

Two milestones for womenâ??s ordination

As the Diocese of the Murray prepares this weekend to ordain its first female priests, the Episcopal Church in the United States has just marked the 49th anniversary of the first women â?? the Philadelphia Eleven â?? ordained there. One of those women, The Rev. Alison Cheek, links the two events. She was born near Adelaide in 1927.

On Saturday 12 August 2023 three women deacons will be ordained to the priesthood at 11am at Christ the King, Mt Barker, after the Diocese of the Murray in June voted 57-4 to allow the ordination of women.

The Revâ??d Carol Cornwall, will become Assistant Curate Southern Suburbs, the Revâ??d Margot Holt, will become Assistant Curate Strathalbyn, and the Revâ??d Alison Dutton, to be Assistant Curate The South Coast.

It comes just two weeks after the Episcopal Church in the United States marked the 49th anniversary of its first women ordained as priests. That first of that group, known as the Philadelphia Eleven, to publicly celebrate the Eucharist was the South Australian-born Alison Cheek, who was later a significant figure in the early days of the Movement for the Ordination of Women in Australia.

The ordinations, which took place at the Church of the Advocate in Philadelphia on 29 July1974, were highly controversial, coming as it did two years before the ordination of women was officially authorised.

It prompted an emergency meeting of the House of Bishops where the ordinations were declared â??irregularâ?• and urged the church to wait for the 1976 General Convention to vote before any further womenâ??s ordinations took place. That convention declared the Philadelphia Elevenâ??s ordinations valid and adopted a canonical amendment barring discrimination on the grounds of gender.

You can see a trailer for a documentary on the difficult journey of the women to Philadelphia below.

Cheek made a number of visits to Australia in the 1980s and early 1990s, particularly at crucial times such as General Synod meetings.



Alison Cheek, left, with Alison Gent, herself an â??agent of changeâ?• in Adelaide in the national struggle from the early 1980s to get women ordained as priests, pictured

at a lunch in Cheekâ??s honour at St Phillipâ??s Broadview 18 March 2008.

As Janet Scarfe writes: â??She was a tower of strength to MOW as a community and to individuals within it. A pioneering women of stature and faith, she manifested the reality of women priests in the Anglican communion to us and to Anglican Church authorities in Australia.â?•

Cheek was raised Methodist and graduated from the University of Adelaide, according to the Movement for the Ordination of Women website.

She and her husband, Bruce, moved to the Washington DC area in 1957 where she became a lay minister at several Episcopal churches while raising four children. In 1963, she became one of the first two women admitted to the Master of Divinity program at Virginia Theological Seminary, from which she graduated in 1969. With encouragement from her rector, she pursued ordination to the diaconate and became the first female deacon in the South in 1972.

â??During a retreat, she experienced a powerful spiritual calling to do something that had never been done before. She heard the voice of God telling her, â??I want you to be my priestâ??,â?• she told the *Chicago Tribune*.

â??It was a powerful experience. Itâ??s why I never thought of giving up,â?• Cheek said.

Cheek died on 1 September 2019 at her home in Brevard, North Carolina. She was 92.

With the Diocese of the Murray now welcoming women priests there are now just three Australian dioceses where women are not ordained to the priesthood: Sydney and the two regional dioceses of Armidale and North-West Australia, both closely aligned with Sydney.

Further reading

https://guardian-prod.shared.lightbulb.digital/2022/02/17/celebrating-30-years-of-women-priests-in-australia/

https://guardian-prod.shared.lightbulb.digital/2022/06/08/womens-leadership-matters/

https://guardian-prod.shared.lightbulb.digital/2022/12/13/womens-ordination-celebration-thanksgiving-and-recollection/

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