

Equal *Rites* for Women:
A History of the
Ordination of Women
in the Episcopal Church

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The Episcopal Church in the United States (ECUSA) has been ordaining women to the priesthood since 1976, coinciding with the height of the broader women's movement sweeping the United States. As the larger movement has its roots in the much earlier efforts to gain suffrage for women, the struggle toward approval of the women's ordination was the product of a much longer history than the preparation for the ECUSA General Convention¹ that assented to the priesting of women. The issues are made somewhat complex by the structure of governance of the ECUSA (specifically her relationship to the Church of England and fealty to Canterbury), so one must also discuss the ways in which the issue of the ordination of women was addressed by the wider Anglican Communion². The discussion that follows will outline the proceedings that led ultimately to the ordination of women in the ECUSA and the controversies surrounding the decision, and seek to contextualize the issues as they relate to the American women's movement generally.

¹ ECUSA Canon Law is set at the General Convention, which includes the House of Bishops as well as clergy and lay deputies.

² Those churches "in Communion with" Canterbury, and under the pastoral and episcopal authority of the Archbishop of Canterbury.

The history of the women's movement in the United States "can be divided into three approximate temporal categories. The first division is from 1850 to 1920 and is also referred to as the first wave or suffrage feminism"³, and the concerns of women were being addressed in the Episcopal Church during the time of the "first wave" feminists. In 1850, the Right Reverend William Rollinson Whittingham, Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Maryland from 1840-79⁴, "'set apart' two deaconesses"⁵. While this was not seen (at the time) as conferring Holy Orders⁶ on the women thus "set apart," the Order of Deaconesses "- which had good Biblical tradition behind it - emerged with renewed emphasis"⁷. The Bishop of London followed suit in 1862 when he "ordered deaconesses by the laying on of hands"⁸, establishing the Order of Deaconesses across the Anglican Communion. The ECUSA officially adopted the Canon of Deaconesses at the 1889 General Convention, although the women remained distinctly and officially *not* members of the clergy.

Thirty years after the adoption of the Canon, the General Convention of 1919 recommended "including deaconesses in Clergy Pension Fund"⁹, but the Fund's Board of Trustees concluded that the women were not clergy and thus not eligible to participate. The following year, the Lambeth Conference¹⁰ resolved that "the diaconate

³ Bratton, Angela. "Feminist Anthropology."

⁴ Smith, Kingsley. "History of the Diocese of Maryland."

⁵ Darling, Pam. "Women's Ministries."

⁶ The deaconesses were not able to preside over weddings, Deacons' Masses (distribution of the Sacrament from pre-consecrated Bread and Wine), etc.

⁷ Maitland, Sara, *A Map of the New Country*, 20.

⁸ Darling, Pam. "Women's Ministries."

⁹ Darling, Pam. "Women's Ministries."

¹⁰ Meeting of the Bishops of the Anglican Communion, roughly once every decade.

of women should be restored formally and canonically”¹¹. This Resolution was interpreted as conferring Holy Orders, at least in theory, on the deaconesses across the Anglican Communion, and another Resolution from the same Conference states that, “with the approval of the bishop and of the parish priest,” the deaconesses should be allowed to preside over “Morning and Evening Prayer and the Litany, except such portions as are assigned to the priest only¹²; in church also to lead in prayer and, under licence of the bishop, to instruct and exhort the congregation”¹³. Despite the Lambeth Resolutions and the recommendation of a Commission on women’s role in the ECUSA that they be permitted to do so, however, women were still not allowed even to act as lay readers in the ECUSA¹⁴. Women were also prohibited from serving as Deputies to the General Convention, even in the face of the passage and ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States.

The advancement of women’s roles in churches within the Anglican Communion suffered a setback with the 1930 Lambeth Conference, at which the implication that the “setting apart” of deaconesses conferred Holy Orders was emphatically rescinded. Resolution 68 states that “such ordination need not be at the Ember seasons¹⁵, and *should not* be combined with an ordination of priests or deacons”¹⁶. A 1935 Commission on Women’s Roles in the Church of England (and, thus, by extension, the Anglican

¹¹ Lambeth Conference Archives: 1920 Conference, Resolution 47.

¹² *e.g.*, certain forms of absolution and benediction.

¹³ Lambeth Conference Archives: 1920 Conference, Resolution 52.

¹⁴ The 1925 General Convention rejected a proposal from the Commission on women’s roles that recommended allowing women to serve as lay readers.

¹⁵ The times at which ordinations to the diaconate and priesthood are traditionally held.

¹⁶ Lambeth Conference Archives: 1930 Conference, Resolution 68. Italics mine.

Communion) “found no reason for or against ordination of women, but affirm(ed) all-male priesthood”¹⁷. A decade later and an ocean away, the first woman was ordained an Anglican priest in Hong Kong. Florence Li Tim-Oi was priested by Bishop R.O. Hall; however, “to protect Hall from censure, she agree(d) not to function as priest”¹⁸. Four years after the Rev. Tim-Oi’s ordination, the 1948 Lambeth Conference rejected Hong Kong’s proposal for “experimental”¹⁹ ordination of women to the priesthood, stating that it “would be against the tradition and order and would gravely affect the internal and external relations of the Anglican Communion”²⁰, and denying the validity of the Rev. Tim-Oi’s ordination. So, while American women were returning to their homes - after spending the previous decade as “Rosie the Riveter” and playing professional baseball - and falling subject to *The Feminine Mystique*, finding themselves “victim(s) of the American Dream”²¹, the Church continued actively to oppress them through national and international structures of governance.

The women’s movement at large had won the battle for suffrage, and all was quiet – for a time, and on the face of it. The post-war American woman was plunged backward to the “endless, thankless cycle of dishes and vacuuming and her husband’s ironing and her children’s laundry”²², and she (generally) bore it quietly. Then, in 1963, Betty Friedan’s revolutionary book, *The Feminine Mystique*, burst into the consciousness

¹⁷ Darling, Pam. “Women’s Ministries.”

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Lambeth Conference Archives: 1948 Conference, Resolution 113.

²¹ Sexton, Anne. Quoted in Rosen, Ruth. *The World Split Open*, 3.

²² Quindlen, Anna. Introduction to *The Feminine Mystique*, viii.

of the American woman. The “problem that ha(d) no name”²³ was finally defined, and it could not have occurred at a more opportune time. The burgeoning Civil Rights movement that cried out for equal treatment of people of colour had a counterpart in white suburban America. Indeed, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 “prohibits discrimination in employment – not only on the basis of race [...], but also on sex”²⁴.

Pauli Murray (1910-1985), the first African-American woman to be ordained in the Episcopal Church...was an author of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. She and the committee that wrote it managed to slip ‘sex’ in there with other things like ‘race’ and ‘national origin’ by convincing Congress that the women of America would rise up in anger if it wasn’t there²⁵.

The time was ripe for the issue of women’s ordination to come to the forefront of the ECUSA, with the concept that the Church was, by denying women Holy Orders based on their *being* women, violating the Civil Rights of half of her members. The General Convention of 1964 amended the Canon on Deaconesses “to read ‘ordered’ rather than ‘appointed’”²⁶, an important distinction that harkens back to the 1920 Lambeth Conference determination that deaconesses were indeed members of the clergy.

Following in the vein of the distinction between deaconesses being “ordered” or “appointed,” the Bishop of San Francisco, the Right Reverend James Pike, officially recognized Deaconess Phyllis Edwards as a member of the ordained diaconate in 1965. In 1966, the ECUSA House of Bishops received, during an interim meeting (between

²³ Friedan, Betty. Title of Chapter One of *The Feminine Mystique*, 15.

²⁴ Rosen, Ruth. Chronology in *The World Split Open*, xix.

²⁵ LeVeque, Anne. Personal communication, May 2003.

²⁶ Darling, Pam. “Women’s Ministries.”

General Conventions)²⁷, a report entitled “The Proper Place of Women in the Ministry of the Church”²⁸. The report supported the ordination of women, and requested that the issue be taken by the ECUSA House of Bishops to the 1968 Lambeth Conference for consideration. Lambeth determined “that the theological arguments as at present presented for and against the ordination of women to the priesthood (were) inconclusive”²⁹ and suggested that “before any national or regional Church or province (made) a final decision to ordain women to the priesthood, the advice of the Anglican Consultative Council (or Lambeth Consultative Body) be sought and carefully considered”³⁰. So, while the Anglican Communion was reluctant to make a strong statement for or against the ordination of women, she acknowledged that her member Churches would be compelled to do so ere Lambeth met again.

Indeed, decisions were made by Churches within the Anglican Communion almost immediately upon the close of the 1968 Lambeth Conference. Hong Kong, Kenya, Korea, and Canada began the ordination of women to the transitional diaconate³¹ before the year’s end. The ECUSA held a special General Convention in 1969, during which it was resolved that women could act as lay readers and be licensed as chalice bearers; a joint commission to study the ordination of women to the priesthood was appointed. The regularly scheduled 1970 General Convention of the ECUSA was the first to include

²⁷ “‘Interim meetings’ cannot legislate for the whole Church, but resolutions passed by them can convey the bishops’ collective understanding of many issues...” (House of Bishops).

²⁸ Darling, Pam. “Women’s Ministries.”

²⁹ Lambeth Conference Archives: 1968 Conference, Resolution 34.

³⁰ Lambeth Conference Archives: 1968 Conference, Resolution 37.

³¹ The branch of the diaconate that is ordained with the understanding that the ordinands will be priested in the future.

women amongst the House of Deputies, a concession for which the women of the Church had been striving for fifty years.

The 1970 General Convention handed down a number of landmark resolutions furthering the cause of women's ordination. The Deaconess Canon was eliminated; women could be ordained to the full diaconate, and the women already set apart in the Order were made fully ordained deacons. This resolution also allowed the former deaconesses to participate in the Clergy Pension Fund. A resolution that would have allowed women to be ordained as priests was passed by the laity, but ultimately defeated (albeit narrowly) by the clergy³².

In 1971, the New Anglican Consultative Council, a focus group of laity and clergy from across the Anglican Communion, declared that it was "'acceptable' for a bishop to ordain a woman if his (sic) national church or province approve(d)"³³. The ECUSA House of Bishops referred the matter for further consideration at the next General Convention. Women, however, began to be ordained to the transitional diaconate alongside men; the year also saw the founding of the Episcopal Women's Caucus (EWC). An ecclesiastical "younger sister" to the National Organization for Women (NOW)³⁴, the EWC "was formed [...] during a meeting of professional lay women and deacons. Notified that the House of Bishops had created yet another study committee

³² The General Convention is structured similarly to the United States Congress with the laity's House of Deputies functioning as the House of Representatives and the clergy as the Senate. The clerical vote bears thus the ultimate authority so, although the ECUSA laity approved the ordination of women, the defeat of the resolution by the clergy was the decision handed down by the General Convention.

³³ Darling, Pam. "Women's Ministries."

³⁴ Founded 1966.

on the ordination of women, without having taken action on its previous studies, the women informed the Presiding Bishop of their refusal to cooperate further”³⁵.

Although the House of Bishops voted 74-61 in favour of ordaining women to the priesthood in 1972, the resolution was again defeated at the October 1973 General Convention. In December 1973, despite the failure of the resolution, five women were presented for ordination to the priesthood³⁶ in New York City. One of those candidates, Carter Heyward, recalls that, in the course of their discussions prior to their presentation, “at first, (they) thought only of a ‘witness’ to (their) dilemma: (they) would be presented for ordination, (they) would be refused, and (their) rejection would be a public symbol of the injustice being perpetrated by the Church on its own”³⁷. It occurred to the women that, although unlikely, it was *possible* that they would be ordained; the bishops with whom they conferred before their presentation “spent the better part of twenty-four hours hashing and rehashing the pros and cons of an ‘irregular’³⁸ ordination [...but] shared with (them) the belief that such an ordination would be *morally right*”³⁹. The bishops, however, were concerned that the irregular ordinations would ultimately be counterproductive.

The five women persisted and were presented for ordination at the Cathedral Church of Saint John the Divine on the fifteenth of December, although only the names

³⁵ EWC. “Our Story.”

³⁶ Candidates for ordination are “presented” to the bishop by the rectors and congregations of the parishes who have sponsored them through the “discernment process.”

³⁷ Heyward, Carter. *A Priest Forever*, 55.

³⁸ Contrary to Canon Law.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 54.

of the male candidates were listed in the order of service. Bishop Paul Moore⁴⁰ did ultimately refuse to priest the women, but, Heyward recollects that his “expression, as (she) looked up at him from (her) kneeling position, was one of anguish. He meant (them) no harm, no injustice, no ‘personal’ rejection”⁴¹. The women, along with at least a third of the congregation, exited the cathedral in protest and in tears.

“The next months incorporated both pain and premonition about what was to come”⁴²; the refusal of their priesting had galvanized the five women who were presented to Bishop Moore, as well as a number of others. Beginning in April 1974, a series of impassioned letters between the congregation to which Heyward was attached, Bishop Moore, and Fr. Thomas Pike, President of the Standing Committee on Ordination, were sent. Heyward reproduced the text of many of those letters in her book, *A Priest Forever: One Woman’s Controversial Ordination in the Episcopal Church*. The central issue of the correspondence was the intended presentation of Heyward and her colleague, the Rev. (deacon) Emily Hewitt, for ordination to the priesthood alongside the Rev. Daniel Jones, planned for the seventeenth of May 1974. “Diocesan response to the pleas of the vestry and congregation was largely bewilderment and anger”⁴³, and the Suffragan Bishop who was to perform the ordination of Jones stated that “he would not, in fact, ordain *him* if there were to be any demonstrations by ‘the women’”⁴⁴ such as their being presented as they had been in December 1973. No such action had been

⁴⁰ Dates of Episcopate: 1972-89; died 1 May 2003 (Sisk, the Right Reverend Mark S., “Information for priests, deacons, and laity.”).

⁴¹ Heyward, 59. Italics mine.

⁴² *Ibid*, 61.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 63.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*.

planned, but “when it became apparent that Emily (Hewitt) and (Heyward) would not be ordained, Dan invited (Heyward) to preach”⁴⁵ at his ordination.

Instead of another presentation at which they would certainly be refused, Heyward and Hewitt, along with nine other female deacons, proceeded to plan an “irregular” ordination for July 29, chosen because it is the Feast of Saints Mary and Martha. Four bishops were present at the ordination service at Philadelphia’s Church of the Advocate on the day of the ordination; three of them would officially be ordaining women to the priesthood. The processional hymn, “Come Labor On,” began and the women were led into the church by crucifer Barbara Harris, now the Right Reverend Bishop Harris, who “probably would have laughed at you if you’d told her then that she would be the first woman bishop in the Anglican Communion”⁴⁶; Heyward’s poignant recollection of the moment speaks of the support, the fear, and the joy she felt:

An assortment of Episcopal clerics ranging from women deacons to retired priests reached out to us as we passed (in procession).

Approaching the door to the nave, my eyes began to pop. There was no aisle, no room to walk. Well over a thousand, maybe two thousand, people were pressed in close to participate. The path to the chancel area cleared as we moved steadily, if timidly, on through the jubilant hellos, waves, hugs, flash bulbs, and television cameras moving with us.

When Bishops Corrigan, DeWitt, Ramos, and Welles stepped through the door, applause burst forth so resoundingly as to fill the space around us and within us. The very foundations of the Church seemed to tremble.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 64.

⁴⁶ LeVeque, Anne. Personal communication, May 2003.

⁴⁷ Heyward, 86.

Indeed, the eleven women, their supporters, and the ordaining bishops *were* shaking the very foundations of the ECUSA. Charles Willie, then vice-president of the ECUSA House of Deputies was the first to speak at the service. He noted that “twice during the 1970 decade, the General Convention was presented the opportunity to confirm the personhood of women by affirming their right to be professional priests. Twice it did blunder”⁴⁸. He further stated that “there are parallels between the Civil Rights Movement and the Women’s Movement [...] both are freedom movements for women as well as men”⁴⁹, and lauded the courage of the women who were about to be priested, saying that they were “refusing to cooperate in their own oppression by remaining on the periphery of the Church”⁵⁰. At “the point in the service when the bishop asks if anyone knows just cause why these persons should not be ordained, etc., several people got up to speak [...] the bishops let people have their say and carried on”⁵¹ with priesting the eleven women.

Two days after the ordination of the women who came to be known as “the Philadelphia Eleven,” the ECUSA’s Presiding Bishop, John Allin, called an emergency meeting of the House of Bishops. On the fifteenth of August (ironically, a Feast of the most revered woman of Christendom, the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin), the House of Bishops proclaimed the ordinations invalid. Charles Willie resigned the vice-presidency of the House of Deputies in protest. Ecclesiastical charges were brought against the bishops who ordained the Philadelphia Eleven. The “Washington Four”

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ LeVeque, Anne. Personal communication, May 2003.

were ordained in September 1975, resulting in the censure of all bishops who would presume to perform further irregular ordinations; a number of priests who allowed many of the fifteen priested women to celebrate the Eucharist were charged, tried, and disciplined for violating canon law.

The General Convention of 1976, at long last, approved the ordination of women to the priesthood and episcopate; as America celebrated the bicentennial of the Revolution, and NOW rejoiced in a decade of existence, the ECUSA acquiesced to the Women's Revolution. The ordinations of the Philadelphia Eleven and Washington Four were regularized in 1977, and over 100 women were priested before the year's end.

Just as the larger women's movement engendered conservative backlash, the ECUSA decision to allow women to be ordained priest and consecrated bishop did not go unanswered by those opposed. Presiding Bishop Allin offered his resignation because he was "unable to accept women in role of priests"⁵²; instead, the House of Bishops affirmed his leadership and adopted a "statement of conscience" which states that "no one should be penalized for opposing, or supporting, women's ordination"⁵³, paving the way for the handful of twenty-first century ECUSA bishops who routinely refuse Holy Orders to women. A break-away denomination, the Anglican Church of the United States of America (ACUSA), was formed; today, the ACUSA adheres to the 1928 Book of Common Prayer, and neither ordains women nor allows them to act as lay

⁵² Darling, Pam. "Women's Ministries."

⁵³ *Ibid.*

readers. The ACUSA and a number of other small denominations which have their roots in the ECUSA do not recognize the authority of the ECUSA or of Canterbury.

Although the 1976 General Convention made it legal to consecrate a female bishop, it was not until 1989 that Barbara Harris, crucifer at the ordination of the Philadelphia Eleven, became the first woman elected bishop in the ECUSA. She accepted the call to become Suffragan Bishop of Massachusetts, and was, in 1989, the first woman consecrated to the episcopate in the Anglican Communion. Her consecration was performed by Presiding Bishop Edmond Browning and sixty other ECUSA bishops; the Revs. Carter Heyward and Florence Li Tim-Oi were concelebrants of the Eucharist at Harris' consecration. The first woman elected Diocesan Bishop in the ECUSA, Mary Adelia McLeod, was consecrated in Vermont in 1993. In 1998, as Chatham alumna the Right Reverend Chilton Knudson, Bishop of Maine, celebrated her thirtieth class reunion, she joined ten female colleagues – and seven hundred men – at Lambeth. Throughout the 1990s, the worldwide Anglican Communion gradually began to ordain women, with the Church in Wales being the last national church to pass canons admitting women to the priesthood.

As the thirtieth anniversary of the ordination of the Philadelphia Eleven approaches, along with the fortieth anniversary of the birth, in earnest, of second-wave feminism, the ECUSA still faces struggles over the issue of women's ordination. Since a Lambeth Conference resolution halting the ordination of openly homosexual persons⁵⁴, a "few US bishops who openly oppose women's ordination, and their sycophants, now

⁵⁴ Lambeth Conference Archives; 1998 Conference.

claim vindication, proclaiming themselves to be ‘in the mainstream of Anglicanism’⁵⁵. The Diocese of Pittsburgh was recently at the center of controversy, when, in 2002, the Right Reverend Robert Duncan granted license to David Moyer, an ultra-conservative priest in the Diocese of Philadelphia, and installed him on the staff of Grace Church in Mount Washington. Moyer had been defrocked by the Right Reverend Charles Bennison, Diocesan Bishop of Philadelphia, for his refusal to allow the bishop to celebrate or preach at the Church of the Good Shepherd, where Moyer is Rector, which constitutes a violation of canon law. At the heart of the arguments between Bennison and Moyer is the Bishop’s support of women’s advancement in the ECUSA, as well as his liberal stance on homosexuality and other political issues. Duncan’s licensure of Moyer has divided the Diocese of Pittsburgh, as has the fact that, since his consecration, it has become increasingly difficult for women to be ordained priests in Pittsburgh. Several candidates for ordination have left the Diocese; others have left the ECUSA in protest of Bishop Duncan’s stance on women’s rights and roles in the Church.

The EWC, having recently celebrated its thirtieth birthday, continues as a strong voice for ECUSA women of the twenty-first century, and proclaims itself “feminist⁵⁶ voice in the Episcopal Church”⁵⁷. Consistent with the goals of NOW, though with an ecclesiastical bent, the EWC states that its twenty-first century mission includes

challenging the church to face its historical complicity in the interlocking, systemic causes of sexual exploitation, oppression and violence; equal pay

⁵⁵ Harris, The Rt. Rev. Barbara C. “Sermon delivered [...] on the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the ordination of women.”

⁵⁶ The EWC defines “feminist” as “anyone who believes that God created males and females equally human” (EWC. “Our Story.”).

⁵⁷ EWC. “Our Story.”

for work of equal value in the church and in the world; increased appointment or election of women to leadership roles, including the episcopate; support for the use and ongoing refinement of liturgical and biblical materials that expand our vision of God and include all of God's people; inclusion of women and minorities in the church Calendar and Sunday lections; and encouraging familiarity and fluency with new forms of technology which will assist our causes⁵⁸.

So, while women across the Anglican Communion continue to make strides toward equality, the ECUSA mirrors the larger women's movement as it suffers the effects of neo-conservatism. As the third-wave feminists have always had in their lexicon the language of feminism, we have likewise *almost* always had women priests, but there are, in the ECUSA, as in the larger women's movement, still hurdles to be jumped and obstacles to be circumvented. Perhaps the third-wave feminists will see the election of the first woman to the Presidency of the United States, the first female Presiding Bishop of the ECUSA, or the consecration of the first woman as Archbishop of Canterbury. These goals, though, will only be achieved if the third-wave feminists do not become complacent, do not think that equality has been achieved until there is equal representation in the House and Senate, at the altar and in the Bishops' Thrones across the ECUSA. Once these goals have been achieved, the final glass ceilings shattered, women across the United States and within the ECUSA will, one hopes, no longer have to justify "our experiences – our feelings, our goals, our vocations, our perceptions and concerns [...] to the structures that, from the beginning, have taken no account of women's experiences or our yearnings for a freedom to be who we are"⁵⁹, and we will

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Heyward, 56-7.

find ourselves to be no longer “victim(s) of the American Dream”⁶⁰, but willing and equal participants in a fully just and equal America. In July 1999, Bishop Barbara Harris preached at the Church of the Advocate in Philadelphia, marking the twenty-fifth anniversary of the ordination of the eleven. It seems fitting to close with her words: “as we marked the tenth anniversary of the Philadelphia and Washington ordinations, Bishop Tony Ramos, the preacher that day, reminded us: ‘...wholeness is far from our reach. The journey goes on, the struggle continues and we need to remain faithful to our call...’ His words continue to ring true today”⁶¹.

⁶⁰ Sexton, Anne. Quoted in Rosen, Ruth. *The World Split Open*, 3.

⁶¹ Harris, Barbara C. “Sermon delivered [...] on the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the ordination of women.”

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