

The Rev. Canon Gene Robinson

Describe three contemporary saints who have influenced your ministry.

Saints are not perfect, of course, but are real human beings through whom, like the saints in stained glass windows, let the light of Christ shine through.

First, **Carl Schaller**, a faithful priest of this diocese, now retired, who for over 30 years served two small, North Country congregations with the graciousness of Christ himself. Carl is a constant reminder to me that one's ministry does not have to be glitzy or impressive in the eyes of the world to be powerful and meaningful to those served. Carl is a priest who understands what it means to be in love with his people. Though Carl spent most of his ministry "north of the notches," he has never been out of touch with the world. True to his ordination vows, he has taken his rightful role in the councils of the Church—both in the diocese and nationally—while never forgetting that real ministry happens at the local level. The joy he takes in God's natural creation is matched only by his passion to protect and preserve it. To be grabbed in one of his warm and welcoming bear hugs is to feel like the prodigal son welcomed home by a loving father. He is indeed a model, a saint, for me, from whom I have learned much of what it means to be a faithful priest.

Second, **Barbara Harris**, first woman elected bishop in Christendom. This physically-small-but-spiritually gigantic woman has been a personal inspiration to me, as well as a friend and colleague. As both an African-American and a woman, she has known a double measure of prejudice and hatred, both overt and subtle. She is passionate about justice; she knows and teaches that, in the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., justice delayed is justice denied. Yet somehow, she is able to balance her powerful prophetic voice with humor and joy. Despite the honor and burden put on her for being the first woman bishop, she has always understood that she could do more for women, not by being "the first female bishop," but by simply being a good bishop. In talking with her about my own call to the episcopate, she showed me some of the hate mail she received for being the woman who went first—a chilling reminder of the hatred and evil in the world and the price paid sometimes for following God's call. But in encouraging me to follow this calling, she reminded me that "The power behind us is greater than the task ahead of us"—words she has shown to be true and by which I try to live my life.

Third, **Mister Rogers**. I know. He's not real. (Neither are several of the traditional saints we love and celebrate!) But he is very like the real-life, ordained

Presbyterian minister Fred Rogers, who created and for many years played him on the famous TV show for children. This TV saint, in his cardigan sweater and blue tennis shoes, was not afraid of looking like a nerd or playing in a sandbox ("unless you become like a child, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven"). Everything he said and did was an expression of the baptismal promise to "respect the dignity of every human person." For those not yet "too cool" to watch, Mister Rogers went about his neighborhood, rejoicing in its diverse races, ages, cultures and personalities, affirming each person and their unique gifts (including the four- and five-year-olds who were watching), asking the ultimate Good Samaritan question: "Won't you be my neighbor?" Not a bad role model for a bishop!

What risk have you taken for the Gospel?

Jesus Christ is no easy savior. While loving us unconditionally, He is always calling us into unknown territory, asking that we merely trust and journey with Him—as Abraham and Sarah did, venturing into an unknown land. As a 12 year old in a poor, rural congregation of the Disciples of Christ, I accepted Jesus Christ as my personal Lord and Savior. Little did I know where that would lead: becoming an Episcopalian in college, saying "yes" to Christ's call to ordained ministry, and my first call to a parish in Ridgewood, New Jersey.

Following Jesus Christ is never easy for long. Although I LOVED parish ministry, in 1975 God seemed to be asking my wife and me to leave that ministry and found a retreat center and summer youth camp, in southern New Hampshire, a foolish and risky idea in the eyes of many, but a clear calling for us. That ministry touched the lives and spirits of young and old alike for some 20 years.

Ultimately, of course, Jesus Christ challenges us to take Him at His word, to accept the extravagance of His accepting love, to be the Child of God we were created to be, no matter the cost—in order to better serve Him. I answered God's call to acknowledge myself as a gay man. My wife and I, in order to KEEP our wedding vow to "honor [each other] in the Name of God," made the decision to let each other go. We returned to church, where our marriage had begun, and in the context of the eucharist, released each other from our wedding vows, asked each other's forgiveness, cried a lot, pledged ourselves to the joint raising of our children, and shared the Body and Blood of Christ.

Risking the loss of my children and the exercise of my ordained ministry in the Church was the biggest risk I've ever taken, but it left me with two unshakable things: my integrity and my God. I learned that there is no way to Easter except

through Good Friday. The Living Christ walked with me on that journey: telling the truth about my life and daring me to be the person God created me to be—for God's service. It won the hearts of my daughters, whom I feared losing, and, later, the love of a wonderful partner, with whom I've made a home for the past 13 years. Now, God seems to be calling me to another journey. If the people of the Diocese of New Hampshire call me as well to the ministry of the episcopate, I will embrace it with joy and excitement, knowing that the God who has called me before, will once again sustain and guide me.

How have you been called as a leader and a Christian to respond to the events of September 11th? How have you led your faith community to be a witness in the post-September 11th world?

On the morning of September 11th, I flew into New York City. On my way into the City, I could see the flames inside the gaping hole in one of the World Trade Center towers and witnessed with my own two eyes the horror of a plane flying into the other tower. The "response" asked for in this question began, for me, immediately and in a very hands-on way—receiving and comforting those who were fleeing the carnage northward into midtown Manhattan, in the midst of my own shock and loneliness, being cut off from those I love and unable to get out of the City. Once again I learned that we are never abandoned by God, even in the midst of unspeakable tragedy and evil.

Part of my ministry, and part of my own healing from that event, has been in sharing my own personal experience of it—it the smell, the chaos, the noise, the silence of it, and to reflect theologically on all the issues raised by it. Because of my diocesan position, my ministry took on a particular focus, working especially to reach out to New Hampshire's Islamic community, to offer the diocese's support in this difficult and dangerous time. I will never forget the courage displayed by Muslim men and women who came to the service at St. Paul's Church in Concord, to witness to their own condemnation and horror at this evil done in the name of Allah. The building up of such interfaith relationships is one of the great rewards coming out of this tragedy.

Very soon, in addition to the pastoral care needed after September 11th, I began to see the prophetic task presented to the Church. Could the Church speak out prayerfully and carefully, asking tough questions about our nation's response to this tragedy, without being disloyal to our great nation or insensitive to our leaders who are charged with our safety? Does scripture have anything to say about what our response should be? Does our faith offer any critique of notions such as

"regime change" and unilateral action taken against another nation? America finds herself not only "the biggest kid on the block," but the ONLY big kid on the block and "those to whom much is given, much will be required." The Church at its best has always remembered that while it is IN the world, it must not be OF the world. "My ways are not your ways, says the Lord." The tragedy of September 11th calls us as Christians to both a pastoral AND a prophetic ministry to our nation.

Identify the top three issues or trends in the life of the Episcopal Church today and how you envision us as a diocese under your leadership relative to these issues and trends.

Can we live together while we fight? It should not surprise us that there is conflict in the church. Peter and Paul fought like cats and dogs in the early Church, so why should we be any different? Ironically, they fought over the same thing we fight over today: who should be included in the Church and who should be excluded from it. Whether we focus on race, gender, sexual orientation, abortion or stem cell research, we seem hell bent on proclaiming some people "in" and other people "out" (ourselves NEVER being in the latter group).

Because we live in a complex world, and because we don't ask our members to check their minds at the door, faithful Episcopalians will continue to disagree on whether abortion is a moral choice, whether dioceses should be forced to open their ordination processes to women, or whether faithful gay and lesbian relationships should be celebrated and not just tolerated. The particular answer to any of these questions is less important to me than how we as a Church deliberate about them. Are we prayerful about them, listening for God's voice instead of our own egos? Do we truly value the people who hold an opposing view, while disagreeing with their position? And most of all, can we continue to come to the communion rail, humbly receive the Body and Blood of Christ, respecting the dignity of those who disagree with us. I believe we can. And must.

Will our faith have children? A popular book on faith development by John Westerhoff is entitled *Will Our Children Have Faith?* But a more pressing issue for the Episcopal Church in this diocese and nation is whether or not our community of faith will have anything to offer our children, youth and young adults. Is it not alarming that 2/3 of those who answered the Bishop's Search questionnaire were over 55 years old? Is it not frightening that so many of our children and grandchildren know so little of the scripture and identify so weakly (if at all) with the Church?

Most of what I have learned about being a Christian I've learned from young people. Youth ministry is what I cut my teeth on. It pleases me to no end that I am known in one of our congregations as the "Canon Dude." If the Diocese of New Hampshire chooses to set children and youth as a priority for the diocese (not just lip service, but a commitment), as your Bishop I would put all my years of working with young people to work in the diocese. Visitations could be structured so that significant and meaningful contact could be made with all the young people of a parish, not just the confirmation class. The Bishop should accompany the diocese's young people to the national Episcopal Youth Event. The Bishop, with the assistance of parish leaders and clergy, should offer a day long conversation for those young people in high school or college who might like to talk about one day becoming ordained. In these and other ways, I would be willing to lead an effort to make sure that in the future, our faith will have children!

Are we a people in community, or is it "us" versus "them?" In New Hampshire and all over the Episcopal Church, not to mention America, we are raising questions about how we relate to one another. At the local level, parishes try to counter the "charity begins at home" philosophy when they ask parishioners to give generously to the work of the congregation. At the diocesan level, some people refer to "the diocese" as if it were made up of resident aliens rather than fellow Episcopalians. Connections are sometimes difficult to make between what we do here in New Hampshire and what is going on in the larger Church and world—and we become lazy about communicating those connections.

Like politics, all ministry is local. The diocese should exist—and be intentionally organized—to support ministry where it happens: in the local congregation. On the other hand, scripture warns that one part of the Body cannot say to another, "I don't need you." As your bishop, I would preach and teach about our responsibilities to one another—whether as Christians (working to lessen the gap felt between the diocese and our congregations), or as citizens (speaking out in public forums for the people of New Hampshire to share the responsibility for educating our children). There is no room for "them" and "us" in the Church, because in God's economy, there is NO "them." A bishop ought not only to preach that message, but with God's help, to embody it in his or her ministry.