



Jesus Hacked: Storytelling Faith

a weekly podcast from the Episcopal Diocese of Missouri
<https://www.diocesemo.org/podcast>

Episode 104: Baptism calls every Christian to the margins

In episode 104, we continue our two-part series with a lay and clergy person called in discernment to an Anglican religious order. Today host Barbi Click speaks with the Rev. Maria Evans, MD. She's currently the interim assistant priest at two parishes, St. Luke's and Church of the Good Shepherd in the St. Louis area for a few more months, before her ministry of interim takes her to the next destination.

Maria's discernment was a winding path, and she shares some of the stories from the journey.

Barbi Click: Welcome to Jesus Hacked, I'm Barbi Click, a member of St. Paul's Carondelet, candidate for the diaconate, and the Guardian of the Episcopal community of the Rivendell.

Barbi Click: I am with the Rev. Maria Evans, interim pastor at the Episcopal Church of Good Shepherd in Town and Country, and also a companion in the Anamchara fellowship. Hello, Maria.

Maria Evans: Hey Barbi.

Barbi Click: It's good to see you, it's been a long time since I've actually laid eyes on you.

Maria Evans: Likewise.

Barbi Click: Yeah. So we've been talking about discernment as a path to these religious communities. As Episcopalians, we often have a tendency to think of discernment as a path that leads directly to ordination, which of course it did with you, but it also led you a little bit more into this fellowship, this Anamchara fellowship community. So were you a companion in the Anamchara fellowship community prior to your discernment for priesthood, or did it come afterwards?

Maria Evans: It came before. And that's something I was gonna clarify because it was in a period of my life where I was in a variety of discernment as a layperson ... A layperson in, I wouldn't call it a mid-life crisis, but just something was changing.

Barbi Click: Right.

Maria Evans: And at the time, I learned about the Anamchara fellowship from a couple of friends of mine on the east coast, and I thought it looked kind of interesting.

Barbi Click: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Maria Evans: And I was already planning to visit a friend of mine who used to be a parishioner at Trinity Episcopal Church in Kirksville, who lived in east Tennessee. They were having their gathering in Paoli, Pennsylvania, which wasn't that far away, really, since I was on vacation and I thought, well I'll just trip up there and check this out. And by the time I left Paoli, I was a companion.

Barbi Click: Alright.

Maria Evans: Matter of fact, most Episcopalians don't even know there is such a thing as vowed religious life in the Episcopal Church.

Barbi Click: Right. I first met you when my wife, Debbie, and our son, Tucker, came into this diocese back in 2007. Soon after we met, I learned that you were on a pathway ... You were in a discernment path of your own. But I'm sure it didn't start right there, or then. Discernment never does. What came before this ordination pathway, the Anamchara, what came before that?

Maria Evans: Well, you can go back quite a way, really. I mean, on the books, I would say most people would say that I began my discernment in 2008...

Barbi Click: Right, which is just around the time that I first met you.

Maria Evans: Right, right. And I ... Looking back, now, through what I like to call the recto-spectroscope, that it probably started way before that.

Barbi Click: Do you mind telling us? Taking us there?

Maria Evans: Yeah, that's fine. I grew up in a different denomination. And it's really interesting, because I got fed up and left that denomination in my 20s, because I realized they would never ordain women.

Barbi Click: Mm.

Maria Evans: And I had absolutely no desire to be a female ordained person. I was going to medical school. So for 20 years, I basically told organized religion to take a hike. Take a long walk off a short pier. When I look back, some interesting things were happening along the way. For starters, in my vocation as first a medical student and later a pathology resident, and later an attending pathologist at MU, I would have students that ... I laugh, because this is what they would complain about. They would complain that they don't like to walk across the street with me from the university to the VA. They go, "Because she'll run into somebody she knows, and then she starts asking them about how're you doing? How's your dog doing? How's your cat doing? How's your grandkids doing?" And she's like, "She knows everybody! And she wants to talk about all that stuff!" I realize, looking back now, that's a real key piece of what being a priest and pastor is all about.

Barbi Click: Caring.

Maria Evans: Caring.

Barbi Click: Caring enough to talk.

Maria Evans: And really genuinely caring about that stuff. I had these moments, in those 20 years, that I kind of referred to as "Episcopal moments." In 1995, I was doing a three month rotating externship as a civilian rotator at the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology in Washington, D.C..

Barbi Click: Wow.

Maria Evans: One of the things that, in being in D.C., it was easy to do every weekend, was go look at tourist stuff. And I kept finding myself drawn to going to the National Cathedral. And I would go to the National Cathedral on a Sunday, and I would sit through multiple services. And between the services, I would wander around and look at the light, dancing in the windows. And I thought, this is pretty awesome. And one time I was sitting in a service, and this homeless guy had come in off the street and he sat next to me for a while, and he looked at me and he says, "I can tell

you're looking for a home." And I'm thinking, "Dude, you're homeless. What do you know about my home?" And I looked at him and I thought, "I can have a conversation with this guy." I said, "Oh really?" And he says, "Yeah." He says like, "I'm homeless, but this is my home. You need a home."

Barbi Click: Wow.

Maria Evans: That really stuck with me.

Barbi Click: I guess so.

Maria Evans: Another moment that was prior to that was in 1990, I was up in northern Ontario in a little town called Moose Factory, Ontario. Like how the rector lives in a rectory, the factor of the Hudson Bay colonies lives in a factory. There were like two things to do in Moose Factory, Ontario. One of them was just go to the hockey rink and watch anybody from age five to 75 play hockey. The other one was to go to whatever was happening at the Anglican Church. I went in on a Sunday service. This is a part of Canada that has indigenous Cree. First Americans are a big part of the population. And they read the Gospel in Cree.

Barbi Click: Oh wow.

Maria Evans: And it's the first time I'd ever heard the Gospel read in another language.

Barbi Click: Hm.

Maria Evans: And it was like, I didn't know what they were talking about until the sermon started because they did the sermon in English. They interposed English and Cree, and English and Cree, like if you did the Nicene Creed in English, you do the prayers of the people in Cree.

Barbi Click: Oh, yeah.

Maria Evans: And I'd never seen anything like that. And I was just fascinated with how it all seemed to work. So I had these moments, and then I moved to Kirksville and my practice associate's wife and our bookkeeper, went to Trinity Episcopal Church in Kirksville. For about four or five years they badgered me to come to church. And I was like, "Pfft, not coming to church. The roof will fall in!" That's the classic line, the roof will fall in, right?

Barbi Click: Right, right.

Maria Evans: And so I finally went one day, to just shut them up. And when I walked in there, I suddenly had this feeling of being at home. Now what I didn't

know at the time was that that church, the architect of that church was the same guy who was the architect of the church I grew up in in my hometown of Macon, Missouri.

Barbi Click: Oh my. Hm.

Maria Evans: And I stayed. I liked it, and I was enjoying it. And then one day, by that time I was on the vestry, I was junior warden, I was the yard mower. Carol Davenport, who's the priest associate there, told me to shut the mower off, she wanted to talk to me. She said, "Maria I've been watching you. I think you're called to be ordained." And since this is a podcast, I won't use the exact language that I said, but I said, "You've got to be..." fill in the blank, me. As it turns out, she was right!

Barbi Click: So where did Anamchara fellowship come into all of this?

Maria Evans: Anamchara fellowship came into this because I knew a couple of friends on the East Coast who belonged to that order, and I was going through a period of discernment in my own life.

Barbi Click: But this was when?

Maria Evans: Oh, this would've been about 2011, 2012. I did this 18 month house remodel...

Barbi Click: Yeah, I remember.

Maria Evans: Where I literally had the house stripped down to the studs, and I was living like a homeless person in my own house, and it was very unsettling. But I think it was a place I was supposed to be at the time.

Barbi Click: Your own little wilderness.

Maria Evans: Yeah, it was my own little wilderness. The address had not changed, but all my surroundings had changed. And I was searching, I was searching for something. I went to one of their gatherings. By the time I left the gathering, I was a companion.

Barbi Click: So what is the difference between a vowed member of the Anamchara fellowship, and a companion?

Maria Evans: Well, a companion has a role to support the vowed members. And companions don't have any special clothing that signifies as vowed religious, or anything like that. I have a green polo shirt that says Anamchara fellowship, but that's about it. We have a different prayer that we pray every day as part of our commitment to the fellowship.

Barbi Click: Do you have to go to the annual chapter meetings or gatherings?

Maria Evans: It's expected, strongly encouraged that companions go. It doesn't have quite the same expectation that vowed members have.

Barbi Click: Okay.

Maria Evans: I've been to most of the gatherings since I became a companion. It's a great time, because a lot of us, even if we're geographically separated, we pray Compline together on...

Barbi Click: Online?

Maria Evans: Zoom.

Barbi Click: Yeah.

Maria Evans: And to get to see the people that I've been praying with is always great.

Barbi Click: Okay, thank you.

Barbi Click: So, the whole theme of this year's podcast is "Wading in the Water." At our baptism, regardless of what age we are when we're baptized, we are asked to put our whole trust in Jesus' grace and love. The surrounding community of Christ pledges to support us in our life in Christ and we are prayed over, prayed for, and prayed with. The community remembers aloud about their own baptismal vows through our renewal of those vows, and the water of baptism is poured over us. We waded into the water. We became sanctified. The chrism oil is drawn on our foreheads, marked us as Christ's own forever, consecrated, a new birth into a new community.

Barbi Click: What is your baptism birthing in you? What has come is coming from your own wading through the water.

Maria Evans: Well, it's always something new and different. And in different stages of my life, I think it's been different things. I think for starters, baptism calls everyone, every Christian, to the margins. And then I think the question is, what kind of margin? As a layperson, a lot of what it called me to do in the beginning was simply to become a piece of the life of the church as it relates to the life of the world. To be involved with all the various ministries, like my home parish, Trinity Kirksville, had. And it was very exciting because that's a pretty small parish, and they do a lot of ministry.

Barbi Click: Mm-hmm (affirmative). They do.

Maria Evans: We've jokingly, over the years, referred to us as the little church that could. And so I think there was a period of time where my baptism called me to just get in there, wade out there as deeply as you can get, and then I think there was a place where it was almost like I could see this current. And it's like hm, I don't know if I wanna get in that current or not. And this current was the current of ordination.

Barbi Click: Yeah.

Maria Evans: And I wasn't sure in the beginning whether it was a current that was calling me to ordination or call to monastic life. It was really hard to read. And that's where the community comes into play, because the community sees things that we don't always see in ourselves, or don't wanna see in ourselves.

Barbi Click: Right.

Maria Evans: I tell a lot of people about a favorite place that I like to just sit. There's a place, up in the very northeast corner of the state, little place called Taylor, Missouri, where if you sit on top of the levee, you're sitting next to the Mississippi River, but if you look up to your left you can see where the Des Moines River is flowing into the Mississippi. And when I first kind of discovered that place, I remember sitting out there one day and it was after we'd had a pretty big thunderstorm. And I was watching entire trees float down the river. The power of this current was making entire trees go down the river. And I just had this realization that where baptism was calling me was very powerful. And it was scary because it was like, this thing will sweep you away.

Barbi Click: Yeah. Into places you can't...

Maria Evans: Into places you can't even imagine. It swept me into South Sudan, and swept me into a formal discernment pathway for ordination, and it swept me into the Anamchara fellowship. And I think, as the years roll by, God's going to reveal other margins that I'm supposed to be called to. And I think the challenge for us as Christians is to be able to freely step into that water and let the current take us.

Barbi Click: I feel that in my own life, each moment of discernment, whether it began back as a teenager, in the Diocese of Fort Worth, as I went on our journey, as we got here, each level of discernment took me a little bit further away from the life that I had known before. And while it separated me from a lot of things, it also brought me closer to an understanding that I belonged to God. And that as I began to take vows, to look at my baptismal vows more closely. To the vows that I took with the Rivendell community. The vows that I'm looking at as I begin the idea of ordination as a deacon. These things are pulling me away from the life I have known before.

Barbi Click: That's not a bad thing, but it's kind of a frightening thing. Does that make any sense to you?

Maria Evans: Yeah. And I would describe it like the old Charles Atlas bodybuilding commercials, dynamic tension. Because I think every one of us in Christian life, takes some kind of vows. We have the vows of our baptism, which we either take ourselves or someone took for them, and we affirm those later. People get married, they take wedding vows.

Barbi Click: Good point.

Maria Evans: When I became a physician, I took the oath of Geneva, I took a vow to care for humanity. I took a vow to be a companion in the Anamchara fellowship. I took a vow to be a transitional deacon before I was ordained to the priesthood. I took vows to the priesthood. I've thought about how all of those vows, in some ways are the same, but in some ways are different. And we don't really ever renounce any of those vows. They're just all sitting there. And the dynamic tension happens when we have to discern which way God is leading us with those things. How do we find the balance in that? And I think for every single Christian, it's a different set of things, pushing on the balance and for every Christian, there's a piece of it that, you know, you gotta walk this lonesome valley. You gotta walk it by yourself. But at the same time, to do that without a community is folly.

Barbi Click: Yes.

Maria Evans: Because like we talked about earlier, the community hears and sees things we cannot or will not see. There's a tension in that. That tension between "Where do I feel God's calling me?" versus "Where does the community feel God's calling me?" versus their own tension of how's that work on their stuff?

Barbi Click: Yeah.

Maria Evans: So I think of it a lot as like, kind of standing on a seesaw and balancing back and forth. And part of growing in faith, for me, has been to not be afraid to feel a little off balance at times.

Barbi Click: That's the truth. I can really relate to that. That being uncomfortable is not a bad thing. In fact, sometimes it's better, because it always keeps you searching. Always keeps you looking for God in the mix. Where is God in all of this?

Maria Evans: Exactly. Exactly, because it's like, how do I find the balance?

Barbi Click: So this is ... I know that we could carry on this conversation for a while longer, and there are so many questions that I still wanna ask you about different things. I really ... It's good to see you again. It's really wonderful to hear your story, and I thank you very much for sharing it with us today.

Maria Evans: Well, I'm happy to come back anytime.

Barbi Click: Alright, awesome. We'll have to do that, maybe get all of us together. You, and me, and Donna, and just have a good ole sit down conversation.

Maria Evans: It'd be great.

Barbi Click: Yeah. Okay. Thank you, Maria.

Maria Evans: Thanks, Barbie.