Women's Ordination

“Irregular” Ordinations at St. Stephen’s

Until 1976, women were not allowed to be priests in the Episcopal Church. But pressure to allow women to be ordained had been growing for a decade. Two events at St. Stephen’s Church were key in moving the Episcopal Church to approve women’s ordination. One was the “irregular” ordination of four women to the priesthood.

On September 7, 1975, four women were ordained priest at St. Stephen and the Incarnation: Lee McGee, Alison Palmer, Betty Rosenberg, and Diane Tickell.

McGee was a member of St. Stephen’s. She, Palmer, and Rosenberg met at meetings of women deacons in the Diocese of Washington. The three decided to pursue ordination because each had jobs that would not be jeopardized by violating church law. They invited all other women deacons in the U.S. to join in; only Diane Tickell, a deacon in the Diocese of Alaska, accepted.

While he supported women’s ordination in principle, the Rt. Rev. William Creighton, Bishop of Washington, was opposed to “irregular” ordinations. He instructed Washington clergy and lay people to not be at the ordination. However, over 1,000 people attended.

Shortly after the 1975 ordination, the House of Bishops banned Bishop Barrett from acting as a minister for a period of time.

“I took the greatest of courage,” said the Rev. Lee McGee. “He stood in very small company at that time and endured censure for years.”