

celebrated women

REVERENCE CONSTANCE COLTMAN 1889-1969

The pioneers of women's ordination have come from a wide variety of backgrounds. Constance Coltman, ordained 90 years ago, was the first woman in Britain to be ordained as a Congregational minister.

Her story illustrates the pathway to ordination of women in the Nonconformist denominations. She would have stood out in any generation for the combination of intelligence, inner strength and courage that sustained her lifelong ministry.

A Presbyterian by upbringing, she was born Constance Todd in Putney, London, in 1889. Her Scottish father was a civil servant, and her mother a doctor, though unable to practice following a domestic accident. They encouraged in Constance a love of literature and learning, which led in 1908 to her studying history at Somerville College, Oxford.



friend Maude Royden, whom she invited to speak at a college conference in 1915. Before finishing her training Constance became engaged to fellow Mansfield ordinand Claud Coltman. They worshipped during vacations at the King's Weigh House Church, in London's West End, where the powerful preacher and pacifist W. E. Orchard ministered.

In July 1917 the Church Meeting of this influential Congregational Church agreed a proposal for its East End mission outpost at Darby Street, Wapping, through the calling of Claud and Constance as assistant ministers to Dr Orchard. Nothing was said about the fact one of them was a woman although the project finances were discussed at length.

Denomination and ordination

As she explored her vocation she met resistance from the Presbyterian Church in England, so then applied to the Congregational foundation of Mansfield College, Oxford. For Constance, her desire for ordination outweighed her denominational loyalty, and she was not alone in this. Of the 18 other women ordained in the Congregational Union of England and Wales before 1939, 11 were from Anglican, Presbyterian or Methodist backgrounds, where the path to full ministry was not yet possible.

Dr Selbie, the principal of Mansfield College, later explained he had admitted her to training because of her deep sense of God's call. There was no certainty that she would be ordained after the three-year course, however, for the denomination had no agreed policy on the question. Furthermore, new Congregational ministers need a call from a local congregation before being ordained, a possibility which no woman had yet explored. By the early 20th century some women were recognised as lay preachers or occasionally lay pastors, but these were local arrangements only.

Constance entered fully into life at theological college, despite the over-shadowing of World War One, and was well accepted by her male fellow ordinands. Questions of where a sole female student would live were more straightforward in this non-residential college than in most other institutions where women would train. If all students live out then women are no different from anyone else in doing so.

Friend and engagement

The causes of feminism, pacifism and women's suffrage were important to Constance, issues also supported by her Anglican

Within weeks, Maude Royden had begun a role as pulpit assistant at another London Congregational church, City Temple. The next day, September 17th, Constance and Claud were ordained at the King's Weigh House Church in a service conducted by four senior Congregational ministers.

Reverend first, Mrs second!

On the following day they were married, so Constance was 'Reverend' before she was 'Mrs'. At a time when women were expected to give up paid employment on their marriage, she combined ministry with marriage and motherhood, something none of her female ministerial contemporaries achieved. Constance managed this partly because she and Claud operated a ministerial job-share, living on one ministerial stipend. She used her private money to subsidise the household and, after the later birth of two daughters and son, to pay for help at home.

In September 1917, while deaths mounted in the battle of Passchendaele and London experienced air raids, the London Congregational Board considered a request for full ministerial membership from Constance Coltman. Her ordination had not received prior recognition and Dr Selbie had stayed away, uneasy that her call was irregular because Darby Street did not have a Church Meeting through which to issue one.

New developments in women's ministry often happen on the edge of irregularity. In October 1917, the Council of the Congregational Union of England and Wales gave formal recognition to Constance Coltman as a minister. That December, Dr Selbie and the secretary of the London Congregational Board,

the Revd R. J. Evans, attended an 'induction' service for her in Darby Street, remaining silent on the status of her September ordination.

A shared and varied ministry

The fact that Constance was better qualified than some of the men she had trained alongside, coupled with her impeccable upbringing, had helped her into ministry. Life in the East End was stressful, though, and she took sick leave on Dr Orchard's advice before coming out of pastoral charge in 1921.

In 1922 she and Claud started another sacrificial ministry, trying to revive the declining church at Greville Place, Kilburn, then moving within three years to Cowley Road, Oxford. A 1936 report on the ministry of women by the Congregational Union noted that several ordained women had received calls from churches in financial difficulties that could not offer an adequate salary for a man. Constance was not alone in taking on difficult ministries in mission settings.

Constance's view of Mary

Throughout their ministry, which took them to Wolverton in 1932 and finally to Haverhill, the Coltmans divided their roles. Constance specialised in baptisms, some weddings, and visiting young mothers. She studied midwifery and advised on birth control and fertility.

Claud was always fully supportive of his wife's interests and activities, which also included writing a regular column of spiritual advice in 'The Sunday at Home' journal during the inter-war years.

She wrote on the Free Churches for Maude Royden's 1924 book ***The Church and Woman***, describing the Reformation as a 'two-edged sword in the cause of the ministry of women.' For Constance, with her unusually High Church outlook, the Reformation's ending of Mariolatry had weakened the status of Protestant women. Contemporary Nonconformist ministers

were vulnerable to opposition by one or two 'protesting church members', she declared with cool realism, so a woman could nearly always be prevented from receiving a call.

Despite such misgivings she was a founder member of the Society for the Ministry of Women and active in it throughout her life. Generations of women ordinands were helped by her in their academic preparation and in the 1950s she learned Swedish so as to support women seeking ordination in the Church of Sweden.

A quiet yet powerful ministry

A lifelong pacifist, member of the Fellowship of Reconciliation and founder of Christian CND, Constance died in 1969. At her memorial service, tributes were paid to her by fellow Congregationalists the Revd Elsie Chamberlain and Lady Stansgate (mother of Tony Benn). The significance of her quiet yet powerful ministry did not escape figures from the wider church, including Lord Donald Soper and Bishop Trevor Huddleston, copies of whose letters of sympathy to Claud have survived.

The United Reformed Church, as part inheritor of the Congregational tradition, recently named one venue in Church House, London the 'Coltman Room'. Perhaps by the time the centenary of her ordination arrives, a decade from now, her story will be better known and celebrated than it has been so far.

Kirsty Thorpe

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Please note: our book reviews include a review of Janet Wootton's book ***This Is Our Story*** — a book about women's ministry in the free churches in the UK.

