

Our friend and fellow St. Stephenite the Rev. Eleanor Lee McGee Street, 78, died in her sleep last Sunday night at her home in Hamden, CT. Lee, as she was known everywhere, was one of the “Washington Four,” four women irregularly ordained to the priesthood at St. Stephen’s in 1975.

Lee and her then-husband the Rev. Kyle McGee first came to St. Stephen’s in the late 1960s when Kyle joined the church staff as an assistant priest. Both McGees were graduates of Berkeley Divinity School at Yale and Lee had a strong sense of vocation to the priesthood, but that calling was not then open to Episcopal women. I write this note to the congregation about Lee partly as a testimony to more than 50 years of friendship between us that began with their arrival. It’s painful for me to remember that when I first heard of the idea that women might become priests, I was shocked and opposed, convinced that God had no such plan for his church. On the other hand, I remember with delight the day Lee said to me in response to some pompous observation I had made on the matter:

“Bill MacKaye, look me straight in the eye and tell me I don’t have a vocation to the priesthood.”

I looked her straight in the eye. I couldn’t. I saw a future priest face to face, and the idea of women priests never troubled me again. The women aspirants knew their call was true. Most of those opposed came to know it also as soon as they saw women priests at the altar if not before.

In those days St. Stephen’s was already committed to racial integration and interracial understanding and the McGees as an interracial couple (Kyle was African-American) furthered that. Passionate opposition to the widening Vietnam War was building in the congregation. The congregation was a center for the reform and modernization of Episcopal liturgy, contributing to what became the 1979 Book of Common Prayer. Now the congregation became a headquarters of the campaign for the opening of the ordained ministry to women.

This is not the place to set down the whole history of the campaign. It’s enough to recall here that in 1974 three retired bishops ordained 11 women to the priesthood in Philadelphia defiance of normal church procedure, and in 1975 retired Bishop George Barrett similarly ordained four more, including Lee, at St. Stephen’s. At that point national Episcopal leaders concluded that the movement was unstoppable. In 1976, the church’s General Convention voted full eligibility of women to all orders of ministry.

As a priest Lee pioneered as well in a second area of church life. Fortified by a master’s in social work she acquired at Catholic University after settling in Washington, she observed and built upon a culture she saw emerging at St. Stephen’s of a congregation seeking to put pastoral care in the hands of all, not simply the clergy. She developed her system further in ministry in Hartford and New Haven after the McGees returned to Connecticut. Their marriage ended there, but Lee began to teach homiletics at Yale Divinity School and subsequently became the Roger L. Squire Professor of Pastoral Counseling. Teaching gave her opportunity to instill her vision of the pastoral congregation in future clergy and to author *Wrestling with the Patriarchs: Retrieving Women’s Voices in Preaching*.

Lee said to me on one occasion that she believed the presence of women in the priesthood would change the church’s understanding of what priesthood was all about. From my experience, I think she was right.

Lee’s sight began to fail in the 1980s owing to a genetic eye disease and in 1997, almost totally blind, she retired on disability. In retirement she spent several years living on a Colorado ranch owned by her second husband, the Rev. C. Parke Street, by then also retired. There she

was able to return to her adolescent love of riding horses. As the years went on, though, the Streets' ability to maintain ranch life declined and they returned to Connecticut. There Lee got about with the assistance of a guide dog but became increasingly crippled by arthritis in her spine. She also was treated for breast cancer. Despite her physical limitations, however, she served as a priest associate of Christ Church, New Haven, and spiritual director St. Hilda's House, a year-long residential service internship program conducted at Christ Church.

Her last visit to St. Stephen's was in 2015 when the three surviving members of the Washington Four participated in a celebration of the 40th anniversary of their ordination. The preacher at the celebration was the Right Rev. Barbara Harris, retired bishop suffragan of Massachusetts, the first woman bishop in the Anglican Communion.

Parke Street and Kyle McGee died last year within a few weeks of each other. Max, Lee's beloved second guide dog, who retired from guide service several years ago, died last week. Lee is survived by her sons Kyle McGee, Jr., New York, and Matthew McGee, Branford, CT, and two grandchildren.

May Lee rest in peace and rise in glory.