

the road to women's priesthood

March 12th 1994 was a historic day: the date on which women were first ordained priests in England, in Bristol Cathedral.

For some in the Church of England today, it seems no time since the historic vote at the General Synod in 1992, which paved the way for women to be ordained to the priesthood, and since that day in Bristol was followed by ordinations in cathedrals across England in 1994. Some of us lived through the years of campaigning beforehand, and witnessed those events unfolding first hand.

But you may not have been a Christian at that time. Or you did not notice the significance. The world has changed immensely with regard to the opportunities for women in recent years, and perhaps you are puzzled about why the Christian Church seems to have lagged so far behind. Or you were still a child in 1992, you've grown up in a church where it is 'normal' for women to be priests – but you've never really heard the story.

This paper is designed for you – a brief summary of a long story; you can follow this up by reading in more depth – or, of course, by talking to the women and men who experienced the changing events, and made history.

Early opportunities

Women have ministered in the church since New Testament times, when we see women disciples supporting Jesus' ministry, Mary of Bethany sitting at Jesus' feet, the position of one learning to be a leader, and women such as Phoebe, Priscilla and Junia mentioned in the letters of Paul. Many of the texts describing these ministries are subject to contested interpretations from within and beyond the evangelical constituency (and you can read more about these in the book *Growing Women Leaders* and other articles on the [Women in Leadership](#) section of CPAS' website). However, it would be true to say that a growing consensus has developed as to the presence and value of women's leadership in the New Testament. But once ministry became more formalized, women seem gradually to have been excluded from formal ministry positions, but that never stopped them from ministering! And through 2000 years of church history we see both individual women exercising remarkable ministries and revival movements in which women have exercised leadership alongside men. You can read more in chapter 3 of [Growing Women Leaders](#).

In the nineteenth century, women began to move into formal ministry in the Anglican Church in a variety of ways. The Church Missionary Society first sent a woman missionary to Sierra Leone in 1820, and as others followed it was inevitable that questions were raised about how women could be used at home in the UK.

Religious orders, the deaconess movement and lay ministries

Religious orders for women were revived in the Church of England in 1845 when Edward Pusey founded a sisterhood. At the beginning, there was opposition to women taking vows of celibacy, because they would not be available for marriage – which in Victorian times was seen as the main role of women (a debate which was first encountered in the early Church when monastic communities were first established). But soon there were twenty communities around the country, mostly working with the poor and those on the margins of society. In 1870 Emily Ayckbown founded The Community of the Sisters of the Church, one of only two communities from that time which were founded and led by women rather than men.

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The existence of these communities meant that there has been a history of strong, able women who pioneered ministry in many parts of the world. Numbers of women in such communities peaked in the 1960s but numbers of both men and women in the religious communities has dropped significantly since then. Some sisters are now ordained, and in an age when people reject 'positional authority', the leaders of communities are no longer hierarchical, but seek to enable the community to reflect the values of its founder and its values, and to empower the members to live these out.

The nineteenth century also saw the revival of the *deaconess movement*. Early in the century a Lutheran pastor from Germany visited England to see for himself Elizabeth Fry's prison work. Back in Kaiserwerth in Germany he founded an order of deaconesses to do nursing and social work. In England, Elizabeth Ferard pioneered deaconess work, and was ordained deaconess in 1862 by Bishop Tait, the then Bishop of London. By the turn of the century there were 13 diocesan deaconess houses, and over 200 women had been ordained and worked as deaconesses. However, at first the Church of England gave no official recognition to the order; it was recognized by the Lambeth Conference in 1897 and formally restored by the Convocation of Canterbury in 1923.

There was some confusion about the role of the deaconess, but whatever the official line they came to lead all forms of public worship, except presiding at Holy Communion; preach at all services; and to baptize and conduct funerals. By the time the order was closed to new admissions in 1987, some deaconesses were in charge of parishes – delegating certain functions to local priests.

The nineteenth century also saw the beginning of a variety of *accredited lay ministries*. In 1857 the first 'Bible woman' was sent out to work among the poor, on the same lines as indigenous women were being used in overseas missions. Many women worked among the poor in the growing towns and cities of the industrial revolution, helping hard-pressed clergy. The first licenses for such women were granted in 1887.

The mid-century revival had a great impact on the church, and alongside new movements such as the Salvation Army, a number of Anglican women were active in itinerant preaching ministry, though usually outside church buildings. The Church Army was founded in 1882; Wilson Carlile's sister Marie was involved alongside him, and through her influence women were fully involved. Between 1887 and 1937, 2,000 women were commissioned as *Church Army Sisters*, and since then women and men have been trained together and commissioned to similar areas of work. Church Army is now committed to pioneering work, along 'Fresh Expressions' lines.

Debate about women's ministry

Meanwhile, there was debate through most of the twentieth century about the ordination of women. Discussion of women's exclusion from church governance had started as early as 1898, when PCCs had come into being, but only men could vote. After petitions and debates, the rules were changed in 1914: women were laity in the same way as men were.

The war gave women wider experience of work outside the home, and for many there was no going back to how things were before. Then in 1929 Maude Royden, who had campaigned for women's suffrage and was a popular London preacher, together with Canon Charles Raven, founded the interdenominational Ministry of Women in the Church.

So debate and campaigning started, albeit slowly but steadily. The Lambeth Conference first considered the subject of women's ordination in 1930, but reiterated the impossibility. In response, the Anglican Group for the Ordination of Women (AGOW) came into being. AGOW

continued to resource the debate for many years, until in 1980 it was merged with the newly-founded Movement for the Ordination of Women.

An Archbishops' Commission was set up to 'examine any theological or other relevant principles which have governed or ought to govern the Church in the development of the Ministry of Women'. It was quite a weighty body, considering many documents and hearing a large number of witnesses. It supported the idea of a special holy order for women (Deaconesses) but rejected the idea that women might be admitted to the three-fold orders of deacons, priests and bishops. On a more positive note it argued that women should be admitted to the same lay offices as men (including lay reader—though this did not happen until 1969!) and that some women should be authorised to preach and lead retreats. Despite some progress over the following years, many blocks were placed in women's way, even to taking part in liturgy.

While progress was virtually non-existent for a number of years, though some women began to be appointed to diocesan posts where they could exercise some influence and gain experience, a significant event occurred during World War Two. In 1944 Florence Li Tim Oi was ordained by Bishop R O Hall of Hong Kong in Free China, in order to provide a priestly ministry for her people; she surrendered her licence (but not her orders) in 1946 in order to defuse controversy, but later exercised her priestly ministry again in the Church in China, and, when she retired, in Toronto.

Reports continued to be produced: Gender and Ministry in 1962; Women and Holy Orders in 1966. In 1968 the Lambeth Conference produced a resolution stating that there were no valid theological objections to the ordination of women, and asking all national and regional churches to debate the issue. In 1969 the first woman was ordained in the Church of Scotland.

Churches thus debated the issue, and in 1971 the Bishop of Hong Kong ordained Jane Hwang and Joyce Bennett to the priesthood. Further impetus was given to the debate in the Church of England, and the following year an important consultative document was produced, *The Ordination of Women to the Priesthood*. This provided background for Synod debates over the coming years. In 1975 the General Synod of the Church of England voted in favour of the motion 'That this Synod considers that there are no fundamental objections to the ordination of women to the priesthood.' But there was still plenty of opposition, and not enough people were prepared to believe that it was the right time to prepare legislation. Another debate at Synod in 1978 failed, and one campaigner, Una Kroll, cried out from the gallery: 'We asked for bread and you gave us a stone.' Soon after this the Movement for the Ordination of Women came into being, and campaigning began to gather pace.

God continued to call women to authorised ministry in increasing numbers, and whereas women had previously trained at separate institutions, some theological colleges started joint training, so that deaconesses could train alongside men.

Ordination as Deacons and Priests

In 1987 women were admitted into holy orders as deacons, and 745 deaconesses, some religious and a number of Church Army sisters took this step. This meant they were now clergy, but it made little difference to their practice of ministry apart from conducting marriage services. But the effect in the Church meant that the role of women was taken much more seriously. Most of these deacons saw themselves as called to be priests, and looked ahead to the next step.

By 1984, progress was being made, and some were convinced that the time was right. The Synod voted in 1986 in favour of bringing forward legislation, and by the following year, legislation had been produced. It was referred to dioceses, and events unfolded, until the final vote took place on Wednesday 11th November 1992. Just before this, I can remember gathering, with supporters from all over England, at Coventry Cathedral. Cathy Milford, and Rowan Williams, then Bishop of

Monmouth, reflected on the concept of 'waiting'. It had been a long wait! After a lengthy debate, the vote was taken, and the necessary two-thirds majority was achieved in all three houses. It has passed. There was much rejoicing, though supporters had been cautioned against showing joy, because of the pain for those who had 'lost'.

On 12th March 1994 the first women were ordained priest in Bristol Cathedral, followed in the next few months by about 1,500 others in cathedrals throughout the country. Women priests were thus able to fill any appointment other than those requiring episcopal orders.

There were also some who disagreed with the 1992 Synod decision. Opposition came, and continues to come, from some Anglo-Catholics and Evangelicals; some churches will not allow a woman to preside at Holy Communion, and these churches and some others are not willing to have a woman 'in charge'. The Episcopal Ministry Act of Synod, passed in 1993 alongside the legislation, created two so-called 'integrities' in the Church of England, and made provision for the pastoral care and oversight in those parishes who disagreed with their bishop on this issue (ie Extended Episcopal Care, using so-called 'flying bishops'). This caused considerable pain for many ordained women, and introduced the concept of a bishop without a diocese, which many in the church thought an unhelpful and possibly dangerous precedent.

As this strange situation has continued, women's experience has varies. Most feel totally affirmed in their ministry as priests, while some are made to feel that their priesthood is somehow provisional, when some who oppose it continue to talk of an ongoing period of 'reception'.

While controversy continues, the Church is at the time of writing turning to look at the admission of women to the episcopate. Debate started in 2000, and over the last few years there has been a revisiting of theological issues, and overwhelming conviction in General Synod debates that it is right for the Church to proceed. Current debate is focusing on how best to make provision for those unhappy with the entry of women into the episcopate. The proposed legislation has been referred to dioceses, and a final vote may be taken in 2012. ...

In the meantime, through the 1990s, women's ministry moved from being something relatively novel, to being welcomed and now taken for granted and largely accepted. Ordained women and men work alongside each other, leading missional churches which seek to take the good news of Christ to an increasingly post-Christendom nation. Women are at the forefront of initiatives such as Fresh Expressions; some are archdeacons and deans, or lead significantly large churches. And God continues to call women to serve him in the task of changing the world!

Further Reading

Rosie Ward, *Growing Women Leaders* (BRF/CPAS, 2008)

Margaret Webster, *A New Strength, a New Song* (Mowbray, 1994)

'Women's Ordination – a brief history', WATCH paper – see www.womenandthechurch.org