



25 years of women as priests in The Church of England

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- This year marks the quarter-century since women were first ordained as priests in the Church of England.
- Thirty-two women were priested at a service in Bristol Cathedral on 12 March, 1994. They were ordained in alphabetical order, which means that Angela Berners-Wilson is officially the Church of England's first woman priest. She had previously served 15 years as a deaconess and deacon and went on to be a chaplain at Bath University. She is now a parish priest and a prebendary at Wells Cathedral.
- After 19 years of debate, the Church of England's parliament – the General Synod – took the decision in 1992 to allow women's ordination. The measure had to be approved by a two-thirds majority in each of the synod's three houses of bishops, clergy and laity. It passed by a margin of only two votes among lay people.
- The Movement for the Ordination of Women was founded in 1979 and was the main group campaigning for women to become priests. It wound up in 1994 after it had achieved its objective. A group called [Watch](#) was formed in 1996 to campaign for gender justice in the church.
- [Figures](#) for 2017 show that 28% of clergy are women and 23% of senior leadership positions are held by women.
- On 17 November 2014, the General Synod voted in favour of removing the legal obstacles preventing women from becoming bishops, ending a process that began nine years earlier.
- Libby Lane became the first woman to serve as a bishop of the Church of England when she was consecrated in 2015 as suffragan Bishop of Stockport in 2015, an assistant bishop in the diocese of Chester. She is now the diocesan Bishop of Derby.
- There are now (March 2019) 18 [women bishops](#): London, Bristol, Gloucester, Newcastle, Derby, Aston, Crediton, Dorking, Hull, Jarrow, Lancaster, Loughborough, Penrith, Repton, Ripon, Sherborne, Taunton and Warrington.
- Five are diocesan bishops with seats in the House of Lords, including the Rt Rev Sarah Mullaly, Bishop of London, and the third most senior bishop in the Church of England.

RESISTANCE TO WOMEN PRIESTS

- In 1993 the Act of Synod was passed allowing for the creation of “flying bishops” (provincial episcopal visitors) to minister to churches that did not accept the ordination of women. Today there are seven: the bishops of Richborough (based in St Albans), Ebbsfleet, Maidstone, Fulham, Beverley, Wakefield and Burnley.
- [363 parishes](#) (from a total of 13,000) opted to come under the care of these “flying bishops” (2010 stats)
- 1,000 parishes object to women priests working in their churches (2010 stats as above)
- [430 priests](#) resigned from the Church of England over the issue and claimed compensation
- [Forward in Faith](#) was set up in 1992 after the vote to allow women’s ordination. It has branches in many parts of the UK. Committed to the catholic faith and order, opposed to women priests and bishops. The Bishop of Wakefield chairs the group. The director is Dr Colin Podmore. Based in London WC1
- [Reform](#) is a conservative evangelical group set up in 1993 against the ordination of women, now also campaigning on issues such as homosexuality. Led by the Rev Mark Burkill, from Leyton, east London
- Group for Rescinding the Act of Synod called for the Act of Synod, which paid compensation to those who resigned and set up structures for opponents of women’s ordination, to be withdrawn, calling it “institutionally sexist”

THEOLOGY OF RESISTANCE

- Opponents of women’s ordination may draw on the following arguments:
 - The Bible says women should not hold authority over men (Ephesians 5:21-22 says the husband is the head of the wife, the ‘headship’ argument)
 - The 12 disciples were all men and there has been a 2,000-year line of male “apostolic succession”
 - Ordaining women as priests is an obstacle to unity with the Roman Catholics and Orthodox churches, which do not allow women priests
 - A priest represents Jesus at the altar and Jesus was a man
- Those in favour of women’s ordination counter that:
 - The text from Ephesians should be read in its cultural context. Elsewhere St Paul said “in Christ there is no male or female” (Galatians 3:28)
 - Jesus had many women disciples, including Mary Magdalene
 - Unity talks continue but Roman Catholics and the Orthodox do not accept Anglican ordinations or sacraments are valid. The issue of women’s ordination is one of many obstacles to unity.
 - Jesus is representative of all humanity, male and female