



WATCH TRAINING DAY

Women Bishops in the Church of England: the Role of MPs

1. **At present by law, women priests cannot be bishops in the Church of England.** This is in marked contrast to the situation in 14 other Provinces of the Anglican Communion, including Scotland and Ireland, where women and men have an equal opportunity of becoming bishops.
2. **The Church of England first ordained women as priests in 1994.** To do this, legislation had to be passed by the church's General Synod by a two-thirds majority (66%) in each of the three houses (bishops, clergy and lay-people). It then had to be deemed 'expedient' by the Ecclesiastical Committee of Parliament, be accepted in both Houses, and receive the Queen's assent.
3. **Why does Parliament have this part to play in the Church's decisions?** The Church of England is still the 'established' church in England. This means that every person living in England is in a (Church of England) parish. They are legally entitled to be baptised and married in their parish church, for example, and their vicar has responsibility to care for them, whether they are church-goers (or even Christians) or not. All this stems from the establishment of the Church by Henry VIII in Tudor times. In return for this 'universal' care, Parliament scrutinises any significant laws the Church passes, as they may affect everyone who lives in a parish in England – which means everyone. **This is why you as an MP have a responsibility to participate in the discussions and decisions about consecrating women as bishops.**
4. **There are today 2000 female priests in the Church of England** (out of 10 000 in total). They are ministering in parishes, cathedrals, hospitals, schools, universities and prisons. A number are archdeacons and two are Deans of Cathedrals. More than half of those currently training to be priests are women.
5. **In July 2006, the General Synod of the Church of England voted in favour of the principle of allowing women to become bishops in the Church of England. A Legislative Drafting Group has now been set up to begin the work of preparing the relevant legislation.** The Synodical legislative process (similar to that of Parliament) will take some years, including consultation and voting at a local level, in all 44 dioceses of the Church. At the end of this process, as with women priests, legislation from General Synod will come to Parliament for your vote to enable women to have the same equal opportunities as men within the established Church of this country.
6. **What will happen to those opposed to women bishops?** In the 1993 women priests' legislation, provision was made for those who could not at that time accept women priests. Parishes could in effect 'opt out' of having a female priest in their church, and financial provision was made for those clergy who felt they had to leave the Church of England. This latter provision lasted for 10 years, and cost the Church £27.5m.

In the last 10 years the ministry of women priests has been widely and happily accepted across the country. However, there still are some who do not accept women as priests, and will not accept women as bishops. Because the Church aims to hold people of different views together, some provision will be made to enable those who will not accept women bishops to remain within the Church. The exact form of this provision is likely to be a key aspect in assembling the legislation. WATCH (Women and the Church) is firmly of the view that the legislation for women bishops must not discriminate against women, and that all women and men who are appointed as bishops must have the same authority and responsibilities. The provision made for those opposed must be secondary to this.

7. In March 2006 Andy Reed's **10-minute bill** calling for the Church to consecrate women as bishops received warm cross-party support. In June 2007 Robert Key tabled EDM 1664, which received 130 signatures. This referred to the concessions made to opponents of women priests in 1993, and asked 'that the Church of England should move on from that compromise and permit the consecration of women to the episcopate'.
8. WATCH is continuing to press MPs to request legislation that is non-discriminatory to permit women to be bishops.

