



by Nancy Janin

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Rev. Canon Stephanie Burette in Jerusalem

Making room for the light

Rev. Canon Stephanie Burette knew from the outset that an internship at St. George's Cathedral in Jerusalem would be challenging. Women priests are not accepted in many religious houses in the Holy Land, and she knew she would confront both worshippers and clerics hostile to her ministry. But Stephanie, who graduated from Yale Divinity School in June 2019 after previously serving in ministries at The American Cathedral, has not made a habit of taking the easy path.

She may be deliberately ignored by visiting clergy at the Cathedral or when accompanying groups to the holy sites; even at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, the holiest site in Christendom, priests leading other pilgrims may speak harshly to her. But Stephanie considers that her presence alone in the Holy City is an achievement. She thus responds to hostile reactions with a calm smile, at best daring a "good morning" if she judges that would be acceptable.

Even at St. George's she is careful to avoid inadvertent offense. "I am walking on eggshells before every service, and I make sure to check with the Dean of the Cathedral about what is possible on any given day," she said. At first limited to intercessor, then allowed to set up the altar, to wear her stole and recently even to read the Gospel, she knows some women would refuse to participate under such constraints. She said she has seen visiting female clergy "shocked and hurt" but also has

begun to notice recent changes. And working by her side are many men in authority positions in the church.

"None of what I am doing would be possible if they were not already convinced themselves that things have to change, and they want to make sure that this change is successful," she said. "There is regular humiliation to endure, but I am joining the cohort of women who have tried to push the boundaries, helped by men (including the Dean of the Cathedral, who has just been elected Bishop coadjutor before becoming the new Bishop of Jerusalem) who try to change habits, gently but with determination."



THE REV. CANONS NICHOLAS PORTER AND STEPHANIE BURETTE IN JERUSALEM



In her first step off the expected path, 20-year-old Stephanie left her home in Picardy and moved to the big city, Paris, to pursue her master's degree, teaching French in local schools on the side. Her family, despite having always told her that Paris was out of reach, nevertheless rallied in support. After graduation, Stephanie continued on to the Sorbonne for that master's degree, before embarking on a doctoral degree in both French literature and art history, which led her to Oxford University. There, Stephanie found herself for the first time in an active Christian community at a local Anglican church. Her dormant faith burst into flame. (Despite having had no religious upbringing, Stephanie in her teenage years had secretly considered becoming a Catholic nun.) Upon her return to Paris, she landed at The American Cathedral, on the suggestion of her priest at the Oxford church.

"The theology, the teaching about God that I had been introduced to in England, was very close to the one shared and embodied at the Cathedral," she said. "This was crucial in my conversation and for my desire to stay in the church in challenging times."

As she began to explore ordination, Dean Zachary Fleetwood urged her to experience the fullness of church life to be sure she understood at the practical level what clergy life would entail. She worked in the mission lunch program; with youth, particularly the Rite 13 group; as a lay minister, a reader, and attended Bible study. After a year of serving as a volunteer across the breadth of ministries, her sense of calling was affirmed.

While Stephanie felt she had come home in the church, her decision was not welcomed by everyone in her life. "My parents were not very pleased, though not completely surprised when they heard that I was considering ordained ministry," she said, and her brothers "were rather suspicious and worried for me." Friends, mostly atheists, kept their distance from her. She believes that much of their attitude toward religion has been formed by bad experiences in the Roman Catholic Church. But many began to support Stephanie as "they saw how much more alive I had become."

Stephanie followed the church's multi-step discernment process, which included a special team of five parishioners to guide her. One of the group, Jocelyn Phelps, remembers being struck by Stephanie's bravery,

offering herself to the world of the established church and clergy life, which was still relatively unfamiliar to her. The group pushed Stephanie to reflect deeply on the reasons behind her desire to be a priest, and after a few months she returned with her calling firmly understood and clearly articulated. She was enthusiastically encouraged to proceed.

The next steps were to obtain the accord of the vestry, approval of the Commission on Ministry of the Baptized and the Council of Advice, and finally of Bishop Pierre Whalon, who, in 2015, granted permission for her



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The logo is from a Japanese chop (or seal) presented to The Rev. Canon H. Boone Porter, in 1945. Perhaps an allusion to the words of Micah 6:8, it reads, "white heart, pure deed."

H. Boone and Violet M. Porter Charitable Foundation honors the vision of its founders by advancing Christian ministries of preaching, teaching and healing in Europe, the Middle East and the United States. This small family foundation leverages its limited means with partnerships into funding projects with outsized impact. Past recipients include The American Cathedral in Paris, Berkeley Divinity School at Yale, Ahli Arab Hospital in Gaza and St. John Eye Hospital in Jerusalem.

"Jerusalem is the navel of the universe. To live, serve and learn in the Holy City remains a rare blessing. The diaconal and priestly formation offered there produce skills and relationships for a global ministry. In 2016 we established the Porter Fellowship to equip new Christian ministers to lead effectively in a conflicted world. Our partnership with Berkeley Divinity School and St. George's College will empower the Rev. Stephanie Burette to complete her fellowship prepared for leadership in the 21st Century."

- The Rev. Canon Nicholas T. Porter,
President, HB and VMPPF



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to apply to seminary. However, before Stephanie was allowed to begin seminary courses, she had one special milestone to pass – to complete her Ph.D. dissertation, on teaching rules to painters at the Royal Academy of Art in Paris in the 17th and 18th centuries. While her subject had no logical connection to her theological studies, the church’s position was that Stephanie should know that being a priest was her choice among other work she was qualified to do.



STEPHANIE AT THE CATHEDRAL,
DECEMBER 2019

So, having never set foot in the United States, and less fluent in English than she would have liked, Stephanie committed to the three-year program at Berkeley Episcopal Seminary, part of Yale Divinity School in New Haven, CT. She said she especially appreciated being at Yale as it educates clergy of many denominations. She was struck by the spontaneity of religious expression – the frequent “I will

pray for you,” the beautiful extemporaneous prayers offered by her classmates. “You understand your own denomination and culture by seeing others,” she noted.

New Haven and American culture also presented some challenges, perhaps a foreshadowing of what she finds in Palestine today. She said she was surprised by the divisions and segregation between groups of people, especially by race, the glaring differences in infrastructure depending on the ethnicity of the neighborhood, physical safety concerns, and the ever-present security forces.

As her studies were ending, Stephanie learned of a nine-month internship at St. George’s College in Jerusalem, an initiative of the Porter Foundation (see sidebar page 15). Again, having never visited the Holy Land, with her characteristic faith and courage, she applied, only later learning of the connection to the former Cathedral

canon, Nicholas Porter. She was accepted to begin in September 2019.

In Jerusalem, Stephanie has three main responsibilities: assisting the Course Director and the Dean of St. George’s College, particularly with pilgrimages, assisting the clergy of the Cathedral, and volunteering with Jerusalem Peacebuilders (see sidebar page 17).

Depending on the size and composition of the pilgrimage groups, Stephanie may be involved in everything from logistics to being chaplain – offering prayers and reflections on holy sites. She feels her main contribution is as pastoral counselor to pilgrims. “It is a deep experience for them, a trip of a lifetime. Many are profoundly moved,” she said.

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REV. CANON
STEPHANIE BURETTE

Stephanie also helps group members bond in their experience together. The pilgrims sometimes know each other well, but often are a mix of parishioners of various churches and other situations. “Just like the borders and checkpoints we cross, it feels like there are borders within the group. As time goes on, in all but one case in my experience, the borders become porous, the group becomes the body of Christ,” she said.

Pilgrimages run by St. George’s combine biblical history with the reality of life in Israel today, a fraught territory. Stephanie said that although people are often “profoundly hurt by how Palestinians are treated, we are keenly aware of the risk of feeding into an antisemitic side of Christianity. Listening to people

who actually live here, in very different and various situations, helps us get a glimpse of how complex and complicated the context is.”

Once a week Stephanie teaches at a public middle school in East Jerusalem, volunteering for Jerusalem Peacebuilders. Trained for this at Cambridge (UK) along with 25 other volunteers, she teaches the program’s curriculum to 12- to 15-year-old Arab Muslims, selected by their school principal for leadership skills and fluency in English. After the course some will go to summer camps operated by Jerusalem Peacebuilders in the United States, mixing with Christian and Jewish students and adult leaders.

On December 29, 2019, Stephanie preached a sermon at the Cathedral that brought together many strands of her life. She had seen an exhibit at the Louvre that showcased artist Pierre Soulages, whose black and black-on-white paintings push the boundaries of darkness, aiming at “*outrénoir*,” a color beyond black. Stephanie drew parallels with faith: God didn’t take away darkness but brought light. Both are there, physically and metaphysically, with darkness often hiding and crowding out the light. But God has left us the choice of how to respond to darkness, how to bring light and life into the world every day. She quoted Martin Luther King, Jr.: “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.” Stephanie urged the congregation to recognize that even darkness beyond darkness, *outrénoir*, “gives more possibilities for reflection than we could ever have imagined” by calling us to bring light to our lives and our worlds.

In that spirit, Stephanie is pushing out darkness wherever she confronts it, shining today in Jerusalem; tomorrow, who knows? It will be fascinating to see where her light, her faith, her determination will next be called upon by God. The only bet we’re making is it won’t be what you’d expect. 🕯

Nancy Janin, who joined the Cathedral in 1988 and served as Senior Warden amongst other roles, now lives in London but continues her involvement as Treasurer of the Cathedral Foundation, and member of the Board of Foreign Parishes.

Jerusalem Peacebuilders (JPB) is an interfaith, non-profit organization with a mission to create a better future for humanity across religions, cultures and nationalities. JPB’s interfaith programs focus on uniting Israelis, Palestinians and Americans, and providing them with the opportunities, relationships and skills they need to become future leaders for peace in the global community.

JPB had its genesis on the 10th anniversary of the terror bombings of September 11, 2001. Having served for some time at St. George’s Cathedral in Jerusalem, the Reverend Nicholas and Dorothy Porter, JPB’s founders, had become convinced that these attacks made the timeless call for peacemaking in the Holy Land even more urgent. In the beginning, the Porters partnered with an international organization to conduct a specialized leadership camp for American, Israeli and Palestinian youth, the first session held in Brattleboro, VT in July 2011.

With the influence of the late Stuart Kensinger, a co-founder, the program has evolved and expanded, and JPB now oversees a robust, four-year, year-round program cycle of in-school and summer programs in the U.S. and the Holy Land. Offering summer institutes at successive levels in Texas, Connecticut and Vermont, each program runs over the course of about two weeks and provides participants with leadership and peacebuilding skills, personal dialogues, service projects, presentations by guest speakers, and interfaith learning, in addition to typical camp activities such as swimming, horseback riding, canoeing, etc.

“Jerusalem Peacebuilders is thrilled with Deacon Stephanie’s involvement in our mission of interfaith peace and leadership education. Stephanie’s weekly teaching on Monday mornings at a nearby school for Palestinian teens in East Jerusalem not only opened their eyes to a new future but also opened hers to the history and struggles of Jerusalem’s Arabic-speaking population. She is incredibly talented, and I hope that this volunteer service in one of the world’s most intractable conflicts contributes to her ministry of loving and learning in Jesus’ name.”

– The Rev. Canon Nicholas T. Porter,
Founding Director, JPB

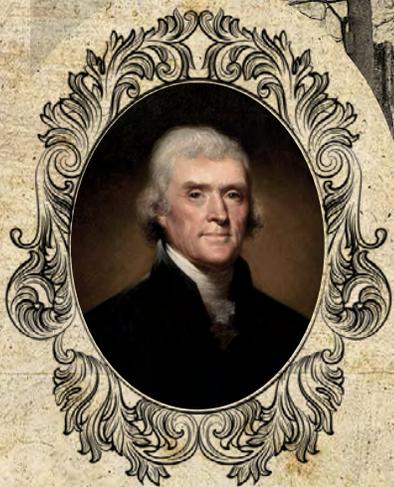
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