

A midlife calling: George Sheats' 8-year journey leads to the priesthood and an Auburn church

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By Tony Blasi

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George Sheats displays the communion paddle he made in order to offer communion in a more distant manner. St Michael's Episcopal Church in Auburn is planning outdoor services during COVID-19 and Sheats plans to use his paddle in drive-by communion offerings. *Andree Kehn/Sun Journal* [Buy this Photo](#)

A simple conversation almost 20 years ago led George Sheats to retire early from a well-paying career to pursue the priesthood. Now after almost a decade of training, he is coming full circle and will lead the Auburn church he was attending when his journey began, inspired by his devotion to his Episcopal faith.

"I have been on this journey my whole life," Sheats, 62, said. "I grew up in the church. I began as an acolyte (a person who assists a celebrant in a religious service) when I was 8 in my home church in Memphis."

Sheats' began his unusual journey to the priesthood in 2012, and weeks ago was named the priest in charge at St. Michael's Episcopal Church in Auburn.

"We are a very deliberate church, which I think is a good way to put it," he explained. "When we talk to people who have calls to be ministers, deacons or priests, we really want to see that it is a really deep (feeling) and it is just part of their soul."

While Sheats acknowledged a lifelong connection to the church, it was a quiet one earlier in his life. Sheats met his wife, former state Rep. Bettyann Sheats, when they were both maintenance test pilots for the U.S. Army. They left the service to raise their family, and George went into business for himself before moving to Maine to work for Poland Spring Water Co. and eventually its owner, Nestle Waters North America, where he worked in procurement beginning in 1994.

"We weren't ones to talk about our faith outside very much," he said. "We were brought up that you live the faith. You practice the gospel and sometimes you use words."

Sheats was conducting an exit interview with an employee, who was moving on to spend more time with his family and church. Sheats told the departing employee that he also made efforts to make time for those precious commitments.

"The guy looked at me kind of odd and said, 'You go to church?'" Sheats recalled. "'Yeah, have I ever done anything that would make you think otherwise?'" Sheats said. "The employee responded, 'No, but you never said anything that would make me think that either.'"

"And that hit me like a ton of bricks," Sheats said. "This was 20 years ago, probably a little more than that. That really set me thinking. Here was someone of faith who didn't recognize that because I never said anything."

Sheats took the decades-old conversation to heart and became more active in his church.

"I started at St. Michael's here in Auburn and decided I should devote more time there, and do more things and say more things," he said.



George Sheats stands in the open doorway of St Michael's Episcopal Church in Auburn on Saturday. Sheats is performing services virtually for now, with plans to start outdoor services when the temperatures warm up a bit. *Andree Kehn/Sun Journal* [Buy this Photo](#)

Eventually, he was elected to the church's vestry (governing body), and then became a warden.

"Wardens are kind of like the elders of the parish," he said. "They are the lay people that guide the parish. When I was finally leaving that role and brought the new wardens on, someone asked me, 'What are you going to do next?'"

"Well, because of the work that I did as a warden, I really felt I did have a call to lead a parish. I was considering what we call a discernment. In our church, the discernment is really that process of exploring what your call is to do, what are your gifts. You do this in a group setting."

He said that process takes a year to complete. "At the end of this, my little group said: 'I hear you being called as a priest.' I did, too," he said.

After the discernment, he sat with another group that provided him with a clear understanding of a priest's responsibilities.

“Many of us are called to serve God in so many ways,” he said. “Each one has requirements ... to really commit yourself to that. The next step is presenting that to the church.”

The process continued with more members of the church sitting with him and exploring his calling. When members agree that a person’s calling is genuine, they urge the candidate to go forward.

At first, Sheats had no problem studying for the priesthood while holding a full-time job and seeing his family. Then, the process became more challenging.

“One of the requirements in our church to be a priest is that you need to attend the seminary and attain a master of divinity or a master of theology,” he said. “That was when things got tough for someone who was working full time.

He attended the Episcopal Divinity School through remote learning. His employer, Nestle, supported his endeavor. He used all of his vacation time for his studies at the seminary, from which he graduated with a master’s degree in June 2017.

“My church also requires that I go through a year of what they call clinical pastoral experience, which is working in a health care environment,” he said. “What I felt was that I was not able to do that and continue working. I chose to retire and then I went to work eight months as a chaplain to complete the requirement.”

To complete his training, Sheats interned at a parish with a priest at Trinity Episcopal Church in Lewiston and St. Mark’s Episcopal Church in Waterville for a couple of years.

Sheats said he feels he ultimately handled the studying, the travel and even the time away from family pretty well, but acknowledged the toughest part was not having family vacation for those years.

“It wasn’t easy,” he said about being away from family. “It took a conscious effort to make sure that we all stayed connected. I don’t think you can enter this without first a degree of uncertainty, with some nagging doubt. You go through that period: ‘Can I really do this?’”

He added, “You get through it.”

Sheats said all that is left officially in the process is “setting the date for my ordination.” Hoping to be assigned to a church somewhere in the area after his training was complete, he was surprised to be told he would be overseeing his home church, St. Michael’s.

“I have my own church now,” he said with pride last week. “I started Sunday as a priest in charge at St. Michael’s in Auburn. I am a clergy in charge there. So it was my first day.

“I am starting this at a very interesting and trying time,” Sheats said. “So much about what we think about doing, we really can’t. My No. 1 goal for next year for my parish is to just keep people connected and in a space where we can worship, which we are doing virtually, and

finding ways where we can stay in contact.”

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