



*Methodist
Minister
Katie O'Hern*



N E X T
G E N E R A T I O N
C L E R G Y

WE TALKED WITH SOME YOUNG PEOPLE WHO HAVE DEDICATED THEIR LIVES TO
RELIGION TO ASK THEM HOW THEY WERE CALLED AND WHAT THEIR LIVES ARE
LIKE NOW.

BY MARY STONE | PHOTOGRAPHS BY TOMAS FLINT

THE CLERGY POSSESS AN AUTHORITY NOT JUST BY THEIR CLOTHES, OR THEIR COSTLY, LENGTHY, AND DEMANDING STUDIES,

but by the people who confide so readily in them every day. From parishioners to strangers on the street, some people want to unburden themselves, to grieve, to heal. By offering hope, and maybe some direction, the clergy provide a safe place to turn.

“People are very giving of themselves; it’s very humbling,” says Michael Costik, a 42-year-old assistant priest at three Catholic churches in Rush-Henrietta. Costik says even from passersby, the mere sight of his collar, in large cities, has elicited requests for confession. It’s an immense responsibility and opportunity, Costik explains.

“I’m good at drawing how God is related to what people are going through. I think that’s the big role of priests... is pointing out where God is in the struggle. In the confessional and when I’m doing spiritual direction, I feel most of the time very happy with the whole experience” Costik says. “Sometimes it’s challenging. But as I’ve been a priest longer, I realize the kind of impact I can have on people.”

Three members of the local clergy agreed to share their experience. All of them say they were in awe of the intimacy, honesty, and trust their place at the pulpit inspires. Our goal was to explore that responsibility from the perspective of a young person and find out how they were called to a profession that for many years has been in decline across religions and denominations. (For this piece, we sought a Muslim imam,

a Jewish rabbi, a Catholic priest, and a Protestant minister as subjects. Muslim association board members, imams, professors, and other connected locals kindly tried to help POST find a young Rochester imam. The effort turned up one imam under the age of 45, but he declined to be interviewed.)

Katie O’Hern is a minister at Asbury First United Methodist Church on East Avenue. O’Hern is a woman in a traditionally male role, and she is young—28. Yet for some of her congregation, she is a lifeline, an counselor, a confidant.

“They told us in seminary that ‘People will tell you things you don’t really want to know. They’ll tell you the state of their marriage, and you’ll be wondering why are they telling me this?’ This even happens with people I don’t know very well; they tell me things that are very private. It comes with the job...people trust me.” O’Hern says. “It surprises me, and I’m glad people are willing to share those things with me. In seminary, they tell us that, and it still is this sort of wonderful surprise when they do. I’m grateful for that.”

Kelly Levy, a 30-year-old rabbi at Temple B’rith Kodesh on Elmwood Avenue, is integral to people’s lives in her congregation even though, like O’Hern, she occupies a traditionally male role, and she is young. The former poses no problem, she says, but the latter can be a hurdle.

“I think that youth might play more of a factor for me because I’m actually the age of some of my congregants’ grandchildren,” she says. Being a woman is not an issue because in Judaism, especially reformed Judaism, women are considered equal, Levy explains. It wasn’t always that way, Levy says, but female rabbis such as Rosalind Gold paved the way for her. Gold was one of the first female rabbis in the U.S. and happened to serve as assistant rabbi at Temple B’rith Kodesh in Rochester in the 1970s.

At the time, one of the 1,350 families left the synagogue, and two members of the Rochester board of rabbis dropped out when she was invited to join their professional group, Gold told the Washington Post in 1981. Thanks to women like Gold, however, female rabbis today are spared the resistance their predecessors faced.

“Now, women feel more empowered to go to rabbinical school these days. It wasn’t so simple in the 1970s. There are many other women who were ordained in the ’70s and ’80s, who have had not had positive experiences. They were not welcomed with open arms at their congregations, or they were welcome, but there were stipulations. They had to wear dresses, for example, when they were leading services. There were stipulations, and, of course, there wasn’t maternity leave,” Levy says. When Levy was interviewed, she was on maternity leave with her first child, Ezri Levy-D’Angelo.

O’Hern says she sometimes is overwhelmed when confronted with the joyous and sometimes painful circumstances she is invited to witness and preside over. She asks herself: “Who am I to step into this role? Who am I to take on these responsibilities?”

“Whether it’s going to visit someone in the hospital: ‘What am I going to say to this person? What do I know about being in a hospital bed or the person sitting next to them, and who am I to have something to say here?’ Stepping into the pulpit, it’s the same kind of thing, especially with the political climate in the country now,” O’Hern says. “I feel a tension: a need to speak to that and also a need to speak to all people gathered. We don’t all agree, but who am I to take on that task or proclaim these promises (of the church) that I really know to be true?”

Levy says sometimes it is hard not to be affected by a difficult period or painful moment



*Assistant Priest
Michael Costik*

"The best way to find out if you can trust somebody is to trust them." —Ernest Hemingway

she witnesses in the lives of her congregation.

“It is impossible to leave everything outside my house. Of course, some things do come home with me, especially those things that are really painful,” Levy says. “(In a painful moment though,) it’s not about me. My job is to be there for someone. If I make it about me, then it will be emotionally draining. It’s important that when I go home, I try to leave everything outside so I can spend that quality time with family.”

The reality, these clergy members agree, is very different from the rigors of seminary or rabbinical school. O’Hern, who has been a practicing minister for a year and a half now, says, “When you’re in a theological classroom, you are talking about things divorced from their context,” she explains. It is easy to focus on the wrong thing. But people and circumstances today are so diverse and complex, O’Hern and Costik agreed, that upholding the theological standards in certain cases must come second to serving people. The clergy person’s job is to make the distinction, sometimes in the moment, whether to stick to a rigid liturgical or sacramental interpretation of the situation or a flexible, more human one.

When people on the street ask Costik for confession, he says he doesn’t say no because confession is supposed to take place in church.

“There’s always going to be something that doesn’t fit,” he says. “What do you do for someone who is asking for confession in an emergency room, and the doctors are working on him? Are you going to tell the doctors to leave? Of course not! It’s unthinkable. You would be crazy. But I think the youngest people haven’t learned that life is not always black or white. It’s often very colorful and very difficult.”

Yet even knowing that, he says, it still can get confusing trying to reconcile the church’s tradition with modern life. “People think you just do what the book says, but it’s not always as simple as that even though I live by that rule, too,” Costik says.

O’Hern says she has to maintain perspective and be willing to let go of her own rigidity sometimes. “You have these theological ideals that you want to hold on to as purists, but life is messy,” O’Hern says. “Sometimes (what I’m hearing) is not exactly how I’ve come to know grace, but the more important thing is that I connect with the person in front of me.”

PRIEST

In his adult mind, Michael Costik knew at least one thing about his future: that he would eventually marry and start a family. He didn’t know what his career path would be—teacher, musician, or lawyer—but at least he knew he was going to be a husband and father. Ultimately though, he gave up all of those and became a priest instead.

The 180 didn’t exactly come out of nowhere. Costik, now 41, grew up a devout Catholic and even as a boy thought about becoming a priest. But at the end of college, he stopped practicing.

“It was just kind of a falling away. I didn’t know if any of it was true,” Costik says. “I didn’t know.”

Now 41, Costik says it was in his early 30s that a general malaise began to cloud his life. He was depressed but unsure why. He was working part time as music teacher near Connecticut, two hours from New York City. Though he was having fun, he recalls, he wasn’t happy.

He was dating; he was preparing to attend law school. He had a life teeming with prospects, but he wasn’t very interested in any of them. Around that time, he leased an apartment almost rent-free from the parents of one of his students.

The family was very kind to him. The husband happened to be from Fairport. Costik himself was from Livonia. The wife had mentioned that her brother was a priest. (The apartment stood opposite a Catholic church.)

Even though he didn’t go to church, he carried a loyalty to the Catholic faith.

“I had a tremendous devotion and deep affection for Jesus Christ, but the son of God stuff I didn’t know about. How do we know that? That was my question,” Costik says. “So I said I don’t know, so I’m not going to practice. I think that’s what happened.”

He doesn’t remember much more than that, he says. It was on a lark that he decided to visit that church across the street. “One day, I thought, ‘This is stupid, but I think I’ll go to Mass.’ I went, and I thought, ‘Oh, this (going-to-church phase) will probably last a week, and then I’ll just quit going.’ But I didn’t.”

Costik was going to Mass every Sunday. “I found myself hearing stories from whatever gospel that was being proclaimed that year, and being very much emotionally affected by what

was being said. It was a wonderful priest. I found myself crying during the homily and during the reading: I knew all of them. It wasn’t anything I hadn’t heard before, that I hadn’t thought about. But it was something very new in me,” Costik remembers.

The real change, however, came after Costik started saying the creed again. In Catholicism, the creed is a statement of a person’s faith, affirming belief in God as the Father, Jesus Christ his Son, and the Holy Spirit.

“I said the creed when I was home at Christmas, in those years I didn’t go to church very often. And then when I started going to church, I started saying the creed again. I’ll tell you that my life just got better the day I did that,” Costik remembers. “The next morning when I got up, I thought, ‘Oh, I realize what I’ve been missing for all these years, where I was having fun but unhappy at the same time.’”

Costik says his whole life felt like the answering of a question. The day he started saying the creed again, he also said to himself: “I’ll do my best.” He remembers that life immediately got easier for him. The next day, he had a project to present at school. He had traffic duty outside in the bitter cold. Normally, he would have worried about the presentation, but this day, he worked out the project in his head. It all came together so fluidly, he thought. When he presented it that afternoon, his colleagues loved it. Costik realized he was on some sort of track that was making daily life easier for him.

“God got me to turn in the direction he was blowing the wind when I had been walking against it all this time,” Costik says. “Our lives are perfected by the lives we share in Jesus Christ. It’s complicated and not complicated at the same time.”

This period in his life, he says, was the closest thing he can equate to a calling from God. The calling back to the church is what was most important he said. About that he was certain. Certainty about becoming a priest developed very gradually.

After he began attending Mass again, he didn’t know in what other ways his life might change. “I had never been in a relationship with anyone who was of any faith really. It was always very secular. So I didn’t know if I would meet a Catholic woman and fall madly in love,

and that was my calling. I didn't know if priesthood was my calling; I didn't know if I was being called back into being a musician."

Even in seminary school, he had lingering doubts. "I had to let that play out over the first year at Becket Hall (a part of the Diocese of Rochester, where men live and study to determine whether or not the priesthood is their vocation). Also, while I was at seminary in Belgium. It was a wonderful experience. I never dated while I was at seminary, but there was still a question in my mind, was this what I was being called to?"

"For me, I was very interested in getting married. It was going to happen sooner or later," Costik says. "I had the idea: 'When I meet the right person, it will all click.' It wasn't an overburdening question. I always thought I was just going through the process."

He remembers a couple of times telling his spiritual director overseeing his studies in Bel-

gium that he was going to give up, go to Poland, and marry a nice Polish girl. "I said, 'I can't take seminary anymore!' Seminary isn't easy for a lot of people, but, for me in particular, I suffered through it. I liked it, but it was hard."

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Costik is very busy, but he's also very happy. The lifestyle and the work fit him well, he says. "That doesn't mean that I'm perfect. It doesn't mean that celibacy still isn't a difficult task, but I'm very happy to be a priest. When my pastor first asked me why I want to become a priest, my answer was, 'I just want to help.'"

As a priest, Costik says his life has meaning, and that makes all the difference. He may be working harder and doing more, but he says he's not nearly as tired as he used to be in his previous life.

Costik says, there still are not enough men entering the priesthood to serve existing parishes. Churches have had to consolidate; fewer priests are retiring, and the priests who are working are doing more Masses and more confessions than their predecessors. Instead of being a priest at one church, for example, Costik is assistant priest at three churches: St. Joseph's, Good Shepherd, and Guardian Angels, all in Rush-Henrietta.

But Catholicism isn't the only religion or denomination to suffer, Costik says. "If you ask Jewish congregations and orthodox Christians, Methodists, vocations are down everywhere. It's not something about being Catholic," Costik says. "A lot of Catholics will say, 'Well, they should just let priests get married. They should just do this or that.' But those things would not solve the problem."

Priests, pastors, rabbis, imams—all are working harder, but that doesn't mean their jobs are less satisfying. On the contrary.

As a priest, Costik says his life has meaning, and that makes all the difference. He may be working harder and doing more, but he says he's not nearly as tired as he used to be in his previous life.

"I would say my life was easier before I was a practicing Catholic, but it wasn't worth getting up for in the morning. So it's an interesting way of looking at it. My life was much easier, but it I described it in Mass one day in saying, for a piano, there aren't wrong notes or right notes until a composer writes music for it, and the notes on

the piano become right or wrong according to whatever music is being played.

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"The piano is perfected by the mind of a composer; our lives are perfected by God, by the life we share in Him," Costik says. "It's a lofty way of putting it, but it works."

PASTOR

People, she says, generally don't think of a 28-year-old woman when they hear "Methodist minister," says Katie O'Hern, minister for discipleship and mission at Asbury First on East Avenue.

Being a young woman in an advisory and authoritative role formerly reserved for men is probably O'Hern's biggest challenge as a pastor, but also an immense opportunity.

"Sometimes I feel like I have to prove myself in spaces where men or people who are older wouldn't have to. But this challenge is also an opportunity that I'm really grateful for because I don't fit the expectations of 'pastor.' I can fit into different spaces and meet different people, and I can help change their understanding of what the church is all about," O'Hern says.

"Sometimes I meet people who are really confused that I'm a pastor, and other times I meet people who are really delighted to learn what I do."

While women were ordained as ministers in the Methodist church in the late 1800s, it wasn't until 1956 that clergy rights were fully offered to women.

She adds: "Pastors certainly aren't the only profession where women face these kinds of challenges and opportunities, and I'm eager for the day when we move beyond thinking of 'pastors' and 'female pastors' to simply understanding that God calls all kinds of people into ministry."

Ministering, she says, makes her wonder sometimes what gives her the right to comfort someone or to counsel them, or relate to the sometimes intense struggles they face. She says: "The response to that though is trusting that I have, in fact, been called to this, and I have the resources. I won't always do my job perfectly. Sometimes I will say or do the wrong thing. But for me, the message of grace is forgiveness is always available to us. We can always choose to live differently if we want to. When I make a mistake, I own it, and say it, and try to do differently next time."

She has her fellow ministers at Asbury and others within the United Methodist network of churches to call on for advice when she is unsure of the right counsel to give, but she knows she also is guided by a higher power.

“I don’t tend to feel out of myself and feel, ‘Wow, that was really God in me.’ But I do have moments when I say whatever is on my mind, and it’s exactly what they needed to hear. Whether it’s a question or a challenge or a word of comfort,” she says.

“I definitely feel God working through me in the process of growth and reflection that comes before and after interactions with people. Whenever I am going to see someone, or I find myself talking to someone who is struggling, I say a prayer: ‘God, work in me and through me, with me and beyond me,’” O’Hern says. “I want to add what I believe God is already doing in the world and also I recognize that I’m never going to do it all. I’m trying to help cultivate the work that God is already doing.”

Her calling, O’Hern says, is hard to sum up in a single moment. It was more of a process, she says. But there is one day that does stand out in her journey to becoming a minister. She had studied elementary and special education at SUNY Geneseo, but was about to study alongside people who had undergraduate degrees in theology, who knew biblical Hebrew. She had doubts about her abilities.

It was late spring, and she was invited by her church in Maryland, where she’s from, to serve as a lay representative at an annual conference of regional United Methodist churches. “It’s sort of like a state senate in the hierarchy of Methodism. I had never been to anything like it,” O’Hern says.

It gave her a chance to see the management and administrative side of the church, but it also allowed her attend the annual ordination and commissioning service, where people as a group are either ordained or taking the first step to ordination.

The ceremony took place on a 95-degree Friday evening in Baltimore. To get in, O’Hern had volunteered to sing in the choir. Sweltering in the balcony, she doesn’t remember a lot about the service itself, she says.

“The bishop preached; there were scripture readings; we sang hymns. Then they called for-

ward one at a time the people being commissioned. Our tradition is they kneel, and their bishop or mentors and a few other people lay hands on them and say basically, ‘Go and preach the gospel and administer the sacraments and care for God’s people and order the life of the church. Go and serve.’

“At that moment, I had an overwhelming feeling that that was what I was being called to do as well. I’m one who is not really prone to feeling emotionally overwhelmed in that way,” O’Hern remembers.

“After all of these new pastors have been ordained, the bishop looks out at the congregation and says: ‘We believe that there are people here who are also called to this work. If you believe that that might be you, we invite you to come forward so that the people who have just been ordained can pray with you.’”

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O’Hern stepped forward and joined the group, where a woman she knew as her youth pastor from high school faced her and prayed. It was emotional and coincidental enough.

I remember after she said, ‘Amen,’ she said, ‘Turn around, and look behind you,’ and standing there in a sort of semicircle behind me were six of the pastors who had served at my church where I was a member throughout my childhood,” O’Hern says. “It was a clear moment where I felt called to this work, and the church that had loved me in so many ways literally standing there with me at the moment. It was really powerful and confusing and terrifying. It was the moment of having certainty that I’m called to this work.”

At school, that certainty would be challenged. There, she worked to embrace her calling and all the doubts and insecurities that she says are part of what it means to be a full person in ministry.

“I have moments where I am overwhelmed a little bit. Particularly the moment we serve communion. The way we serve communion is I tear off a piece from a loaf, and I look the person in the eye and hand it to them. I say, ‘This is the body of Christ, the bread of life given to you.’ Sometimes I do that, and it’s a person I’ve never met before, and it’s still a beautiful connection where we connect as two humans and connect to this story bigger than we can understand.

“At other times, I met with the person just yesterday, and I know how much pain they are dealing with, and to look them in the eye and say, ‘This is the bread of life,’ matters in a different way when I know that, and maybe no one else in the room knows it,” O’Hern says. “That’s very powerful and overwhelming, and again I say to myself, ‘Who am I to stand in this moment and meet people in this way,’ except

that I find myself here, and I’m going to do this to the best of my ability.”

R A B B I

Where she grew up in Texas, Kelly Levy was the only Jewish student in her grade. If it weren’t for her parents and their constant involvement in Judaism, she might have chosen a completely different life for herself.

Today, however, she is a wife, a new mother, and a rabbi at Temple B’rith Kodesh on Elmwood Avenue. It’s a lot for a 30-year-old, but overwhelmingly rewarding, she says.

“To be present at the sad moments. It’s incredibly rewarding to be present at any life moment. To be able to be there for someone when they’ve just had a child. To be there when they are suffering through the loss of a loved one,” Levy says. “You get to be in the lives of people in a way that



*Kelly Levy, a
30-year-old
rabbi at Temple
B'rith Kodesh*

"The most basic of all human needs is the need to understand and be understood." —Ralph Nichols

nobody else can do. It would be voyeuristic for others, but for us, it's a part of what we do.

"You get to be there to offer something tangible in these moments in a way others can't. To be there for people is a blessing and a gift," Levy says.

From the time she was 12, preparing for her bat mitzvah—a Jewish coming-of-age ceremony—Levy knew she wanted to be a rabbi. For her family, Judaism was the center of their lives.

"They weren't just involved in our temple," Levy recalls of her parents. Her family went to services every Friday and every holiday; she went

hers there as a camper and a counselor and unit head and a faculty member," Levy says.

"Jewish summer camp is a really profound experience for many Jewish youth. It certainly was for me. I think it's something that overall really helps Jews feel a connection to Judaism and to God and to the experience of being Jewish.

"Especially as a Jew in Texas, there is a fairly significant Jewish population, but you're often alone. When you go to Jewish summer camp, everyone is Jewish. And being Jewish is more than just a religion, it's a cultural experience as

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to religious school on Sundays and attended Jewish camp every summer. "My father was past president of the temple. He currently serves on the Union for Reform Judaism executive board as the treasurer. My mom was a pre-school teacher at the Jewish Community Center for years. After doing that, she worked with Jewish youth groups in Texas and Oklahoma. She was the regional advisor for almost 10 years with them. So we were engaged in Judaism in every manner," Levy says.

"Because I was so active, I found a real love and passion for Judaism as a young child all the way through my adult years," she adds. Her siblings, she says, are considerably less involved. Her brother does not attend temple but does keep a Jewish home with his wife; her sister does not practice at all. For Levy, it was a female rabbi in San Antonio and Jewish summer camps that really cemented her commitment. Her calling to become a rabbi, she says, was more like a combination of moments, often at camp, than a single epiphany.

"I attended a Jewish camp every summer, from the time I was 8 years old. I spent 16 sum-

mer." It was important, Levy says, to connect with other people who knew what it was like not to have a Christmas tree when everyone else did or to have to go to services on Friday night when other kids were out having fun.

The spiritual aspect of Judaism was revealed to her most often through music. "There's something really amazing about Jewish summer camp music, with guitars, drums, electric guitars, and bass, everything you can imagine, which makes a special experience, especially for prayer.

"A teenager that I worked with recently said it perfectly: Music tells a story that we can't tell necessarily articulate ourselves. Music is something that can connect you to the other people sitting around you," Levy says. "It can help you meditate a little bit more on your own personal beliefs by taking you out of your own thoughts for a moment. Music has an ability to really raise your spirit. If it's a sad or darker moment in your life, it can really elevate your spirit, or the music can help you be in that moment of grief as well. But music has that amazing ability to take us away from ourselves or help us connect even deeper to ourselves."

Thanks to camp and some important female rabbi mentors, Levy has spent most of her life convinced of her calling—with one exception.

"After college, I graduated a semester early and moved to Israel and worked in a private school that had a classroom for students with low-functioning autism," Levy says. "I found a real love working with children with special needs. I found I had a real passion for it, and I was good at it. So for a while, I thought maybe I would not be working as a rabbi, and I would instead work as a special education teacher. But as a rabbi, I can do both, I realized. I'm not a special education teacher, but I can make a place for children and adults with special needs to feel welcome and supported and cared for in my congregation."

For a 30-year-old, Levy's responsibilities to her growing family and to congregants are immense. Even before maternity leave, Levy says it was hard trying to be everywhere for everyone at once.

"It's hard. You are expected to be at your office to accept every phone call, but also be at every hospital and every nursing home and anybody's home that needs visiting—all at the same time—and teach classes and lead services. It's hard to do all of it at once."

Most of the congregation, she says, is understanding. Others, usually when there is a crisis, are less so. And that's normal, Levy says.

"If you're in crisis, it's hard to see beyond your own personal experience. When you need something, and you need it right then, and I'm not there to give it, it can be challenging. For the times that it does, once the crisis has passed, they can see beyond. I just can't be everywhere I would like to be."

It can be emotionally draining, but she has excellent support, she says. Her husband, who is finishing his master's degree in public administration at SUNY Brockport, is always there to listen.

"The other part of it, is to have some really incredible clergy partners, and I absolutely do with Rabbi Peter Stein. Anytime I need to talk to him or work things through, he has offered me so much mentorship and guidance while I've been in Rochester."