

Pioneering deacon Phyllis Edwards

Obituary, July 21, 2009, Lynette Wilson

The Rev. Phyllis Edwards, one of the first women ordained a deacon in the Episcopal Church, died July 7, 2009 in Forks, Washington. She was 92.

Edwards was a civil rights activist who marched with the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and fought for the ordination of women in the Episcopal Church. She was ordained to the diaconate in 1965 by California Bishop James Pike. (General Convention didn't officially recognize women deacons until 1970.)

"That was the day when there were deacons and deaconesses, it was not like actor and actress," said the Rev. Elizabeth Kaeton, president of the Episcopal Women's Caucus and rector of the Episcopal Church of St. Paul in Chatham, New Jersey. "She became a full and equal partner in the ministry of Jesus and opened the door for other women to become full and equal partners."

"She told me one time that she wanted to be a priest since the time she was 13," said Dawn Edwards-Tibbett, Edwards's daughter, in a telephone interview, adding that Newark Bishop John S. Spong ordained Edwards to the priesthood on June 29, 1980.

A native of Chicago, Edwards earned bachelor's and master's degrees in education from Black Hills Teachers College in Spearfish, South Dakota, while teaching elementary school and raising four children. In 1962 she enrolled in Seabury-Western Seminary to become a deaconess. In 1964, after graduation, she was sent to work in the Mission District in San Francisco.

"She was fun, cantankerous, a good pastor and had a deep social conscience. We worked on improving liturgy, Christian Education and social justice," said the Rev. Robert Warren Cromey, in a letter to Dawn Edwards-Tibbett.

Cromey worked with Edwards at St. Aidan's Episcopal Church in San Francisco in 1969, he said in the letter.

Working in inner-city San Francisco led Edwards to participate in civil rights marches and acts of civil disobedience "up and down" the California coast, and in 1965 she joined King in Alabama on the march from Selma to Montgomery, Edwards-Tibbett said.

"It was during her experience in Selma that she saw the relationship between the oppression of blacks and of women, an insight which affected her ensuing ministry," said a 1980 Episcopal News Service story about her ordination to the priesthood.

(https://episcopalarchives.org/cgi-bin/ENS/ENSpress_release.pl?pr_number=80242&fbclid=IwAR2gDOQ4aJJBmjgsdrQbqSDIm04FEUZj62jmwMqghlwyxrU1PXpwf4qU2lY)

Edwards worked in Christian education, as a hospital chaplain and in campus ministry, among other positions, and later became an assistant at St. Paul's in Bremerton, Washington.

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Also:

AP Wirephoto, 1965

Woman "Reverend" Deaconess Phyllis Edwards will be the first Anglican woman to use the designation "reverend." Bishop James A. Pike of California says he will perform the ceremony recognizing Mrs. Edwards as a minister Monday in San Francisco's Grace Cathedral. The House of Bishops refused to authorize Pike's attempt to appoint Mrs. Edwards as a deacon, a position held only by men.