

CATHERINE BUTT, MIRANDA THRELFALL-HOLMES
and LEAH VASEY-SAUNDERS

Women Priests: The Next Generation

Catherine Butt, Miranda Threlfall-Holmes and Leah Vasey-Saunders in conversation with Margaret Masson.

This article is the report of a conversation that took place at Cranmer Hall, Durham in the last few weeks of Catherine, Miranda and Leah's training for ordination. All three women are in their twenties and were ordained as deacons in the Church of England in June 2003. Here they reflect on their experience as young women in the church.

Margaret: Can you begin by each telling me something of your journey to ordination? Did being a woman make a difference?

Miranda: I went to church as a child, but I wasn't Christian, and I actively decided to stop going when I was about eleven. I was converted at university, and felt called to ordination very soon afterwards. The interesting thing looking back is how fascinated I was in the vote at a time when I was totally uninterested in church and not a Christian. None of my close friends at school were Christian either, and yet I can clearly remember a group of us who were having a maths lesson when the vote was announced, and we insisted on having a radio in and stopping the lesson to find out what was happening. It seemed really important. And it made the church much more interesting: I definitely get the impression it was the best piece of mission the church has done in recent years – credibility went sky-high, people were interested. It was a fantastic piece of publicity, and then the church has just totally thrown it away by being so sour and petty about it. That really annoys me.

Anyway, back to the question – I was converted at university, I had a dramatic 'conversion experience' and then something similar a few months later when I felt called to be ordained. At the time I didn't think being a woman would be an issue at all, I assumed that had all been dealt with years ago, before the vote. I was shocked when I arrived at college to discover that we were still ordaining people who were against women priests. And who were actively campaigning on it! I mean, I thought it was very civilised to protect the jobs of people who had gone in when women were ordained and hadn't changed and were still there. But when the church has changed its mind, to continue actively recruiting people who disagree just seems bizarre. So I've become increasingly radicalised over my time at college.

Catherine: I became a Christian when I was about fourteen, through a friend, and went to an Anglican church which met in a community centre. I had good friends in the youth group and went for four or five years in that church, generally getting stuck into things and being quite passionate about God and mission and evangelism. And then I went to university with the advice to find the Christian Union (CU), and so I was quite involved in the CU at Oxford, and it was an inherently androcentric institution. I was at St. Hilda's, which is a girl's college, so we had two female CU reps and an all girls CU and some of the men found that very challenging, so that was an interesting quirk of my situation, but it never really dawned on me that in the wider church this was an issue. And then after university I worked at a large evangelical church for a year and that was the year that I thought maybe ordination was the thing. And so my path to ordination was actually quite short – within that year I had gone to see the vocations advisor and the DDO and then I came to Cranmer the September after. And so I arrived here generally thinking it was going to be like one long Christian holiday camp; thinking I was going to learn lots, have good worship, make lots of friends and that generally things were going to be...

Miranda: ...one long Spring Harvest!

Catherine: Yes! And then when I got here, I suddenly realised it's not as simple as that. And I spent quite a long time at the beginning of my second year wondering whether I could cope with being in an institution that says 'You can't do this'. I came to a point where I was so intensely, deeply frustrated with the structures of the Church of England that I just thought 'can I actually bear this?' The three of us are all in our twenties; we could be working in the C of E for the next forty years. That's a long time to keep fighting. Although I was a Christian at the time the vote went through, my church wasn't political, not radical in terms of awareness of issues in the church, so it basically completely passed me by. And though some people at Oxford would give me sideways looks if I led a study group or something, because I was a woman, I thought they were just a load of public schoolboys. But there is a vocal minority which actually perpetuates that sort of attitude. It wasn't until I got to theological college that I realised this wasn't just going to go away, and it is a fundamental issue. I think it is about mission and discipleship. I'm not saying it's the only thing that needs sorting out, and there is a part of me that says there are more important things, but I do think that this is a really important thing, and if it's not sorted out it will be more costly to us.

Leah: I think my call to ordination came as a bit of a surprise to everyone really. I've always had an interest in 'holy' things; as a very young child, I used to talk about becoming a nun, to my parents' shock! I wasn't really aware of the vote, but it wasn't until after that that I had the notion that I could actually become anything in the church. When I started university, being a musician, I quickly got involved with a group of musicians who worshipped at the local church and I started going along. It was a pretty gradual process, of coming to faith and realising that that was what I was going to do, live the whole of my life as a Christian. And I don't think I can separate the call to ordination from the call to be a Christian; the two were bound together. I had one or two very close friends who supported

and encouraged me. Then in my final year one of my closest friends had a crisis about the ordination of women and that was really painful in that final year, because that was when I was facing up to the thought that this was what I needed to explore very seriously. However, also in the final year because of that I got involved in the CU and made some good friends there. Then I went on my first 'year out' which I spent in a parish, and it was a horrific year. I was the first woman to work there full-time, although they'd had a female curate before, a deaconess, and they had contact with a female deacon, but I was the first woman to be there all the time, a robed figure – the vicar insisted I had to be called Sister Leah. In terms of my ministry, the year there really affirmed my calling, and I knew that the people that I worked with approved, and that was really valuable. But things the vicar said will take a long time to heal. To be frowned at for wearing a short skirt and high heels, or for wearing a bit of mascara and lipstick, or to be told that I'm over emotional because I cry when I'm put under immense pressure and am being bullied. I will not tolerate that again. I went on to work at the Cathedral for a year, which was fine, and they supported me through the selection process. But the rejection – for being a woman, for wearing earrings – was still there. For example I served at a Solemn Eucharist there and people complained because I wore earrings and lipstick!

Miranda: (laughs) I have been told off for giving communion wearing nail varnish...

Leah: At the end of that year I came to theological college. I knew about the Act of Synod, I knew about the clauses in the Measure, because that had been explained to me when I was having a hard time. When I got to college I thought, this is going to be great. The people here have been through the selection process, they'll know loads of women vicars, and they'll be cool with it – it'll be fine. I won't have to deal with this here, I'll be able to have a rest, and heal.

(Everyone collapses in laughter)

Leah: No way! I mean, it's not that we face huge opposition, but ... For example I went on placement to an evangelical church and it turned out that women aren't permitted to preach in that church. I don't think it's something I'm ever going to escape – partly because it's enshrined in the legislation, and partly because I now see it as part of my calling, something I'm called to face and to help others to face.

Miranda: I think we all thought originally that it would just go away. People would get used to it and it would be fine. But we're now realising that ten years on, it isn't going away, and it's actually becoming more entrenched. We thought people would just see women were doing a good job and it would all blow over. But in fact, people have been so bending over backwards to help the people who aren't sure about women's ordination or who disagree with it, that those positions have been able to become really entrenched. The people who are anti are really making a fuss, and I think I'm moving much more towards thinking 'We've got to shout louder' – we've got to make ourselves as bolshy or bolshier as the people who are anti.

Margaret: Do you think that sense of struggle is exacerbated by the fact that women can't yet be bishops?

Miranda: There is a psychological impact of not being allowed to be a bishop. It's not that any of us want to be bishops or have any idea whether we've got the right gifts, but in any other job you could go to any level or any specialism and so you're free to explore what your gifts might be. There's a psychological weight on us, that we're not allowed to think about those things, there are areas we're not allowed to go. Just the fact that you're not allowed to look there...

Catherine: Because you're a woman...

Miranda: It feels surprisingly aggressive.

Catherine: Yes.

Miranda: And there's an issue with other jobs too. I mean, one of us might be a good vocations advisor, or be good at administration and maybe make a good archdeacon, or whatever. The three of us did some research for GRAS (Group for Rescinding the Act of Synod) and we found that women aren't being appointed to jobs they could do. There seems to be a sense that a lot of jobs are seen as being stepping stones to being a bishop and so therefore there's no point putting a woman in them. It's very frustrating to think we might not be able to do the things we're good at because people will think there's no point giving us the job because they won't be able to 'promote' us from it.

Of course the problem is that there's a risk of people just thinking 'Well they would say that, they just want to get promoted'. I've heard that said – it can be seen as self interest once you're ordained.

Catherine: 'You're only campaigning for women bishops because you want to be one'.

Miranda: Yes! It's a really easy put down.

Leah: It's not about that at all. It's about the incoherence of the Anglican church at the moment.

Margaret: Thinking about sexism, how does your experience in the church compare with your experience in other jobs or with the experiences of friends of a similar age to yourselves working outside the church?

Catherine: I have a friend who is a lawyer in London, who is earning a pretty packet, and there are partners in her firm who are women. I think there are other issues for her, questions about home and family, which are issues every woman following a profession has to face, but there's no question that she is allowed to do that job, that she's allowed to have the ambition to be a partner.

Miranda: And if someone didn't give her a job because she was a woman she'd sue them!

Catherine: That the church is exempt from all that is outrageous. And what really gets me is that the reason – whether it's substantiated from Scripture or from tradition – is basically because you're a woman. And I just think, in this day and age how on earth can anyone ever use that as an argument against somebody doing something?

Leah: In lots of professions its an argument *for* women doing things. Women are seen as having gifts that are needed. Employers want the whole range of gifts that a variety of different people can bring to their company. For example a white man cannot speak for a black man and in the same way a man cannot speak for a woman.

Miranda: I'm a bit wary of that argument, though. One of the things people often do argue in the church is that it would be good to have women bishops because they'll do it differently. In some ways I think that's true – having women probably will make things less competitive, more rounded – but on the other hand there's no reason why a woman might not do the job in exactly the same way as a man (and possibly better!).

Catherine: You've surely got to allow people to explore the gifts that they have, that God has given them. In the church it seems absurd not to appoint people on the basis of their gifts, and instead on the basis of their gender. It's completely illogical.

Miranda: We're from three very different traditions – I'm Liberal, Leah's Catholic, Catherine's Evangelical in background – and *none* of us can see the logic in any of the arguments that are presented!

Catherine: To some extent we've each had to come to terms with how our different traditions have dealt with the issue. But on the other hand, within each of our traditions there are lots of people and even organisations that say, OK we might approach the Bible differently, or think of priesthood in a slightly different way, or approach ethics differently, but on this particular issue we agree. There are groups in every area of the church that says this is absurd, there are no arguments against women at all levels in the church.

Miranda: Before I entered training I worked in brand management for a year, and then in universities. In both those places there are issues being a woman, but the difference is they weren't structurally entrenched. There were no structural barriers to promotion, no problem if you wanted to take maternity leave and so on. What the church has done differently is to say 'We'll opt out of sexual discrimination legislation, and we'll put a law through Parliament saying that if you don't want a woman you can vote to say that you don't'.

Catherine: What gets me is that on a whole range of issues the Church isn't seen to be above reproach. We're seen to be stuck in the dark ages. It comes back to mission and discipleship. If you're going to have people who are faithful in their Christian lives, people of integrity, then surely the organisation to which they belong needs to be transparent and full of integrity. I don't think the church is, on lots of issues.

Leah: I want to be proud to be a vicar, and to know that in every sense I can model something for other people. But at the moment people can see that I'm not accepted totally, and that's modelling something about women that I don't want to say.

Miranda: I want the church to be a beacon of good practice. We can't talk to business about business ethics or the ethics of investment with any integrity when

our employment practices are totally unequal. To opt out of discrimination legislation on the basis that it might be a faith issue strikes me as...I just can't see how you could have a kind of Christianity that might conflict with equal rights and fair employment practices. It sends so many wrong messages. It's embarrassing.

Catherine: It's historically embarrassing too. What are people going to think of all this in 300 years time?

Margaret: How confident are you that things will change?

Miranda: What, in 300 years time? (Laughter)

Margaret: In ten years, twenty years?

Catherine: In my first year here I thought surely, in ten years time there'll be women bishops. Surely we can't be as stupid as this for much longer? So I thought I don't need to do much, it will just happen, it must. But actually there's a significant vocal minority who argue that for one reason or another we should remain in this place.

Leah: Or even go back.

Catherine: So I'm not that hopeful for things happening very quickly, or at least not without a great deal of mess. But on the other hand, I do think the future is on our side. Because you can't go on pretending that where we are now is a place of integrity.

Miranda: I really hope it does sort itself out. I don't know what sort of timescale to expect – but I suppose I do expect, hope, pray that in 20 or 30 years time there'll be a couple of women bishops. I think if that doesn't happen we'll lose a lot of credibility. For most people, including most people in the church, the gender issue is such a non-issue that to institutionalise sexism as the church has done just underlines the irrelevance of the church to everyday life.

Leah: I think it will change, but it's not going to change quickly. I worry that if it changes too quickly, arguments about women bishops will just move on a level to arguments about women archbishops. A lot of it for me is about figuring out how we can cope with the fact that women priests are here to stay. There's no going back now, the bishops have always been very clear about that, so we need to work out how to live with that. And not campaign against each other but be able to have real dialogue, real understanding. And to be able to accept together that the Anglican church has made this decision. We need to be proclaiming the gospel to the world, not proclaiming Resolution C.

Margaret: All of you have come a long way in being aware of the issues. Had you known all this at the start of your paths to ordination, would it have made a difference?

Leah: I had quite a big struggle last year. I really thought, why am I doing this, I've had a hard enough time already, why should I spend the next forty years of my life doing this and putting up with this? And I had a serious internal conversation about it. I think partly there are other issues attached to my own situation, because I'm married to someone who's ordained as well. But I had a huge conversation with myself as to whether I could be more radical and effective as a lay woman.

And I came to the conclusion that my vocation is to be ordained. Somebody else at college said to me ‘You have to be in it to change it’. The lay women who campaigned for women to be ordained did a terrific job, and we wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for them. But in the situation we’re in now, I think my friend was right; there is a specific thing about being in it, actually being ordained, actually wearing the collar.

Miranda: I’d have seen it as a challenge! There is a sense in which I think we feel called to the struggle now. The fact that it might be uncomfortable for us is something we’re going to stick with, because unless people are prepared to stick with that, it won’t get easier.

Leah: I think it would have made me think twice about going into it, if I’d known. But then, we all felt called to ordination by God, and the fact that it might not be very pleasant doesn’t stop you doing what God calls you to do. So perhaps its best we didn’t know! If anything, having been naive at the beginning makes me more determined to educate other women (and men) in the facts of the legislation and the history that has gone before them, of all the people whose prayers and support have made it possible for us to even have this conversation.

Catherine: The Movement for the Ordination of Women achieved what they wanted to achieve and then disbanded because they’d done what they set out to do. But unfortunately ten years on there is still a struggle to be carried on and GRAS and WATCH (Women and the Church) have been formed to enable that struggle. We’re carrying the torch into the next generation in a way – those women in the past have achieved so much, and I want to stand on their shoulders, not undermine anything they’ve done, and move forward in the same direction.

Leah: I think there’s a sense that the women who achieved the ordination of women need us to do that too – the struggle is really tiring, and I think it’s encouraging for people who’ve been doing that struggle to see new people taking up the torch with the same amount of passion and movement, and wanting to move forward and onward.

Margaret: Changing tack just a little bit, there’s been a lot talk about the shape of the church in the future, the idea that parishes are dying, the need for new forms of church and so on: how does that whole discussion shape your thinking about what women have to offer?

Catherine: Well I think there’s a move towards collaborative ministry, partially financially driven and partially theologically driven, and if there’s a man on a team who refuses to work with women then that’s going to be to the detriment of the ministry team.

Leah: And that is happening already.

Catherine: The potential that that type of ministry might have for a local community is compromised.

Miranda: There is an idea that women are better at collaborative ministry and so having women ordained will help that process along. I think to some extent that’s true; I’m not sure that women are genetically better at it, but we are nurtured

and taught to be collaborative in our society, that's just the way our society is and has been. So I think maybe it will help, and hopefully that will then change society to the extent that women and men together will both be good at working together.

Catherine: Teams are a good way in which the church could model fantastic employment practice to industry. That's not just a women's issue, it would be a good thing for men and women.

Miranda: Yes; a multi-skilled team means that anyone whose parents are ill, or children are in hospital, or whatever, can be covered for by other people. It's a much better model of working and of being human. So hopefully it will be a really positive thing.

Leah: I think the other thing about the changing shape of the church, and looking at future ecclesiology, is that now that women are ordained there are women more involved in those conversations. It's about not imposing male thought structures down, but having well balanced theological discussions and planning at all levels. The shape of the church is a bit of a free for all at the moment, and that means women have a real opportunity to input into it. There are still areas where women don't seem to be included in discussions, though, and that's one of the reasons for wanting women bishops.

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