

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 Roman Catholic churches, proponents of women's ordination still fight opposition from church authorities.

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 other 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. These women were preceded by generations of female preachers who had few credentials beyond their own clear sense of divine calling. 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 visible differences between the various streams of Christianity in America has been whether women are present in the ordained ministry. Some Holiness and Pentecostal denominations were among the first to begin ordaining women in the first half of the 20th century, believing that the Holy Spirit could empower whoever God chose. In the 1950s and 1960s, the Presbyterians and Methodists also 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 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 movements—in the midst of 19th-century revivalism, reform, and egalitarianism. In all of these churches, however, women are visible in other forms of ministry, including in teaching, counseling, chaplaincy, administration, worship, youth ministry, community outreach, and pastoral care positions. In both the Roman Catholic Church and in a number of Orthodox churches, women also 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 Holy Communion services, performing the major sacraments of the life cycle, heading churches and dioceses, deciding doctrine, and holding higher positions of power in the church. Those who oppose women's ordination articulate their opposition on the basis of their theology of gender and on what they understand to be an unchanging tradition of male ministry and priesthood, beginning with Christ and the twelve disciples.

As with many issues, the interpretation of the Bible is 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, however, also quote the references of St. Paul to women serving as deacons, apostles, and co-workers, as well as his Letter to the Galatians 3:27-28: "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 also cite how the resurrected Jesus appeared first to Mary Magdalene, meaning that a woman was the first to witness the resurrection and be entrusted with proclaiming the message of Good News.

In the Roman Catholic Church today, many people see women's ordination to the priesthood as an urgent 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 number of Catholic feminists have also called for the assertion of feminist ministry in a new kind of church, a discipleship of equals without the hierarchical structure of priesthood. Organizations including the Roman Catholic Women's Ordination Conference have 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, these ordinations were not recognized as 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 continued to advocate for women's ordination and has grown with the ordination of womenpriests across the U.S., Europe, Canada, South America, South Africa, and China.

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, serving in the Los Angeles area of the California-Pacific Annual Conference and joining the 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.