

A PAGE FROM THE LONG AND
AMAZING HISTORY OF ST. STEPHEN
AND THE INCARNATION EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Women's Ordination

Alison Cheek Celebrates the Eucharist

Until 1976, women were not allowed to be priests in the Episcopal Church. But pressure to allow women to be ordained had been growing for a decade. Two events at St. Stephen's Church were key in moving the Episcopal Church to approve women's ordination. One was the first public celebration of the eucharist by a woman priest.

"In a service that ranged from solemn prayer to joyous hugs and bursts of spontaneous applause, a woman celebrated holy communion in an Episcopal church here yesterday for the first time in the history of the denomination."
-Marjorie Hyer,
The Washington Post



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On November 10, 1974, the Rev. Alison Cheek stood before the altar of St. Stephen and the Incarnation Church, said the words "On the night before he died for us, our Lord Jesus Christ broke bread," and thus **launched the public ministry of Episcopal women priests in their own church.**

Up till that moment no woman had publicly celebrated the Eucharist in an Episcopal Church. Cheek and ten other women had been "irregularly" ordained five months earlier in Philadelphia. But with charges and countercharges flying through the denomination, and especially in its House of Bishops, about the appropriateness or indeed "validity" of the ordinations, no Episcopal congregation was ready to offer a public altar to the new priests. Until the wardens and vestry of St. Stephen's, and our then-rector, the Rev. William A. Wendt, decided that they wanted Alison Cheek, whom they had known since she was a deacon in the Diocese of Virginia, to minister among them.



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Because the ordination of women had not yet been approved by the Episcopal Church, the then-Bishop of Washington, William F. Creighton, wrote Bill Wendt five days prior, directing him to not allow Alison Cheek to celebrate the eucharist.

Wendt was charged with violating church canons and his ordination vow to reverently obey his Bishop.



Cheek held aloft by the Revs. Loren Mead (left), and Bill Wendt

WIDENING THE CIRCLE THE CAMPAIGN FOR ST. STEPHEN'S