

Church of England Makes History With This Controversial Move

The Church of England voted on Monday to allow women to become bishops, a historic decision which overturns centuries of tradition in a Church that has been deeply divided over the issue.

Two years ago, a similar proposal failed narrowly due to opposition from traditionalist lay members, to the dismay of modernizers, the Church hierarchy and politicians.

But after a five-hour debate on Monday, the General Synod, the governing body of the Church of England, voted overwhelmingly in favor of an amended plan at its meeting in the northern English city of York.

"Today is the completion of what was begun over 20 years ago with the ordination of women as priests. I am delighted with today's result," said Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby, spiritual leader of the world's 80 million Anglicans.

"Today marks the start of a great adventure of seeking mutual flourishing while still, in some cases, disagreeing."

The issue over women bishops has caused internal division since the Synod approved female priests in 1992.

It has pitted reformers, keen to project a more modern image of the Church as it struggles with falling congregations in many increasingly secular countries, against a conservative minority which says the change contradicts the Bible.

First Female Bishop

Women serve as bishops in the United States, Australia, Canada

and New Zealand but Anglican churches in many developing countries do not ordain them as priests.

Welby has said the first female bishop could be named early next year.

"This is a watershed moment for the Church of England and a huge step forward in making our society fairer," Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg said.

"Allowing women to become bishops is another long overdue step towards gender equality in senior positions."

The 2012 vote was rejected by the Synod, with the bishops and the clergy in favor and opposition from lay members denying the two-thirds majority needed in all three houses to pass.

The Church's response was to set up a committee to find common ground and its new proposals won widespread acceptance in the Synod in November last year.

The plan will create an independent official who could intervene when traditionalist parishes complain about a bishop's authority, as well as guidelines for parishes whose congregations reject women's ministry.

Critics say ordaining women bishops would break with the tradition of a male-only clergy dating back to the Twelve Apostles, while supporters argue it is a matter of equality.

"While we are deeply concerned about the consequences for the wider unity of the whole Church, we remain committed to working together with all in the Church of England to further the mission of the Church to the nation," said Simon Killwick, chairman of the Synod's Catholic Group, which opposed the move.

Bishops are senior managers in Christian churches that uphold the episcopal tradition because only they can ordain priests and assure the continuation of the clergy.

Writing by Michael Holden; Editing by Janet Lawrence

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