

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra. And today I'm joined by Melissa Chim, scholarly communications librarian at Excelsior University in New York and co-author of the book *Living Archives: a History of the Center for Christian Spirituality*. Melissa is here to tell us about Margaret Guenther and women's contributions to the Episcopal Church. So first, could you give us an introduction to Margaret?

MC: She was an Episcopal priest. She actually earned her Master's in Divinity from General Theological Seminary in 1983. But before that, she actually earned her PhD in German language and literature from Radcliffe. And one thing that makes Margaret really special is that she's the first female director of the Center for Christian Spirituality at General Theological Seminary. She started her position in 1986. And then she actually retired in 1997. And that was after she really revamped the program and made it pretty much into the seminary's most popular spiritual direction program to date, actually.

AT: So one of the things that you've talked about in relation to Margaret's influence is spiritual direction. So what does that mean in this context?

MC: So here is a kind of brief definition of spiritual direction as defined actually by General Theological Seminary and their Center for Christian Spirituality. In their program, they say spiritual direction is about companionship. In a Christian context, a spiritual director is someone who accompanies you as you explore your spirituality and grow in relationship with God. Spiritual direction can help you listen for God and live more fully into Christian faith. A spiritual director will invite you to reflect on your life in the light of faith, guide you in prayer and spiritual practices, listen to you and with you in discerning God's purposes and courage through our baptismal discipleship. And it's interesting that this definition includes listening, because Margaret Guenther's first book was published in 1992. And it was actually called *Fully Listening: the Art of Spiritual Direction*. She was really, really influential in making spiritual direction something that lay people can be involved with, and something that wasn't so very intimidating as it was in the past. She wrote about spiritual direction and the spiritual director kind of as an amateur. Before that, in a lot of spiritual direction tracts, you would see this idea of the spiritual director being an expert. They're directly in tune with God, and they can help you discern what's going on in your life. But she really changed that into making it seem like this practice of her being your own guide. Basically, you're both going on this journey together. You don't know what's going to happen. She's going to kind of help you through it. You could talk through it. You can gain skills also to listen and to really understand what's going on in your life and how God is helping you. So she really pioneered that idea of the spiritual director as an amateur. She described it as one who loves, loves the art that she serves, loves and prays for the people who trust her, loves the Holy Spirit, who is the true director in the strange ministry called spiritual direction. And another really unique thing about her was that she was unapologetic in bringing her own perspectives into her spiritual direction practice. She would say from the very beginning that she is coming from the perspective of a woman, a woman who had been married for many, many decades, a woman who had children. So she was very influential in that aspect too of bringing spiritual direction more down to earth and more as a personalized practice, too.

AT: Throughout history, in a lot of different ways, institutions have been used to keep women out of positions of authority. So you can only be a medical professional if you go to medical school, but women aren't allowed in the medical school. So things like that. And as you're describing this, it sounds like she was pushing back against that institutionalized barriers to authority in this context and making that more accessible and saying "there is value in other perspectives and people who maybe don't have this particular qualification, but they still have something to add, to teach, to guide."

MC: Right. Yeah, that's the perfect way to describe it. She really did pioneer this notion of going back to the idea of the amateur, saying that, "you know what, we're not, any of us are not experts here. We are just going

to be open to what's happening and everyone's perspective is valid and can be used to communicate with God and to also improve your own life to actually looking inward” and saying, “okay, I'm not an expert, but I do know these things and this is how my perspective is being brought to the table.” She even said of herself, I had this really great quote, this actually came from the Center for Christian Spirituality newsletter in 1994. She wrote, “I'm not a professional fundraiser, but just a spiritual strudel stretcher.” And I think it's great just to show her humor on display too, but to even say, “look, I have this background in spiritual direction. I have my PhD and everything like this, but at the end of the day, I'm just stretching dough and seeing what's going to work here.” So I think that aspect of her personality was very unique in making the spiritual direction more accessible overall too.

AT: It also diversifies when you don't have all of those barriers in place dictating that only this select group of people, who tend to be very homogenous, hold those positions. So there's this quote about, “I can only write from my own perspective. First and foremost, that is the perspective of a woman, a woman who has been married for over three decades, and who has born and reared children.” So not just saying, “this is the voice that I'm bringing to the conversation,” but acknowledging that we are all limited by our own experiences.

MC: Exactly. Yeah, there is this sense that we are all limited by our own experiences, and also it doesn't even have to be a limiting aspect either. Her perspective as a wife and mother too can really bring a lot of valuable insight into the table where heretofore there was that sense that, “okay, there's only one type of spiritual director or even one type of religious leader that you can see. And as long as they look this way and sound this way, then they are a good figure of authority.” But now she was saying, “oh no, actually these aspects of our personality that may have been downplayed before in the church or even just in society in general is actually something that's one of my major strengths.” And I think it's really important to see religious leaders, female religious leaders like that, just in the sense for women to actually see themselves reflected in these leadership positions, especially too, not just in Christianity and Judeo-Christian religions, but in a lot of religions, there are very misogynistic stories that are a part of the religion itself. And for women to actually say like, “oh, I can actually look to a woman in authority, see myself in her.” I know that her experience as a woman and being uniquely female is something that I bring too.

AT: Yeah, definitely. And I think it's really interesting that from my perspective, she's commenting on the limitations of other leaders by acknowledging her own limitation in the same context, if that makes sense. Like saying, “I can only write from my own perspective,” and not saying the quiet part out loud that “y'all can only speak from your own perspectives as well. And y'all have very similar perspectives, guys.”

MC: Yeah, I think there is that uniformed aspect of the church, that there's this assumption that everyone is coming from the same perspective, and that there's only one perspective that matters. So in that sense, I really do like how she was able to say, “these are only my experiences,” and to even say in a very veiled way too, that “everyone else, you're coming from your own perspective, too. And it's not necessarily 100% right, it's not 100% wrong. And you can't say that yours is the only perspective that matters.” Everyone has biases and limitations. And it could be freeing in a way to say, yeah, we do have all these things. And I'm coming from a different perspective than you. But maybe we can meet halfway too.

AT: And speaking of quotes, she also has one about, “I am not the star or even a major player. It is not a performance and certainly no feat of professional bravura. It's just sitting in my quite comfortable chair with no expectations and no agenda, and doing my best to honor the person in the other chair.” So I think this goes back to what you were saying about the importance of listening. And I don't think it's inherent, I think that we're socialized this way, but women do tend to be better listeners and better at sitting in that quiet space and giving the other person room to come to where they need to get for themselves.

MC: She really did have this idea of the spiritual direction moment to be really about listening, not only listening to the other person that's on the other end of the spiritual direction practice, but even just taking a quiet moment, the both of them, the director and directee, taking a quiet moment and just listening almost to the silence or the voices in our own heads. Like to take a moment and say, "okay, let's just be completely silent," kind of like you do during meditation or during yoga, where you take that brief moment to have some silence and really listen to what's going on inside your body, to what's going on outside. And I think she felt that by truly listening, by actually being open, so all the noise everywhere, that's when you could really hear God too.

AT: Something that I've noticed about women in a lot of different contexts is that many times they're often the ones doing a lot of the work, even most of the work behind the scenes. But then they're much less likely than the men to be in the prominent, visible roles, even when they're keeping everything running. So why do you think having women, particularly in religion, in these leadership roles, publishing books, making themselves visible, why is that so important in this context?

MC: So important, I think, especially in religion. Going back to what we were talking about before, of how pretty much every religion has some kind of misogynistic aspect to it. I think being visible is so important for women, especially young girls, to see other women in a role of respect, whether that is as a scholar or a religious leader or in business or anything like that. It's so important for girls to actually see women in positions of authority to know that their voices matter, their voice is important, and they can be leaders too. In religion, I think it's so important because religion plays such a large role in everyone's life, especially in close-knit church communities or in any communities like that. It's so important for women to be able to see themselves as actual leaders in their community too. It gives such a sense of fulfillment for someone to know that they are respected in their community, that they're contributing to scholarship or even just contributing to make everyone's everyday life or even spiritual life better. So I think it was so important for a lot of women, especially in this time period where Margaret was really coming to prominence, only a few years before she became director at the Center for Christian Spirituality, women were allowed to be ordained by the Episcopal Church only a few years previously. And so she really came at this time where people were actually stopping to say, "oh, wait, women should be given these leadership roles." And before women's ordination, she wouldn't have been able to become a priest. She would have been able to work in the Episcopal Church, maybe in administration or something like that, but to actually get a Master of Divinity and to have that title is something that wouldn't have been available to her a few years previous. It certainly wouldn't have been available to her mother or her grandmother or her other foremothers. She was really a woman of her time in a lot of ways and beyond her time too.

AT: Now, I was raised Catholic, so this next question is not specifically calling the Episcopal Church misogynistic more so than any other religion. I just want to be clear about that. But in the context of religion, a lot of, I would say, feminists and probably other people will ask, "why would I stay in a system that is misogynistic? Why would I stay within this institution that, at its core, has a lot of issues with sexism?" And then other people will say, "so that you can change it." And then, of course, the counterargument is, "well, how much can you really change it when it was designed this way, it's been this way for centuries? How much change can you actually implement when it is that ingrained?" So where do you think she fits into this paradigm of trying to change the system from within and how successful actually was she?

MC: As someone raised Catholic also, and I identify as a feminist myself also, I think that's a great question, especially because when we look at the surrounding historical context, in the Episcopal Church, of course, women had just started to get ordained, but this was also the time of second wave feminism. And a big portion of second wave feminism at this time was becoming radical and by radical meaning getting to the root of things. So when we look at certain religions and we see that at the root of them, some of them do, of course,

have very misogynistic practices. And I think from Margaret Guenther's perspective, I don't claim to know what she was thinking, but just from what I've read of her and what I know about her through the archives, I would think that she would say that the Episcopal Church and then also Christianity as a whole at its roots isn't misogynistic and that we are able to change the religion within it just because the very root of it isn't poisonous and we're not dealing with fruit of a poisonous tree. We're just dealing with a couple of bad apples. And so I think from her perspective, she would say that we are able to change things from within. We won't be able to convince everybody that this change is good. Especially at that time in the '70s, there was a very huge pushback by the Episcopal Church to stop women from getting ordained. Even on the General Theological Seminary campus, there was a split between faculty about who really supported ordination, who didn't, and then the seminary's actual stated position on it, too. But there was a lot of debate about that, too. So I would think, especially for her, that she would say that when you're working in those systems that aren't 100% non-misogynistic, that there is that ability to work on an individual level where you can make changes and hoping that goes towards a collective change as well. So I would think, looking back, she would consider herself very successful in making those changes. I think if she saw now how the Episcopal Church and how other Christian religions, too, have become more progressive, I think she would be very happy with that. But I think that she would disagree that certain institutions, religious institutions, are poisonous at the very root and need to be changed from the very root. I think she would just say that there were, yeah, those few bad apples to change. That would be my interpretation of what her perspective would be. I'd be really interested in to ask her. If she was still with us, I would definitely ask her that.

AT: Oh, I'm sure that everybody who comes on my podcast to talk about particular people would be like, "oh, I'd love to have a chat with her." Actually, that's not true. There are some that are like, "I don't think we'd be friends. I don't think I'd like her."

MC: We can have a beer and disagree over things. It should be fine.

AT: So her first book came out in 1992. So that was *Holy Listening*. Between her books and her leadership role at the center, how influential was she in actually making change in her career within the church?

MC: I think she was able to enact some great change in the church in her own context. She really did a lot of changes to the spiritual direction program that actually made it a lot more accessible for people to join in. So I think she was very influential in her corner of the Christian church. Like I mentioned before, she came into spiritual direction with this perspective of, "pretty much anyone can be a spiritual director. We're all amateurs here." And so that really opened up the program to a lot of people of really diverse backgrounds. She was able to do a lot of new programs, too. There was this new program called Thursdays at General. So people were able to come in on that day of the week. And so they didn't have to change their schedules too much to do that. And also she really reached spiritual direction as a whole field of study also. She was really the first to talk about the spiritual direction in an academic context, too. Like her book, *Holy Listening*, really brought that to the forefront of academic study and religious studies. So I think she was able to really change so much in her own little corner of the church that was really able to spread out very far.

AT: And so since we've been talking about women that made change, is there anyone else that you wanted to mention in that vein?

MC: I do. I really have to mention my co-author, Dr. Anne Silver. She is absolutely fantastic. She was really a treasure trove of knowledge on the center and then also about Margaret personally. Anne was actually, she's now the retired director of the center, but she was still working there when we were working on our book. And she was the one that told me, "oh, we have a ton of boxes just on stuff from the Center for Spiritual Direction."

So I was able to go through those boxes. We went through them together. Our previous librarian actually had gone through and organized the boxes at the collection level. So everything was organized really nicely, but we were able to go in and see everything that was in there. We found some really cool stuff and I was able to make a finding aid from it, too. And so while she is just amazing for any questions regarding spiritual direction, Margaret Guenther, or the history of General Theological Seminary, she is just fantastic.

AT: So are there any personal details from going through all the boxes that you might like to share with us? Because I know a lot of times you'll find just little tidbits or facts that just make someone even more interesting.

MC: Oh, exactly. One of my favorite things that we found in the archive was actually a document that came out right before the center was actually founded. So the center's founder, Alan Jones, had written up a proposal. And so he was bringing it back and forth with one of the deans at General Theological Seminary. And it's basically just a typewritten packet of papers. And it's filled with just handwritten notes. And there's even a giant coffee stain on the front, like someone rested their coffee cup on there. And just seeing little things like that are just so fun. And with Margaret, too, as director of the center, she had to do a lot of fundraising things and basically take part a lot in the community. So you see handwritten thank-you cards that she had sent out in the '70s and '80s and handwritten letters, and you could just see her sense of humor on display. She would always add a little joke every now and again into her correspondence. And like I mentioned, too, in that newsletter, she called herself a strudell stretcher. Little things like that are always so much fun to find in an archive.

AT: Now, is there anything in particular about Margaret that made you want to talk about her today, other than obviously this connection through your work, but also having enough information that we can actually talk about her? Because that's often an issue where, you're very lucky to have all this documentation, but we don't have that for a lot of other women. So was there anything in particular that made you say, "yes, I've got to tell everyone about Margaret Guenther"?

MC: I think the most interesting thing that I found about Margaret that I think makes her very interesting in terms of history and then in terms of women in the church is how visible she was, but also how invisible in the sense that she was very visible as the director. She wrote numerous books. She also wrote a lot of correspondence and things for the center letters and program details and things like that. But also invisible because if you were to ask someone involved in the Episcopal Church, name a very high-profile woman from the Episcopal Church, they might name a saint like Florence Li Tim-Oi or Pauli Murray or someone like that. And they probably wouldn't mention Margaret Guenther. But Margaret had such a lasting impact on the church. And throughout it all, she remained so humble and so down to earth and just so funny. But she was really able to make such a big impact while still being very invisible in a lot of ways. And she did a lot of visible and invisible labor, whether that was through General itself or for scholarship or even just raising her family too. She put in a lot of labor into all of those projects. And I think both those invisible and visible forms of labor should be celebrated and brought to the forefront. So that's something that I really find admirable and very interesting about her that I would like other people to know. And I think she was very approachable in the sense that when you read her writing and read everything she wrote, she wrote in a very down-to-earth style in her correspondence for the center, but also in her books too. She writes in a very warm, inviting style, very relaxed. And going back to the whole concept of the spiritual director as an amateur, she was very humble in that sense of being able to say, "I am not an expert here. I'll try to guide you as best as you can, but we're both on this journey together and we're both going to learn things and neither one of us is above the other one." And all organized religions love hierarchy. That's one thing that all religions share in common is this respect of a hierarchy. But she was able to actually say, "you know what, let's suspend that. The only one that's the highest point in this relationship here is God. So let's just go on this journey together and see what God is trying to say."