

## MMACC FOUNDING STORY

*by Jane Via*

I began my professional life as a professor of Theology in a small Catholic college and later in a Catholic university, teaching mostly Biblical Studies, specializing in New Testament Studies. Teaching undergraduates New Testament radicalized me. I learned things about the Bible I did not learn in doctoral studies. I learned that much of Roman Catholic dogma and doctrine do not have a Scriptural basis. I learned that Jesus' interaction with women reflected a belief in their equal value and worth.

In 1984, I signed the New York Times Ad which advocated open theological discussion of abortion in the Roman Catholic church. The ad did not advocate abortion. A series of subsequent events led to an ultimatum from the local bishop that I recant my signature on the NY Times Ad. I was unable to recant, which resulted in the bishop silencing me. I was no longer able to teach in any public, Catholic forum on any subject.

I became an attorney and was privileged to become a county prosecutor. In that role, I tried a wide variety of cases but received special satisfaction trying cases involving vulnerable victims. [E.g. child abuse, elder abuse, etc.]

Meanwhile, I had married and had two boy children. Over the years, I remained a faithful Catholic, attended Mass regularly, and did everything I could to attempt to achieve the changes implicit in the vision of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican Council, especially with regard to women in the church. I was part of a Women's Ordination Conference [WOC] group in San Diego which later evolved into a woman church. Those experiences were invaluable, but always left me incomplete. Neither my husband/best friend nor my sons were able to participate in this uniquely women's experience.

Over the years, I remained active in the Roman Catholic Church, seeking out the most progressive parishes in San Diego, participating as a lector, baptizing my children through RCIA, serving on a parish council, rendering the Sunday readings inclusive on behalf of a parish, serving as a Eucharist minister, occasionally counting the collection after Mass, when possible seeking the cooperation of parish priests to drop some exclusive language from the Mass or adopt some inclusive language in the Mass, occasionally lecturing in a non-Catholic context, and regularly attending Mass. I watched as the Vatican subtly, but effectively, dismantled the advances made in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican Council, often to the detriment of women.

In 2002, I learned of the excommunication of seven Roman Catholic women in Europe who were ordained priests in the Roman Catholic rite. By then, I had been pushed over the edge by the departure from progressive parishes of farsighted clergy willing to take some risks for the equality of women and by the relatively traditional theology and clerical culture of the clergy who had replaced them.

Meanwhile, I sought personal religious fulfillment in the Immaculate Heart Community [IHC] of Los Angeles. In December 2003, I made my commitment to their community of women, men, children, and marginalized Catholics. Shortly thereafter, I discovered the identity of one of the original seven women ordained on the Danube in 2002; and, at the very end of the year, I wrote to her asking if a woman from the U.S. might join their movement. This led to my ordination as a Deacon in June of 2004 on the Danube River, an event about which I told no one because my son was a senior in a Roman Catholic high school.

In September 2004, I met Rod Stephens at an IHC event. Rod had been a diocesan priest first in L.A., then in the Diocese of Orange. He resigned from active diocesan priesthood as a matter of conscience and in opposition to some of the canonical disciplines of the Church. He had just become a candidate for membership in the IHC. That was the beginning of a collaboration and friendship that would alter both of our lives. By August of 2005, I had shared my ordination to the diaconate with Rod. He elicited from me the vision that was to be concretized in the birth of MMACC: a parish for driven away Catholics like my husband, for fallen away Catholics like my sons, for divorced Catholics without annulments like my colleagues at work, for gay and lesbian Catholics like many of my friends, and for progressive Catholics like me who had nowhere to worship with integrity as Catholics. Rod enthusiastically affirmed that vision. Within three weeks, we met with Methodist friends to ask them to vouch for us with a Methodist church centrally located in San Diego. In October 2005, the Board of Mission Hills Methodist Church approved our request to rent space from them. On the first Sunday of Advent in 2005, we met for Mass for the first time. Rod and I wondered whether anyone would come. A hundred people attended. Of those, forty became involved in the creation of our parish.

With their energy and effort, we developed a parish which is democratically governed by a non-profit Board and a parish council with decision-making authority, modeling inclusive language in worship and song and bringing contemporary theology to the language of the Mass. Although we remain a work in progress, we are a vital, engaged, community of believers committed to gender equality in the church, contemporary theology and service to one another and the world. The vision unfolds.