

ABC July 2026

In 2014 Michelle Obama said 'No country can ever truly flourish if it stifles the potential of its women and deprives itself of the contribution of half its citizens.'

Do we truly flourish?

So, this is the story of women who wanted to change the church. Maybe you know it. Maybe you don't. It wasn't easy and it was a very slow journey. You might be surprised now about how hard it was.

I've called this piece ABC. ABC stands for Archbishop of Canterbury and on March 25, 2026, Dame Sarah Mullally was installed as Archbishop of Canterbury. She is the 106th person to hold that position. But she is the first woman. She follows on from 105 male predecessors. Why did it take so long?

Women in authority? Women in leadership roles? Is that a new craze-women's lib and all that? But have you forgotten the likes of Boudicca and Elizabeth I? However looking back through history, we don't read about lots of famous and powerful women. We don't even find lots of examples of women being given the same rights or being treated with the same respect as men.

They say that history has been written by men, so who knows what secrets the past holds. Yet we do know that it hasn't been easy for women to be given the same justice as men and that is especially true in the church. The path to equality for women has been long and hard and riddled with bumps and forks along the way.

Today I really want to tell you about the Church of England's journey with the issue of women clergy but first let's look at just a few examples of how women have been treated in the secular world.

In 1876 an Act of Parliament officially permitted women to enter the medical profession.

In 1920 Oxford University issued its first degrees to women but it took till 1948 for Cambridge to do the same.

It wasn't until 1928 that women in England got the same voting rights as men. That year the Representation of People (Equal Franchise) Act was passed.

In 1966 Bobbi Gibb hid in bushes at the start of the Boston marathon and joined after the start. She wasn't allowed to take part just because she was a woman and it wasn't until 1972 that women were officially accepted to run the Boston Marathon

In 1979, Margaret Thatcher became the first woman Prime Minister of the United Kingdom.

Ancient history? Certainly not-some of those dates were in my own lifetime and maybe yours too.

And so, let's return to the position of the Anglican church. Dame Sarah Mullally is now the spiritual leader of the worldwide Anglican Communion and Primate of All England. She took over from Justin Welby and many people thought he would still be replaced by a man. Even those very much in favour of women's ministry were delighted but surprised in Sarah's selection.

But why should it be a surprise? I suspect many of you reading this would have been brought up, like me to think that all vicars were men and it wouldn't have occurred to you that it could be anything different. So, what has changed in our lifetime? Remember you're not that old!

Most journeys start with a desire for change and it's not always easy to know where this journey starts. The Bible tells us that Phoebe was a deaconess in the early church, 2000 years ago. History doesn't give us a lot of clues after that. But then in the 1840s the modern diaconate movement was

revived by Protestants in Germany. England took the hint and the first official deaconess in the UK was Elizabeth Ferard who was ordained in the Church of England in 1862.

Over 100 years later in 1979 in England the Movement for the Ordination of Women (MOW) was launched. This was a group that promoted the ordination of women to the priesthood in the Anglican church. It successfully lobbied the church's General Synod. Although the church's General Synod had agreed in July 1975 that in principle there was no reason why women couldn't be ordained, it took another ten years until 1985 for it to pass the Deacons Measure. This gave deacons the right to be part of the house of clergy and use the title 'The Reverend'. And so the first women deacons were ordained in 1987.

The then practice of the church was that men were ordained deacons and after a year ordained priests. This was still not the case for women. It took 7 more years till women were able to be ordained priests; in 1994 synod gave its blessing and they could now give absolutions, blessings and preside at holy communion.

Hooray-progress. You might think so, but the church doesn't do anything in a hurry, after another ten years, in 2014 Synod passed the act approving the ordination of Women Bishops. The following year Libby Lane became the first woman Anglican bishop.

And what about Dame Sarah and her journey as part of this story? An inspiring woman who was around at the right time and who freely admits she stands on the shoulders of others. Born in 1962, Sarah trained as a nurse and in 1999 became the youngest person to hold the position of chief nursing officer, despite having dyslexia. She was ordained priest in 2002, leaving the NHS to pursue full time ordained ministry. She made rapid progress through the ranks of the church and became Bishop of London (the first woman) in 2018.

And so now, for the first time in its history the Anglican church has a women ABC. A path that has been trodden for hundreds of years has finally reached its goal. But has it? Today, in July 2026, approximately 587 Church of England parishes still formally reject female priests. For many the journey continues.