

Today, 26 January 2015, the Church of England consecrates the Reverend Libby Lane as its first female bishop. This act may prove to be the most substantial change to the church's highest order of ministry, the episcopate, since Henry VIII broke with the Church of Rome in the 1530s. While some will see the appointment of a female bishop as the capitulation of the church to the secular world, in fact it represents the final step for English Anglicans in a century-long, vigorous theological debate about the nature of women, the church, and God.

From some perspectives, Lane's consecration is not especially momentous. She is not the first woman to become a bishop. Lutheran churches in Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Germany have had female bishops for decades. The first Anglican female bishop, Barbara Harris, was consecrated in the United States in 1989. For the past nine years the leader of US Anglicans has been a woman, Katharine Jefferts Schori. Over the last twenty-five years some forty-two women have been made bishops in Anglican churches in New Zealand, Canada, Cuba, Australia, Swaziland, South Africa, India, and Ireland. Ten of them have retired, and two have died.

Moreover, Anglicans should be used to female spiritual leadership. While the anticipated presence of female Lords Spiritual in the British Parliament will be remarkable, the legislation enabling Lane's consecration to go ahead was ultimately signed by another woman, Queen Elizabeth II. The Supreme Governor of the Church of England has been a woman for 200 of the last 480 years. The greatest catastrophe in the Church of England's history - the abolition of the prayer book and episcopacy in the 1640s and 1650s - was presided over by a male Supreme Governor, Charles I.

Nonetheless, in Anglican polity the Church of England still matters. Internationally, it is the mother of all Anglican churches. This is represented in the most commonly used definition of Anglican, which is to be 'in communion' with the Archbishop of Canterbury. It is now possible for the See of Canterbury to be filled by a woman. Thus it is reasonable to conclude that with the consecration of the first female bishop for the Church of England, the Anglican debate about the ordination of women has reached a definitive moment. To be Anglican is to recognise that women and men exercise spiritual leadership as priests and bishops.

It is therefore timely to evaluate how it is that the Church of England has come to embrace this extraordinary change, the admission of women and men on equal terms to the offices of deacon, priest, and bishop.

First, it must be observed that the established Church of England has been largely left to its own doctrinal devices since the great debacle of the 1928 Book of Common Prayer. Unlike Sweden, where the government instituted the ordination of women against the protests of some in the Swedish church, the Church of England has been free to make its own decisions about theological matters. Its decision to ordain women is a theological one informed by years of long debate ranging from its highest councils to its most humble congregations. Theology has changed the church.

The theological debate has not taken place in isolation from the world. In the nineteenth century as women began to enter universities and the professions, some began to query why it was they were also barred from the clerical profession. The Anglican response was, typically, to establish a committee. The first significant report on the ordination of women was delivered to the Church of England in 1935. This Commission found it surprisingly difficult to justify why the Church did not ordain women, offering primarily the lack of a precedent in centuries of male-only tradition, while questioning the authority of the Anglican Church to alter this tradition independently of the Catholic and Orthodox churches.

This ‘why not?’ approach that sought for reasons why women could not be ordained, set up something of a vacuum for theologians to fill in the 1930s and 1940s. The vacuum was soon filled as theologians revisited Christian scriptures and traditions. Dorothy L. Sayers famously asked ‘Are Women Human?’ and opened up the question of whether the exclusion of women from the ordained ministry equated to a denial of their humanity and a denial of their redemption. Theologians revisited the New Testament household codes which had long been interpreted as demanding the subjection of woman to man and concluded instead that such injunctions were culturally and temporally specific. C. S. Lewis wrote passionately against the idea of a female priesthood as incompatible with Christian culture. E. L. Mascall argued that as Christ was male, so too the priest had to be male to represent Christ to the people.

Arguably, most of the key theological principles for and against the ordination of women had been set out by the 1970s. The Church of England then turned to the work of weighing these arguments, and engaging its membership in the debate. Synods, commissions, and local parish studies considered a wide range of theological arguments old and new. Can women exercise spiritual leadership? Are women and men equally redeemed? Does Christianity teach that women are subject to men, or does it preach gender equality? Could Jesus have been female? Is God male? What is the role of a priest or bishop anyway?

By the 1980s a majority was emerging in the Church of England in favour of the ordination of women. Jesus was born male, but this historical particularity did not restrict redemption or

spiritual authority to men. God transcended gender, but both women and men were made in the image of God. Women in the bible preached to men, from Mary Magdalene's announcement to the male disciples of the news of Jesus's resurrection, to Paul's denotations of Phoebe the deacon and Junia the apostle. Increasingly, the experience of women in ministry demonstrated that they were as effective as men, and that fears about the feminisation or sexualisation of the church that would result from the ordination of women were unfounded prejudices.

The 1980s and early 1990s were the peak of intensity in the debate. For some Anglicans, the church moved too slowly, and they left the church believing that Christianity was irredeemably patriarchal. For others, the magnitude of the change was too great, and some of these left for other churches, believing Anglicans had departed from Christian tradition.

In the 1990s and 2000s attention was given less to the theological reasons to begin to ordain women first as priests and then as bishops, and more to the question of how and when. Would traditionalists who dissented from the majority view still be welcome in the church, and what would that welcome look like? When could the Church of England know that it had fully received the ministry of women as priests such that it could proceed to the virtually irreversible step of making women bishops?

The final legislative decision was taken in 2014, by the Church of England's General Synod. What is remarkable about this decision is that the church chose to proceed not by a special law to allow women to become bishops, but by a change to its existing canons to state that both women and men could be ordained. In so doing, the Church of England altered its doctrine and practice to recognise women and men as equally capable of spiritual leadership.

So what issues remain?

The early hopes of many supporters of the ordination of women are yet to be realised. Could women change the church's hierarchical culture, and with it meaning and practice of ministry? Or will the ordination of women merely prove to be an 'add women and stir' approach to the remaking of the Church of England into a twenty-first corporation?

As is patently clear from the long process that led to the final passage of the legislation enabling women to be bishops some twenty-two years after the measures permitting women to be

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Written by The Conversation

priests, the Church of England has much to learn if it is to stand by its commitment to maintain a place in its ranks for those who oppose the ordination of women. This is equally true in relation to the wider Anglican Communion, half of whose churches do not have female bishops. The Church of England must also work out how to carry its new convictions about women in ministry into its dialogues with the Catholic and Orthodox churches, in which the ordination of women remains firmly prohibited.

If it is to be true to itself, the Church of England must take care to hand on to future generations the theological reasons for opening holy orders to both women and men. What is gender? What is ministry? Who is God? These are ultimate questions worthy of deep reflection and consequent action in a world of fleeting, self-serving claims to truth.

If the Church of England can figure out how to stand by its convictions and at the same time engage with difference, it may just have a chance of dealing with its biggest challenge of all: engaging with a society that is no longer familiar with basic Christian concepts, that does not respect traditional beliefs, and is increasingly hostile to religious institutions. In meeting that challenge, the new bishop and her colleagues, male and female, will need all the help that theology can offer.

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