

Education for Ministry - Hear from Three Graduates

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by Lola Michael Russell

Sewanee: The University of the South, School of Theology, is committed to preparing lay and ordained leadership for service to The Episcopal Church and the world. Education for Ministry is one of its most successful lay programs. According to its website:

Education for Ministry (EfM) is a unique four-year distance learning certificate program in theological education based upon small-group study and practice. Since its founding in 1975, this international program has assisted more than 120,000 participants in discovering and nurturing their call to Christian service. EfM helps the faithful encounter the breadth and depth of the Christian tradition and bring it into conversation with their experiences of the world as they study, worship, and engage in theological reflection together.

The EFM program invites participants into groups of 6-12, with commitments made for one year at a time. Groups meet with a mentor weekly, either in person or online, with the goal of providing tools for an individual to better carry out their lay ministry. Complete studies of the Bible, church history, liturgy, and theology, along with reflections, are included in their studies.

One such small group has flourished in the Episcopal Church in Delaware, despite the parameters imposed by the COVID pandemic. It is based at St. David's Church, Wilmington, under the mentorship of the Rev. Ann Kathryne Urinoski, who said: "EfM combines fellowship, study, and guided discussions in a small group format over the course of the program year. The group gathers weekly to discuss readings and reflect on the ways we find God in the world around us." This year, three of the group's participants graduated. We asked them their thoughts and reflections on the program and its impact on their lives.

Elinor Knodel, Robert "Bob" Irwin, and Robert "Rob" Carver came to The Episcopal Church from different backgrounds. Knodel was a cradle half-Episcopalian —her mother was Episcopalian, and her father, Lutheran. They decided that the family would become Methodist as a compromise. While a student at Columbia University, Knodel sang in the choir at St. Paul's Chapel on campus and after three years decided to become an Episcopalian. She was confirmed at the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine and has been a practicing Episcopalian for more than 50 years. She is a member of St. David's.

By contrast, Carver came to The Episcopal Church by chance. St. David's was just up the street from where he lived, and he decided to visit. He heard one of the Rev. Brad Hinton's sermons and decided to go back to hear a few more. He soon realized he had found a spiritual home. He was comforted by the kindness he encountered and appreciated the language of acceptance and love that had been missing in his previous church life.

Irwin was raised a Roman Catholic and came to The Episcopal Church as an adult. He is a member of Immanuel, New Castle.

As for what led these graduates to the EfM program, their paths toward it were again diverse. Carver said: "I attend a church that has many EfM graduates, who all speak highly of the program. For a long time, EfM was not offered in person in the diocese, although I knew that there were online offerings through Sewanee. That changed with this EfM cohort sponsored and hosted by St. David's. I joined this cohort as it was an in-person session, which is what I wanted."

Knodel had been drawn to EfM for some 25 years, but family and work responsibilities precluded her participation. She said: "Then, after my retirement, I'd say that St. Mary opened the door for me and gave me a nudge to enter the EfM world. When talking to a staff member at Christ Church Christiana Hundred, I noticed a lovely icon of St. Mary in his office. He told me that it had been a gift at his graduation from EfM years before, and if I liked it, I could have it. He also said that a new EfM group was starting at St. David's, to be mentored by the Rev. Ann Urinoski."

Carver, on the other hand, said: "I was unaware of EFM until Father Brad mentioned it to me as a possible next step on my spiritual journey. I had been involved in what we called *The 9:00 Hour* or the *Equippers* group at St. David's for a few years, but we were ending that program and I was looking for something that would provide the same spiritual spark, and which would allow for some deeper self-reflection like we had been doing in the *Equippers*. I decided to attend the informational meeting and then to give it a try for one year."

Irwin, who had waited years for the opportunity to participate in EfM in person, rather than online, noted: "The irony is that this cohort was in progress in March of 2020 when everything was shut down due to COVID. Our group pivoted and stayed connected through Zoom. This became an anchor in my life and something to look forward to as we navigated the pandemic. This is a group that changed as we had members of the cohort leave for a variety of reasons, and others join. The thread that ran through all of this for me was the relationships that I formed initially and sustained through our online gatherings. The discussions about the weekly readings and from the theological reflections were something that I looked forward to each week as the pandemic continued. The robust discussions led to additional readings and study that was well outside of the required readings."

For each of these graduates, EfM kept them engaged for the full program. Carver commented: “The thing that kept me coming back was the community that we developed those first few years we were together. This also sustained me as we navigated life as the pandemic entered into the following fall. When we were finally able to gather in person again, it made the gatherings so much richer and an event to look forward to.”

Carver, too, said that the people he met in EfM kept him engaged in the program. “I always find it hard to pull down my mask and be my true self and in EfM I had an opportunity to do that and when we all did that — especially in the spiritual autobiography — I knew I wanted to spend more time with these folks and grow with them. Each week, after completing the theological reflection, I always felt a tremendous amount of connection with my Higher Power and with those in the group. There were God winks constantly, and that feeling is something that kept drawing me back week after week and year after year.”

For Knodel, deep desire kept her in the EfM program. “I had wanted to read and discuss the whole Bible with fellow Christians, which we covered in the first two years. The rest of the curriculum also intrigued me — Diarmaid MacCulloch’s *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years*, and several shorter books on theology, ethics, and interfaith encounters.”

She commented that: “EfM participation requires a significant time commitment, but the rewards can be great. Aside from gaining knowledge from working through the texts, I experienced a spiritual growth through the close fellowship of the EfM group. We had learned to trust each other, shared aspects of how our lives were going, provided honest viewpoints on the texts, and during theological reflection a way of looking at life through a theological lens. Hearing how my fellow Christians were thinking about our current world made me open my mind and heart to other alternatives — it was an unexpected gift and a blessing.”

Their EfM experiences led to personal awakenings and profound realizations. Knodel commented that: “The experience made me more willing to wrestle with hard texts. Currently I am slowly working through *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* by Fleming Rutledge, a book mentioned by one of my EfM friends. I also expect to continue participating in Christian study groups and specially to learn to listen more and speak less.”

Of his experience, Carver realized: “That God is everywhere and in everyone and everything. It is something I did not really understand before EfM. I also, quite honestly, discovered myself being a bit embarrassed to be a Christian. The history of the Church was more complicated and messier than I realized. There was a lot that I learned that truly disappointed me. At the same time, I am extremely blessed to be an Episcopalian and to have an opportunity to question everything. In a lot of ways, I think EfM has helped me to become a different kind of Christian, with an awareness and understanding of the past and willingness to reckon with it in order help create a future that reflects what Jesus and the disciples were trying to teach us all.”

He went on to reflect: “I think EfM has helped open my eyes to the difference between religion and spirituality and the need to bring those two things together again. I believe that EfM has shown me a path forward that will allow me to continue my spiritual journey WITHIN the church. EfM has taught me it is OK to be my authentic self just as God made me to be and that it is okay to question anyone or any institution that would want me to hide my light under a bushel.”

Irwin summed up his reflections: “EfM is part of the larger journey that I am on. I have developed a deeper faith and it has allowed me to apply this to my life in the world. EfM has led to serious additional study and a desire to learn even more. I have developed the ability to live with ambiguity and develop a sense of peace as I move through the world. My completion of year four of EfM, and marking a graduation of sorts, is not the finish of the process. Instead, I see it as a launch pad for future reading, study, and growth.”

Carver and Irwin are committed to continuing their EfM connections and will become co-mentors for the upcoming year, with the Rev. Urinoski, who commented:

“This fall, our St. David’s EfM group will begin our fifth year together. We’ll meet most Tuesdays from 6:30 – 8:45 p.m. on Zoom (with a handful of meetings throughout the year being in-person at St. David’s or other nearby churches). Our group currently has five members who will be starting their second, third, or fourth year of EfM. If you are interested in learning more, please join us for our interest meeting on Tuesday, Sept. 19, at 6:30 p.m. at St. David’s. We’ll share in refreshments and fellowship as we talk through our next year together. You also may reach out to one of this group’s mentors: the Rev. Ann Kathryne Urinoski, Bob Irwin, or Rob Carver.”

Lola Michael Russell is the communications assistant and staff writer for the Episcopal Church in Delaware.

lrussell@delaware.church