

## **The History of the Debate**

The Church of England has been debating the role of women for a short time in comparison to its history as the Established church. This chapter hopes to outline the history and how the debate has taken shape since women have become increasingly involved in the life and teachings of the Church. It will also track the social change that has taken place over the last two hundred years and how this has helped the Church to come to a decision over women in the church. The conclusion will outline what has happened in recent years and the debates that are still going on.

Victorian England was a time of great change, socially and politically. There were many changes happening as Queen Victoria came to the throne. The Industrial Revolution was changing the face of the country as factories filled the skyline and cities became bigger. Working class men, women and children spent many hours of their time to earn a small amount of money as democracy took over. The French revolution brought new meaning to the words liberty, equality and fraternity. Men were professional and women were generally uneducated.<sup>i</sup> Education was for the upper classes and so was church. The Church of England has always been a patriarchal institution,<sup>ii</sup> with men at the forefront of theology and leading the church while women made up a majority of the congregation; they played their part in the history of the church as faithful daughters, wives and mothers.<sup>iii</sup> From the early centuries church history has been written by men for men, therefore women's roles have been in the background. Yet as society developed so did the roles of men and women.

The Church soon realised the need for educating the masses during the early nineteenth century and women took the responsibility, stretching the boundaries of the traditional roles of women in the Church. New church buildings and schools were built, especially by those of evangelical and non-conformist denominations and middle class women quickly became teachers. The women that ran the schools and helped care for the poor were not trained or paid by the Church though their input into the education of young children was invaluable to the growth of the Church. At this time the Church were discovering that the standards of teaching in many schools were falling. In comparison to paid clergymen, teachers had no formal training for the work they were doing. This lack of instruction paved the way for the first questions about women's training in Church ministry, did they need training to teach and if so, should they be paid?<sup>iv</sup> This apparently simple question was surrounded by other debates, relating to the middle-class gentry and the notion that voluntary work was more pleasing to God than paid ministry.<sup>v</sup> These questions and the discussions that took place over the next few years led to women finding a permanent place in the church and was the beginning of training for lay ministry for men and women. This meant that both genders were being trained as teachers and pastoral workers.

With the increase of education for all, congregation sizes were growing and so were religious communities. The first women's community was set up in 1845, in London, to provide a base for charity work in the city and an opportunity to pursue a dedicated prayer life.<sup>vi</sup> This community is seen as the birth of the deaconess sisterhood, which is largely of Anglican denomination. This movement allowed women to lead a life of prayer and care,<sup>vii</sup> giving them a safe place to rest at night and a base to work from during the day. Many women used their faith and the Church for

their work with other people, notably Josephine Butler, who created better conditions for prostitutes and Florence Nightingale, who worked with the sick. Women soon became an active part of mission in the Church. They were going out into the world to spread the message of the Gospel, this was a privilege for the women of the church, who had fought to get this far. Some members still found the inclusion of women in ministry controversial.

With the opening of new religious communities, there was pressure on the Anglican Church to discuss the training and ordaining of women. For a long time women had a separate and distinct role from men in the Anglican Church but began to take over the leadership roles, so that there could be worship while men were working.<sup>viii</sup>

Women were the mainstay of the congregation; they were responsible for the daily worship in the Anglican community.<sup>ix</sup> The main debate during the latter part of the century concerned the role of sisterhoods and whether the Church should allow women deaconesses. Many priests asked the General Synod to consider the 'terms and conditions' of the position, notably Reverend R. Seymour. He asked for a set of rules for the newly ordained women, not to hold them back but to protect them from harm.<sup>x</sup> It took around fifteen years for the Church to come to a decision. In 1861, the first Anglican deaconess was ordained in London.<sup>xi</sup> This event made women in ministry visible where traditionally they were invisible.<sup>xii</sup>

In the following fifteen years the movement of sisterhoods and deaconesses grew considerably. In 1875 there were 18 sisterhoods in London alone.<sup>xiii</sup> Various Bishops had been impressed by the work that the sisterhoods and deaconesses were doing and appointed several to help with work in parishes where men could not work. They

were under the command of the parish clergy and through training and ordination they were officially recognised in the Church.<sup>xiv</sup> Each Deaconess had to be at least twenty-three years of age and educated, though once trained, they could not be ordained until they were thirty.<sup>xv</sup> Deaconesses were now responsible for a huge amount of work that was taking place in the Church of England and this, in turn, encouraged many more men and women to become involved in their local communities. In the last twenty-five years of the nineteenth century the number of women in ministry, either lay or ordained, rose into the thousands.<sup>xvi</sup>

Although women were now established in the life of the Church, they found that the Church did not want them involved in the general government of its buildings and money. Lay women were already serving on Church councils and becoming Church Wardens in many parishes when the Church decided that Parochial Church Councils should be 'male only'. This was only decided on a very close vote of bishops at Canterbury in May 1897.<sup>xvii</sup> By February of the following year the bishops were presented with a petition opposing the ban of women, which brought the involvement of women in Church councils to the forefront of the Upper House's debate, many argued that churches would not be able to find the required amount of candidates if women were to be excluded, while others had positive reasons for the inclusion of women.<sup>xviii</sup> This particular debate stayed with the Upper House in Canterbury until it was reversed in 1914. During this time many women stepped forward to voice their concerns, as awareness of what could now be termed as first wave feminism grew and women began to ask more question of their place in the Church.

In 1901 Edward VII came to the throne and the women of the Suffrage movement became less and less popular with the new king as they campaigned for the right to vote.<sup>xix</sup> For many years the movement fought to pass a suffrage bill in parliament, but even the newly elected liberal government would not allow women to vote.

Emmeline Pankhurst and Millicent Fawcett became household names, with Emily Wilding Davison becoming one of the most famous suffragettes, when she was killed by King George V's horse in a derby race during June 1913. The following year saw the onset of the First World War and women were urged to help support the men at war by working in factories across the country.<sup>xx</sup> Throughout the war the Church League for Women's Suffrage concentrated on gaining the full rights of laity and equal political rights for the female members of the church as well as pushing for representation at diocese level and beyond.<sup>xxi</sup> Towards the end of the war, the different groups of women's activists focused on equality in all Church councils. Between 1917 and 1919 women's opportunities increased greatly as they were allowed to sit on all councils. The female representation at the first National Assembly (a combination of ordained and lay peoples) totalled forty out of 357 laity and women continued to grasp new opportunities into the middle of the century.<sup>xxii</sup> Women had also been given permission to preach at non-liturgical services, due to the absence of many clergy, but this came with conditions, as they had to be 'qualified, trained and tested'.<sup>xxiii</sup>

During this important time for the Church, those who opposed the ordaining of women saw their argument grow. The Archbishop of Canterbury presented a report that examined the evidence of women in ministry during the Church's history and the New Testament. It concluded that there was no indication of women priests in the

Christian tradition and that the ‘evidence of the New Testament is the evidence of that generation’, meaning that the New Testament was to be used in context.<sup>xxiv</sup> This stopped the admission of women to ordination for sometime, although it was insightful when considering the context of the New Testament. It also did not give any indication of where women’s ministry was to take shape in the life of the Church in the future. The Deaconess role became the only order recognised in 1920 and the Lambeth Conference suggested that it was the only ministry that should be used by women.<sup>xxv</sup>

Whilst opposition against the ordination of women was increasing in the Church during the 1920’s, the Suffrage movement continued and in 1928 achieved its goal when every woman over the age of twenty-one was given the right to vote in local and general elections. This paved the way for women in education and politics, as well as feminism, which was a growing fast. Maude Royden, who was a leading figure in the movement for women to become priests, outlined the reasons commonly given in the argument against the full ordination of women, these were ‘subordination because of physical weakness, the taboo of uncleanness, bearing children, sexual attraction and ecumenical considerations’.<sup>xxvi</sup> These reasons gave rise to the phrase ‘equal but different’, women were allowed equality, but they were not to go as far as priesthood. This phrase was used by both parties in the argument, for and against. During the late 1920’s women became more organised in their efforts to have their case heard by the leading councils. The Anglican Group for the Ordination of Women was the main campaigning body,<sup>xxvii</sup> but despite this effort, a review in 1930 from the Lambeth Council concluded that little had happened in the Church, for women, following the permission to allow them to speak and pray during

intercessory services in 1918.<sup>xxviii</sup> The Lambeth Council was not, however, static, despite its position on women: divorce and contraception were discussed, and opinions changed accordingly.<sup>xxix</sup> Attitudes to sex and relationships were changing. Science and psychology over taking the dominant Christian view. Medical advances helped to change the way people understand illness and disease.<sup>xxx</sup>

In 1935 the Church set up an Archbishops' Commission to look specifically at the question of women's ministry. The result of these meetings was mixed. Deaconesses were soon to be ranked among the clergy, receiving better pay and more recognition for their work. The council also granted deaconesses more responsibility in the Church, they were now allowed to preach and perform baptisms. This responsibility was meant to help the laity welcome women into roles that were traditionally male,<sup>xxxi</sup> but women were still not equal in the Church. By the middle of the 1930's women had positions in the Church that were not open to them in the previous century. The beginning of the Second World War at the end of the 1930's saw women step into the vacant jobs that had been left by men who were fighting for the country. Yet as the war ended women returned to their traditional roles as homemakers. Men were promoted as the breadwinners by the media, schools and public policies.<sup>xxxii</sup> This continued until the early 1960's.

During this time of relative stability in the Church of England, the world church was going through a number of important decisions. Many historians note the ordination of Deaconess Florence Tim Oi Li in Hong Kong, during 1944 (though this was needed by the church due to a shortage of male priests).<sup>xxxiii</sup> They also write about the movements across the world and of the members of the Anglican Communion who

were ahead of the Church of England in their thinking, to show the differences in opinion across the world. The discussions and decisions had an effect on the Church, and in the same year that women priests were first ordained in Scotland, Lay Readership training was opened to the female portion of its congregation in England.<sup>xxxiv</sup> The Church had let women into a role that they had been excluded from since 1869. From 1969 to the present day much has happened socially and in the Church.

The 1960's and 1970's saw a second wave of feminism that eventually gave way to the ordination of women. During the twenty-five years it took to make the decision, the Church considered the many reasons for and against the ordination of women. The debate formally started in July of 1967. Women across the country were calling for the Church to review the role of the deaconess, as it was very similar to the role of a deacon, the only difference was found in the words used by the Church.

Deaconesses were in 'a Holy Order' but not in 'Holy Orders'.<sup>xxxv</sup> This difference caused women to call for the Church to provide an effective ministry for women, as there had been some perceived apathy. This had been aggravated by the Church's adoption of a 'third view' in a 1966 report, where it had been decided that though the ordination of women was not impossible, there were good reasons for it not to happen.<sup>xxxvi</sup> The Council feared that the ordination of women would be internally divisive within the Anglican Church and would be an obstacle to its ecumenical relationship with the Catholic Church.

When the Anglican Consultative Council reconvened in 1967 there was still some opposition from a many of the members. Few used examples of other churches that



had allowed women priests to become part of ordained ministry and had subsequently failed to draw a significant number of women for the ministry to continue. Prebendary J. H. B. Andrews used the example of the Bible Christians in North Devon, whose ministry allowed women to be equal with men from 1815. This particular ministry only included one female by the time it joined with other groups to form the United Methodist Church. Other members opposed to the ordination of women called for the Council to consider the biblical roots of the Church, in particular the fact that male priesthood finds its origins in Genesis 1-3.<sup>xxxvii</sup> The members of the Council considered the ordination of women with a weighed argument, the General Synod also became involved and in 1975 a motion was passed by the General Synod that concluded ‘there are no fundamental objections to the ordination of women to the priesthood’. Although this had happened within a relatively short period of time, women were still held back with various legal barriers. One motion was put forward in 1978 to remove the barriers and allow women to become a part of ordained ministry. Unfortunately the Standing committee did not pass the motion as one of the three Houses, the House of Clergy, lost the vote.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

The loss of this particular motion caused an upsurge of supporters for the ordination of women and gave the debate some publicity. Many women continued to voice their opinions in the media spotlight as members of the Movement for the Ordination of Women. During this time the General Synod passed a motion allowing the preparation for the legislation of the ordination of women in Canterbury and York. Between 1984 and 1988 reports were published and the decision was taken to allow women to become ordained as deacons. Finally, after more than 140 years as part of

the ministry of the Church, women were welcomed into the sacred threefold ministry.<sup>xxxix</sup> At this point the Deacons Measure of 1987 closed the order of deaconesses to new recruits because of women's admittance to the diaconate and the organisation 'Women Against the Ordination of Women' was set up. The members of WAOW viewed the ordination of their own kind as a threat to the family values and tradition of the Church as well as an attack on secular feminism.<sup>xi</sup>

In July 1988 the General Synod and Convocation (a group who only meet when called to do so) agreed to the draft legislation allowing women to become ordained in the Church of England. In 1990 a reference to the draft legislation was produced outlining the financial provisions and the Code of Practice (for the churches who were not willing to receive female priests).<sup>xli</sup> On 11<sup>th</sup> November 1992 the Synod approved the legislation. Women could now be seen as equal in the Church of England, they were allowed to be ordained and celebrate communion alongside their male peers. In the following year parishes were asked to decide whether they would permit women to their local ministry or not.<sup>xlii</sup> All of the important parts of the legislation were passed and the first women priests were ordained in Bristol Cathedral on the 12<sup>th</sup> March 1994.

The last two hundred years have been a challenge for women in ministry. There have been many obstacles for those who believe that women should be equal in all respects to men. Progressive change in society and the evolution of feminist theology has greatly helped the case for the ordination of women. The development of women's ministry has been a steady one, where, despite set backs, campaigners have shown that their cause is worth fighting for. In the last ten years there has been a

steady increase of women in ordained ministry, there were more than 1,200 members of clergy in 2002.<sup>xliii</sup> The Church of England is currently discussing the admittance of women to the position of Bishop. This brings with it yet more arguments and problems, socially and theologically, but women's contribution to the Christian faith as a whole has been invaluable and therefore can not be ignored if they are to achieve their full potential as Christians and in their service to those around them in the name of Christ.

- <sup>i</sup> Edwards R.B., *The Case for Women's ministry*, (SPCK, 1989), p. 119
- <sup>ii</sup> Gill, S., *Women and the Church of England from the 18<sup>th</sup> Century to the Present* (SPCK, 1994), p.6
- <sup>iii</sup> The Archbishops' Council, *Women Bishops in the Church of England?* (Church House Publishing, 2004) p.115
- <sup>iv</sup> Gill, S. Op. Cit. p.216
- <sup>v</sup> Gill, S. Ibid. p.216
- <sup>vi</sup> *Women Bishops in the Church of England?* p.116
- <sup>vii</sup> Webster, M., *A New Strength, A New Song: The Journey to Women's Priesthood*, (Continuum International Publishing Group, 1994), p.11
- <sup>viii</sup> *Women Bishops in the Church of England?* p.115
- <sup>ix</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>x</sup> Field-Bibb, J., *Women Towards Priesthood*, (Cambridge University Press, 1991), p.67
- <sup>xi</sup> Jones, I., *Women and Priesthood in the Church of England: Ten Years On*, (Church House Publishing, 2004), p.17
- <sup>xii</sup> Gill, S. Op. Cit. p.2
- <sup>xiii</sup> Webster, M., Op. Cit. p.12
- <sup>xiv</sup> *Women Bishops in the Church of England?* p.117
- <sup>xv</sup> Heeney, B., *The Women's Movement in the Church of England – 1850 – 1930*, (Oxford University Press, 1988) p.73
- <sup>xvi</sup> *Women Bishops in the Church of England?* p.117
- <sup>xvii</sup> Heeney, B., Op. Cit. p.96
- <sup>xviii</sup> Heeney, B. Ibid p.96-97
- <sup>xix</sup> <http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/MOedwardVII.htm>, accessed 08 February 2006
- <sup>xx</sup> <http://www.tchevalier.com/fallingangels/bckgrnd/suffrage/>, accessed 08 February 2006
- <sup>xxi</sup> Heeney, B. Op. Cit. p.107-109
- <sup>xxii</sup> Heeney, B. Ibid. p.110-111
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Heeney, B. Ibid. p.123
- <sup>xxiv</sup> *Women Bishops in the Church of England?* p.119-120
- <sup>xxv</sup> *Women Bishops in the Church of England?* p.120
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Heeney, B. Op. Cit. p.137
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Jones, I. Op. Cit. p.19
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Heeney, B. Op. Cit. p.126
- <sup>xxix</sup> Gill, S. Op. Cit. p.210
- <sup>xxx</sup> Giddens, A., *Sociology, 4<sup>th</sup> edition*, (Polity Press, 2001) p.126
- <sup>xxxi</sup> *Women Bishops in the Church of England?* p.121
- <sup>xxxii</sup> *Women Bishops in the Church of England?* p.123
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> Field-Bibb, J., Op. Cit. p.134 and Edwards, R. B., Op. Cit. p.126
- <sup>xxxiv</sup> Edwards, R.B, Ibid. p.126
- <sup>xxxv</sup> Field-Bibb, J., Op. Cit. p.96
- <sup>xxxvi</sup> *Women Bishops in the Church of England?* p.125, Reasons are outlined in Field-Bibb, J., p. 95
- <sup>xxxvii</sup> Field-Bibb, J., Op. Cit. p.100
- <sup>xxxviii</sup> *Women Bishops in the Church of England?* p.125
- <sup>xxxix</sup> *Women Bishops in the Church of England?* p.126
- <sup>xl</sup> Field-Bibb, J., Op. Cit. p.84 and Gill, S., Op. Cit. p. 254
- <sup>xli</sup> *The Ordination of Women to the Priesthood: Reference of Draft Legislation to the Diocesan Synods 1990* (Church House Publishing, 1990)
- <sup>xlii</sup> *Women Bishops in the Church of England?* p.127
- <sup>xliii</sup> *Women Bishops in the Church of England?* p.129