

Why the holy war? Sarah's in charge

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"Devastating". "Sorrow".
"Impossible". "Disappointment,
anger, fears for the future".

The most powerful person in the Anglican communion is, for the first time in its 1400-year history, a woman, and some people are very cranky about it. Which is a shame because it's actually an astonishing moment. Dame Sarah Mullally, now the 106th Archbishop of Canterbury, worked as a cancer nurse for many years before becoming a senior nurse. A nurse, leading the church. Florence Nightingale would be so delighted.

Some have tutted at this – she's not a great theologian! Or a renowned preacher! Or a man, like the 105 before her! She's a nurse who is now the ceremonial head of 85 million Anglicans in 165 countries worldwide.

It's predictable that many conservatives were angered that a woman should be appointed to such a position of authority. And, what's more, a woman who has controversially supported the blessing of same-sex unions. She was "disobedient!" they cried.

How do you solve a problem like Dame Sarah?

The Church of Nigeria officially rejected her appointment, with Archbishop Henry C. Ndukuba saying those responsible had disregarded the convictions of "the majority of Anglicans [who] are unable to embrace female headship in the episcopate".

The English church has had female priests since 1994, but female bishops only since 2015. The Australian Anglican Church has had female priests since 1992, allowing each individual diocese to decide for itself if it wants them, and female bishops since 2018, although some parts of the country, like Sydney, still refuse to recognise



women as either priest or bishop. The problem with female bishops, for those who advocate for male-only clergy, is that they ordain other people, and are senior to other male clergy. The opposition stems from: tradition, a literal (and, in my view, archaic and erroneous) interpretation of Bible passages where women are instructed to be silent and submit, and a belief that men should be the heads of women.

There have also been vigorous Australian critics of Mullally. Bishop Peter Hayward, Commissary for the Archbishop of Sydney, said that while "the office of the Archbishop of Canterbury once held a symbolic leadership role in the global Anglican Communion", orthodox Anglicans must "now look to other leaders".

Dr Mark D. Thompson, the head of Sydney's arch-conservative training ground for priests, Moore College, wrote that "the Church of England's leadership continued its tragic slide into irrelevance" with Mullally's rise. "If we leave aside

the provocative appointment of a woman," he wrote, "which is disturbing enough in itself" to people who believe women should "complement" and support men, "Mullally's record... demonstrates how unfit she is for this role".

Could it be, though, that Mullally may mark a sign of relevance, instead, in a world where women are

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still fighting for basic rights, where empathy is derided as weakness and compassion as woke, leading to headlines like "Loathe Thy Neighbour", which seems a pretty solid perversion of the original?

Mullally once told a magazine: "There are great commonalities between nursing and being a

priest. It's all about people, and sitting with people during the most difficult times in their lives." Who could argue with that? She also says: "Washing feet has shaped my Christian vocation as a nurse, then a priest, then a bishop. In the apparent chaos which surrounds us, in the midst of such profound global uncertainty, the possibility of healing lies in acts of kindness and love." At a time of pugilistic militarism, populations decimated by bombs, algorithms thrilling to snark, this is a welcome contrast, returning to Christianity's more radical roots of service.

But the whole fracas has made me think about how much of the opposition to women having any authority in the church is rooted in the argument that we must resist an ungodly world, an ungodly feminism, a "worldliness" or a secular society where, I dunno, women supposedly rule.

But it has always been clear that the dominant culture is patriarchy, a world where men dominate

parliaments, courtrooms and boardrooms, along with pulpits. What is truly countercultural is pushing back on the silencing, diminishing and stifling of women *because they are women*.

Mullally's time as Archbishop of Canterbury is likely to be difficult, dogged by criticism of her leadership, some of which may be valid. (Abuse survivors, for example, believe she has been too defensive of the institution.) But the church would be wise to support her.

In Adelaide, the Right Rev Sophie Relf-Christopher said she "delighted with millions of Christians around the world" at Mullally's appointment.

"The institutional church does its best work," she says, "when it stands in solidarity with those with less power, and it is hard to imagine how it might continue to credibly undertake that work with men alone leading the way."

In a world where "theo bros" of the hard right are arguing women shouldn't vote, when domestic violence is dismissed by the US president as a "little fight with the wife", when kindness is slammed as feminine cliché, a female-led church can be a strong rejoinder.

The first woman to be made bishop in the American Episcopal Church, Barbara Harris, was ordered to wear a bulletproof vest to her consecration in 1989. She refused, saying: "I thought, if some idiot is going to shoot me, what better place to go than at an altar?"

The mighty Harris was an African American civil rights leader, who regularly blasted the church for racism and sexism. "I certainly don't want to be one of the boys," she said. "I want to offer my peculiar gifts as a black woman... a sensitivity and an awareness that comes out of more than a passing acquaintance with oppression."

People forget that Jesus inhabited not the centre, but the margins of power.

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