

On being a laywoman, ten years on

The builders of Durham cathedral laid a line of marble at the back, marking the nearest point women could get to the altar. It was used at the 'Magnificat' service in April 1983, when women representing different organisations and roles assembled behind it, then processed up the aisle, symbolically freed to be fully part of the church.

Rejoicing in the work and witness of women

That service was advertised as 'a rejoicing for the work and witness of women throughout the ages'. It originated with supporters of women's ordination, and some of those who planned it had a calling to priesthood, but it quickly became something wider. We wanted to celebrate and encourage women to use all their God-given gifts in the service of the world and the church. For supporters of women's ordination this included being priests, but it also stressed women's vocation as lay people.

This was a practical point. A growing acknowledgement that women were different and equal with men meant they were in demand in the 1980s to provide a female input in ministry. The cry went up from all-male clergy groups: 'We need a woman on the team!' Since women couldn't be priests, that meant stressing the value of lay vocation, and where possible opening jobs up to lay as well as ordained. Thus the Girls Friendly Society employed laywomen as industrial chaplains to work alongside male clergy, and that was my own route into ministry.

It wasn't all smooth, but it was creative. Men, ordained and lay, were allies, but there was a sense of solidarity among women working for the church, whether they felt called to priesthood themselves or not. There was a lot of networking, of groups examining what contribution women could make in theology, liturgy and spirituality. The hope was that this would bring new dimensions to ministry, and challenge old models of clergy seeming a distant elite.

Righting an injustice

The 10th anniversary of women's priesting prompted me to ask how lay women who were part of that wider movement now view the church and their role within it. Had their hopes been realised, and had the existence of women priests affected the way they understood themselves as lay women? I did a small survey to find out, beginning with lay women who work, or had worked, for the church in such roles as diocesan officers, chaplains, trainers or licensed lay ministers, and including active lay women who were churchwardens, chairs of deanery synods, or working for Christian organisations.

Few of them had much interest in the concept of priesthood, whichever wing of the church they came from, and even fewer in arguments about women bishops. They rarely saw themselves as feminists, but the main reason for supporting women's ordination was that women's exclusion from priesthood and clerical leadership was an injustice that needed righting. Several commented that relationships with non-Christians had become easier: 'I'm able to hold up my head with friends

who thought the church impossible to take seriously before the legislation went through'. There was also an overwhelming sense that ordaining women alongside men made the church's ministry more complete, human and balanced because it was no longer a male club. They felt represented, included.

Simply a minister

While having women priests hadn't necessarily affected the way lay women carried out their ministry, they felt less isolated and more accepted as colleagues by men: 'there's less tension around than in the days when I could be the only woman with a group of male Incumbents', said one diocesan officer. Some also thought their leadership role was better accepted. An accredited lay minister said, 'I feel empowered in the sense that the church now recognises that women have important parts to play in ministry, lay as well as ordained.'

Recipients of their ministry often seemed not to distinguish whether they were ordained or lay, they were simply seen as women ministering. A Reader reports: 'I have always had huge respect and grass root support from the laity ... I do not think having women priests has made that much difference. For some I have been the first experience of women's ministry. For some who are anti women priests, I have even been more acceptable.'

Here come the women

It's not clear how far having women priests has added to the numbers of women being ordained, or licensed as lay ministers. The numbers of women in ministry has been rising, though there's a striking disparity between men and women in stipendiary and non-stipendiary ministry. The percentage of stipendiary clergy who are women has gone up from 6% in 1992 to 14% in 2002, and while that figure will gradually change, there's still an imbalance among new clergy. 71% of those entering stipendiary ministry in 2002 were male, 29% female. Among non-stipendiary ministers, however, the percentage of women has risen from 29% in 1995 to 43% in 2002, and similar figures apply to female readers. OLM schemes also seem to be attracting more women than men.

I wondered whether women priests were role models, not only leading women to consider licensed ministry, but to take on 'up-front' roles as churchwardens, treasurers, intercessors etc. I couldn't find research on this, and those I surveyed were divided: 'It is *not* my perception that there are more lay women in prominent roles or responsibilities in the church,' says a diocesan officer. 'In many congregations and Deanery gatherings ... there is as much stereotyping of roles as there ever was.' This may reflect the different cultural attitudes towards women's roles in different parts of the country, though.

Others had evidence of lay women doing more up-front, such as the two elderly ladies who'd become servers through the encouragement of a female vicar. The woman in my novel *No Perfect Priest* who moves from hostility to her female vicar to leading services with her, reflects such stories. But other factors are involved here, such as women becoming more confident generally, or fewer men taking on such roles.

A woman's role?

In the 1980s, I was encouraging women to play a fuller part in church life. I'm glad if it's happening, but there are two dangers. One is that the more women enter ministry, the less men will participate. Church congregations are already largely female. A 2001 survey found that women formed 65% of Anglican congregations, and that proportion probably hasn't changed much over the years. That's gone alongside a leadership that has been overwhelmingly male.

Women priests aren't likely to redress that balance, since organisations that become identified as feminine find it hard to attract men – the world of primary education provides one example. I heard of one male reader who moved parishes when he became the lone male on the ministry team, and even men who support women's ministry may find such a position uncomfortable. Women may be tempted to respond, 'now you know what it was like!', but women's ordination wasn't about women taking over the church. It sought justice, and equal recognition of women's contribution. Anything that excludes men is a step away from the balanced, complementary ministry which women priests were supposed to represent.

Ordination as the highest calling

The second danger is that the focus is on ministry in the church rather than involvement in the world. The vision of that 'Magnificat' service was of a church revitalised by women's gifts reaching out into the community. What concerned the lay women I interviewed, and particularly those licensed or employed by the church, was that ordaining women as priests had reinforced the idea that ordination is the highest Christian calling, and thus had created a greater gulf between clergy and laity. A diocesan officer speaks for many of them in her belief that 'Adding women to the priesthood has reinforced the assumption that ordination is the way to leadership and influence in the church. ... the church does not have a way of valuing lay people's gifts and skills other than by ordaining them'.

After the vote, lay women who worked for the church would frequently be asked if they were thinking of ordination. Some women who'd been highly vocal about staying lay have since been ordained, but many of the others have become more consciously lay. For me, seeing women priests, being involved in their training, and even writing novels from their point of view, has only confirmed that I'm not called to a liturgical, pastoral or parochial ministry.

Nonetheless, as a diocesan officer puts it: 'There is some suspicion about a lay woman who takes on a role of leadership or management without ordination. Are you ordained? Why not? Since the ordination of women there is an assumption that everyone's vocation is to aspire to that.' This has long been an issue for lay men in the church, but women's ordination has sharpened it for lay women.

Yet while some women in diocesan posts or licensed ministry had issues about the recognition of their ministry, and worried that there were now fewer job opportunities for them, the lay women I talked to believed they were in the right place: 'Being lay not ordained, or licensed or acknowledged is an honourable state and confers its own opportunities.'

Challenges ahead

The campaigning for women's ordination went alongside a recognition that women had gifts to bring in lay as well as ordained ministry, in the world as much as in the church, and in partnership with men. Like other lay women who were involved back then, I'm still delighted that the vote went through. But as this tenth anniversary approaches, we need to repeat that ordination is only one form of ministry, and that the prime calling is to live out faith in the world.