

Road to the Ordination of Women in the Episcopal Church, USA

1855: The Bishop of Maryland “sets apart” two deaconesses.

1935: A commission of the Church of England found no reason for or against the ordination of women, but affirms that women would continue to be excluded “for the church today.”

1970: The General Convention voted on a measure to authorize female ordination. It was approved by the **laity** but narrowly defeated by **clerical** deputies.

1973: The General Convention rejected female ordination for the second time.

1973: Qualified women deacons were presented alongside men for ordination to the priesthood in New York. The bishop refused to ordain the women.

1974-JUL-29: The “Philadelphia Eleven” were “irregularly” ordained as priests in Philadelphia, PA by two retired and one resigned bishop. “The event caused great consternation among the church hierarchy. On August 15, the House of Bishops, called to an emergency meeting, denounced the ordinations and declared them invalid. Charges were filed against the dissident bishops. Attempts were made to prevent the women from serving their priestly ministries.”

1974-OCT-27: Revs. Allison Cheek, Carter Heyward, and Jeannette Piccard celebrated their first public Episcopal service at *Riverside Church* in New York, NY.

1974-NOV: The Rev. William Wendt invited Alison Cheek to celebrate at *St Stephen's and the Incarnation* in Washington, DC. He is later charged, tried and disciplined for violating canons.

1974-DEC: The Rev Peter Beebe invited Alison Cheek and Carter Heyward to celebrate at *Christ Church*, Oberlin, OH. He is charged and tried for violating canons.

1976-JUL: After much heated debate, the 72nd General Convention in Philadelphia passed a resolution declaring that “no one shall be denied access” to ordination into the three orders of ministry: as deacons, priests, or bishops, on the basis of their gender. A second resolution declared that no one could be barred from participating in the life and governance of the church, either because of their gender, or because of their theological beliefs concerning the ordination of women. They asked that non-conforming dioceses report in 1979 on their progress towards female ordination to the *House of Bishops* and *Executive Council*. They were asked also to report to the next *General Convention* in 2000. If they don't, they faced the possibility of a church trial. One of the four bishops, the Rt. Rev. Jack Iker of Fort Worth, said that he planned to undertake “active resistance to the directive... I cannot

compromise my conscience because I have serious theological reservations.” He decided to continue to refuse to ordain women, referring them to another diocese instead.

1977: The priests who were irregularly ordained at Philadelphia and Washington were “regularized.” One hundred women are ordained by year end.

1978: The Lambeth Conference accepted female ordination as an option at the discretion of the local province.

1988-SEP-24: The Rev. Barbara C. Harris was elected *Suffragan Bishop of Massachusetts*. She was consecrated on 1990-FEB-11.

1997: Only four dioceses still refused to ordain female priests: Eau Claire (WI), Fort Worth (TX), Quincy (IL), and San Joaquin (CA).

2000-JUL: By the time of the 73rd General Convention, Eau Claire diocese had accepted women as priests, San Joaquin had made some progress in that direction, but Fort Worth and Quincy had not budged. The sense of the convention was that “*the time had come.*” 24 years had passed since female ordination was permitted. Deputies from the three dioceses pleaded for “*tolerance.*” Task force A045 was created by the Convention to “*visit, interview, assess and assist*” the three dioceses in their efforts. They were asked to make semi-annual reports. “*A substitute motion by Bishop John Lipscomb of Southwest Florida, calling for a less adversarial approach under the direction of the presiding bishop, drew strong support across theological boundaries, including several women bishops. It was defeated narrowly, but later passed as a ‘mind of the house resolution.’*”

The Rt. Rev. Barbara C. Harris of Boston, ordained as the first female Episcopal bishop in 1989, successfully called for defeat of an amendment that would have allowed the four dissenting bishops to continue denying ordination to women as long as they hold office. She said: “*The message such an amendment would send to the women of this church and those who support the ordained ministry of women in this church is that once again this house is engaged in a delaying tactic...To engage in further delay says to the women of this church, ‘We do not value your ministry, even though God has called you.’*”

2002-FEB: The *Episcopal Church’s Executive Council* heard a “*mid-process report*” from a task force which had been created to use “*sensitivity and flexibility as it monitors progress toward full access of women to the ordination process, as required by the canons.*” They visited the three dioceses which still refused to ordain women:

San Joaquin, CA: The task force met with Bishop John David Schofield and a dozen other representatives from the diocese. Task force Co-chair Sarah Harte reported that some of the latter were concerned that the task force might “*dig up information to be used to bring charges against the bishop.*” Many of the clergy support the bishop, even though they disagree with his position on female ordination. The task force learned that the bishop “*has been supportive of women in the process of pursuing ordination and that there are several women currently in the process.*” He states that they will be ordained in the future; but if they were eligible for ordination today, it is not likely that he would do it. He stated that “*he is not currently convinced that the work of the General Convention in revising the canons was, in fact, reflective of the will of the Holy Spirit. Therefore he is not convinced that women who go*

through ordination are truly ordained.”

Fort Worth, TX: Harte reported on their meeting with Bishop Jack Iker and members of the diocese: *“We were received by the bishop and graciously welcomed as brothers and sisters in Christ—but not as members of the A045 Task Force. Bishop Iker sees our work as intrusive and negatively reflecting on the life of the diocese. However, the bishop agreed to have a conversation with us in which the primary focus was for us to learn about the ministry of the diocese.... The bishop and other leadership described with passion some of the ministries in the diocese, including women’s ministries, [which are regarded as a] supportive and essential role... The role of women in the church was described to us as analogous to the role of a woman in the family—supportive and nurturing... They feel the work of the task force is damaging the health of the diocese and causes a further disconnect between the members of the Diocese of Ft. Worth and members of other dioceses. They request the national church to give them ‘space, freedom and respect.’”* Three women who are testing their vocations in Ft. Worth have been transferred to the Diocese of Dallas.

Quincy, IL: Task force members met with Bishop Keith Ackerman and representatives from his diocese. He has allowed three female priests to enter his diocese on three occasions to officiate at a wedding, baptism and funeral. There are two women deacons in the diocese, but there have been no female candidates for ordination since he became bishop.