

Women's Ministry in the Church

Summary: Protestant women across many denominations fought for, and slowly gained, a share of ministerial authority over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries; in Eastern Orthodox and, especially, in Roman Catholic churches, proponents of women's ordination still fight official opposition.

In 1893, at the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago, the Reverend Antoinette Brown Blackwell declared that “[w]omen are needed in the pulpit as imperatively and for the same reason that they are needed in the world—because they are women.” The Rev. Blackwell was the first woman to be ordained by an established denomination in the United States, having been called to be pastor of a Congregational church in South Butler, New York in 1853. Like many women of her day, she was active in speaking out as a Christian against slavery and for numerous social and economic reforms. In the late 19th century, the Quaker preacher Lucretia Mott and the Universalist preacher Olympia Brown were also recognized in the ministry of their churches, as was the irrepressible Jarena Lee in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. But the question of women's ordination did not become a widespread and burning issue for America's churches until the mid-20th century.

In recent decades one of the most controversial and most visible differences between the various streams of Christianity in America was whether women are or are not present in the ordained ministry. In the 1950s and 1960s, the Presbyterians and Methodists began ordaining women to full status in the ministry, followed by most of the Lutheran churches in the 1970s. After decades of discussion in the Episcopal Church, the ordination issue was brought to a crisis in 1974 when three bishops took matters into their own hands and conducted an “irregular” ordination of eleven women to the priesthood. Two years later, the Episcopal Church voted officially to open the priesthood to women. Today, in local churches from Long Beach, California to Long Island, New York, women serve as priests and ministers, fully ordained by a wide spectrum of Protestant denominations. With the 2010 ordination of Margaret Lee, in the Diocese of Quincy, Illinois, women have been ordained as priests in all 110 dioceses of the Episcopal Church in the United States.

In many of America's churches, however, there are no women in the ordained ministry. This includes America's two largest denominations, the Roman Catholic Church and the Southern Baptist Convention, although there have been women ordained and called to ministry by individual Southern Baptist churches.

In the Eastern Orthodox churches, the issue of women's ordination remains closed and without much controversy. The same could be said of many independent Protestant churches, even though women had often been ordained in the early years of these churches—in the midst of 19th century revivalism, reform, and egalitarianism. In all these churches, however, women are visible in educational, community, and perhaps counseling roles. In both the Roman Catholic Church and in a number of Orthodox churches, women have important leadership roles as members of religious orders. But women in these churches are excluded from the ordained, sacramental ministry, which prevents them from officiating at Holy Communion and performing the major sacraments of the life cycle. Those who oppose women's ordination articulate their opposition in theological terms and, even more, in terms of an unchanging tradition of male ministry and priesthood, based on the example of Christ and his apostles.

As with many issues, the interpretation of the Bible is also at stake in the discussion of women's ordination. Opponents of women's ordination call upon passages in St. Paul's letters in the New Testament, such as I Timothy 2:11, "Let the women learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent." Those who affirm women's ordination also quote St. Paul in his Letter to the Galatians 3.27-8: "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." Further, they cite the example of the early church where women were entrusted with the message of Good News from the very morning of the resurrection when Jesus appeared first to Mary Magdalene.

In the Roman Catholic Church today, many people see women's ordination to the priesthood as a "front-burner" issue. Already women have assumed de facto leadership of many parishes because of the acute shortage of male priests. Some Roman Catholic sisters who have felt called to priesthood continue to press for ordination, a move said to be supported by 60 percent of American Catholics. Other women have left the Roman Catholic Church for ordained ministry in other Christian denominations. A small number of Catholic feminists have called for the assertion of feminist ministry in a new kind of church, a discipleship of equals without the hierarchical structure of priesthood. The Roman Catholic Women's Ordination

Conference has kept the discussion of these complex issues before the church for more than thirty years. In 2002, a group of seven women from Germany, Austria, and the United States, were ordained on a ship on the Danube River. Known as the Danube Seven, the women's ordinations were not recognized as being valid by the Roman Catholic Church and the women were excommunicated in 2003 for their refusal to repent. Since then, the Roman Catholic Womenpriests movement has emerged in full support of women's ordination and continue their effort today.

Meanwhile, in some Protestant churches, women have risen to significant positions of leadership. The first woman bishop in the United Methodist Church was Marjorie Matthews, elected in 1980. In 2004, Minerva Carcaño was the first Latina elected as bishop within the United Methodist Church. She currently serves in the Los Angeles area of the California-Pacific Annual Conference and is one of a growing number of women in the House of Bishops. In 1988, in the Episcopal Church, the diocese of Massachusetts elected Barbara Harris, an African-American priest, as the church's first woman bishop. In 2005, The Lutheran Evangelical Protestant Church in the USA elected Nancy Kinard Drew as its first female Presiding Bishop and in 2006, The Episcopal Church elected Katharine Jefferts Schori as its first female Primate.

It is also significant that, in the 21st century, more than half of the students in American theological schools and seminaries are women, many of them preparing for the ordained ministry. In addition to those women preparing to serve in parishes, many others are now claiming and expanding the context of lay ministry to include a vocation to Christian service in many areas of life.