more liberal diocese, the Bishop informed the committee that they weren’t allowed to ask about her sexuality. Instead, the commission coded their inquiry:

“What is your support network?”...What they mean is, is there a relationship we should know about? How do you as a person of color find your way in our church? We are not going to be your friend. The church isn’t going to be full of your friends, so...how do you come to this place?... I’ve been in so many interviews where liberal, white guys will say, “what is your support network?” They’re trying to figure out if I have a secret partner that I haven’t told them about. But that is just the first part...the other part is “you don’t fit socially here as far as I’m concerned...you are an outsider.”⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ The Lambeth Conference of 1998 was quite controversial. And the General Conventions in preparation for this gathering were equally contentious. The conference of all Bishops from throughout the Anglican Communion takes place every 10 years. It was the first to have women bishops in attendance. Additionally, the bishops were going to be debating the question of same-sex marriage and ordination of openly lesbian and gay persons. The General Conventions after Lambeth confirmed the ordination of Gene Robinson, the first openly gay Bishop. The church split with several congregations and Bishops from the Episcopal Church forming the Anglican Church of North America (ACNA).

⁷⁸ Rev. Sarai, Interview.

Rev. Sarai didn't feel like an outsider, this was her Church, her home. After Rev. Sarai stumbled through these and other coded conversations, the Bishop eventually stepped in and yelled "enough." He told the commission that they would be inviting her to be a postulant.

Who is on the Commission on Ministry (COM) is so integral to how easeful or unnecessarily difficult the ordination process will be. Once you are in front of the COM, one should stop thinking that they are in a discernment process. It is more like an admissions process. The confusion comes when these different spaces are seen as equal opportunities for vulnerable exploration. A parish discernment group is there to support your call, the COM has different priorities, they are gatekeepers of who is allowed into this profession and who will be left out.

Once accepted as a postulant, she didn't really hear much from the diocese, by her final year in seminary, on the East Coast, she had to come in to do her final interviews for candidacy which would allow her to take the GOEs and get scheduled for ordination as a transitional deacon. Before her final interview with the new Commission, Lambeth 1998 had happened. They had a "different posture. There were different people on the committee. It's where I learned it matters a lot who is on the Commission on Ministry...they were horrified by how homophobic Lambeth had been and LGBT people in the diocese told them how hard it was."⁷⁹ In this candidacy meeting the energy was much more about caring for Rev. Sarai as a person. They really wanted to make sure that her spirit and faith in the church was still intact.

As supportive as this new commission was, the desire to care for a person can also be unintentionally harmful. After being ordained as transitional Deacon, similar to Bishop Emma, Rev. Sarai was informed by a gay member of the COM that she was unemployable because she is queer and could begin looking for jobs elsewhere. Rev. Sarai says, "he was trying to get rid of me."⁸⁰ As she started to call around she found dioceses that were supportive and willing to at least interview her to see what they could do. The problem was that the diocesan Bishop had not been the one to release her. When the Bishop found out, he was furious. He rectified the situation by giving her three months' salary, benefits and an

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

invitation to figure out her next steps, including staying in her diocese. Rev. Sarai was ordained a priest in January of 2000.

As we look at the slights and harms of the ordination process for both Bishop Emma and Rev. Sarai, we can see that various parts of their identity limited some to see them as priests. The difference between them is time. Bishop Emma was one of the first and had to navigate through undiscovered territories. Rev. Sarai had guides who had already been through the journey. These leaders had vision for leadership that looked like her. Rev. Sarai explains:

Beginning with even my racist, sexist, homophobic Chaplain [or] the Presbyterian woman,...there's definitely a sense that you could step up and step into something you're not yet. And I think the Episcopal Church often views all kinds of us, all kinds of people as only what we already know. And I think it prevents seeing vocation and it prevents our capacity to see through and with diversity...if you haven't seen that before [you] can't see it in the future.⁸¹

Reflecting on our conversation, and my knowledge of Rev. Sarai, I realize that it is her accountability to the institution that has sustained her. Her deep sense of justice is rooted in an idea that the Church can do better. Rev. Sarai sees a possibility in this institution where others have grown skeptical. Her ordination story highlights the complexities of power, who she thought would be obvious allies, were not always that way. Similar to, Bishop Emma it was the powerful institutional players that rose up to support her. From her experience and positions in Church governance, she has been able to learn ways that institutional systems can be worked to the advantage of the disinherited. And she feels called to use this kind of knowledge to motivate change for others.

For a long time Rev. Sarai was a college chaplain. This does not seem surprising based on how college chaplaincy supported so much of her faith journey. There is that famous quote from Audre Lorde, “you can't use the Master's tools to destroy the Master's house,” but that is exactly what Rev. Sarai is learning to do. In her own words, “As a chaplain, I saw a whole world that needed Jesus, you know, and that we wanted leaders for that. And so because we're talking about discernment, I really associate that

⁸¹ Ibid.

with my time as a chaplain.”⁸² As a chaplain, she was in the church and yet not limited by it. Through this experience, she became and continues to help those who don’t fit. As she gained institutional power, she uses her knowledge for those who continue to be on the margins.

REV. ISABELLA

Rev. Isabella and I spoke via zoom on December 4, 2020 at 9:00 AM Eastern for approximately an hour. I was introduced to her when I was seeking a bi-lingual (Spanish/English) chaplain for an Episcopal Relief & Development training. We didn’t end up working together due to the pandemic. When I reached out to Rev. Isabella for this project, she had just been ordained and by the time we sat down to speak, she had only been ordained for about two months, her ordination process had taken approximately seven years, and this did not include seminary. Our Friday morning conversation was one of the first time that she was able to really process and talk about the difficulties of her experience. Her story was less linear and had fewer details because she hadn’t had distance enough to construct the narrative of what happened. What was lacking in detail was filled with emotional content. The words “difficult,” “push through,” “fight” and “how” arose often throughout our discussion.

Rev. Isabella identifies as Hispanic. She is of Puerto Rican descent and has a long history of working in the Latinx community of her major East Coast city. Raised Catholic, she originally imagined being a nun. While life brought her down a different path, what remained was a sense that she would serve people. She says, “I always had and felt the calling to ministry...it was a pull on my heart... ‘this is where I [God] want you to go and this is what I [God] want you to do.’”⁸³ She became an ordained pastor in a non-denominational church, but eventually felt called to join a Hispanic Episcopal congregation.

When asked how she made that leap, she recounts that she spoke to the Rector and let him know that “I just feel in my heart that I’ve been called to serve at least at this physical church.”⁸⁴ A “pull” or “feeling”

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Rev. Isabella, *Women of Color Discernment Stories*, interview by Tamara Plummer, Zoom, December 4, 2020.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

in her heart is a consistent theme for Rev. Isabella's ministerial pursuits. It is an intuitive and embodied understanding of call that consistently rooted her experience.

While Rev. Isabella did not articulate it this way, her story echoes Mujerista Theology. Similar to other liberation theologies, Mujerista theology focuses on the experiences of Latinas. According to Ada María Isasi-Díaz, "*Mujerista* is the word we have chosen to name devotion to Latinas' liberation."⁸⁵ What we will see in Rev. Isabella's story is a desire to utilize her own liberative self to help others see where they have fallen short and be liberated as well. Her pull to the Episcopal Church manifests in the way that she speaks about not only service to the Latinx community, but illuminating racist practices for White people to be transformed. Isasi-Díaz describes it this way, "as a liberative praxis, *mujerista* theology seeks to impact mainline theologies [and religious institutions], those theologies which support what is normative in church and, to a large degree, in society – what is normative having been set by non-Hispanics and to the exclusion of Latinas and Latinos, particularly Latinas."⁸⁶ It is with this kind of theological base that Rev. Isabella enters the Episcopal Church.

Rev. Isabella was welcomed to join and soon expressed her call to ordained ministry in the Episcopal Church. Upon conferring with her Rector and the vestry, she gained support and began the formal ordination process within the diocese. What was not clear in her story is a formal discernment process. Something must have happened, but I am still unclear on how that process was implemented. The lack of coaching and clarity of telling a call story in a linear fashion made her engagement with the formal ordination assessment processes contentious. If our interview was representative of how she talks about her call, Rev. Isabella's intuitive theology would not be acceptable to the COM. Let us explore these contentions further.

The misogyny Rev. Isabella experienced in the Latinx congregations meant that she wasn't prepared to encounter mainstream Episcopal spaces. As a staple in the Latinx community of this city, her

⁸⁵ Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1996), 61

⁸⁶ Isasi-Díaz, 62.

hometown, she found push back from Latino priests who were newer to the area. She ended up attending two separate Latinx congregations led by men who at first welcomed her, but soon felt that her light was too bright and outshone their own. From Rev. Isabella's perspective, her social capital could have been helpful for these leaders to get rooted in the community, but they weren't willing to accept her help. During the time she had spent at each congregation, she was accepted as a postulant under one diocesan Bishop. But he left about a year into her postulancy and all candidates were put on hold until a year into the new Bishop's tenure.

This new Bishop had a great deal of experience in the Latinx community. He encouraged her to go to an historically Black congregation with a female priest. The arrival at this Black congregation brought relief. While Rev. Isabella felt rooted in her Latinx community, the Black congregation was able to support her in ways that the other two were not. Black congregations have a long history of staking claim to their place in the Episcopal Church and have "survival/quality of life" tools that Rev. Isabella needed in this unknown wilderness.⁸⁷ She says, "I finally felt like there was somebody there who was a woman who embraced me who began to just, 'Okay, I want to help, we gonna fight this. And we're going to get this done.' And she really believed in the calling I have, and she just fought through with me in so many different areas."⁸⁸ Her new ally was willing to help her fight through the difficulties of getting ordained and help her know how to navigate the power structures of the diocese. While the path didn't seem to get any smoother, at least she had a supportive ally to help her persevere.

After a year under the new episcopate, postulants were allowed to resume the process, but they had to start from the beginning. Rev. Isabella explains that she spent time meeting with various members of the commission and of course the inevitable question came "how did you know that this [priesthood] is what you want to do?" Her response, "how do I know?... I feel it in my heart. It's a calling." At this moment, Rev. Isabella's intuitive embodied theology challenged what is a practical experience for many.

⁸⁷ This is referencing Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*. Additionally, Harold T. Lewis, *Yet with a Steady Beat: The African American Struggle for Recognition in the Episcopal Church* (Valley Forge, Pa: Trinity Press International, 1996).

⁸⁸ Rev. Isabella, Interview.

For Rev. Isabella, a calling to ordained priesthood was who she is, it wasn't a choice, but a response to God's voice and demand for her life.

One commission member believed that her lack of a clear and concise explanation was because of a lack of intellectual acumen. The interviewer said, "I know that you have not been privileged to...go to main line school."⁸⁹ Rev. Isabella pushed back and pondered what he meant by "privileged." She explains, "I am now questioning what do they mean by privilege. What do they mean by that. Because I felt as though I've always been privileged...I had God on my side, I really have a great family and children and all. And so what do you mean by privilege? And then I realize, I was in the middle of a group of White people. They were asking me this question...As a woman of color... I knew in my heart that I have more to give them than they were giving me."⁹⁰ For Rev. Isabella privilege had little to do with socio-economic status, her privilege was grounded in spiritual and communal power. This was a privilege that she did not see in her committee. And it was a privilege she wanted them to gain from her experience.

While she gained support and tools from her new ally - another woman of color, there may be pitfalls that happen even in this marginalized space. Black Episcopalians have figured out how to navigate mainstream spaces and developed intuitive knowledge about covering demands that are difficult to articulate to others. Rev. Isabella's theological epistemology was similar enough to her Rev. Ally, but different enough to not fully prepare Rev. Isabella for her encounters. Simply put, Rev. Isabella's purely embodied language was not going to resonate to a mostly white commission. According to John Suggitt, "in east and west alike there grew up a clear distinction between the sacred orders and the rest of the Church."⁹¹ Particularly for those who are ordained this kind of initiation process requires one to demonstrate their distinction. For Rev. Isabella it was her lack of distinction that required her to participate in Holy Orders. While all were engaging in English, they weren't speaking the same language.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ John Suggitt, "Ordination," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, June 23, 1978,37.

Like the commission, I very much struggled through this interview because I wanted to get a clear call story. What I missed in the interview, and perhaps for those who were preparing her for the process, was a deeper dive into the theological source of daily life. Isasi-Díaz calls this source, *lo cotidiano*. These are “the daily lived experiences that provide the ‘stuff’ of our reality” and points to “shared experiences.”⁹² Earlier, when Rev. Isabella spoke about how she was privileged, she spoke about her relationship with God, family and community. How Rev. Isabella moves through these spaces and serves in this communal context is an expression of her “commissioning.”⁹³ Digging deeper into her *lo cotidiano* would explicate what she experienced intuitively.

Having spoken with her before, I could have asked about her ministerial work in Puerto Rico after the Hurricanes and Earthquakes. As a researcher, here is where my being mainstreamed in an Episcopal ordination process was limiting. I had set questions about what I thought was an ordination call story. For most Episcopal priests, they have told it so many times that it comes out easily. Rev. Isabella could very well have had a similar story, but she lives in a theological expression that was foreign and similar enough to my experience with Puerto Rican culture that I didn’t ask clarifying questions in ways that would have elucidated the content I desired. Rev. Isabella did not grow up institutionally in a context like the Episcopal Church so how she understands and expresses call will be different than my own.

This lack of institutional and cultural access was expressed clearly when I inquired about what knowledge she has gained through the process : “I just wish I just knew how people were going to react towards the Latina woman... I really didn’t know racism until I got to the church... isn’t that crazy...How do I fit in here?...I’m still trying to figure out how do I navigate through the institution part.”⁹⁴ Although difficult, with support she has managed to navigate and be ordained to the diaconate in 2019 and ordained priest in 2020 during a pandemic. These moments were an achievement. Even without a “privileged

⁹² Isasi-Díaz, 67.

⁹³ Hjelde, Sigurd, et al. *Calling* define a commission as a part of the call story as present in Hebrew scripture. The commission is the process of one being “sent to fulfill the task conferred,” “a task beyond human capacity” that requires “divine power.”

⁹⁴ Rev. Isabella, Interview.

education” Rev. Isabella passed her GOE’s. And she did so with no Master of Divinity degree. She was made to take a one year course of study with a tutor. Despite the commission’s lack of vision to see her intelligence and years of ministerial experience, Rev. Isabella was able to fulfill God’s call.

I asked her to describe the ordination service and it reveals how Rev. Isabella will continue to navigate institutional space, “I think when you go, knowing that the Holy Spirit, that Christ is in you, you know, you’re ready...when you get there, you already know that there is going to be something different...for me it was receiving it because I am a giver...It was the new beginning.”⁹⁵ She then continued to explain how as a non-denominational, evangelical, Latina the Episcopal church became a place to express her ministerial call:

I think it was about the things that need to change. And we are the ones that God call upon so we can...send a reboot... Now I realize... I am the change because if I wouldn’t have gone through all what I had to go through, to endure the pain, to endure the suffering, to go through to the darkest alleys. And then to try to find the lightest light...I don’t think I would have the strength of the courage of God to stand up for what I believe... Now you’re going to listen to my voice, whether or not if you like it or not, I’m going to speak the truth. Sometimes we have to break some of the rules and just go...And sometimes, people have to see what you do, so that way they can understand, what exactly, what you're called for...I’m going to speak the truth whether or not they can understand it or don’t understand it. That would be something on them, but I need to speak up. ⁹⁶

As Rev. Isabella develops space for herself and others like her in the Episcopal Church, I am curious about how she will continue to navigate the institutional culture. If she pushes back too much, she will find herself so marginalized that she cannot affect change. If she is mainstreamed too much, she will lose a connection to the margin that continues to motivate her ministry, the community to which she is accountable. Rev. Isabella’s Borinqueña identidad and *mujerista* theology pushes back and challenges the Episcopal Church processes in ways that I think are interesting. And I desire space for Rev. Isabella to dig deeper into the specificities to actuate the call she feels. Rev. Isabella is essentially setting herself up as a cultural translator. Developing translation skills may require her to express herself in ways that are distant

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

from her authentic self in order for White folks – and some of us Black folks – to understand. And we must figure out how to speak a language that lies outside our comfort zones.

REV. JULIAN

Rev. Julian and I spoke on December 3, 2020 at 12:00 PM Eastern for just over an hour and 20 minutes. I was most excited to speak with Rev. Julian based on our previous encounters. Every conversation has left me with much to think about. What I struggled with most was whether or not to identify her particular tribe. As mentioned before, the Episcopal Church is small and the pool of women of color clergy is even smaller. The church has a complicated history when it comes to indigenous communities. Spellers explains, “Starting in the 1600’s and continuing to the present day, America’s leaders have visited unimaginable terror and betrayal upon indigenous peoples, often with the tacit blessing or acquiescence of the Episcopal Church.”⁹⁷ To this day many of the wounds of the past are played out in the ways that indigenous communities are at times engaged by the rest of the Church with outdated missiology rooted in colonizing practices. A particular example is the lack of indigenous communities led by indigenous clergy. These complex power dynamics made it important for me to interview an indigenous woman and made me decide to provide her tribal identity. Rev. Julian’s story is integrally connected to her identity and it felt disingenuous to generalize that experience.

Rev. Julian is Diné; it is what Navajo people call themselves. She has lived her whole life in Navajo territory and has generational lineage in the Episcopal Church. Her father was an ordained Deacon and her mother a community activist and leader. Similar to Rev. Isabella, Rev. Julian’s faith story is rooted in a community based spirituality. Much of her faith journey is wrapped up in indigenous heritage and her journey to the altar was motivated mostly by her relationship with her community. She has memories of engaging with White missionaries, setting up the altar or visiting elders with her mother, watching her father go off into contemplative prayer when things were difficult, and listening to the

⁹⁷ Spellers, 59.

stories of her ancestors during traditional ceremonies. While she would be very doubtful about becoming a priest, her call came at a young age and later was confirmed by her community.

Her diocese had very few Diné priests growing up. Rev. Julian was on the administrative staff of the diocese when her Bishop asked, “What would it take to get Diné clergy?”⁹⁸ She responded after reflecting on the question, “there’s a lot of healing that needs to happen around our intergenerational trauma. And I think that over the years, that people have to be reminded that they are good and that they are worthy and that this traumatic experience of...history was not their fault...Our people have to forgive...even though forgiveness may take some time.”⁹⁹

Rev. Julian explained that it was taboo in her tradition to go to the place of suffering, “we’re not supposed to go back to the place of suffering, to the place of where the encampment happened, where my people were rounded up [but despite taboo] we have to go back to Fort Sumner, to the place of suffering, where my people were encamped.”¹⁰⁰ This echoes Vincent Harding in his forward to *Jesus and the Disinherited*. Harding writes, “the ultimate issue is not being more moral than white folks, but becoming more free than we have ever been, free to engage our fullest powers in the transformative tasks that await us at the wall.”¹⁰¹ James Cone adds, “there can be no theology of the gospel which does not arise from an oppressed community.”¹⁰² The Diné had to grapple with how their backs ended up against the wall in order to live into a freedom that brought them back to the Gospel. By going through the process of healing, they could build Diné leadership within the Episcopal Church.

What Rev. Julian was proposing is similar to the challenge of Monica A. Coleman. Coleman seeks a religious view that “acknowledged the power of the cultural and personal past as instructive for living in the present and into the future.”¹⁰³ A Diné led church (within the polity of the Episcopal Church)

⁹⁸ Rev. Julian, Women of Color Discernment Stories, interview by Tamara Plummer, Zoom, December 3, 2020.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Vincent Harding in Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, xvii.

¹⁰² James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 40th anniversary ed (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2010), 5.

¹⁰³ Monica A. Coleman, *Making a Way out of No Way: A Womanist Theology*, Innovations : African American Religious Thought (Minneapolis, Minn: Fortress Press, 2008), 6.

was not a reality. For Rev. Julian it was clear that “only certain people were allowed to be priests.”¹⁰⁴ But there was a desire for this reality to change. They were seeking to “make a way out of no way.” According to Coleman, “there are four characteristics of ‘making a way out of no way’: (1) God’s presentation of unforeseen possibilities; (2) human agency; (3) the goal of justice, survival, and quality of life; and (4) a challenge to the existing order.”¹⁰⁵ We can see how these elements are translated to the Diné context as they went through the healing process of addressing intergenerational trauma.

Rev. Julian, along with her community, engaged these four elements by challenging cultural taboo. She said “we have to go there, and we have to pray, and we have to cry, and we have to grieve and we have to feel everything that was felt there so that we could release it. And tell our ancestors that we’re here and to help us to know what we’re supposed to do with our ministry.”¹⁰⁶ In other words, going to this place of harm would help them, “set about the task of interpreting the Gospel in terms of the needs of the missionized and not in terms of the needs of the missionaries.”¹⁰⁷

The challenge to cultural taboo was a challenge to the existing order, but it was for the purpose of justice, survival and quality of life. Such a purpose is described by Rev. Julian as a process of disrupting intergenerational trauma and seeing the ancestors as discernment partners as they sought to respond to their communal ministry. God’s presentation of unforeseen possibilities would become real through human agency, a response to the call of the ancestors to develop a new generation of healers that could replicate the healing they found at Fort Sumner.

From this journey and several healing circles, Rev. Julian talked about the release of trauma she didn’t even know she had. She said, “I felt the spirit strengthen me and give me courage.”¹⁰⁸ It was time to start recruiting Diné leadership. Rev. Julian as the diocesan administrator helped to create the application form for those who truly felt called. On the night that aspirants came to the diocesan office to

¹⁰⁴ Rev. Julian, Interview.

¹⁰⁵ Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way*, 33.

¹⁰⁶ Rev. Julian, Interview.

¹⁰⁷ Harold T. Lewis, *Yet with a Steady Beat: The African American Struggle for Recognition in the Episcopal Church* (Valley Forge, Pa: Trinity Press International, 1996).

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

meet, Rev. Julian said her goodbyes and was about to leave the office. The Bishop asked if she would not be joining them. She simply said no and went to walk out of the office, but something made her pause. After what felt like a long time, she turned around, filled out the application, that she had created, and joined the 14 others in their initial meeting. From that group there are currently five Diné clergy currently ordained in the diocese.

The path for Rev. Julian felt very different than the others I interviewed for this project. The healing circles and generational trauma work became vulnerable spaces where the community could hold each other in authentic ways. This instilled a true self that wasn't reliant on ordination. Instead of trying to convince her community, the community needed to convince Rev. Julian. She had a particular view about what constituted a priest, that person was more male, White and perfectly holy than she perceived herself. She explains the community's call:

The elders in my community said to me that "you have a gift...you're very present with people and [we think] that you would be able to hear and listen to their stories and you would be there," and you know, they saw me as a person that would give them hope and also that when I offered communion; they said there was something they just said there was something about how [I] related to people was very, you know, compassionate is what they said to me, and that they felt that I was called to be a priest. So the community is the one that said we feel [Julian] to be the priest and we will raise her and continue to walk with her and support her.¹⁰⁹

Because she was discerning within her cultural space and the church was looking for priests like her, she didn't have to prove anything. Discernment was a real opportunity for exploration of call. Her ordination was not wrapped up in fulfilling particular requirements to prove her priesthood.

Once accepted into the process, Rev. Julian knew that "saying yes to God" would not end her suffering, but would be an unknown journey to something.¹¹⁰ She continues, "we don't know the future because we won't be able to handle it. So we have to live into life's terms as it comes to us in our daily lives. And part of that is going to be suffering, pain, joy, new beginnings, loss, disappointments, betrayals."¹¹¹ This unknown path forward was eased because she would receive her formation while

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

remaining in her home community. She took classes through a Canadian seminary that blended the traditional theology of First Nations people with Christianity. She explains, “it was very open and it was very inviting....[It] didn’t feel like boarding school.”¹¹² Like most of her life the Anglican/Episcopal tradition could align with her Diné tradition. They were not polarities, but equal paths of what made Julian, Julian. Holding two traditions was especially palpable at her ordination to the diaconate.

After a few years, the elders believed Rev. Julian to be ready and so she was ordained to the diaconate in 2013. Rev. Julian believed that this was appropriate because it was the Winter Solstice, the date of her father’s ordination to the diaconate and the feast of St. Thomas. The solstice holds significance for her indigenous community and St. Thomas was her favorite saint. She explains, “I’m the kind of person that says I gotta see I gotta feel, I gotta touch in order to believe...we’re a people of signs... I still doubt you know, part of my humanity, and it helps my faith. It helps me to believe.”¹¹³ Her diaconal ordination continues to be talked about even today because it was a ceremony of signs, tactile ways of experiencing the holy, Diné style.

The day was all planned out and the local medicine man was going to perform traditional rituals at the end of the ceremony. Upon his arrival, he looked at the program and smelled the cedar burning in the chalice. It was Diné cedar. This immediately made the medicine man feel welcomed and comfortable. So he changed the service. If this was going to be a Diné space, he needed to start the ceremony. Rev. Julian went up to the Bishops and clergy gathered, many from outside of the Navajo Nation, and said that the medicine man was in charge -- they all acquiesced. Once the medicine man completed the necessary rituals to prepare the space and Rev. Julian the typical ordination service began.

In this way, the ordination of Rev. Julian wasn’t just about her, it was another opportunity for communal healing. According to Brown and Cocksworth, “Ordinations are ecclesial events in which the interdependence between presbyter and people is expressed at a number of points, from a particular

¹¹² Ibid. By boarding school she is of course referring to the violent history of White people educating indigenous people to forget and abandon their traditional epistemology and culture.

¹¹³ Rev. Julian, Interview

Christian community for ministry in a particular Christian community.”¹¹⁴ The particularity of the Christian community was Diné and Episcopal. Both of these showed up that day. The traditional ways were not left at the church door, they were centered as sacred and holy in this Anglican, colonizer’s Church. It was a way of saying, yes we believe in this Anglican tradition, but never separate from our Diné tradition. For the next two years, she was a deacon, but quickly was made to do all the things in the service that a priest would do, except the specifically sacramental elements. This scared and excited Rev. Julian, she was able to demonstrate the healing presence of Diné clergy.

Getting through seminary online while working full time and doing additional ministerial duties was going slowly. She looked around and wondered why she and other clergy were not allowed to go to seminary in the US. She then applied to seminary and got accepted at a traditional Episcopal Seminary in the East Coast. By going away to seminary, she would be able to complete her formal education more quickly, but she would also be exposed to mainstream clergy formation. If she was to thrive in the Diné space, but also beyond it, she knew that these kinds of “credentials were going to be really important.”¹¹⁵ She continued, “that’s really unfortunate you know because my people, we don’t believe in paper... We go by respect and the character of people.”¹¹⁶ With all the legacy of colonizer boarding schools she went off to Seminary.

Some in her community believed that leaving would make her disconnected from her community of accountability. But Rev. Julian’s mom, a wise woman with a fifth grade education told her that she would have to learn to invite all to the table. Her mother taught her that because of her color or how she speaks there would be some that would not listen, but she still had a duty to try to say the words that were necessary. Learning in this Anglo context would help her do that. She had already gone through what

¹¹⁴ Christopher J. Cocksworth and Rosalind Brown, *On Being a Priest Today* (Cambridge, Mass: Cowley Publications, 2004), 21.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

Rev. Julian called “Spiritual warfare” by trying to reject the traditional ways completely. But she has come to understand the Christian way and the Diné way are parallel, “they walk side by side.”¹¹⁷

Upon arriving at seminary, Rev. Julian leaned into her Navajo way and pushed back fiercely in her papers about their readings might counter her cultural context. Having officially been ordained priest before going to seminary and passing GOEs, the traditional formation experience would not be the contingency for her progress towards priesthood. The MDiv experience was purely a learning opportunity. During her second year Rev. Julian’s spiritual director, who is indigenous, suggested she lean into the Anglican tradition and not fear the loss of her Diné identity, it would always be there. By her third year, she was able to find space for both:

What happens is that it all comes together at one place, which we say is the ceremonial way for me. That the Gospel is the center of the sacred circle...We’re one whole ceremonial people or one whole liturgical people, if you will... Liturgy is not supposed to be comfortable...But liturgy is supposed to be uncomfortable because that’s where our spiritual dependence and growth really comes from. And God says that, even in our traditional ways...I had struggles with the traditional way... I had to go back to the healing place...that was a part of my trauma. You got to make peace with it because that’s what we call the beauty way you know...I finally realized like, wait a minute, what am I doing? I’m creating this separation from myself and I was separating myself from God.¹¹⁸

For Rev. Julian, the healing of her community was replicated in her personal healing of reconciliation between the Episcopal way and the Diné way. There was a place for each in her life. At times she may lean more Episcopal. In other spaces, she may lean more traditional. There are also times when her experience is syncretistic; so that she can feel reconciled to God. Embracing her multitudes allowed her space for salvation: healing of intergenerational trauma. Healing for herself and for her community. Ordination was a manifestation of how her skills could support her community. But her true self was developed by healing trauma and embracing ancestral knowledge and power.

REV. JUANITA

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

Rev. Juanita and I were able to speak on November 30, 2020 at 10:30 AM Eastern for almost an hour and a half. There were several technical difficulties and so we ended up not being able to see each other. In the beginning of our conversation you can hear the hesitation as we fumble through technical difficulty, pondering silence and the traditional awkwardness of a first time conversation. I “met” Rev. Juanita on a large Black clergy and lay leaders conference call. As I went through the squares of faces, I saw a younger Black woman and thought, perhaps I should reach out. My colleague that is more involved in this circle of leadership than I, confirmed that she would be a good person to speak with. A direct message and a few emails later, we were talking about her call story. Despite our initial awkwardness, this conversation was destined by the Holy Spirit.

Rev. Juanita is from the central southern United States and had been ordained for approximately a year and a half when we sat down to speak. She identifies as African American and came to the Episcopal Church through her work in Episcopal schools. But her call story started in college when she was writing a senior thesis on religion and health. She had traveled to South Africa and worked in an AIDS hospice as a part of her studies. Here, studies went from an academic pursuit to ministerial reality. In this place of so much death and suffering, there was also hope. She wanted to know more. After graduation she attended Divinity School and also majored in Public Health. From there, she got a teaching position at an Episcopal school.

In the Episcopal boarding school setting, attending Morning prayer and Sunday liturgy became an entry point into the Episcopal Church. After a few years, she moved to a large East Coast city and started teaching at an Episcopal Day School. One day, after she gave a chapel talk, the head of school walked up and said, “you are going to be a priest one day.”¹¹⁹ As a newer Episcopalian, priesthood was not on her radar. Growing up Catholic and Baptist, priests and pastors did not look like her. The school environment pushed her to explore. She explains, “there are all of these people every day speaking something into my life and being in a school gave a certain kind of grace.”¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ Rev. Juanita, *Women of Color Discernment Stories*, interview by Tamara Plummer, Zoom, November 30, 2020.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

The school chaplain dropped the application for ordination in her mailbox and told her to think about it. The application sat there for months, but one day the spirit pushed her to pick it up and so she began to explore. Rev. Juanita illuminates, “one of the distinct things about my call experience is just the number of people who lifted me up, who saw things in me that I felt, but couldn’t put into words. And it was sort of their witnessing, their testifying that gave me the courage to truly look and see.”¹²¹ Similar to Rev. Julian, it was her community that raised her up and pushed her towards exploring her call.

Rev. Juanita’s school had a strong relationship with the diocese and while candidates must be sponsored out of a congregation, her lay discernment committee was heavily populated by her school colleagues. Only one congregation member was on the committee. Rev. Juanita’s congregation and Rector pushed back, but the school won. Rev. Juanita explained that the goal of this lay discernment group was to answer, “What is the sacramental nature of this work that I’m doing and how will priesthood allow me to live more deeply into what I do every day?”¹²² Such a question is contiguous with Marth Percy who writes, “Ministry is...both more and less than a profession; it is about being, not just doing.”¹²³ For Rev. Juanita, how would being a priest help her do the art of teaching? And how would being a teacher help her do sacramental life?

Her process would move rather quickly. She went from aspirant to postulancy, candidacy, Anglican year and ordained Deacon all within two years. The Anglican year was the most transformative part for Rev. Juanita. Having already received an MDiv, she could “seep deeply within a tradition and realized that there were so many different ways of being a priest.”¹²⁴ In seminary, she could see a priestly call that was more reflective of her true self. It was fully her intention to continue working at the Episcopal school. Teaching was always a ministerial call and ordination would be an enhancement. Problematically, the structure of the diocesan process was set up for those who were discerning traditional

¹²¹ Ibid. Rev. Juanita uses “sort of” often in her story sharing. I have edited out some of these for space. I am not fully sure what I want to reflect on about her use of passive language even post ordination, but there is something there to be explored.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Martyn Percy, *Clergy: The Origin of Species* (London; New York: Continuum, 2006), 24.

¹²⁴ Rev. Juanita, Interview.

expressions of priesthood that lead to paths of leadership. Rev. Juanita is an educator discerning out of a school context that has a diversity of religious experiences. Rev. Juanita felt called as bi-vocational clergy, which the diocese desperately needed. But the process had not changed to reflect a vision of priesthood that met this need.

Percy points out that “the evolution of orders, in almost any period of history, was often specifically linked to the environmental context in which distinctive spiritualities arose.”¹²⁵ Such an evolution is a response to a Church that is “under the Spirit, a movement, an event, a happening, always being transformed, always re-inventing itself.”¹²⁶ Rev. Juanita’s situation highlights a historical moment where church and spirituality is going public. We have already seen theologians who have created public space for their theological practice. And many of these people are those who represent the margins, the disinherited. The Episcopal Church, when it comes to numbers, is in decline and there are not enough placements for ordained ministers, particularly in major cities. Perhaps, using the Public theologian model, there is the option of Public Priests.

So much about traditional ordination requires one to be rooted in a congregational context. We have seen the particularity of the congregational context be a blessing for someone like Bishop Emma and difficult for Rev. Isabella. During this time of pandemic, online worship has further problematized traditional concepts of Church. Rev. Sarai further explains, “good people are going to be coming to us from contexts where there is no community, or where there is complicated community.”¹²⁷ What processes would serve these aspirants?

One might discover the Episcopal Church on a college campus or through an emergent church congregation, or like Rev. Juanita, through a teaching position at a school. One may find spiritual resonance with the liturgy and the tradition. And yet these particular spaces of welcome are not The Episcopal church or representative of all dioceses and congregations. Such people will have no particular

¹²⁵ Percy, 53.

¹²⁶ Cláudio Carvalhaes, *Eucharist and Globalization: Redrawing the Borders of Eucharistic Hospitality* (Eugene, Oregon: PICKWICK Publications, 2013), 181.

¹²⁷ Rev. Sarai, Interview.

“home” or congregation that aligns with their denominational interests. For this population discernment and ordination processes have to reimagine what we mean when we talk about congregations, by challenging where the sacred is traditionally acted out or manifested and what characteristics of priesthood are necessary for such communities. The idea of sacramental life as standing behind an altar on Sunday morning in front of the same group of people every week is merely one manifestation of sacramental life. How might our processes allow space for alternative discernment and vision?

The non-traditional nature of Rev. Juanita’s discernment helped her answer a direct question, but she wasn’t able to explore other ministerial questions related to her call. By the time her lay discernment committee completed their gatherings, Rev. Juanita could articulate what sacramental leadership meant for her vocation as an educator. She could see her call story as pointing her to priesthood. However, it didn’t necessarily allow space for other questions to be engaged. Rev. Juanita had two communities of accountability, the school and the African American community in which she was raised. Her process focused on one - the school.

Let us discuss the process of the committee to understand the issue. The lay discernment committee took the six qualities that the diocese had laid out as characters of priesthood and Rev. Juanita wrote reflections on each. Each discernment meeting focused on these reflections. At the end of the process, the committee provided a report that would highlight where Rev. Juanita excelled and where she could improve. Rev. Juanita reflected, “My lay committee may have been too school focused and maybe that’s why I’m in this really intense period of discernment now. They didn’t ask me the kind of questions that I...some of the kinds of questions I needed to explore in that committee...It was pretty rigid”¹²⁸ The committee was all White and “I was never asked a question about race. I was never asked a question about justice. I was never asked the question.”¹²⁹ Her written reflections often situated her call in the context of being an African American woman, but her committee kept returning to her role as educator.

¹²⁸ Rev. Juanita, Interview.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

Rev. Juanita in reflection asks, “How can you go through a process and not have to deeply wrestle with the history of racism in the Episcopal Church?”¹³⁰

This lack of engagement on race and theology has now become a difficulty for Rev. Juanita as she continues to teach and be an assisting priest in a congregation. 2020 was not only the year of pandemic, but racial reckoning after the murder of George Floyd. While the Episcopal Church chose racial reconciliation as a priority, it continues to struggle with exactly how to engage all congregations in the conversation. Rev. Juanita puts it this way, “I feel as if certain theological ideas become options and sometimes we hide you know, we hide behind our liturgy. But to me, if our liturgy isn’t in some ways bringing us into a deeper encounter with God who liberates, then maybe it’s just liturgy. I don’t know.”¹³¹ Looking back on her writings from seminary, she remembers how central the questions of James Cone’s Black theology permeated her papers and sermons. Now such engagement in her liturgical context has become an option.

Cláudio Carvalhaes illuminates what Rev. Juanita is longing for, “whatever we do at, in, or around the Communion altar/table is fundamentally connected to the very practical ways we live.”¹³² The discernment process that brought her to see her priestly call also needed to engage what it meant to be Black, Episcopalian and sacramental. She reflected: “in some ways, no one ever said this to me explicitly, but I feel the need to hide my blackness.”¹³³ As she moved through the process she realized, “I’ve gotta play safe and now it’s like how do I rid myself of that to really be authentic, to really be who God called me to be.”¹³⁴ Even now, she struggles with how to couch difficult ideas in ways that will be heard by her “predominantly White, high Anglo-Catholic” congregation.¹³⁵ Because “if people stop listening, you’re

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Carvalhaes, *Eucharist and Globalization*, 3.

¹³³ Rev. Juanita, Interview.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

not effective. But at the same time sometimes you just have to come out and say things.”¹³⁶ Effectively,

Rev. Juanita has engaged in *covering demands* that limit her ministerial call.

Rev. Juanita spoke more explicitly about these *covering demands*:

I had a few people who would come up to me and say, ‘Hey, you know, when you go talk to the standing committee, these are things that you would say or should think about.’ ... What I was running up against is that there’s like this...Episcopal speak. In some ways, our tradition just gets really small, where we feel as if in this tradition, I don’t know if I should be saying this, ... we feel as if we’re the only people who have liturgy. We’re the only people who have the right approach to reading the Bible and knowing the Bible and I’ve been around deeply faithful people my entire life who couldn’t tell you the difference between a chasuble and a stole, but that has no bearing on their understanding of liturgy and the beauty of God’s presence and sitting in God’s presence, of worshipful space...I was trying to make a claim for... ministry happening in the school setting. It doesn’t look like a parish.¹³⁷

She was making a claim for a liturgical response to a ministry context that lied outside of the discernment/ordination process’ intention. Essentially the process was trying to “move the *other* into sameness, turning the *other* into the colonizer’s self-realization and making the unknown knowable, safe and easy to deal with or even to control.”¹³⁸ It is hard for me not to see the colonizing elements of Rev. Juanita’s process. The contortions and new language that had to be engaged in order to be “safe” and “knowable.”

Episcopal Speak and other *covering demands* is harmful because as Rev. Juanita put clearly “So much of the pathway looks like doors, and although we use the language of exploration and discovery, I don’t think that these committees are anything but doors.”¹³⁹ The rapid nature of her discernment experience and the Whiteness of her lay discernment committee didn’t allow Rev. Juanita to explore, discover, or question what race had to do with her ministerial call. And yet, her ordination service brought her back to why she felt called to the Episcopal Church in the first place. She says, “ordination is reality as it is. Something is happening through the holy spirit, but there is something else that is also happening.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Carvalhaes, *Eucharist and Globalization*, 169.

¹³⁹ Rev. Juanita, Interview.

A liturgical moment that is drawing us to the heart. It is not about us, but all the people around you. You are being raised up for the church. And I hope that's a capital 'C' Church."¹⁴⁰

Now that she is ordained, perhaps there is more space for discernment and spiritual direction that will continue to help her work through these difficult questions and authentically express her voice. Like Rev. Juanita, I believe that we have to speak in ways that others can hear us, but we must heed the warnings of Rev. Julian. Too much disconnection between one's culture and one's call ultimately results in a disconnection from God. One cannot lead a community into reconciliation unless her work of reconciliation is a part of one's spiritual journey.

LESSONS LEARNED

Delores Williams writes, "All of our talk about God must translate into action that can help our people live."¹⁴¹ In the previous sections, we learned about the ways that five women of color priests talked about God and how they have been called into action. Here, I will summarize some key learnings and survival tools as an epistemological base in order to construct more liberative and equitable processes.

What stands out most, is how these women constantly return to God, God's call, God's purpose, God's vision. Their path is choppy sea, but God is the horizon.¹⁴² As Fred Hammond says at the beginning of his song *Your Steps Are Ordered*, "When you've been called by God or called to have a relationship with God, sometimes...it just don't feel good."¹⁴³ God-centeredness, as Rev. Julian spoke to, does not mean an easy life, but it will result in a more fulfilling one. Choppy seas come from two sources: God's transformative power and discrimination. Every interviewee discussed their encounters with racism, sexism, heterosexism, and classism. At the same time, they had to navigate the discomforts of leaning into a new way of seeing and understanding themselves, articulating what they felt inside for

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 180.

¹⁴² Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1988).

¹⁴³ Fred Hammond, *Your Steps are Ordered*, vol. Pages of Life- Chapters I&II, 1998.

those who would confirm their spiritual and vocation pursuit. Navigating both spaces required a focus on what God is doing through them, not just what was happening to them. Such navigation requires curiosity, wonder, a bit of fear, and malleable expectations: “We make plans, God laughs.”

The desire to get back to God and God’s call helped to focus the process of discernment and then became a supportive grounding for the destabilizing moments of discrimination. At the same time, God’s support shows up in communities and allies who affirm their call. It is specifically helpful when those who have already navigated these processes or are members of the mainstream translate and provide advice for those who enter the process from the margins. These women found allies to help guide them along the way. Spiritual grounding and supportive community provide space for seekers to live into their true self.

Each participant talked about unexpected allies that supported them in their call. The capacity to be an ally and know how to do it well takes experience. For those who have a historical legacy of being welcomed, they will feel more comfortable to take chances and advocate for non-traditional or “more risky” candidates. Also, access to power spaces in the church has happened in waves. First Black people fought for access, then women and then LGBTQIA folks. All these groups have overlapping members who then experience the entire process in their own unique way. For example, Rev. Sarai spoke about how other people of color did not accept her Queerness or how Queer folks did not welcome her South Asian identity. As each marginalized community enters the mainstream, navigating new power dynamics is complicated.

Real change will happen when we recognize that there isn’t limited space in God’s Kingdom. Some of those with limited vision are gatekeepers and they operate out of a fear of losing power. This means that aspirants from the margins are continually navigating discriminatory power dynamics which is exhausting. One default tool is the StrongBlackWoman. While an effective strategy at times, clinging too tightly to “strength” may have seekers missing out on resources that they didn’t even know were options.

Rev. Sarai puts it this way, “you don’t know sometimes what you're allowed to ask and how to ask.”¹⁴⁴ Injustice and inequity in the process results in two kinds of discernment skills: 1) How to listen for and respond to God’s call and 2) How to respond to an unjust community with nuance. Survival of both requires drawing strength from God, and ideally a loving community of allies that will be God’s presence in her life.

The goal of any discernment process for ministerial leadership is to have “authentic leaders [who] ... aim at liberating the heart, their own and others’, so that its powers can liberate the world.”¹⁴⁵ We have seen how some processes are not set up in ways that yield authentic leadership. Yet, these women continue to discover God’s call and ways to live into their true self. It is interesting that each did find liberation in the liturgical moment of ordination. There was a light and beauty in each woman’s discussion of their ordination service. In that liturgical space, their multitudes could be embraced and celebrated.

The path to ordination will inevitably affect what happens after the ordination service. If discernment committees have limited vision, so will those who discern limit their ministry. If you have to navigate *covering demands* then ecclesial power begins to be centered over God. Clergy are meant to lead the fulfillment of the mission of the Church: “to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.”¹⁴⁶ At the same time, priests “do not erase the priestly calling of the people of God. It exemplifies it ... [empowering] the people of God to realize their true identity.”¹⁴⁷ In the story of Rev. Julian, we have seen how reconciliation yielded liberation: “the *project* of freedom wherein the oppressed realize that their fight for freedom is a divine right of creation.”¹⁴⁸ Therefore, pursuit of ordination requires a reconciliation process for the discerners and those who discern with them.

¹⁴⁴ Rev. Sarai, Interview.

¹⁴⁵ Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak*, 76.

¹⁴⁶ Episcopal Church, *Book of Common Prayer*, Pg. 855.

¹⁴⁷ Cocksworth and Brown, *On Being a Priest Today*, 32.

¹⁴⁸ Cone, *God of the oppressed*, 127.

A large stumbling block to liberation is one that wasn't covered as explicitly in the interviews, but we must speak about now, financial resources. Participants spoke about seminary debt that could reach \$100,000. According to the Diocese of New York website, minimum required salary for a full time position for those ordained less than three years is \$46,000.¹⁴⁹ As the amount of full time positions decreases, so do salaries and contributions to retirement and pension funds. If seminary is required for formation, how do those with limited financial resources feel free to attend certain institutions? How do seminarians access additional resources beyond their diocese? What communities have insider knowledge of these scholarship and grant programs, who doesn't? But financial resourcing plays a role long before a person obtains postulancy.

An easy way to make allies in the diocese and be seen as priestly, is to participate in ministry committees or the legislative life of the Church. These meetings often happen during the week between 9am and 5pm. I can remember my mother taking days off from work to lead Episcopal Church Women (ECW) meetings. She was privileged enough to do so. What about those who have hourly positions and no vacation options? Do these experiences provide adequate, safe childcare so that parents can participate? In dioceses that are larger with limited transportation options, can a person even get to the diocesan office without an overnight stay? Wealthier dioceses can provide such resources, but they are also the places that tend to have more competitive processes. Financial limitations are real, both for dioceses and those seeking ordination. If we do not address this issue, we may raise up priests that look diverse, but continue to reflect more elite expressions of leadership.

We have spent time describing and deconstructing the experiences of women of color clergy. And not all has been said. Further research needs to focus on those who have not made it through the process. What happens to their ministerial call? How might structural and legislative change yield less traumatized

¹⁴⁹ The Diocese of New York encompasses Staten Island, Manhattan, The Bronx, Westchester County and other wealthy parts of New York State until just south of Albany, NY. <https://www.dioceseny.org/administration/for-clergy/clergy-finance/minimum-compensation-guidelines-for-priests/>

priests? We have learned that discernment happens on two planes, the temporal and the divine.¹⁵⁰

Surviving the process for the disinherited is understanding how both are at work in their lives and what both mean for utilizing their gifts in community. We now speak more specifically about how that might work moving forward.

PROPOSED NEXT STEPS: CONSTRUCTION

Turning our focus to construction, I propose two changes to our understanding of the ordination process. The first is disentangling formal discernment processes from the application for ordination. This requires creating a culture of discernment that goes beyond ordained ministry and an ordination process that incorporates equitable hiring practices. Secondly, I propose that we embrace a fuller understanding of priesthood in relation to Christian community. Rather than priests engaging sacramental leadership in particular communities, we can expand the chaplaincy roles and develop priests that can bring sacramental life to the world.

UNIVERSAL DISCERNMENT

Discernment is the process of discovering what is of God, centering the spirit to hear God's voice, and figuring out how one is going to respond to that call. Ordination is more like an admissions process, job training and certification. In the ordination process discernment happens in two areas, communally and institutionally/canonically. It is assumed that personal discernment has already happened before one enters the process, but this is not always the case.

The Episcopal Church does not have a culture of vocational discernment that lies outside of the ordination process. There are programs, such as Education for Ministry (EfM) or spiritual direction that offer discernment.¹⁵¹ While both have been life giving for some, it feels different than the Quaker

¹⁵⁰ I pull the concept of two planes from: Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, n.d.). Particularly the second sermon on the two orders.

¹⁵¹ EfM is a weekly commitment that can last for three years. Trying to find a spiritual director of color and of competence, even in NYC, for me has been extremely difficult. With a complicated work schedule, neither has been a viable option for my spiritual discernment needs.

approach of a “clearness committee.”¹⁵² Clearness committees are more malleable and respond to the need of the person discerning than a set curriculum like EfM. To create a discernment culture would require the formation of people in every congregation of the denomination who can sit with people to provide caring support in their pursuit of God’s call. Such formation would be transformative for those discerning and those helping folks discern.

We do not have to look far to find guidance on this topic, the Constitution & Canons of the Episcopal Church state that dioceses must provide, “Assistance in understanding that all baptized persons are called to minister in Christ's name, to identify their gifts with the help of the Church and to serve Christ's mission at all times and in all places.”¹⁵³ Further, “The Bishop, Commission, and the discernment community shall assist persons engaged in a process of ministry discernment to determine appropriate avenues for the expression and support of their ministries, either lay or ordained.”¹⁵⁴ These Canons imply two things: First, we should already have official community processes to support all baptized persons to identify their gifts and explore what that might look like in achieving Christ’s mission. Secondly, such a culture of discernment needs to address ministries beyond those seeking Holy Orders.

Here is my unfiltered truth. There are devoted Episcopalians who have profound spiritual experiences that lead them to want to align their vocation with the Church. They feel deep spiritual callings to something. Because there isn’t a culture of discernment and limited vision on what ecclesial leadership looks like, people enter the ordination process seeking guidance. What God was calling them to, wasn’t ordination. Just because you “love the Lord” doesn’t mean that you should be ordained. A better culture of discernment would help guide people to an answer that doesn’t have to end with priesthood. And whatever the answer is, needs to be celebrated, honored and lifted up as very good. It is

¹⁵² Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak*, 44.

¹⁵³ The General Convention of the Episcopal Church, “Constitution & Canons,” *General Convention*, accessed April 7, 2021, <https://extranet.generalconvention.org/staff/files/download/23914>. 99.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 101.

when the individual is allowed to vulnerably discover their path with “God on the horizon” that ego and power leave the room so that liberation and freedom can enter in.¹⁵⁵

For those who are called to ordained ministry, but do not get a chance to truly discern before they enter the process, they are at even greater harm for injury. As we see in Rev. Juanita’s case those who determine if she will be presented for postulancy were her colleagues and spiritual support network. How can one be vulnerable and uncertain in such a space? If the aspirant is not put forward for postulancy, this support network may no longer be a place of healing and discovery. Even when one is made postulant, support networks may continue to be decision makers in your spiritual journey. Rev. Sarai puts it this way, “I wish there had been trusted people to talk to about formation, who I wasn’t scared of, who couldn’t hurt me.”¹⁵⁶ How can one, like Rev. Juanita suggested, not see this path as anything but doors? Having more spaces for individual discernment may help people enter the ordination process with clearer vision.

Cultural transformation needs support for the structural institutional powers that are the “doors” on the path. The diocesan Commission on Ministry (COM), Standing Committees and anyone else involved in the ordination process “need to identify their own biases relative to the situation. We all have histories that shape our outlooks. What we have to say needs to be measured against those histories.”¹⁵⁷ In essence, those evaluating a person for ordination need to examine their explicit and implicit biases. Everyone has an idea about what priesthood “looks like.” Those who fall outside of such visions will have more difficulty navigating the path.

There are several resources that exist to help people be more intentional and thoughtful about how they participate in ordination/discernment processes. Of those that I have read, they do not explicitly point to the role social location impacts how call is experienced by those on these committees. For example, *Listening Hearts* is a go to resource for discernment groups. The book emphasizes things like

¹⁵⁵ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*.

¹⁵⁶ Rev. Sarai, Interview

¹⁵⁷ Gills, et al., *Listening Hearts*, 52.

humility, openness, and embracing a lack of clarity. Their goal is virtuous, they seek discernment to be centered on God and open to exploration. The issue is that one quality can be read as virtue for the mainstream and problematic for the disinherited. Covering demands are constantly at work in our world, discernment groups must be fully aware of these biases.

Debra Jackson explores the complexity of how race and gender complicate how we interpret one's actions and presence. Jackson speaks to the differences in reaction to the testimonies of Professor Anita Hill and Professor Christine Blasey Ford: "Tears made Ford credible, but assertiveness made Hill not credible. And this is the rub. An African American woman would not have been able to portray herself as Professor Ford did. She would not have been received."¹⁵⁸ Time is as much a factor as race in how these women were received, in part because of Anita Hill's courage. And Jackson's point holds, particularly when we include the actions of Justice Brett Kavanaugh. He could throw a tantrum on the floor of Congress and still be confirmed to the Supreme Court. Social location affects how communities read one's presence, actions and leadership, in congressional hearings and in front of ecclesial commissions and committees.

Holding all this complexity, communal discernment is a necessary part of the ordination process for we are not just called by God. We are called to share particular gifts in a community. Responding to God's call in community is "our participation in the Trinitarian life of God in which each divine person lives in and through the other and for the other in the ultimate pattern of priestly identity."¹⁵⁹ And Cone reflects that "one's selfhood is bound up with the community to which one belongs."¹⁶⁰ We cannot understand our call separate from the communal context. What I am proposing is that the circle of advocates and supporters has to be different than the decision makers. Discerning in the right kind of

¹⁵⁸ Debra Jackson, *Meant for Good: Fundamentals of Womanist Leadership* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2020), 11.

¹⁵⁹ Cocksworth and Brown, *On Being a Priest Today*, 20.

¹⁶⁰ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 147.

communal context “can transform and liberate us beyond our narrow expectations.”¹⁶¹ Such liberative discernment is most likely to happen in spaces meant for uncertainty and exploration than evaluation.

In order to be ordained one must pass institutional discernment and confirmation of call. Before one reaches this point in the formal ordination process, one discerns personally, in their congregation and then at the diocesan level (communally). The results of these discernment experiences become pieces of an application process. Once accepted *candidates* are allowed into the institution of priesthood. The issue in the Episcopal Church, is that there are 110+ admissions offices that interpret the criteria for admission differently. Every diocese has its own way of doing things, some processes are more easily navigated than others. Some, particularly those with financial resources will often go from diocese to diocese until they are ordained.

We now must examine ways that Bishops, Standing Committees and COMs can be more equitable structurally. Elections to all these positions of power come out of governance structures that continue to manifest some of the Church’s problematic history. The church has many ways of working on this legacy. In the meantime, we need to be very clear that “discernment” in these spaces is not discernment, it is an interview. Here aspirants must display a level of certainty and yet be “open to being formed.”¹⁶² In order to be successful at the institutional level, people must be coached on what kind of covering practices to employ and how to utilize “Episcopal Speak.” For example, Rev. Juanita required coaching to realize, “oh they just want me to say incarnation...As a Black person we live that every day.” What was explicit for the Standing Committee was implicit to her life. The non-profit space provides an example for the church.

In December of 2018, I attended a training with *The Management Center*, an organization that works with justice oriented non-profit organizations to develop effective and equitable management

¹⁶¹ Gills, et al., *Listening Hearts*, 46.

¹⁶² During my own discernment, I was given feedback that I seemed too certain and not open to formation. He probably wasn’t wrong. As a young looking Black woman, I have learned to use certainty and my intelligence as a way to make adults in the Church take me seriously. I didn’t feel like there was space for any other way to present my story and be heard as something other than Jennifer’s Daughter. Jennifer, my mom, is known throughout the diocese for having limited patience for ignorance and mediocrity.

processes. Some of the tools accessed in this training may provide opportunities for change at this institutional level. The facilitator told a story about an organization that was fighting to get Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) passed in the state. The facilitator had the perfect candidate in mind, an undocumented person who had already done this work in their own state. The perfect candidate didn't apply because the job posting required that all applicants have a Bachelor's degree. Because of his citizenship status, the candidate couldn't get the aide he needed to go to college. We have built systems that are meant to liberate, but they are based on processes that have historically marginalized. *Covering demands* and Episcopal Speak become barriers to entry, particularly for the disinherited.

The Management Center encourages organizations to spend some time discerning what they are actually looking for before they begin writing a job description and hiring process. When crafting these descriptions, organizations are asked to think about their PTRs -- Preferences, Traditions and Requirements.¹⁶³ We can often confuse what is required with cultural norms that have been implemented over time (traditions) thereby creating a mainstreaming culture that marginalizes other ways of being. "From an equity and inclusion standpoint," being clear about one's PTRs "can help you mitigate bias in hiring, delegate equitably, and gain more perspectives."¹⁶⁴ In other words, focusing first on requirements will lower the barrier to entry for those voices and experiences that are not familiar to the mainstream. In the words of Rev. Juanita, "I think every diocese needs to examine what it's doing...question who enters the process, who doesn't enter the process and who do we tend to say no to."¹⁶⁵

I want to push Episcopal dioceses and the Church as a whole to use PTRs, not as condemnation of all that has happened, but as a way to stay vigilant and maintain equitable systems. Every single person who has been through the ordination process that I have told about my thesis asks if they can read it. They all make a painful face before saying, "yeah, the whole thing is really messed up." Regardless of race,

¹⁶³ The Management Center, "That's How We've Always Done It! (A Guide to Using PTR)," The Management Center (blog), accessed April 9, 2021, <https://www.managementcenter.org/article/thats-how-weve-always-done-it-a-guide-to-using-ptr/>.

¹⁶⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ Rev. Juanita, Interview.

gender, sexual orientation, ability, socio-economic status, etc. the ordination process is a difficult one. And it should be. We are ordaining people into a difficult ministerial call. Whether one is accepted or rejected, they should be given a spiritual director, or given support groups/mentors to help people process what they have experienced. And these discussions can provide feedback to the overall process.

Let us take the Constitution & Canons of our church seriously by creating a culture of vocational discernment that supports people through all steps of their spiritual journey. Such a process would involve a discernment community that continually works on cultural competence and examines their implicit biases. Institutionally, dioceses and the denomination would look at their PTR's and the experience of those who are not ordained as feedback for improvement on the overall experience.

PUBLIC PRIESTHOOD

Next we turn to the idea of a Public priest. Rev. Sarai said, “we have latched on to this very, very, very small idea of what a priest is.”¹⁶⁶ In her own way, each interview exposed how limited ideas of what a priest is resulted in harmful encounters between aspirant/postulant and committees/commissions. I believe that a more open vision of the priesthood would allow for more diocesan structures to see priesthood in more diverse call stories.

The limitation of academic positions has made the role of Public Theologian necessary. Graduating theologians have had to figure out ways to share their acumen and maintain financial stability. Therefore the role of Public theologian comes out of economic necessity and a deep seeded desire to make theology accessible. The role of the Public theologian is to bring theological insight to the masses. Priests are experiencing similar limitations in the traditional congregational context. The Public priest would bring sacramental life to the masses. Many may see this proposed role as similar to that of deacon or chaplaincy. However the deacon is really a bridge between the church and the world and chaplains often are formed out of the same ordination processes we have already examined. What I propose is an ecclesiastical role that recognizes the church as the world. The goal isn't to fill pews and churches. Rather

¹⁶⁶ Rev. Sarai, Interview.

the role is to recognize the incarnational in the world and participate with it through sacramental life, administered by the Public Priest.

According to Brown and Cocksworth, “there is no such thing as an ‘absolute ordination,’ a conferral of position in the Church abstracted from the realities of service within a local community of Christians.”¹⁶⁷ However, this is exactly what I am proposing. First, we have seen in the stories of Bishop Emma and Rev. Sarai that while they were ordained in one context, they were made to seek other communities to serve. Rev. Juanita’s community is a student and faculty population where most are not Christian. These examples mean that we may already be a church of “absolute ordination,” we just need to embrace it! Such an embrace does not mean that everyone will be ordained or that public priests would not be held accountable. This role would have accountability to the denomination, but freedom to discern out of a variety of contexts.

We must deal with the reality that our concepts of church, community, and local have been problematized by technology, economics, pandemic and migration. From my apartment in Brooklyn, I could go to bible study in Jamaica, Sunday Morning service in Washington, DC and evening prayer at a camp in Connecticut. Most of my friends don’t go to church at all, even those employed by it. My spiritual, but not religious friends have made me their default chaplain because I publicly say I’m Christian. When they are having crises or a desire for rituals to mark life’s important moments, they ask me to help. I have moved often for work and these friends live throughout the country. This displaced group of friends feels like my church community. Additionally, those disillusioned by church limitations are realizing that they don’t have to enter particular doors to experience God’s belovedness at all. They see God’s mission everywhere.

Patrisse Khan-Cullors is known as a leader in the #BlackLivesMatter movement. Her memoir offers theological insights into how we might understand Public priests. In her story we see the ways that various community groups, educational institutions and friend networks provided space for her to develop

¹⁶⁷ Cocksworth and Brown, *On Being a Priest Today*, 21. Emphasis mine.

lifegiving God-talk. Her description of family barbeques sounded like the parish picnics of my childhood. The ways that her chosen family shows up for each other is similar to the ways that I access my community of care that is rooted in the church. Most touching are the stories about her relationship with her biological father: “In a world that has made Black humanity invisible, I feel seen in a way that is almost shocking.”¹⁶⁸ As she talks about organizing her father’s funeral, it is “the first time I have ever called community together to acknowledge a life.”¹⁶⁹ And it will not be her last.

These seemingly secular spaces become training grounds for Khan-Cullors like church basements had been for John Lewis. While today’s leaders often say, “this is not your grandmother’s civil rights movement,” in many ways it is. Instead of church basements its non-profits (and it is also church basements). Instead of hymns like “we shall overcome,” it is Kendrick Lamar’s “we goin’ be alright.” At the root of modern movements and those that came before is a theological center on the beloved worthiness of those who have been deemed unworthy by institutional structures and from those who benefit from the existence of such structures. The Episcopal Church has been on a journey to correct their involvement and support of oppression and we are doing so by developing God-vision within our communities. One possible tool to help in this process is Public Priesthood.

This past summer I swam in some of my favorite New Hampshire watering holes, it was an opportunity to remember what was written in my rejection letter from the Commission on Ministry so many years ago, “the ministry to which you feel called is not one priesthood would prepare you for.” They told me to come back in ten years. I read the letter as code for, “go grow up and figure out what priesthood is really about.” Almost ten years later, they may be right.

The structures that currently exist were not created for people like me and how I understood my priestly call. While there are generations of priests that understand their ministry in “the streets” there are others for whom church polity and ritual is their ministry. I am not proposing either/or, I am Episcopalian,

¹⁶⁸ Patrisse Khan-Cullors, Asha Bandele, and Angela Y Davis, *When They Call You a Terrorist: A Black Lives Matter Memoir*, 2020, 95. We can see the parallel between these words and the ways that Bishop Emma spoke about her Black church experience growing up in the 50’s and 60’s.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 106.

I am proposing both/and. The stories of these women speak to ways that Church tradition has something to do with social change and that social change has something to say to our tradition. According to Spellers, “Anglicanism can and should always balance the ancient and the contemporary, the catholic and the vernacular. We call this middle way, the *via media*, and it allows us to rejoice in having unity without uniformity.”¹⁷⁰

What happens in ordination processes matters because who we call as leadership matters. The work we have to do is not just about policy and structure. People are crying out for love, attention, support and caring presence. Our work, as the church, should be where “the Word of God gathers and is incarnated in the community of faith, which gives itself to the service of all.”¹⁷¹ The Church exists to participate in “the fullness of liberation,” which is “communion with God,...other human beings,” and the rest of creation.¹⁷² The church is being called into forming leadership that can support communities where true liberation can be practiced, where true liberation can happen. Thanks be to God. Hallelujah, Anyhow!¹⁷³

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¹⁷¹ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 7.

¹⁷² Ibid, 24.

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