

**Catholic Feminist Newsletter for Women and Men in the Southeastern Pennsylvania Area MISSION** - As women and men rooted in faith, we call for justice, equality, and full partnership in ministry. We are committed to church renewal and to the transformation of a structure which uses gender rather than gifts as its criterion for ministry.

## SAINT MARY MAGDALENE MASS & CELEBRATION

Sunday, July 21 at 9 am

Drexel Hill United Methodist Church, McBurney Chapel,

600 Burmont Road • Drexel Hill, PA 19026

*Refreshments following service!*

Questions or for Zoom access, email [kschuck55@gmail.com](mailto:kschuck55@gmail.com)

### Reflection on Holy Thursday Witness (and Some Unexpected Encounters) By Marguerite Hermann Sexton

Holy Thursday dawned a bit damp and chilly but when we arrived at Sister Cities Park, across from the Cathedral of Saints. Peter and Paul in Philadelphia, there was already a small contingent of enthusiastic SEPAWOC sisters, along with a few brothers, gathered for the annual Holy Thursday Witness.

As the one who was chosen to receive the prestigious Mary Magdalene Award, I took my place among the group. This Witness recognizes the ongoing injustices inflicted, not only upon women, but by extension, every aspect of humanity and ecology. This is due to the Roman Catholic Church's original sin of male supremacy, a sin rooted in male hubris.

As our feisty little group took its place, someone unrolled a banner simply stating, "Ordain Catholic Women." Looking around at these faces, some long familiar, some new, my eyes grew misty. "Here they are honoring me," I thought, "while all these years they have planted their feet and literally kept the faith, (admittedly, in their own subversive ways) that so many of us could no longer endure."

I will always remember the tenderness and affection that surrounded me that day. It is hard to imagine being deserving of such accolades. As women, especially as older Catholic women, each of us, have gone through life making hard choices, accepting sorrows and disappointments, yet continuing always to take one step forward and while not looking back. Looking around at those faces, I kept thinking to myself, "Just look at these feisty faithful women! We are the angels in white that sat beside the empty tomb to announce The Resurrection. We carried the news of the Risen One to the men. We have never been believed. We are Pieta, the eternal mother holding the child. While trying to ignore us, the men inside need to creep out another door lest they encounter us!"

The Witness is always planned to coincide with the end of the mass so that those leaving might see, hear, and understand the depth of the commitment. During our prayer, a young (20 something) white male crossed the street seemingly curious as he approached us, I motioned for him to join us then walked toward him to greet him. He inquired as to what we were about, so I told him that this was a prayer service witnessing for the ordination of women. He quickly became angry and responded with, "Don't you understand that it would be impossible to do that? Don't you understand why that cannot happen?" I gently told him that this is a prayer service, and we were not there to debate anything and again invited him to join us. He said, "Is there somebody here who

### What Are We Not Allowed to Know?

By Regina Bannan

*Andrew said to his brothers, "Say what you will about what Mary has told us, but I don't believe that the Savior said these things."*

*In response, Peter spoke out with the same concerns. He asked, "The Savior didn't speak to a woman without our knowledge, did He? Did He prefer her to us? Will we turn around and all listen to her?"*

*Then Mary wept and said to Peter, "My brother Peter, what are you thinking? Do you really think I thought this up by myself in my heart, or that I'm lying about the Savior?"*

*In response Levi said to Peter, "Peter, you've always been adversaries, but if the Savior made her worthy, who are you to reject her? Surely the Savior knows her very well and that's why He loved her more than us. Rather we should be ashamed, clothe ourselves with perfect humanity, acquire it for ourselves as He instructed us, and preach the Gospel; we should not be laying down any other rule or other law beyond what the Savior said."*

*Then they started to go out to teach and preach.*

The reading is adapted from the Gospel of Mary, one of the writings in the *Nag Hammadi Library*, written in the second century. It's from that group of early Christians who worshipped with Mary Magdalene. Being a Philadelphian, I characterize their Gnostic belief as like the Quakers, inner light within everyone. There's a lot more to it, of course.

What that date means is that none of the principals are alive when the text is written. We already know all about Peter, who is here characterized as angry, Andrew his brother, and the tax collector Levi, who never exactly became part of the inner circle; I think of him as marginalized like LGBTQ people today. Then there is Mary Magdalene, who we have learned so much about in recent years: first witness of the resurrection and leader in the early community.

In the Gospel section just before our reading today, Peter asks Mary to share with them what Jesus might have told only to her, and she does. She describes a vision – frequent among the Gnostics – in which Jesus talks to her about the soul, and the soul answers: "What binds me has been slain, and what surrounds me has been overcome, and my desire has been ended, and ignorance has died." It's Mary's statement of a Platonic purity.

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## Championing Hope Once Again

By *Ellie Hart*

We could so easily lose hope and court despair today. Just read, watch, or just inhale the news. Our hearts cry out in lamentation. And, although with not the same magnitude as our anguish over worldwide devastation and increasing new threats, our fragile hope (and hard work and persistence) for positive change in that other issue so dear to us here, full inclusion and participation of women and other gendered in leadership and ordained ministry in our Church, sustained another blow as the Pope, in recent interviews, proclaimed the ordination of women, even as deacons, was not going to happen.

Despite all of this, I'm going to implore you to join me in fighting off that despair. We're pretty good at it anyway since we've been doing so for so long! Nicholas Kristof in the *NYT* on May 12 beautifully articulated the reason: "*Despair doesn't solve problems; it creates them. It is numbing and counterproductive, making it more difficult to rouse ourselves to tackle the challenges around us.*" With that in mind, and in case you missed them, I present some excerpts from a hopeful set of articles in the May issue of *Commonweal*. The editors asked four distinguished women: "In what ways are women excluded from and undervalued in the life of the Church? What does the Church lose by marginalizing women? How are women still managing to lead from the margins?"

**Jane Varner Malhotra** wrote the article, *Women at the Altar*: We are depriving ourselves of the divine as embodied by women. As one of those people who believe in working on reform from within the Church, I appreciated her touting her aunt, Anne E. Patrick, SNJM, theologian, author, and religion and women's studies professor, at Carleton College.

*By her lived example of sticking by the Church—in the Church—while trying to reform it, she showed our family a way to respond creatively to injustice. Her life is what I have come to understand as the kind of life Jesus himself led. He didn't abandon the imperfectly practiced tradition of his family, but offered guidance on how to put love at the center of how we treat one another, even when it means breaking unjust rules. ...*

I also loved this anecdote:

*On my final day in Rome, I went inside St. Peter's for the first time in twenty years. I was surprised how moved I felt, and my heart was drawn to the stunning baldacchino. No service was going on, so I walked up close and soaked it in, then took a selfie with it behind me, with a combination of smirk and prayer: "How long must women wait to be on this altar, O God?" I sighed and wandered away. A few minutes later, I looked back: lo and behold, a woman stood on that altar. An elderly sister in her habit, she held a spray bottle and rag and was wiping down the table. I shook my head and chuckled—God has a wicked sense of humor! And then I realized, God's not joking.*

*Women have been at this altar all along, God was saying. You are my daughters, my queens, my caretakers, my coworkers, my companions. Soon women will be fully restored to our God-given leadership roles in places of worship, including this one, with all the challenges and blessings that will bring.*

In *Moving the Center: The Church needs a new outlook on gender*, our esteemed Mary Magdalene Award winner **Mary E. Hunt** enriched us with this perspective:

*In 1975, when the Women's Ordination Conference began, we knew what a woman was, why men got ordained, and who was*

*involved in the conversation by who was registered for the conference. Fifty years later, these matters are infinitely more complicated. Gender fluidity expands the definition of women; clericalism shows the limits of ordination; and what was once a weekend meeting has become an important part of a global movement. However, there are still no validly and licitly ordained Roman Catholic women deacons or priests, even though many Catholic women are engaged in myriad ministries.*

*Since then, the Roman Catholic Church has rendered itself all but irrelevant. By permitting women to be ordained, it could have expanded its workforce, improved the quality of its ministry, and claimed some moral status in a hurting world. But the world has moved on. The loss is not so much for women as for the Church and, more importantly, for the people who need the resources a two-thousand-year-old institution can provide....*

*Fortunately, none of this has stopped women from ministering. Many have simply decoupled their efforts from institutional constraints and gotten on with it. But it is unfair and wasteful that a Church that belongs to the whole Catholic community is held hostage by the few cardinals and bishops who make the decisions. ...*

*Luckily, thanks to the women who got the process started, the paradigm is shifting. Those on the margins now are Church officials who hoard the resources, both material and spiritual, that belong to and are needed by everyone. With a change of heart and practice, they, too, can be part of the whole; it helps no one for anyone to be marginalized. The challenge is to blur the lines of center and periphery, leaving no willing hands idle when it comes to creating justice.*

If you think Mary E. Hunt's words are challenging and inspiring, you should be in her presence!

**Teresa Delgado** in *Distorting the Gospel: Gender-based exclusion and colonial violence applied the act of colonization of peoples, and especially women, to our own Church.*

*While promoting women in ordination is important—I would never dismiss its importance—the process of decolonizing our Church requires more than allowing women to lead from the altar. The corrective to colonization of women's bodies in the Church requires us to learn from women's ways of "being Church," particularly those found in Latinx culture and theology. ...*

*We have to reconsider what it means to be a woman—in relationship to each other, to men, and to the Church. We have been given a framework that upholds the status quo, and it can be disorienting to question it. But this discomfort can be a catalyst for creativity, rather than something that dooms us to complacency. In fact, what emerges out of a place of dis-ease is the prophetic voice, which can motivate a people to change that which is seemingly unchangeable. This is our decolonizing challenge as Catholic women.*

**Alice McDermott** one of my favorite authors, wrote from the perspective of an observant Catholic in *Why Not Women?* The all-male priesthood is no small matter:

*I attended Mass the Sunday after the Dobbs decision. I love the Mass. I love the Eucharist. For all the anguish my Church has caused, in the world and in my own heart, I have never been denied the peace, understanding, and renewal of hope and love*  
*continued on page 4*

## ‘Corpus Christi’ - Another Perspective

By Eileen McCafferty DiFranco

I am writing this essay one week prior to the Feast of Corpus Christi. By the time I reached my late teens, I was bemused by the deep respect and intense love shown to Jesus present in a piece of bread and the deep disrespect shown to God’s people who weep and mourn in a valley of tears because of conditions imposed by racism, sexism, cut-throat capitalism, and a church that regularly bows at the altar of mammon and male privilege.

From the beginning, the growing church gave precedence to the words, “This is my Body; this is my Blood.” These words far surpassed Jesus’s other words, “Whatsoever you do to the least of my sisters and brothers, that you do unto me” and “Love your neighbor as yourself,” although all are regarded as the word of God. Thus, the most serious sin in the Catholic Church is the desecration of Jesus in a consecrated host, not Jesus who is present in every human being. And how easy it is to adore a host! The adoration of the host- above all other lives- allowed the captains and the kings and the bishops throughout the ages to devoutly receive communion, assured that all was right with their murderous, slaveholding, women- oppressing souls.

Having the power to say, “This is my Body; this is my Blood” still grants a clean conscience to the men of the church.

I watched the interview with Pope Francis the week before I wrote this essay. Francis gets a lot of really good press. And so, he should for giving up the accoutrements of wealth bestowed by the office of pope, for living simply, for addressing the dreadful practice of clericalism, and for his care of the environment.

His view of women, however, is as backward, blinkered, oppressive, and prejudiced as those of his predecessors. Amid the happy talk between Francis and Nora O’Donnell, he inserted his baleful assertion that women can never be deacons or priests. This is breathtakingly wrongheaded for the leader of the church whose earliest documents from one of the earliest followers of Jesus record women deacons like Phoebe, leaders of house churches like Prisca, and apostles like Junia. Only a deep and pervasive bias could enable Francis to make this claim in spite of clear evidence to the contrary.

Francis’s assertion is very serious since women comprise half of the members of the church. His blatant lack of respect for women hog ties the church, ensuring that it will never move beyond clericalism. In addition, Francis’s heartfelt words criticizing actions that harm the people of the world ring false. Why would he expect others to give up their deeply held prejudices that hurt people when he refuses to give up his? As Native Americans said so succinctly, like too many men in power, Francis speaks out of both sides of his mouth.

We know what the comforting words, “This is my Body; this is my Blood” have done for Catholics throughout the centuries. It’s time to concentrate on “Whatever you do to my sisters and brothers, that you do unto me” should mean to Catholics.

By denying women ordination, Francis and company deny Jesus’ words to do unto others as they do unto him and there by deny his rightful place in a church that can flourish. (There are implications in every area of life, of course, which are very important). They deny his gifts. They make him a second-class citizen. They deny

Jesus, as they do woman, a seat at the table and silence his voice, and, by doing so, allow all sorts of horrors to unfold.

Jesus also said, “By their fruit, you shall know them.”

The church continually harvests a bumper crop of unholy sexism and calls it spiritual sustenance. It’s time to plow that crop under and grow something that’s fit to eat, the Body and Blood of Christ without the ingredients of power and clericalism, a Corpus where all of God’s creations thrive because they are all loved and honored beyond measure, regardless of any physical characteristics.

**Eileen McCafferty DiFranco** is a Roman Catholic Woman Priest and frequent contributor to EqualwRites.

### How we sustain *EqualwRites*

We do not have a subscription rate or annual membership. We simply ask you to contribute if and when you are able.

It’s that simple. We accept checks and PayPal. (You can find a donation link at our home page [SEPAWOC.ORG](http://SEPAWOC.ORG), under Judy Heffernan’s picture!)

So far, we have continued our mission and presence in South-eastern Pennsylvania, promoting our beliefs in a discipleship of equals. Thank you for making it happen!

### St. Mary Magdalene Community

Drexel Hill – Sunday at 9  
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For updated information and zoom links,  
contact Eileen at 267-258-6966

### In Memory of Patricia Walsh

We sincerely mourn the passing of our dear friend and SEPAWOC supporter, **Pat Walsh**. As her obituary outlines, Patricia Walsh was a graduate of Hallahan and Chestnut Hill College. She earned a Master’s Degree in Adult Religious Education and completed 60+ additional Master’s level credits in education, English, math and computer science. She taught at C. W. Henry School for 30 years and was a recipient of 1990 Rose Lindenbaum Award for Teaching Excellence. She was a proud member of Southeastern Pennsylvania Women’s Ordination Conference. We will deeply miss her.

## Reflection on Holy Thursday Witness

*continued from page 1*

is willing to debate this with me?" I reiterated that this is a prayer service and there will be no debate. Again, he started to protest. So, I snapped, "You are barely out of adolescence! Look at these women. They know more about theology than you could possibly begin to understand. Come back in twenty years when you've had some life experience. In the meantime, you are in no position to challenge anyone here about anything theologically." I sadly wondered if that young man was the future of the diocesan priesthood: smooth, self-assured, and egocentric.

Our service proceeded. It was in turn both solemn and joyous. These women have nothing to lose. The singing of "We Shall Not Be Moved" was accompanied at times by dancing and clapping. There were a few people who crossed the street and curiously greeted us with friendliness, some taking pictures, some smiling and nodding, even inquiring about us.

At last, larger groups were exiting the cathedral, the first being a group of about eight mid-twenties Latino men dressed uniformly in dark suits and ties.\* They gathered in a cluster to the left of the steps and, to our amazement, lit cigarettes! I was simply aghast! They looked to be in their mid-twenties, handsome and very serious looking as they puffed. Everything inside me was screaming, *How dare you! Isn't this place sacred to you?*" I decided to cross the street and meet them while my sisters behind were still singing "We shall not be moved!"

Seeing me heading their way, they instinctively dropped their cigarettes onto the ground then, as if by some hidden signal, turned on their heels and high-tailed it down the street, except for one, who remained to challenge and to act as though he never imagined anything as preposterous as women priests. As I turned to go, he called out (with more than a hint of condescension), "I'll pray for you!" I responded, "Please do. I always need prayers."

Finally, a yellow school bus pulled up to pick up a group of teen girls in uniform just as they were exiting. We called out: "Girls! Come on over! Work for justice for women! Demand women's ordination!" They all smiled and waved. Several shyly gave a thumbs up. I was aware of the juxtaposition of this group of older women facing teenage girls. In retrospect, it occurred to me that those girls seeing us there may have been the single most important audience for the witness. At least they know that something more is happening for some women than they are being taught. Perhaps somewhere in their lives when they get out from under the dogma and learn to think critically, they will remember a moment on a chilly Holy Thursday and the faithful women who witnessed there. Seeing their youthful energy, a thought flashed through my mind: *We were you once. Maybe you will be us one day and work for equality and justice. Little sisters, remember us when you do.*

Sisters of *SEPAWOC*, I stand in awe of your courage, dignity and tenacity. You provided me with such a wonderful honor seeing the work of my life and raising it up as sacramental. I will never forget what you did for me. I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

\*Subsequent research has led me to suspect that those young men are affiliated with the deeply conservative movement that has taken hold, especially within the Catholic Latino community, "The Neocatechumenal Way."

**Marguerite Hermann Sexton** is living an active retirement at the Philadelphia Protestant Home with her husband, Tom. She works tirelessly for racial and gender equality and is a committed ally to the LGBTQ+ community. They also love to travel.

## What Are We Not Allowed to Know?

*continued from page 1*

This is where our scripture reading begins. Andrew finds these strange ideas. Peter says, "Did he really want us to listen to a woman?" Today we who say "Jesus was a feminist" because he spoke with and through women will notice how radically different this text is, hardly two centuries later. Mary is hurt and defends her vision, and Levi, the tax collector ally, speaks up to remind them how important she was to Jesus. **"Rather, we should not be laying down any other rule or other law beyond what the savior said."**

I take three lessons from this Gospel.

1. If it had been heard every three years like other Gospels, would we remember **"Rather, we should not be laying down any other rule or other law beyond what the savior said"**? If someone says, "Where your treasure is..." we can all complete the sentence. We should be able to complete this one.
2. Gerda Lerner, in *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness*, makes the point that there were feminists between the medieval period and the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but their stories were forgotten. Women had to discover feminism again and again – just we have discovered Mary's story after years when it was buried in the desert.
3. What are we not allowed to know? Mary's message in this whole Gospel is to go out and preach Jesus. Whose interest is in suppressing it? How can we go forward and speak that pure truth?

**Regina Bannan** is the President of *SEPAWOC*.

## Championing Hope Once Again *continued from page 2*

*that the celebration of the Mass has always afforded me. But on that day, I saw my presence in my own church as a kind of collusion—collusion with misogyny, with hypocrisy, with the conviction that to be female is to be the other, to be lesser. Less complex, less moral, less valuable, less intelligent, less worthy, less human. As Catholics, we are aware of—we celebrate—the outward signs of inner grace. Our rituals are built on the importance of those signs and symbols, and our Church, our spirit, thrives on them as a source of good. But if there are outward signs of inner grace, then surely there are outward signs of inner corruption, signs that betray our faults, our sinfulness, our blindness, our failings. The all-male priesthood of the Catholic Church, my Church, has become for me just such a sign. And so, I persist, with varying degrees of hope. I ask and ask again: Why not women? I pray for change.*

We can pray and work for change. You know we can!

**Ellie Hart** is co-editor of *EqualwRites*.

### Editorial Staff of *EqualwRites*

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**Marian Ronan**, **Eileen DiFranco**

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## Book Reviews

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*The Gospel of Peace: A Commentary on Matthew, Mark, And Luke From the Perspective of Nonviolence* by John Dear. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2024. Paperback, 401pp.

Reviewed by Marian Ronan

If you're anything like me, you are finding it really hard these days to tune in to any news that's not about war—Gaza, Gaza, Gaza and less but plenty about Ukraine—with occasional references to Myanmar, Sudan, Colombia, Somalia, and on, and on. If so, you can understand why I was excited to learn that the indefatigable peace activist and teacher, Father John Dear, had just published a commentary on nonviolence in the synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke.

But I have to confess that when my copy came and I began to read it, I was a bit put off. You see, my scholarly training was in something called feminist literary theory, a subset of postmodern deconstruction, which aims to undercut the clear either/or binaries mandated since the Enlightenment (and in neo-Thomist theology as well). So when Dear began to argue that the entire Gospel is about nonviolence, I was a little put off. Maybe it's about a few other things as well?

Dear's approach reminded me of the sermon template that my husband, a widely regarded American Baptist preacher, used to share with his seminary students. To preach a good sermon, he would say, first, tell them what you are going to tell them. Then, tell it to them. Finally, tell them what you told them.

But as I read through *The Gospel of Peace*, I began to be converted. If it's a sermon, it's a pretty good one. Though let me first admit that I did not read the book all the way through. As Dear himself says in the introduction (p. xxv), the book is a commentary on the first three Gospels, so basically, it's a reference work. And almost nobody reads a reference work through from cover to cover. (Though it's hard to imagine why a "reference work" would not have an index!!)

But I did read a good number of sections, first, those about the Resurrection, with the members of my Pax Christi group here in

Brooklyn, and then, a number of them on my own. One thing that my feminist deconstructive eye was wary about was Dear's enthusiasm for the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew (5:1-7:29). This was so because it includes, among the "thou shalt nots" that follow the Beatitudes, the prohibitions on adultery (5:27-30) and divorce (5:31-32), which I have always assumed were used to control women. But Dear argues the opposite, that these prohibitions were aimed at protecting women, and I came away convinced by his argument.

And as I read carefully through Dear's exegesis of the Sermon on the Mount, which he renames "The Great Mountaintop Sermon on Nonviolence," I bought more and more into his thesis, that peace and the commitment to radical nonviolence are at the very heart of Jesus's message. And as I read through Dear's interpretations of Mark and Luke's Gospels, I became increasingly convinced that the peace he gave us was indeed Jesus's primary message.

I was also blown away by something I learned from the introduction to *The Gospel of Peace*, which places significant emphasis on how Gospel nonviolence shaped the lives not only of Martin Luther King, Jr., but also of Mahatma Gandhi. According to Dear, Gandhi was so deeply influenced by the Sermon on the Mount that he read it every day, during his morning hour of prayer. Every day!

As we stare with horror at the wars and violence around the world, a good deal of which our own taxes are financing, perhaps we should follow Gandhi's example and read the Great Mountaintop Sermon on Nonviolence every morning!

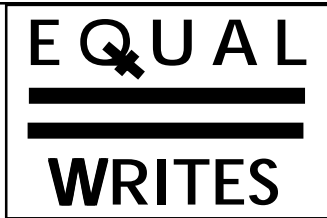
And imagine if those whose sermons we listen to, whether in a small faith community or a parish church, also read that Sermon every morning, and then read Dear's interpretations of the lectionary passages they preach about. Now that would certainly bring us some peace.

**Marian Ronan** is a retired seminary professor who lives in Brooklyn, NY.

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## Scripture Reflections

### Pentecost Season Gospel of Mary

*Judith A Heffernan, M. Div.*

On May 17, 1980, across from the Philadelphia Cathedral, SEPAWOC gathered for our first Ordination Day Witness with our banner "Remember your sisters who are ready and willing to be ordained".

This year, our banner and ourselves a wee bit older, we gathered with renewed hope because of the synod gatherings around the world; people everywhere spoke out clearly about the need to honor the Spirit's call of women to ordained ministry within the church, of how needed women are, how welcomed they would be.

During our Ordination Day Liturgy, we shared a reading from the Gospel of Mary. We heard Andrew and Peter expressing their disbelief that Jesus would have dialogued with a woman and shared teachings and insights with her without their knowledge and without the men being included.

Then, the words that would endear Mary Magdalene to me forever: Mary wept and asked through her tears how her brothers would think she would lie about this.

Levi then spoke out fearlessly that Mary was indeed called by Jesus and said clearly that the men should not be laying down any rule or law beyond what Jesus said... Amen!

The very next day after our Ordination Day Witness, an interview with the Pope was televised, stating that the ordination of women as deacons or priests is now once again on the Church cutting room floor.

Discouraged and upset, I read our Liturgy again...We cried for doors closed to our witness, gifts rejected, equality unrecognized...we prayed for the oppressed and the oppressors. We drew strength from Mary Hunt...Many small acts of courage and commitment make change...our efforts are based on Gospel values of church...celebrate that we are part of a world phenomenon.

We accepted the challenge of Marjorie Stoneman Douglas: Be discouraged and disheartened, but never give up.

Each year as our Witness concludes, we join hearts and share this prayer from the Women's Ecumenical Visions Conference: "We recommit ourselves to proclaim Your Gospel of liberation and equality for we are all created in Your most amazing image: I say YES". We give thanks you join your YES with ours! "We are moving in the light of God"!

**Judith A. Heffernan, M.Div.** leads liturgies and ministry with the Community of the Christian Spirit and the Saint Mary Magdalene community and is a member of the SEPAWOC Core Committee.