

Yet We Persist

A Historical Reflection on Episcopal Church Women

by Katerina Katsarka Whitley

Yet We Persist!

The author wishes to acknowledge the members of the ECW National Board that served with Kay Meyer's leadership for their encouragement, input, and first performance of this historic play. Many events and votes during this long history are omitted because of space and time restrictions; if you wish to read the history of ECW, please ask for a copy. The history was made possible by the hard work of ECW national presidents who did the research in the church's archives. Without their work this play could not have been written. I thank them and honor them.

— *Katerina K Whitley*

Author's note: *At the end of the play, please invite those in the audience who were present or even active at the meetings that resulted in the votes singled out within the play to stand up. Give them a chance to express what they feel if you have the time and the inclination.*

All the women actors process on stage. They are dressed with clothes of various ages—from the 1860s to the first decade of the 20th century, to the '60s and up to today's styles. You may achieve this very simply by layering your clothes and by putting on or removing hats, shawls, beads, etc.

{Music plays as women take their places. "Christ for the World we Sing"

#537}

ACT I

Voice 1: We are called old-fashioned;

Voice 2: We are called passé;

Voice 3: We are thought of as irrelevant;

Together: Yet, we persist. Why?

Narrator I: Our history declares that we cannot be ignored, that we have relevance, and that the church could not have functioned without us.

Voice 1: Look at Mission in the past two centuries: Without us, who would have cared for the needs of missionary families?

Voice 2: Who would have raised the money?

Voice 4: Without us, who would have worried about young girls and about children working in factories?

Voice 2: Who would have raised the money?

Voice 5: Without us, who would have taken action against the sickness of alcohol and its damage to families?

Voice 2: Who would have raised the money?

Voice 4: Who would have worked to claim the vote for women?

Voice 6: Who would have seen to it that all women were informed of the actions of their beloved church?

Voice 7: Who would have nurtured the children?

Voice 9: Who would have seen to the sick?

Voice 8: Who would have offered hospitality?

Narrator: Let's look at some scenes from our history. We need to remember!

{Music as Emery women take their places. "Come, labor on" #541}

On stage, one woman moves to a writing desk and starts writing. Family members gather around her as if in a living room. {Fade music}

Mary Emery (*writing and reading aloud*): "Therefore, sisters, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us. . ."

Narrator: The year is 1872. We listen in as a remarkable family of Episcopalians gather in the parlor of their home in Boston. The father is absent at sea, as is often the case with him, since he is a captain. Inside Captain Emery's parlor sit his five daughters with their mother, a woman who keeps her home open to servants of the Gospel. Mary Emery, the eldest daughter, is at her desk.

Julia Chester Emery: Dear sister Mary, you have been writing for hours. What is so urgent?

Mary: I am attempting to encourage the women of the church to join their local society for the furtherance of mission, Julia. Listen and please comment: *(She reads from her paper.)* “We long to have each one feel she, individually, has something to do for Christ and for the coming of His Kingdom, not alone or as a member of a single parish but as one of that great company wherein, in their own special station, wait and watch and labor for their Lord.” I add later that, “We offer you gifts of time, strength, intellect for our, *your* Master.” *(She looks at them.)*

Susan Lavinia Emery: Ah, of course, how lovely. I especially like that reference to our intellect. *(She glances at her mother.)* Yes, Mother, I know I am not showing proper humility. *(They laugh.)*

Margaret Theresa Emery: Mary, dear, there is so much you are doing, but we certainly are not going to sit idly by. We will help you. Please tell us, how did all this start? Tell us some of the women’s story, so that we may discover our own roles also.

Helen Winthrop Emery: Yes, Mary. Tell us a story as you used to do when we were little.

Mary: I have been reading old vestry and diocesan records, so I am able to give you a quick summary of crucial events in the life of our beloved church set in a world that is groaning in travail as St. Paul repeatedly reminded us. Certainly, we in these United States are still filled with memories of the civil war’s tribulations, but further back, the year of our Lord, 1821, was crucial for many other countries: Greece declared her independence after four centuries of Ottoman rule, so Christian mission was able to begin there shortly thereafter; we have records of the first missionary in that poor country, and she was a *woman*! Isn’t that right, Mother?

Mother: Yes, even closer to us, Mexico and Peru, the Dominican Republic and Panama, declared their independence from Spain, and the rest of the Central American countries followed this liberation example in quick succession. It is fitting that our own Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society was constituted in that same year of worldwide independence movements; *(emphatically)* this was a rather strong break from the old world and its history, a kind of *Declaration of Independence* for our Episcopal Church.

Julia: Was that the year *The Spirit of Mission* began its publication?

Mother: No, it was later, in 1836. What is very important for us women is that auxiliary groups began to organize immediately after 1821. Of the eleven auxiliaries, *eight* were women's groups; do you not find this remarkable?

Margaret: It is indeed remarkable, Mother. What were some of them?

Mother: I do remember the Troy Society for the Advancement of Female Education in Greece, the Seabury Society in New Haven, and the Female Protestant Episcopal Prayer Book Society.

Julia: But who funded all these societies and their mission? Women never seem to control the money!

Mother: Yes, Julia, but we women apparently have the gift of *raising* the money. I remember always the words of St. Paul concerning Phoebe, the first deacon: "She has been a benefactor to many, and of myself as well." It is obvious that women's support of mission started as early as the first century in the life of the church! Thus, it seemed fitting when four years ago New York parishes established the Ladies' Domestic Missionary Relief Association; since then we have aided with funds, household goods, clothing, and medical supplies.

Mary: This is why last year, at the 30th General Convention, the Board of Mission organized a Women's Society. . .

Helen (*interrupting proudly*) which led to the hiring of our own Mary Abbot Emery to be the Corresponding Secretary. (*They all applaud and Mary bows.*)

Mary: And now, my dear ones, I must write to every rector asking for a correspondent from each parish! I hope my wrist holds out.

Narrator: The sisters continued their work with diligence and faithfulness. Mary Abbott worked as secretary to the Women's Society until her marriage in 1876.

Mary: (*writing*) I urge every woman to put aside a penny a week. With this small contribution we women can raise \$100,000 a year!

Helen: (*facing the audience*) Mary continued to raise funds even after her marriage to the Reverend A. T. Twing whose position opened for our sister the salons of prosperous and pious New York Episcopal Churchwomen.

Susan: They heard about the needs of women and of missionaries from our truly remarkable Emery sister and responded in kind.

Julia: Meanwhile, I continued Mary’s work of writing letters as well as reporting regularly by writing the Woman’s Work column for the *Spirit of Missions*, our periodical.

Susan: My sister, Julia, remained and worked in that capacity for 40 years. We, her sisters, were also involved in various forms of writing and in service. I, Susan Lavinia, edited *The Young Christian Soldier*. My sister Margaret Theresa helped with the writing and editing of the periodical, but also devoted herself to organizing the Box Work—for nearly five decades.

Narrator: The first gathering of the General Annual Meeting of the Woman’s Auxiliary occurred in 1872, at the same time as the General Convention assembled in New York City. Sixty-six women from five states attended.

Margaret: By 1875 we had sent 331 boxes valued at \$44,393.04 to missionaries. I, Margaret Emery, coordinated this Box Work, having asked individual parishes to forge a relationship with a missionary family. We knew the sizes of their clothes, their need for books, medical supplies, and even furnishings, and all these constituted our successful Box Work.

{*Music reprise: “Come labor on.” #541*}

Narrator: The meetings of the women—which later came to be called Triennial—continued, and in 1880 they were invited to “suitable seats as observers” at the General Convention.

Together: Suitable seats? What does that mean?

Voice 2: Observers? They were not observers where they lived! They were *participants!*

Narrator: Ninety years would pass before they became participants at the General Convention. Meanwhile, the women did not spend their time idly. Let us hear from Ida Soule.

Ida Soule (enters): At the 1886 Triennial Meeting the special offering came to \$82.71. Why so small an amount when there were 500 women present? I thought the reason was that they did not know *how* and *where* the money would be used. Could we designate a worthy recipient? Julia Emery suggested that I write a letter to the women urging an auxiliary offering, our Thanksgiving offering. She published the call in *The Spirit of Mission*. By 1892 this United Offering had risen to the sum of \$20,911.76.

Narrator: The century ended with significant accomplishments by the women who insisted that a loving, feminine touch was not enough to bring about the kingdom; women, as well as men, needed to be educated and trained for mission. Women deaconesses were recognized officially through the untiring efforts of leaders like Mary Emery Twing; deaconess training schools opened in New York and Philadelphia and Chicago. The women asked that they no longer be categorized as “auxiliaries.” They needed representation on the Board of Missions.

Together: Their request was denied.

Voice 4: Instead of giving in to bitterness they started the Woman’s Auxiliary Episcopate Trust Fund.

Voice 5: Before the century ended the women had created the Church Periodical Club and the Girl’s Friendly Society.

Voice 1: The years after the Civil War proved to be full of creativity, a kind of yeast that continued to rise and rise to the glory of God and the furtherance of Christ’s mission on this earth.

Together: Do they sound like *observers*?

{The musical interlude here should denote the change of centuries; something light like “A Bicycle built for two”? We need some levity.}

Narrator: The 10th Triennial Meeting opened with the 20th century in 1901. The women of the church were filled with energy, crowned by accomplishments for the mission of the church. Mary Abbott Emery Twing died during this Triennial, after completing her book with the unintentionally humorous title. . .

Together: *The Prehistoric Days of the Women’s Auxiliary.*

Helen: Celebrating her life, the women of the church raised funds for a girls’ dormitory at St. Mary’s School in Shanghai.

Julia Emery: During the first decade of the 20th century, the United Offering approached a quarter million dollars in thankful offerings and I, Julia Emery, had the privilege of attending the Pan Anglican Congress in London. Afterward I toured the world to visit our missionaries. I wanted them to know of the work of the Woman’s Auxiliary on their behalf. The following year I attended the Edinburgh World Interdenominational Missionary Conference. Our work with other Christian groups had begun.

Narrator: Julia and her coworkers persist, though the question, uttered by Julia Emery, resounds: “Could the Woman’s Auxiliary be asked to do more than raise money? Shouldn’t they also help with new developments of the Board of Mission?”

Together: The question is met with silence.

Narrator: The 45th anniversary of the Woman’s Auxiliary coincides with the 15th Triennial meeting in 1916. The women present are younger, better educated, trained. Still they gifts are ignored by the church at large. Julia Emery in her report to the Board of Missions declares:

Julia: The Woman’s Auxiliary has been given tasks entirely incommensurate with its strength, and thus, I resign.

(A musical break from WWI)

Narrator: A terrible, cruel war intervenes. In 1920, women in America vote for the first time. The United Offering becomes the United *Thank* Offering and approaches the half a million dollars in contributions.

{A short musical break here: a song from the suffragettes?}

Voice 1: We worked hard during that terrible war to end all wars.

Voice 2: And in the church, we believed that the time had come for the men to acknowledge our work and to declare us equal in all but Holy Orders.

Voice 3: We asked for full rights, responsibilities, and privileges.

Voice 4: We elected eight women to the Board of Missions.

Voice 5: The General Convention rejected the election of the potential board members with the comment:

Together: “It is improper for women to enter the political arena.”

Narrator: The years pass rapidly with some advances and many setbacks in the role of women in the church. Another war devastates the world in the 1940s but women continue to work and to serve.

Voice 3: At the General Convention of 1946 I was elected a deputy by my diocese of Missouri. My name is Elizabeth Dyer. The House of Deputies voted to allow me to be seated without voice and vote. I refused.

Voice 7: The year is 1949. Allow me to present Mrs. Edmund Cowdry from Missouri, Mrs. Elizabeth Davis Pittman from Nebraska, and Miss Ruth Nekins of Olympia—all elected by their dioceses as deputies. General Convention offered them seats without voice or vote.

The three Together: We refused.

Voice 4: It was the custom in those days to include commentary in the form of a cartoon in *Triennial* daily. The burning issue was called, “Ladies Be seated,” and it had nothing to do with the manners of gentlemen.

Elizabeth Pittman: So that year, the *Triennial Daily* wrote bitterly:

Ruth Nekins: (quoting) “Sorry not to give you our *Triennial* cartoon comment on the *Ladies Be Seated* issue. This is a time when we should be neither seen nor heard.”

Mrs. Edmund Cawdry: The women who had kept the country running during the war years, were now relegated to a silent presence in the church.

Voice 1: The sixties arrive turbulent, uncertain. The old things are passing away, but the new are frightening to many people. Yet, women now are members of parish vestries, delegates to diocesan conventions, and Virginia Theological Seminary admits women for the Bachelor of Divinity degree.

Together: We are moving on!

{The song, “To everything there’s a season” ends this segment.}

ACT II

{The same song, “To everything, turn, turn, turn. . .” opens this segment.}

Narrator: In 1965 a courageous man, the Rt. Rev. John Elbridge Hines, became the new presiding bishop of the church. In that year, the house of bishops created “The Committee on the Proper Place of Women” in the church’s ministry. The General Division of Women’s Work was asked to cooperate with this study. Ignoring the irony implied in the words, “proper place of women,” representatives from the Church Periodical Club and Daughters of the King participate in the meetings together with the provincial presidents of Episcopal Churchwomen.

Voice 1: The 32nd Triennial Meeting in 1967 saw changes longed for over the course of nearly a century. Among the changes was the organization of Province IX.

A Spanish-speaking voice: La organización de Province IX fue parte de los cambios. Nosotras mujeres de América Latina, unidas por nuestra herencia indígena, la lengua española y nuestra fe. Ahora somos un grupo oficial miembro de la organización femenina de la iglesia episcopal. Continuaremos rezando y trabajando juntas.

(The same person or another must read the translation.)

We, women of Latin America, with our rich heritage of indigenous cultures, the Spanish language that unites us, and the faith that sustains us, had been a part of the Episcopal Church, but now we were officially members of a Province and included among the women of the Episcopal Church. From this time on, we would be worshipping and working together through all the years to come.

Voice 2: The turmoil in the United States over a war taking place in a southeast Asian country with the exotic name of Vietnam, and the struggle of our Black brothers and sisters for their civil rights, were reflected in the calls of Presiding Bishop Hines to the women of the church *to recognize the plight of the poor and the powerless.*

Voice 3: He said,

Voice 9: “The women of the church are related to the urban poor in their powerlessness and second-class status in the Church.”

Voice 3: He also said,

Voice 9: “I will rejoice when the wrong of denying to women the right of serving as deputies to General Convention is remedied by a constitutional change.”

Narrator: Working feverishly over the course of five days, the delegates of Triennial and UTO agreed to devote the United Thank Offering to the urban crisis fund. As a result of the vote,

Together: we stood up spontaneously to sing (*they stand and sing a cappella*)

**Praise God from whom all blessings flow
Praise Him all creatures here below;
Praise Him above ye heavenly hosts;
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.**

Voice 5: The Presiding Bishop thanked us, and I quote: “not for the money you have given but for your perception of the issues.”

Narrator: By a standing vote the women passed a unanimous resolution that General Convention approve the seating of women deputies.

Together: On Tuesday, September 19, 1967, at 10:32 in the morning we received word that this had passed.

{The Doxology this time is played; the players and audience join in.}

**Praise God from whom all blessings flow
Praise Him all creatures here below;
Praise Him above ye heavenly hosts;
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.**

Voice 4: One resolution of note that was also approved at that convention included a request for equal remuneration for men and women workers for work of equal value and elimination of all forms of racial discrimination. It sounds so simple now, so inevitable, but, oh, what agonies we suffered before these words were finally uttered.

Voice 1: In the next decade one success follows another amidst arguments, bitter disappointments, agonizing prayer, and countless meetings.

Narrator: Of special note are these decisions. 1968: Lambeth declares that women deaconesses (as they were then called) will from now on be regarded as in Holy Orders, and women could be licensed as lay readers.

Voice 8: October 30, 1971. Sixty women meet at Virginia Theological Seminary in Alexandria. We are to discuss the role of professional women, ordained and lay, in the Episcopal Church. We have among us women of college age up to the age of grandmothers affirming the role of women in the changing church.

Voice 3: Thus the Episcopal Women’s Caucus, Inc. was born. The refrain ran through the meeting: When will women be priests in this church? On that same day, the bishops at their meeting decide to put off solving “the women problem.”

Together: Still we persist.

Voice 2: The women draft this statement: “The Episcopal Women’s Caucus is an ad hoc group of lay women (and some men), seminarians, and ordained women whose purpose is to actualize the full participation of women in all levels of ministry in the Episcopal Church.”

Narrator: 1973: Another General Convention, another bitter disappointment. While so many groups are working feverishly “to actualize the full participation of women in all levels of ministry,”

Together: Lay women still persist in all levels of ministry and service in the parish.

Voice 10: It is at this convention that the ministry of ECW, dormant for a triennium, is reaffirmed as a vital organ of the church.

Narrator: July 29, 1974. It is the feast of Mary and Martha, two New Testament women who are the models for all of us in our multiple roles as women of vision and intellectual passions, as women who nurture and do all the tasks that are necessary for the survival of those who depend on us. And when the occasion demands it, we declare that we are women of courage.

Voice 11: The place is the Church of the Advocate in Philadelphia.

Together: Eleven of us are ordained to the priesthood.

Voice 12: The ordination is termed “irregular” only because the bishops who ordained us are not our diocesans.

Voice 13: We are prepared for the controversy, but we function as priests, unacknowledged by much of the church hierarchy.

Together: We are troublesome.

Voice 5: We are faithful.

Voice 4: We serve, but many are confused.

Together: Still we persist.

{Music starts, “Lift High the Cross.” #473}

Narrator: History marches with inevitability. Our world is changing rapidly. There seems to be no job, no profession left that is closed to women in our society. Why not the priesthood?

Voice 10: 1976. Minneapolis, Minnesota. The 35th Triennial Meeting.

Voice 8: A prayer tent is set up. We feel the Holy Spirit moving through us. This is our Pentecost.

Voice 12: The joint session is electrifying. Everyone who has wanted to speak on the issue of women's ordination has spoken.

Voice 10: After five minutes of silence, it is time for the vote. There are 2000 of us present, women and men, deputies to General Convention, bishops, Triennial Meeting delegates. The hush in the great hall is overwhelming in its power and reverence. The vote is cast. We breathe in, we breathe out.

Together: *(prayerfully)* ***Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.***

Voice 12: The ordination of women is no longer in limbo.

Together: The vote is YES!

{Music crescendo on "Lift High the Cross" #473}

ACT III

Narrator III: The years pass. Women fill the halls of our seminaries; gradually, after prayer and hurt and tears, some are called as rectors. The numbers increase. The church is blessed. Are we content?

Voice 12: Signs appear: *A woman's place is in the House of Bishops.*

Voice 9: This becomes not just a sign but a reality when on February 11, 1989, the Reverend Barbara Harris of the Diocese of Massachusetts, becomes the *Right* Reverend Barbara Harris, the first woman bishop in our church.

Voice 7: In the early 90s, as the 20th century is drawing to a close, two more women priests are ordained bishops. (*short pause*) A whole century has passed since the Emery sisters and other women struggled to become *participants* rather than *observers*. We are coming full circle.

Voice 1: In between, so many heroic women have struggled to help us reach this point. So many prayers have ascended, so many tears have been shed.

Together: **And so many hours upon hours spent in meetings, meetings, meetings.**

{*Musical interlude: "For all the saints" #287*}

Narrator: July, 2006. Columbus, Ohio.

Voice 12: The new millennium's decade is turbulent, with two wars, uncertainty in the international arena and disasters at home.

Voice 13: Women continue to raise their voices and, at times very quietly, to help the poor and needy.

Voice 10: In 2005 a terrible hurricane devastates New Orleans, a great American city. The following year, at the Triennial Meeting, the bishops of Louisiana and Mississippi make an unannounced visit to the women to speak of their project, Darkness to Day, intended to raise money for the rebuilding of destroyed parishes and rectories. Immediately, our Triennial chaplain places a bowl front and center and puts a \$10 bill inside, perhaps hoping that through the day some money will be raised.

Voice 11: Yet, there was no wait. Without discussion, the hundreds of women present made their way to the offering bowl to add their own gifts, in a spontaneous procession of solidarity with our sisters and brothers in the devastated area.

Voice 5: In the course of 10 minutes, the offering reached a total of \$10,000.

Voice 10: When the bishops were offered the check, they were deeply moved.

Voice 3: And the wonder of that Triennial and General Convention continued.

Voice 12: The list of those eligible for the election of presiding bishop includes a woman of superior accomplishments, easily acknowledged by the world at large. She has been bishop of Nevada only a short while, having come to the priesthood after achieving excellence in the realm of science.

Narrator: A hush falls on all who roam the Halls of General Convention and Triennial. As the bishops are voting behind the closed doors of Trinity Episcopal Church, the thousands of Episcopalians who wait are filled with anticipation. The day before we women had celebrated the 30th anniversary of the ordination of women; with gratitude we unfolded a paper chain of the names of ordained women, a chain that encircled our large meeting room. What will today bring?

The vote is cast. The announcement reaches the House of Deputies; it is proclaimed and, within seconds, it runs like a current through all the thousands waiting in the halls of Convention. A cry of joy rises like a prayer: Katharine Jefferts Schori has been elected Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church.

{Music: "Alleluia, Alleluia, The Strife is Over" #208}

EPILOGUE

Together: Is this the end?

Voice 1: Have we lost our energy, our purpose?

Voice 2: Are parish ECW groups no longer relevant now that women can serve as priests and bishops and even as presiding bishop?

Voice 3: What else needs to be done?

Voice 4: What are the needs of our parishes?

Voice 5: What are the needs of our dioceses?

Voice 6: What are the needs of our church?

Voice 7: We don't sit back expecting our ordained women (and men) to answer these questions.

Voice 8: We, women of the laity, are ready to respond:

Voice 9: We, young mothers and grandmothers;

Voice 10: professors and activists in the community;

Voice 11: artists and business women;

Voice 12: retired women and working women;

Voice 1: and so many, many more--

Voice 13: we are present in the world. In response to the Christ who called us,

Voice 12: you can find us feeding the hungry--

Voice 7: giving water to the thirsty--

Voice 9: visiting those who are in prison--

Voice 7: building a Jericho house in New Orleans--

Voice 1: offering companionship to the lonely—

Voice 3: ministering to the least of these, as Christ commanded us--

Voice 2: Our work, our mission never ends.

Voice 10: How then can women of the church be considered irrelevant? How can ECW ever end its mission?

Narrator: Dear friends, dear women of the church, if you have recognized yourself in any of these ministries, you are indeed one of us, *Episcopal Church Women*.

Together: And the answer to all these questions is up to you, up to each one of us! Yes. Together, we persist.

{Music: choose a song that all the women know well so they can join the presenters.}

The End