

## Ministry Statement Lauren Page

I first thought about becoming a minister in 1971 or 1972. Since it's now 2005, and since I'm now 50 years old, you can see there have been some delays.

Back then, I was not yet a Christian, and what I was thinking about was being a Unitarian minister. I knew very few Christians intimately, except for one old woman in a nursing home. But I was actively seeking God, and I was already a worship leader in the Liberal Religious Youth (then the Unitarian youth program). My "worship leading" was very much of the "one person lights a candle, 24 appreciate the religious experience" variety, but still, there was something there that drew me, and I think it was the visceral knowledge that I could experience transcendence myself, and help others to that experience.

And then I became a Christian. For a while, all this meant was I read the New Testament a lot, choosing the bits I liked and thinking I could discard the bits I didn't like. I went off to college with the declared intention of becoming a Unitarian minister. But as I began to meet Christian people and to learn more about Christian doctrine, and to attend churches of various kinds, I knew I couldn't call myself a Unitarian any more—and this being 1973 or so, I had grave doubts about whether women should be ministers at all. In 1974 I was baptized in a small, storefront Pentecostal church in Isla Vista, California, loosely affiliated with the Calvary Chapel movement, and, for a while at least, was certain, not that the door was shut, but that there was no door there for me at all.

I didn't go looking for that door again for nearly twenty years. In that time, I married, became an Episcopalian, had a baby, changed careers to support him better, became a single parent, lost and gained jobs, remarried, and kept on going through a life that seemed to be split in two, more and more, between the person who worked for and served her church, and the person who served her corporate masters. Also in that time I walked with a dear friend, Carolyn Metzler, as she made her profession in the Society of St. Margaret, left the Society to marry, attained a Master's Degree in Divinity, was rejected for ordination in the Diocese of Maine and then, ultimately, accepted, after years of alienation and reconciliation. She was the first person who said to me, "You know, you ought to be doing this too..."

But I've always felt as though I didn't fit in the world where I've worked for more than 18 years now. Both my academic training (social work and political science) and my work life immediately after college were built around the idea that my vocation was helping people. It was painful to let that go, and the pain has not really diminished. I have always felt that I ought to be doing something else, and other people—close family, friends, and even just acquaintances—have often affirmed the same.

Nowadays, I don't really seek transcendence, and I don't think it's the work of a minister to create a worship experience. God and the believing hearts of the people together provide that, and it's our job to create the place in space and time where that happens. I

often feel very strong emotions when I work on the altar, but whether I am nearly overwhelmed by a sense of God's presence or merely aware of my creaking knees is a matter of indifference to me. I feel the sustaining force of the rock beneath me all the time, the quiet under-girding that makes whatever we do up there part of the glory of God.

I'm seeking ordination as a Deacon for several reasons, both positive and negative.

When I think of being ordained, I feel a tremendous well of latent power within me, just waiting for the place and the time to make itself felt. I don't have a single clear goal for "a mission" at this point, but I sense within myself a still-untapped spring of energy that moves me forward. I think the kind of leader I am—or the kind I aspire to be—is more diaconal than priestly. I want to come alongside people as an encourager, rather than stand in front.

I think the most important thing ordination to the Diaconate would give me would be the external symbol of the internal authority I already feel within myself. While I believe with all my heart in the priesthood of all God's people, I also know that there's something about a label that inclines people to listen to what the person with the label has to say. And I do think my life experience has given me some unique words:

- About the way bright, "difficult" children are treated in our society and the sort of support they really need to thrive;
- About what it's like to be in the business world and trying to live a righteous and a balanced life;
- About being an equal companion with people who have been made different by God—not a helper reaching down, but a fellow-struggler working alongside.

I mention these because I think they are the areas where I could be most useful as a Deacon:

- Most of the younger people I am friends with now would fall into the "bright, 'difficult'" category. I don't have their permission to say a lot about them all here, but I think I'm able to model the possibility of a successful adulthood—and I know that some of them who don't care much for Christians have respect for me, and through me for what I believe..
- In the business world, I can say with real pride that there are four people who have jobs at my company now because I proved the job was worth doing well, and that I did this without compromising my personal sense of identity or my values. I think I could speak very effectively to and for other people who never climb the ladder very far, and yet are successful because they live full lives.
- And while there's no credit being claimed by me for the great blessing of being loved by someone who happens to have a major handicap, I do think that I have a recognition of the common threads that underlie the various states of being human that allows me to work around and under a lot of the barriers that lie between us. I would very much like to make part of my ministry finding a way to help such people into a fuller priesthood themselves.

On the other hand, I don't think the Church needs another middle-aged, overweight priest with bad knees and asthma, who has maybe 25 years of useful work left in her, especially if five to seven of those years must be given to seminary. While I don't think the work of a Deacon is less than that of a priest, I do think I could start being of use sooner in that capacity.

There are two things I think the Episcopal Church in general and our diocese in particular could do better. The first has to do with communication. We need to become much better at telling ourselves and others what we believe and why. I believe that one major cause of the decline in attendance in our church is that we—clergy and lay people alike—have difficulty expressing our beliefs clearly and with passion.

The reason we need this clear and passionate voice can be seen in the characteristics of those Christian denominations that are experiencing growth. What these churches offer is, in most cases, a worship service with emphasis on the worshipper's emotional experience, combined with firm direction about issues of life and death, the roles of men and women, standards of behavior, etc. These churches also offer many additional activities, so that there is little reason for members to seek additional experience in "the world".

What we can offer is different. We can offer the joy of living in paradox; we can proclaim the triumph of the victim. To be more specific, I think I could teach people something about the joy of living in a world that always challenges us to choose, where the answers are never easy, and where the directions of the Bible are alive because they are re-voiced for today's need. Not discarded—I recently got quite angry listening to a sermon that discounted half the text of the Gospel because, "You people don't need that in this day and age." On the contrary, I think the more we deal honestly with the parts of scripture that are hard for us, the better able we will be to affirm our faith.

The second thing I think we need is a more practical type of social action. For example, we send teams of young people to other countries to build churches and housing, and that's great. It would also be great, though less romantic, if we were joining Habitat for Humanity here in Boston to build housing. Our diocese will shortly be supporting two charter schools, but are we asking the parishes to help staff them and provide resources for them? If we're Episcopalians in Lowell or in Boston, are we sending our own children to these schools? Or do we see them as something we do "for others", and not for ourselves? I'm thrilled that we're supporting and lobbying for affordable housing—but how many of our churches are actually sponsoring the construction of subsidized housing, either independently or with other churches? I have always been impatient with the idea that one has to go far away from one's home or it's not "mission". Faith communities are built when people work together towards a worthy goal, praying and supporting each other on the way, and it doesn't really matter if the task at hand is around the corner or across the globe. And I know that if my small church in a big building in Malden wants to grow, we have to take a significant place in a community that's increasingly either not Christian at all, or Christian in the "join-us-and-withdraw-from-

the-world” sense. For us, our mission is here—in our hearts, and on the doorstep. I strongly suspect that the story is the same in other communities.

I have considered alternative callings. I am clear (most of the time, at least), that I’m at the end of my personal career in the business world. And many of the alternatives are things I could usefully do while being a Deacon. They include:

- Getting a Master’s Degree in Religious Education and becoming a Religious Education professional
- Getting a Master’s Degree in Pediatric Counseling, an MSW, or a similar type of certification that would allow me to practice counseling/social work where I feel I could be most useful
- Applying the business and administrative skills that my current job has developed to helping non-profit organizations win grants and administer grant-based programs

So, whatever the outcome of this process, I will be on to something else in the next several years. And I hope to serve God and God’s people, however it all comes out.