

Interviewee: Reverend Jill Williams  
Interviewers: Ali Marinelli and Zachary DeLoughery  
Date: November 23, 2008  
Place: Assumption College in Worcester, Massachusetts



Overseen by: Dr. Paula Fitzpatrick, Assumption College

**Abstract:** The Reverend Jill Williams is an ordained priest in the Episcopal Church. Jill was born in Worcester on April 4, 1981. She attended high school in West Boylston and college in Florida. Following graduation from college, Jill sensed a call from God and began a one-year discernment process within the Episcopal Church. As a result, she was accepted into a program at Virginia Theological Seminary. She completed a Master's Degree in Divinity and is an ordained priest in the Episcopal Church. Jill is currently the Associate Rector of St. Francis Church in Holden, her home parish as a child. She also teaches dance. In this interview Jill touches upon the uniqueness of her position as a young female clergy-person, even commenting on the limited availability of vestments for female priests. She speaks of her hopes to be a good role model for girls who may have never encountered a female priest. She also talks of the future and her desire to one day combine her professional aspirations with her plans to be a mother.

**AM :** We are conducting a history of the lives of Worcester women and we need to collect stories about a broad range of experiences based on the goals of the 1850 National Woman's Rights Convention in Worcester. We're focusing on the areas of women's education, health, work, and politics slash community involvement. So thank you for helping us with this important project.

**JW:** You're welcome.

**AM:** Alright, so I'm just going to ask you some questions. If you need a minute, just tell us and you know, anything you can do to help us would be helpful. What is your full maiden name, and, if applicable, which it is, your married name.

**JW:** Okay, my full maiden name is Jill Christina Barton.

**AM:** Could you spell that?

**JW:** Uhhh yes. That's B-A-R-T-O-N

**AM:** And your middle name is?

**JW:** Christina

**AM:** Alright. When were you born?

**JW:** 1981, April 4<sup>th</sup>, 1981.

**AM:** Do you have children?

**JW:** No, okay.

**AM:** What cultures or ethnicities do you identify with?

**JW:** Caucasian.

**AM:** Have you ever married?

**JW:** Yep.

**AM:** Okay. What is the name of your current husband?

**JW:** Andrew Williams.

**AM:** Just tell us a little bit about your parents and who they are.

**JW:** Well, my dad's name is Bruce Barton, and my mom's name is Holly Barton, and they grew up in the Worcester area, and married when they were young. And my dad owns a business, and my mother was a Christian Education Director.

**AM:** What does your dad do?

**JW:** He owns an HVAC business.

**AM:** Okay. Alright, and your mom is a?

**JW:** Christian Education Director.

**AM:** Okay. Where have you lived during your life?

**JW:** I lived in Holden, and I lived in Lakewood, Florida, and I lived in New York City, and I lived in Alexandria, Virginia, and now I live in Ware.

**AM:** What was the place in Virginia?

**JW:** Alexandria.

**AM:** Okay. (pause) Alright, did you grow up in Worcester?

**JW:** I grew up in Holden, right outside of Worcester.

**AM:** Okay. Okay. And what was that neighborhood like?

**JW:** It's actually the other end of Salisbury Street, so right across from Dawson School, and really nice like cute neighborhood, lots of elementary schools, knew all my neighbors. We were all friends, we'd get together for a barbecue for the 4<sup>th</sup> of July every year.

**AM:** [unintelligible] Where do you live now?

**JW:** Now I live in Ware.

**AM:** Okay. And what is that like?

**JW:** It's an old mill town. So it's a little more rural, takes a little longer to get to and from the city area. And there's a lot of little paths, it's a small sort of small town, everybody knows each other.

**AM:** Okay, do other family members live in the same area?

**JW:** No.

**AM:** Okay. What challenges do you think the city still faces? Like, what would you change about the city and the area?

**JW:** Well the broad area of, like, Worcester county, or just Worcester? Worcester county?

(unintelligible)

**AM:** Central Mass, yeah.

**JW:** Yeah. And, I think we probably still face a significant racial divide, and especially around, like, economic levels, and education levels.

**AM:** Okay, what changes have you seen in the area over time? Like from your childhood, childhood to now.

**JW:** There's definitely a lot, like especially in ... in the city they've cleaned up the city a lot and there's not as many areas where you're like 'no don't go there' you know, especially around the DCU center and the hospital.

**AM:** mhm.

**JW:** And I think, just in the larger area, we have ...there's a lot more people moving in to sort of the more rural towns like Holden and Rutland and [town name] are growing, growing areas, partially because of our proximity to Boston, and then I think partially because of the Wachusett school system.

**AM:** Okay, what distinct characteristics make Worcester the place that it is? Like what separates it from other cities in the U.S.?

**JW:** That's a good question... I think that there's a bigger sense of community in Worcester, especially within like sort of the sub-culture of Worcester. I think there's a sense of community whereas in some of the bigger cities... when I was in New York obviously, there's, you have your Manhattan, and your , you know the Village and whatever but that doesn't, outside from living there you might not identify with the people in the area. There's suburbs and sort of subcultures in Worcester but I think the people of those subcultures identify better with each other.

**AM:** Okay. And what do you think women's experiences in Worcester have been generally?

**JW:** That's a really broad question (laughter) I don't know, my experiences with Worcester women...

**AM:** Maybe look at it from your perspective you know, like out of your, did you face any discrimination?

**JW:** Well I think it's also different when you are, I mean, I'm only 27 years old, so my experience of growing up in Worcester was not you know, I didn't really experience much discrimination, or I imagine that that's part of women's history everywhere, Worcester county and beyond. And but I think being part of Massachusetts culture we tend to be on the forefront of some of those political endeavors and yea.

**AM:** That's a good answer. So where did you attend school?

**JW:** I went to West Boylston High School.

**AM:** Could you just spell that?

**JW:** Yea it's West, and then (spells Boylston) and ... do you want to know where I went to college?

**AM:** Yea.

**JW:** Florida Southern College.

**AM:** Okay, and what programs of study did you pursue?

**JW:** I have a Bachelor of Arts from Florida Southern in English and Theater, English Lit and Theatre Performance, and I have a Masters of Divinity from Virginia Theological Seminary.

**AM:** Alright, what were your challenges in education?

**JW:** Hmm that's a good question. (pause) hmm I don't know. I don't know if I had any challenges in education. I'm trying to think ... Can we come back to that one? Maybe I can think of something.

**AM:** Upon finishing your formal education, what did you see as your options?

**JW:** I felt like actually I had a lot of options, and although I will say that a Bachelor's, I mean, certainly, I took a year off between college and getting my Master's Degree so I feel like out of college I felt like I could kind of do whatever. But you quickly find out that a Bachelor's Degree doesn't mean as much as it used to mean, and so but I was offered several opportunities and...you know, in management positions, cause if you do well in college then you have more options coming out certainly. I ended up managing Waldenbooks for a while, and then teaching at a high school, teaching at Leicester for a year in the music department. So and then from there I sort of said, "I don't want to do any of these things really, the pay's low, out of college, and I want to get a masters." Think about what to get a masters in, and now I'm a priest. There you have it. That's the story, the long and the short of it. [laughter]

**AM:** What support networks and mentoring have been important to you?

**JW:** I actually have a great group of women that meets. It's sort of ... I think growing up I had really great spiritual vibes about the particulars of women's spirituality as opposed to overall church spirituality and with ... given a way to think about God in terms... in a larger context, then some churches may provide, and with a lot more freedom, especially artistic freedom. So they're still, probably those are the people that led me to the priesthood, just by modeling this ultra-radical perception of many ways of worshipping.

**AM:** Okay. Do you work outside the home?

**JW:** I do.

**AM:** And when did you begin working?

**JW:** I moved here in '07.

**AM:** And that's your current job?

**JW:** Yeah, well I work for, I do two jobs. I actually have two jobs. I work part time for the Episcopal Diocese of Western Massachusetts as the Christian Formation Missioner of the Worcester Corridor. So we divide up into three corridors, and I work with all the formation resources in the Worcester area. And then I am clergy, I'm the associate rector at St. Francis in Holden.

**AM:** Okay. So when was your first job, for pay?

**JW:** Like ever? You mean even like in high school?

**AM:** Yeah

**JW:** It was at 16.

**AM:** And what was that?

**JW:** Well I did two things. I worked at Fashion Bug, and I taught dance. I'm a dance teacher, that's the other... I guess I have three jobs cause that's the other thing I do, I teach dance.

**AM:** Okay, and how specifically did you come to this work? Being a rector, an associate rector.

**JW:** Like how did I end up at St. Francis? Or how did I come to the priesthood?

**AM:** We could actually make that two separate questions.

[laughter]

**JW:** Well, I think that this is probably the female faith, the woman side of my story, but it is not a usual thing for a woman to be a priest obviously.

**AM:** Right.

**JW:** And, I was going to, I was going to be a priest's wife. That was sort of my, I knew I wanted to be in the church, but I was going to work in Christian education. And at one point, I was going to marry a man I thought was going to be a minister and then and then that ... my call just changed. And I very much felt that there needed to be a younger female voice in the priesthood saying that it doesn't always have to be older men who are relating to God. Women can relate to that instantly as well, that God speaks to all of God's children, male and female, and so having someone specifically to represent that became important to me.

**AM:** Okay, and how did you actually become it?

**JW:** Well I ended up, well you go basically in the Episcopal Church, you go through a year-long discernment process. And that involves, you know, meeting with several committees and people to discuss your sense of call and where it comes from. And then if you get through that process, and many people agree that you are called to ministry, then you get a Masters Degree. You get into a school and it takes about three years. I did it in two and a half, but it's supposed to take three. And then you get out, and you try and find someplace to work. St. Francis is my home parish. So I didn't think I would be coming home. Even Jesus wasn't accepted in his hometown in the Bible, so I didn't think that I would be coming home to Massachusetts. I thought we would probably end up someplace

south. But it's been awesome. And the rector there reached out and said, 'You know, we want a younger female type.' I'm the first female St. Francis has had, priest at least, and then... it's really cool.

**ZD:** What brought you back home? Was there a reason for coming back to St. Francis?

**JW:** Well, he kinda sought me out a little bit, but the diocese was really interested in the fact that I'm not typical. You go to clergy day which is sort of diocese of Western Massachusetts has clergy day... I am the only, you know, young 27-something female. And I think they sensed that there was a need for that here, especially in St. Francis, because it's right outside of Worcester and it's a growing congregation. There's a lot of 30-somethings, so there's a different, I'm accepted, I think, in a different way there than I might be in a Marlboro community.

**AM:** So who do you work with or work for?

**JW:** I work with Rich Simpson, he's the rector. I work for the larger Diocese of Western Massachusetts under Bishop Scruton.

**AM:** Bishop...

**JW:** Scruton? It's [spells Scruton]

**AM:** Okay, and Rich, can you spell Rich's name?

**JW:** Yes, it's Rich and then [spells Simpson].

**AM:** Okay. And what has your work meant to you?

**JW:** It's really... wonderful. I love what I do. It's a lot of well I guess, I certainly get to preach the gospel, and hopefully reach a different group of people, and... and what else do I do? I work really closely with pastoral care, and specifically pastoral care for women, which I think is really cool. And the young families, and I work with youth. A lot. That's probably my whole job, but I really like my job a lot.

**AM:** Yea. What are your primary responsibilities in terms of housework?

**JW:** I pretty much do the housework. Yea, I cook and I clean. And I do the laundry ... and my husband does the dishes. I really appreciate that.

**AM:** Okay. How has housework changed for you over time?

**JW:** Well, I will say that I didn't... that's not something that we sort of like... pre-planned. Like it's just it ends up being that someone has to do it, and I kind of end up doing it. So I think what took some negotiating, was that working full time, it's hard to fit that extra stuff in. And so there's... I've had to rearrange my schedule so that when I

work a little less or more from home, sometimes so that I can be cleaning and keeping up with the housework on top of it. So it definitely took some negotiation on how to run a household, you know I'm just my own [unintelligible].

**AM:** I actually think we answered the next question. How would you characterize the personal and professional costs of your chosen talents?

**JW:** Personal, professional... hmmm good question. I've been looking at that. I haven't had to let a lot go personally for my profession, and I imagine that that will be less true as I think about having children. I can't imagine having children and also being a priest at the same time... just because if somebody goes into the hospital, or your kid is sick on Sunday morning, it can happen. You know, you really wouldn't be able to say 'I'm gonna leave my kid and go to the hospital and be with this parishioner.' And that's ultimately your job. So while I haven't really had to make many personal sacrifices yet, I think when my husband and I think about children, it will change how involved I can be in a parish.

**AM:** And how about the benefits? What's good about your job?

**JW:** Well... I really like my job. I think one of the most special things for me about my job is I get -- and in my church we have a very liturgical tradition -- so I get all dressed up in this like alb with a stole and the whole deal, and like... I'm a priest. And their... they don't even make priests' clothes very well for women yet. And it's not like it's certainly not like attractive anyways. And there are all these little girls in my congregation, just tons, who have probably never seen a woman dressed like that and standing up and presiding at the element and preaching a sermon, and preaching a sermon that I hope is relatively balanced between being emotional, and educational, and theological, and intellectual and all of those things. And that I think is really neat. Like it's just cool that I never saw that growing up, and now they can. Especially, in my own church setting.

**ZD:** When you do preside over mass, do you ever feel like a minority, like people are usually used to seeing male priests, but do you ever feel like you're kind of breaking the barrier or anything?

**JW:** The first time I sang the mass, I remember cause I'm the singer too, so I get, like I have whatever, I've been studying voice for a long time, but I have a very girly, soprano voice. And I've only ever heard the mass sung [sings] really low and like manly, and I didn't know, I mean I remember having a conversation with my rector like, 'Are people going to be able to handle this, because it sounds really different when I sing it than it would if a man was singing it.' And (unintelligible) I think that's the first time that I really felt conspicuous or uncomfortable in my own skin as a woman, presiding at the table. So they took it well, but it was hard.

**AM:** What type of work does your husband do?

**JW:** He's also a priest.

**AM:** Does he work at the same parish, or...

**JW:** No, he is at Trinity Church in Ware, and St. Mary's in Palmer.

**ZD:** Are they the same faith as yours?

**JW:** Mhmm.

**AM:** Do you... do you consider yourself active politically?

**JW:** Yep. Yep. We vote, yea.

**AM:** Have you been involved in volunteer and community work? Given the nature of career, I suspect the answer's yes.

**JW:** [laughter] Yes.

**AM:** If so, what groups did you work for?

**JW:** That's a good question. I did a little bit with Loaves and Fishes in Springfield, and I also like youth work camps, I think I work youth camp trips a lot.

**AM:** And you work within your own parish?

**JW:** Yea, of course. There's, my parish does a lot with like (unintelligible) and the Mustard Seed, and the Worcester County Food Bank, which are huge, so yea.

**AM:** And what led you to join the Loaves and Fishes, that organization?

**JW:** Really I love to... I like to work with organizations where that first of all are Christian centered, because I believe fully that God works with it, you know, God works with what we have to make it even more. And that Loaves and Fishes is one of the only food... food places that's open every day of the year. It's open every single day for two meals a day. It's just huge, and they do it purely on a volunteer basis. And, by the way, they're downstairs from my office, [laughter], so if you know, I just need to see the population of people that come and, and they like stand outside your door, and you know, here they are, two times a day. And I just think it's a really neat ministry, and they're in there on Christmas and Easter and the whole deal so... and I like the concept too, of fishes and loaves, and the multiplying and the feeding of the 10,000 and how it all connects together and so, its really cool.

**AM:** Is it something where they deliver the food to people that need it? Or is it...

**JW:** No they come, yea, and we feed people right there.

**AM:** The organization's main goals are...

**JW:** To feed the hungry.

**AM:** So what does that work consist of, making food or...

**JW:** Yeah, making food and serving food, it depends on the day, I oftentimes end up bringing groups of volunteers with me, so yeah I'll take a different role, so...

**AM:** What would you consider that group's major accomplishments?

**JW:** I think... I think it's just a huge thing to be known in a community, and not to be overstocked sometimes. You know, there are times when I'd call and say I'd like to come and volunteer, and bring six kids with me, or whatever. And they said actually we have too many volunteers, and you can't have six kids come! And I think that's amazing for an organization that's open for, you know, two meals everyday. And it's clearly important to me too, because it is a gathering spot, it's central, beyond just being fed, physically. I think they're in community with each other. It's a gathering place.

**AM:** You listed other organizations, ... we can skip the next one, it's what role has religion played in your life...

**JW:** Ohhhhh [laughter] Gee I don't know!

**AM:** How have health issues impacted your life?

**JW:** Not really, not really. No, not really.

**AM:** What are your experiences in accessing quality and affordable healthcare?

**JW:** Good.

**AM:** And whose health are you responsible for?

**JW:** Huh. I guess mine and my own?

**AM:** Okay.

**JW:** Well you know, my own, and I guess if my parents were ever sick, or whatever, we feel a huge sense of obligation, both Andrew and I, to making sure that our families are taken care of, so that's... I don't know if that's where you're going with that question...

**AM:** Yeah, I think its mainly for mothers, and

**JW:** Yeah.

**AM:** So, is there anything else you feel that we should include to try to, like, tell the story of the history of women that has been recorded in the past? Like anything unique about your life, like, you know, being the first female priest anything significant about that?

**JW:** Well, I think it's two-fold. It's funny because... let me think about how I want to say this. (pause) In my profession it's not just about a male and female, it's also about young and old. And so, I think that's a more complete, a more accurate picture being taken, not only sort of gender, but also sort of age discrimination and what its like in terms of the education levels too, to become an Episcopal priest. But I also think that because women really need to start looking at age instead of gender. My first jobs, I don't think I was just paid less because I was a woman, I think I was also paid less because I was a young woman. Maybe educationally I had the same education as everybody else, but being younger, you know what I mean? So I think its just harder to separate out the two.

**AM:** Is there anyone else you suggest we talk to? Anyone else that's ... (unintelligible)

**JW:** Anyone like around Worcester?

**AM:** Yeah, anyone that's just... kind of remarkable or has done amazing things with their life.

**JW:** Yeah, okay. I feel like I know a lot of these, my .. well my friend Kate would be ideal. She lived here for four years, and was a Christian Education director, and just got back from three months in Africa, serving at an AIDS orphanage, and working with children in need.

**AM:** Anything else, you think? Any of the additional questions there? I think this is an interesting one...How were girls treated when you were in school? Because you are younger, and our peers interviewed people who are older, so it might be an interesting contrast.

**JW:** Yeah, I didn't see a huge difference between girls and boys in school. If anything, maybe the opposite was happening when I was young, that girls were sort of expected to be a little more mature, and ... and when I was walking the halls, if I'm walking the halls and I'm a young, female honors student walking the halls, they would not ask me for a pass when I was in school because... but if I was walking the halls and there was a boy like two lockers behind me, they'd ask him for a pass. And so I thought that was really, it was sort of weird, like boys are rowdy and boys are whatever and girls are proper and do what they're told. Yeah, and then I figure it would sort of ... stereotype is that girls aren't as good in math and science but are better in English and theatre, which is true for me, but it's not true for all women. And my science teacher was female, so that was not really a huge, you know that wasn't a huge issue. She had high expectations, and never came across as you couldn't do this, or ...

**AM:** Yeah, based on your life experiences, what advice would you give to the women of today and future generations?

**JW:** They don't have to do it all. I think for a long time, the women's rights movement was trying to catch up with equality in the workplace, and in that we gave up a lot of other things that are important to us, like family and housekeeping and children. And that instead of saying this is just as important a job as a male job, it became I can do it all, I can do both, I can have a full time job and keep my house and have children. And I think it's unfair. I think it's way too high an expectation of women, and it's our privilege to get to be a mother. And it's the one opportunity we have to really change the future of the world. I love my job, but my job will be children when I have children, and there's no reason I have to be able to do both. That's important in and of itself. So I hope that society can start to realize that those things that are unpaid are still equally important as the things that are paid and for women to just, take a break you know, and be a little bit easier on ourselves. We can be a working woman for awhile, a mother for awhile, and then I hope we get to a place where it's easier to go back to the workforce.

**AM:** Anything else, you think?

**ZD:** I don't think so.

**AM:** They're all kinda weird..

**JW:** Yeah

**ZD:** One of them's what's your favorite song...

[laughter]

**AM:** Do you have a favorite religious song?

**JW:** [laughter] No, [laughter] I like Shorty Got Low.

[laughter]

**JW:** We were dancing to it last night at bowling!

[laughter]

**JW:** So is that what you wanted?

**AM:** Yeah it's definitely what we wanted, and thank you very much for your time.

**JW:** You're welcome, I'm glad that I had a chance to meet you both, and I hope it was helpful!

END.