

The Accessible Church

*For the Rev. Emily Richards, C'94, T'02,
it's about people, not buildings*



For practically all of her life, the world has been a place not necessarily hospitable to the Rev. Emily Barr Richards, C'94, T'02.

Richards contracted rheumatoid arthritis when she was only a few months old. The arthritis almost killed her, then crippled and stunted her body, especially attacking her joints. Already as a teenager, she endured hip and knee replacement surgeries. She walks with a lurching gait and cannot climb stairs; she never quite grew to five feet in height, and her arms and hands are as small as a young child's.

"A person with a disability doesn't always feel welcomed in the world, or shown hospitality," she says. "A person with a disability doesn't always feel like she belongs, because the world is an able-bodied world."

But although the able-bodied world may view her through the lens of disability, the church was for her an exception: a sanctuary in which she was always loved and accepted as she was.

"The church was always home to me. It was a place where I felt I belonged," she says. And it was a place of empowerment as well; in the words of her former parishioner and friend Mattie Decker, "The only thing little about her is her size!"

Now four years into her ordained ministry in the Episcopal Church, her focus is on extending love and acceptance to all people and on encouraging the church as a whole to fulfill that calling as well.

Richards' first few years of ordained

ministry were spent in her home state of Kentucky, at All Saints' Episcopal Church in Lexington and at St. Alban's in Morehead.

Her mother, the Rev. Donna Barr, is an ordained deacon, serving as a hospital chaplain in the Diocese of Lexington, making them one of only a handful of mother-daughter clergy in the Episcopal Church.

Richards' disease was the touchstone for each woman's faith journey. "Our calling came from a similar place," says Richards. "I said, 'I have spent enough time in the hospital. I want to serve in the church.' For my mother, [her calling] was going into the hospital and serving people there."

But before they came to that point, each had to confront the hard existential questions that serious illness — especially in a very young and completely innocent child — inevitably raise.

Barr went through a period of anger over her child's suffering. Her turbulent emotions led her on a faith quest that eventually led to the Episcopal Church and even to ordination. Richards also became very involved in the church, especially through choir and the youth group; yet she had her period of questioning during her teen years as well: Why would a good and loving God allow such suffering?

"What I finally came to realize is that God did not want this suffering to happen to me; God does not want tragedy to happen in people's lives. God is in the midst of it, loving us and caring for us, but God did

not want this. There isn't really an answer to why I had this disease at a young age, though it would be nice if there was.

"Just like love is hard to describe or express, so is the darkness in our world. The suffering and the pain can't always be explained."

Sewanee, says Richards, also played an important part in her journey of faith and of her life within the Episcopal Church.

"My time at Sewanee as an undergrad helped me discern that my life and my future call was to be an ordained person in the church," she says. "I don't know that that would have happened if I had been at another place."

There were two particular things in college that confirmed for Richards what everyone from laypeople to the bishop had told her for years — that she had a calling to the priesthood. One was seeing her mother's ordination in 1994. The other was watching the ministry of Annwn Myers, Sewanee's associate chaplain.

"I did not grow up knowing any woman priests, so when I saw her, especially when I saw her celebrate the Eucharist — and that's essential to the life of a priest, offering the sacraments — when I saw her do that, as a woman, something in me said, 'Look, you can do this too.'"

Myers herself calls Richards a "shining star." "I was surprised when she alluded to me as being a role model," Myers says. "She inspired me!"

Myers remembers being impressed by Richards' spirit from the first time they



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met. Richards not only sang in the University Choir but was also a leader in her sorority, served on the dorm staff, and went to formals in gowns tailored especially for her. She traveled around campus on a scooter, which she decorated seasonally. And as a seminary student, she and her husband, Daniel Richards, C'95, would frequently host dinners in the dorm apartments where they lived (Daniel was a head resident and director of residential life while Emily was in seminary).

"The way she was just makes you think, 'Golly, she gets so much out of life, lives with gusto every day, finds so much to rejoice in!' Her effervescent personality was contagious," says Myers. "That enables her to speak with great authenticity when she talks about servant ministry. Here's someone who needs to be served, but is so intentional on serving others. That's a very powerful witness."

Having attended both college and seminary at Sewanee, having met her husband in choir and marrying him in All Saints' Chapel, Richards sees Sewanee as intimately linked to her experience of faith and the church, as part of that place where she was accepted for who she was.

Not that the church or Sewanee was all that physically accessible to her, she admits. "I was always lifted up and down the steps to get into the choir pews," she notes. "But I felt like I was loved for who I was, and it was a place where I belonged." The University did go to some lengths to make the campus work for her — even moving the

classics department (her major was Latin) from the second to the first floor of the elevator-less St. Luke's Hall. And later, her seminary class designated its senior gift toward making the Chapel of the Apostles handicap-accessible.

For Richards, at Sewanee the church and the school were intimately connected, but not in a prescriptive manner. "I felt the life of faith was a part of the academic life, and the academic life was a part of the life of faith," she says. "We're all on a journey, seeking to understand who we are, how we fit into this world, and who we're called to be, whether that's as a doctor or lawyer or priest or professor. Sewanee gave me the safe space and the freedom to be able to do that."

In December 2005, the Richards moved to Ridgefield, Connecticut, an affluent suburb of New York City. Emily is serving as the assistant rector at St. Stephen's in Ridgefield, while Daniel is working on his master's degree at the General Theological Seminary in New York.

Ridgefield was seeking a minister to focus on hospitality and mission — exactly the type of work that Richards feels called to do. "One of my gifts is hospitality, making the church a place that is open and accessible to all people, whatever they're facing in their lives, whatever struggles, pain, or joy. I feel like we have a calling as a church to be a place where people know that they are truly loved, by God and by their fellow human beings."

When Richards talks about accessibil-

ity, however, she's not just thinking of physical accessibility; and this vision is what impresses so many people, including the people of St. Stephen's Church.

"I told the vestry when I interviewed that I was looking for accessible people, not accessible buildings," Richards told the *Ridgefield Press* in a story about her ministry.

Mattie Decker says that the word "accessible" also best describes Richards herself. "She really exemplifies courage, and an indomitable spirit. I don't want to make her seem like a superhero, because she's definitely very vulnerable and very open. She herself is accessible to others, wherever they are. She's taught me a lot about not judging, and how everybody comes to God in their own way."

Just as Richards is accessible to others, she wants the church as a whole to be a place that welcomes all people, regardless of their background or status.

"I have a considerable amount of compassion and understanding for people who feel like outsiders, who feel like they don't belong. As a priest who offers the sacraments to God's people, what I'm doing is offering them God's abundant grace. In preaching, in celebrating the Eucharist, in baptizing, what I'm doing in my actions and in my words is saying, 'God's grace is there for you, and God loves you as one of God's beloved children.'"

—Laura Barlament