



First woman archbishop of Canterbury can't preside over communion in hundreds of churches

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As an academic specialising in gender and the church, the news that Bishop Sarah Mullally would be the next archbishop of Canterbury came as a pleasant shock to me. The announcement of a woman as leader of the Church of England and the ["first among equals"](#) in the worldwide Anglican communion came as a surprise to others too. One woman priest told me she was "stunned but pleased".

What is not surprising, though, is the immediate condemnation from church conservatives, many [outside the Church of England](#). Social media naysayers made their views known too – I read comments arguing that a female archbishop makes a "mockery of tradition" and that such "feminist rebellion" spells the death of the church.

This type of abusive commentary has been aimed at women priests [for years](#). My [own research](#) explores the gendered abuse faced by women in the church.

The appointment of a woman as archbishop is a welcome show of resistance by the church against such misogyny. But it is by no means a panacea for the sexism and misogyny built into the church's structure.



The new Archbishop of Canterbury Sarah Mullally at her installation as Bishop of London

Before 1993, women were not permitted to be ordained in the Church of England. The campaign for women's ordination has a long history, gathering pace from the 1970s. Finally, in 1992, General Synod – the church's governing council – voted in favour of allowing women to be priests. The vote was close, and many in the church remained opposed to the move.

To accommodate those who could not accept women in the priesthood, [the Act of Synod](#) (1993) facilitating the ordination of women established a dual structure, allowing individual parishes to refuse the ministry of women priests and to have pastoral oversight from a bishop who did not ordain women (nicknamed ["flying bishops"](#)).

In 2014, legislation was passed to allow women bishops. The House of Bishops agreed on a document detailing [Five Guiding Principles](#). This document paradoxically states the church is unequivocal in its commitment to women's ordination, while also committing to the continuing provision for those who do not accept women can or should be priests.

The discriminatory structure, with its no-go parishes for women clergy, was maintained. The church can do this because it is exempt from [UK equality legislation](#) in matters of belief and conscience.

Today, [about 5% of Church of England](#) parishes officially object to women priests, though there are also churches where women's ministry is unofficially curtailed. The official number of parishes avoiding women's ministry is a minority, but they have had a disproportionate impact on the structure of the church. The open disavowal of women's priesthood will erode the authority and status of the next archbishop of Canterbury.

There are currently nearly [600 parishes](#) that officially bar women priests. The Church of England must now deal with an extraordinary situation: the archbishop of Canterbury will not be able to preside over communion in these churches.

In my recent book, [Women Priests, Symbolic Violence and Symbolic Resistance](#), I detail the damage this structural discrimination does to women priests. It affects them materially, emotionally, psychologically, and undermines their status by allowing some to claim they are not priests.

To that end, the historic appointment of a woman as archbishop of Canterbury is a bold and significant move by the church. And it may, to an extent, ameliorate the damage to women's status and bring the church's own discriminatory practices against women clergy back onto the agenda.

Structural inequality

With guarded optimism, Martine Osborne, the chair of [Women and the Church](#), an organisation campaigning against the Five Guiding Principles, [writes](#) about the church's need to challenge its institutional misogyny: "Hopefully, the appointment of our first female archbishop of Canterbury will be a big step towards this." But without the dismantling of the current structure, the misogyny that infects the church will not be tackled.

I think it is unlikely that the new archbishop will instigate the end of the dual structure. Bishop Mullally may [describe herself as a feminist](#), but it remains to be seen whether she will create the conditions for real change that is needed to give women priests dignity and equality.

British professor of theology Linda Woodhead [has praised](#) Mullally's emphasis on unity in the church, saying it is "exactly what the church, and nation, needs right now".

Yet, unity may still be a tall order for the soon-to-be archbishop. Conservatives and traditionalists within the Church of England and in the worldwide Anglican communion may have trouble dealing with a woman's authority and leadership, precluding any dramatic structural change. And women in the church may be disappointed that their circumstances will not be improved greatly.

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