

## **Crossroads: Episode 26**

### **Celebrating Women at the Cathedral**

#### **The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens**

What do we find at the intersection of faith and the world? Our new podcast, Crossroads, explores this question in thought provoking conversations featuring guests from around the world who are seeking to live faithfully in the public square. This is a safe space to discuss politics, technology, and our responsibilities as citizens. Pull up a chair and meet us as we search for a better way forward.

Welcome to Crossroads, where we discuss the intersection of sacred and civic. I'm your host, Jo Nygard Owens. On today's episode, I'm joined by two of my Cathedral colleagues, Provost Jan Cope, who you all know from previous episodes. I'm also delighted to welcome Mimi McNamara, the Cathedral's Director for Creative Engagement. Mimi just celebrated her 30th anniversary of working for the Cathedral, and she is a font of knowledge about the art, architecture, and history of the Cathedral.

They're joining me today to talk about the role of women at the Cathedral, as we celebrate Women's History Month. Welcome, Jan.

#### **The Rev. Canon Jan Cope**

Good to be here, Jo.

#### **The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens**

It's always good to have you. And I'm so excited to introduce you all to Mimi McNamara. Welcome, Mimi.

#### **Mimi McNamara**

Thank you for having me. It's a real pleasure to be invited.

#### **The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens**

And tell us, where are you joining us from today, Mimi?

#### **Mimi McNamara**

Well, I'm up here helping my uncle out in Bar Harbor, Maine, which is a very different climate than Washington, D.C.

### **The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens**

I happen to be in D.C., and I am in Jan's office today. And I will say it is beautiful. I'm taking advantage of the weather here.

Today we are going to talk about Women's History Month and what that means. And the Cathedral is a beautiful example of the intersection of sacred and civic when it comes to how women are portrayed and the iconography and the role of women at the Cathedral. So, Mimi, I want to start by asking you a little bit about the iconography at the Cathedral.

We have such beautiful statues and stained glass windows. I'm thinking of the carvings on the Human Rights Porch and some of the windows that we have. Would you tell us a little bit about the carvings and windows at the Cathedral?

### **Mimi McNamara**

Well, the Cathedral's like a giant storybook. It tells numerous stories of our faith and our American history, and just the state of being human and humanity itself. But we have some very strong women depicted in the art of the Cathedral, including Harriet Tubman. She's stitched into needlepoint. We have about 180 needlepoint cushions that represent individuals whose lives really impacted American history and culture.

We have the stained glass window that, as the docents used to call it, the Formidable Hebrew Women, and it's the Women of the Hebrew Bible, the real title, and it features Deborah and Judith carrying the head of Holofernes in the basket, and Miriam dancing when her enemies were vanquished, as well as verse parts. And, you know, of course, Jesus and his mother and Mary Magdalene.

And I think we have a new carving coming soon, St. Phoebe, as well as Hildegard of Bingen, and numerous fantastic people that have lessons for us to emulate. As well as just great stories to tell.

### **The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens**

I love thinking about the Cathedral as a storybook. And when you go out to the Human Rights Porch and seeing Rosa Parks and Eleanor Roosevelt and...

### **The Rev. Canon Jan Cope**

Mother Teresa.

**The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens**

Mother Teresa, thank you, Jan. Yes. To see those women out there. And so often women have to search hard to find their place. And these women are portrayed very prominently in the Human Rights Porch, which everyone walks through. That's kind of the entryway.

**Mimi McNamara**

And then, as a little bit from my personal history, if you walk from the Human Rights Porch into the Cathedral's nave, you cross under a carving that's a Girl Scout Trefoil. And think of how many Girl Scouts have become women through scouting.

**The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens**

Yes. Oh, I didn't know that. I'm going to have to go look for that next time I'm walking through. Okay, here's a question, and maybe both of you have a perspective on this. So the Cathedral was built from the East end to the West. And as you walk from the East end to the West end, will you end up seeing more and more women portrayed as you get closer to the West?

**The Rev. Canon Jan Cope**

You wouldn't ask the question unless the answer were yes.

**The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens**

You got me, Jan.

**Mimi McNamara**

And the whole iconographic story is from creation to redemption, so that you add more women as you go along is sort of redeeming, right?

**The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens**

Oh that's beautiful, Mimi. Yes, I like that.

**Mimi McNamara**

On the North side, there are carvings of great humanitarians and modern saints, modern Christian saints, which include Helen Keller and Jane Addams. But you also start picking up more women artists along the way, which is great too. We have Brenda Belfield, who created the most stained glass windows at the Cathedral, but they're all the way to the West and in the tower stairwells, which a lot of people don't see unless they're on a behind-the-scenes tour. Listing some of these artists, you have Hildreth Miller in Resurrection Chapel, who was a great Art Deco artist.

And then one of the fun things I learned was that there used to be art competitions in the Olympics.

**The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens**

I didn't know that.

**Mimi McNamara**

And so a number of our artists, including men and women, had participated in the 1932 Summer Olympics in the arts categories.

**The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens**

I had no idea that there was art in the Olympics. And of course Cathedral artists were in the Olympics.

**Mimi McNamara**

So to Marion Breckenridge, who created a lovely statue of Joan of Arc, among other people, and Isabella Thornburg, and then Laura Garden Frazier was another one. And as well as her husband, James Earl Frazier, who's a little more well known. But Laura created the modern quarters for the women's quarters series. There's a portrait of George Washington, which when the George Washington quarters were originally created, there was a competition, and she won, but she wasn't selected. They instead selected the work of a man. So now her work is being seen on these women's quarters. Which is kind of fun.

**The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens**

That is. And I was also thinking, you touched on this, Mimi, I was here for the dedication of the George H.W. Bush kneeler a little over a year ago. And the artist who designed the needlework... we think of like, "Oh, it's needlework. It's just a nice women's craft." But no, these kneelers are artistry. And so it was amazing to see the artist in person and to hear her story, how she helped to create that kneeler, and to recognize it as a work of art, not just a simple craft.

**The Rev. Canon Jan Cope**

A little backstory on the artist. Her name is Catherine Kapikian, and she specializes in fiber art. She was, for many years before her retirement, a professor at Wesley Theological Seminary and overseeing the Luce Center for Arts and Religion, and brought in artists in residence during her tenure there.

**The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens**

Oh, thank you for that tidbit, Jan. And this is why we have the two of you, because you all know so much this depth of the Cathedral that so many don't know.

**The Rev. Canon Jan Cope**

There's another wonderful... Mimi, you may have been intending to speak about this, but it was only recently that I learned about the first female architect at the Cathedral, an African-American woman by the name of Martha Purcell Thompson. She and her sister were the first women and first African-American women to graduate with a degree in architecture from Cornell. And Martha worked for Frohman, Robb, and Little Architects, as the Chief Restoration Architect at the Cathedral, due to her extensive knowledge of Gothic architecture, and she worked at the Cathedral from 1959 until her death in 1968, and her work was instrumental as this Cathedral was coming into being.

**The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens**

Wow. We don't think about women holding such prominent positions during that period of time, and that's just incredible.

**The Rev. Canon Jan Cope**

And then bringing it forward, we now have our first female stonemason, Brianna Castelli, who was hired last year and has already been featured on PBS specials, etc. as a leader in her tender young years in the field.

**Mimi McNamara**

And I believe she's going to be highlighted in the Smithsonian Folklife Festival this summer as well.

**The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens**

She is, yes. We mentioned that a few episodes ago. And if you missed that episode, we'll have a link to it again. But it also has a link in those show notes to the Smithsonian Folklife Festival coming up this summer in July.

Alright, so thinking about the role of women in leadership at the Cathedral, thinking about how the Cathedral has helped to show women at the altar, in the pulpit...

Jan, can you talk to us a little bit about how the Cathedral has stepped up as the times have allowed?

### **The Rev. Canon Jan Cope**

Happy to. The Cathedral was the site of the first ordination of women priests in 1977, and three of the seven ordinations on that date in January were Carol Crumley, Pauli Murray, and Elizabeth Weisner, two of whom went on to actually serve at the Cathedral. Elizabeth Weisner was one of the first women to serve as volunteer clergy at the Cathedral, and as I said, she was ordained in '77 and was essentially one of our weekday pastoral counselors at that time.

These were the very first group of women who were ordained in the Episcopal Church. Carol Crumley went on to be a canon at the Cathedral, and she was the first woman priest hired full time. And that was in 1981, and she was Canon Pastor and Educator, and was instrumental in the founding of the Cathedral Center for Prayer and Pilgrimage, and she also directed the Cathedral Volunteer Service.

Community lay canon came on board somewhat later than that. Carter Echols, who was Canon Missioner at the Cathedral from 1997 to 2000. And then when you move into the episcopate, there was Bishop Jane Holmes Dixon, who was only the second woman bishop elected in the Episcopal Church and the third woman in the entire Anglican Communion when she was consecrated as bishop in 1992.

During the period after the then diocesan bishop, Ronald Haynes, retired, she served as bishop pro tempore from 2001 to 2002. And if we have time to, I'd love to tell just a personal story about Bishop Gibson. And it relates to 9/11. Do we have time?

### **The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens**

We have time. We always have time for you, Jan.

### **The Rev. Canon Jan Cope**

Okay, so 9/11... at the time, I was not at the Cathedral. I was not ordained. But Bishop Dixon knew me, knew I had served in the White House, and knew that I had a relationship with the Bush family. George W. Bush was president at that time, as everyone will remember. And about midday, my phone at home rang and it was Bishop Gibson, and she said, "Jan, where is the president right now?"

And if you all will remember, he was up in the air, and no one knew precisely where he was unless they were, you know, in security or they were on the plane with him. And I said, "Well, Bishop, I have no idea. Why are you asking?" And she said, "Because I want to get a message to him to offer the Cathedral for a prayer service for the nation." Following 9/11.

And she said, "Can you help me get through to him?" And I was like, "Sure, that's right in my hip pocket, no problem." But I did know, because of some of my background, that... this will take you back. I had a fax number that I knew would go into the operations center at the White House, and even though the White House staff had been evacuated, I knew someone in the Situation Room or someone would be monitoring the message.

And I said, "Just write them a message and send it to the following fax number." There was this long pause, and she said, "Well, Jan, I sent all of the diocesan staff home, and I don't know how to type." Oh, one of those confessions. And I said, "Bishop Dixon, just print neatly and they'll be able to read it."

And so off she went, she printed a note of invitation to please use the Cathedral and feel free to use the Cathedral. And I think we all remember that it was just three short days after 9/11 when the Cathedral hosted a service for the nation, and frankly, for the world, on September 14th, 2001. I was privileged to be there for that service, and I'll just never forget that day for so very many reasons.

But to hear this pregnant pause from my bishop because she didn't know how to type is something, you know, as the good southern girl that she was, was quite the confession.

### **The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens**

Mimi, do you remember that service? Were you here?

### **Mimi McNamara**

I was here, I worked outside that day. I was standing on South Road near the gap in the road that goes down to St. Albans School. And my job was to check off the State Department vehicles that were coming in, and to prevent other vehicles from coming. But a lot of people were walking up the hill because a lot of transportation was shut down in the city at that point in time, and it was of difficult to get around.

And we had a United flight crew that had walked from National Airport in their uniforms.

### **The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens**

And to our listeners at home, to take an Uber from National Airport into the Cathedral takes about 20 to 25 minutes. So that tells you how far they want.

### **The Rev. Canon Jan Cope**

And just to bring it a little forward, we were privileged at the Cathedral in 2006 to host the consecration and investiture of Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori as our Presiding Bishop. She was the very first woman Presiding Bishop, as well as the first woman to hold the role and lead one of the provinces of the worldwide Anglican Communion. So amongst all the archbishops in all the provinces across the Anglican Communion, she was one of a kind, and was for some time.

And then, of course, in 2011, we welcomed our current bishop, Mariann Edgar Budde, who was the first elected diocesan bishop, who's a woman in the Diocese of Washington.

### **The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens**

That is quite a legacy that the Cathedral has been a part of, that Jan and Mimi, you all have been here for. So I'm curious, Jan, as a woman in ministry here at the Cathedral, I know that you had a whole career before entering ministry. And so who were the women that you saw around you here in the DC area and farther out that had an impact on you as you were discerning your journey into ministry?

### **The Rev. Canon Jan Cope**

Well, certainly Bishop Dixon. Because I'd been really involved at my home church, St. John's Lafayette Square, I'd come to know the bishop in many different contexts. St. John's Lafayette Square is one of the most historical and prominent Episcopal churches, I would say, in our diocese. And we were also one of the first to hire a woman as one of the assistant rectors.

And at the time, it was quite the glass ceiling shatter when that happened. And by the time I was discerning ordination, it was not such an odd thing. There were so many people serving that it wasn't like I felt like I was walking out on a tightrope. I'm very cognizant of the fact that I stand on the shoulders of so many who have gone before, and so it didn't feel that earth shattering for me because there were so many models around.

### **Mimi McNamara**

I do know that it wasn't always easy for Bishop Dixon, that she wasn't always welcome in parishes, and that there were a lot of... because my time did overlap, and you would hear the stories and in the staff meetings about how something happened at the diocesan visits, etc.



**The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens**

Thank you for sharing that.

**Mimi McNamara**

It's hard to imagine, right?

**The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens**

But to be honest, I mean, it's still there, not to that degree, but there is still a stained glass ceiling. And women are not always afforded the same... just graces that men clergy are. And so we keep stepping out bravely and keep doing the work.

So whenever I'm online and monitoring the YouTube chat, or if I am greeting people at the West End after a service, it never fails - almost every Sunday, I hear a comment that says, "There are women here? I had no idea you allow women to be up there." And it makes me wonder... when visitors come here, some are expecting it to be a Catholic church. Maybe some don't even know. They just want to come here and experience the service. And they've never heard of women in leadership at a church.

And so I wonder what happens when they go home. How does this place and the women who serve here shake things up for people. I don't know, have you had any experiences with that, Jan?

**The Rev. Canon Jan Cope**

Most of them, frankly, just struck me up. I can't tell you how many times older women have come up to me after a service and tell me they're Roman Catholic, and they never imagined seeing a woman behind the altar, much less preaching, and they start to weep.

Just how much it has meant to them, and that it just gave them an experience they never imagined. It's incredibly humbling. You know, as I said before, I stand on the shoulders of so many people. And part of my daily prayer is for me not to screw it up.

**The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens**

I'm right there with you. You have not screwed it up. We can attest to that, Jan.

**The Rev. Canon Jan Cope**

Some might quibble with that too, but you're most gracious.

### **The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens**

Not at all. So we are so lucky here on the Close to have a number of schools around us, including the National Cathedral School, which is a girl's school.

And so I'm thinking about all of the ways that those young girls, if they start at Beauvoir in either pre-k or elementary school, all the way up through seniors in high school, I wonder how seeing women and even themselves being welcomed regularly into the space of the Cathedral... I wonder how that impacts them.

### **The Rev. Canon Jan Cope**

I think they consider it their Cathedral. The good news is that, again, it just seems like the norm. And isn't that a beautiful place to be? And you know, again, I've heard so many stories of people who came through the Cathedral on an eighth grade school trip, you know, it's the classic go to Washington for a week on spring break, who later come back and they're part of our 20's and 30's group.

Girls from NCS who just take it for granted because they get a very good education that promotes this, that, frankly, anything's possible. They don't have to dream about the day when there will be a female bishop. They're with our female bishop. They don't have to dream about the day when a woman could be on a clergy staff, or be the Chief of Staff at the Cathedral, because women are serving in those roles.

And so the bit of hope for me is that the generations coming after us see this is just a matter of course, that that's what they're surrounded by, and they don't have to dream big dreams because it's right in front of them.

### **The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens**

Or they can dream even bigger dreams because those dreams have already been realized. And that makes me think, Jan, you said that the girls at National Cathedral School take it as a given that they are welcomed here. They are welcomed in leadership. They can step up and do whatever they dream of. But that's not the case around the world.

We talk with people every Sunday, joining us from truly every continent in the world, sometimes even Antarctica, who may not have that example where they are. And so the Cathedral can be a beacon of hope across the globe, truly worldwide, and show what is possible. And who knows what dreams we might inspire that way.

**The Rev. Canon Jan Cope**

I think one of the things that we often overlook is that women were some of the earliest fundraisers, and that's been a thread that's continued to the present, as well as some of the greatest philanthropists, even in our most recent campaign. The top donors, if you will, were primarily women. And they can see all the things that this place has stood for and stands for, and they want to ensure that it continues.

We've been the happy beneficiaries of the work of groups like the National Cathedral Association, the women who picked up the mantle from Mrs. Bracknell and formed All Hallows Guild, which oversees the beautiful grounds on these 58 acres that we're privileged to be a part of. And we just have so many things to thank for the women who had the foresight and the fortitude to make a concept and a vision and a dream a reality.

**The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens**

Mimi, do you have any thoughts of hope? Of what all of this... women at the Cathedral, what it might give to future generations, or even just those out listening today?

**Mimi McNamara**

Just a light question. Again, seeing all the young people who do come to the Cathedral and people who've never experienced the beauty of something like a Gothic Cathedral, first time visitors, and people who come back again and again and again, they're seeking that hope and that beauty, and they take a little visit with them and that they could take that seed with them to their communities, and visit us online and engage with us in those kinds of opportunities as well.

They're planting seeds and they're leaving seeds, right? So it's that growth, right, that opportunity for growth and sharing.

**The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens**

Does our Bloomberg app have a women history track?

**Mimi McNamara**

It does. Currently it has two bits of content featured. One is on the women artists who helped create the art and iconography of the building. It's far from complete, but it's a representation of women, and I think we've all experienced learning about women in the past can be very difficult because they're either buried under somebody else's names.

Often, if it goes back far enough, they're Ms. somebody and not their own names, or there just isn't a lot of information, or it's tantalizing at best.

And then an exhibition on Bloomberg about women who are interred at the Cathedral.

**The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens**

Wonderful. Thank you. So folks, no matter where you are, you can go and learn more about how women have been impactful here at the Cathedral.

Thank you, Mimi. Thank you, Jan. I am so thankful for the history, stories, and anecdotes you shared which brought the women of the Cathedral to life for us today.

I hope you all will join us for our next episode when we're joined by the new Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, Bishop Sean Rowe.

Also in a few short weeks, the podcast will celebrate its one year anniversary with a special Ask Me Anything episode, and we want your help using the form linked in the show notes or found on the website at [Cathedral.org/podcast](http://Cathedral.org/podcast). Submit a question for us to answer in the episode. We ask for all submissions to be turned in by April 4th.

Thank you for listening to Crossroads, and until next time, peace be with you. If the digital offerings of the Cathedral enrich your daily life, please consider becoming a supporter today by making a gift at [cathedral.org/inspire](http://cathedral.org/inspire)