

REPORT:

Using the lens of women's ordained ministry, how can we grow diversity within the strategic leadership of the Church so that all may flourish?

2020

STRATEGIC LEARNING AND
DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME:
COHORT 2 PROJECT 4



THE CHURCH
OF ENGLAND

Diversity in the Church

Women have been ordained deacon in the Church of England since 1985 and the first woman was consecrated bishop in 2015. For the first time in 2019 more women were ordained deacon than men, but women are still underrepresented in senior positions and indeed the number of BAME ordinands who are beginning training has decreased (Church Times 19th June 2020 p6).

A summary of findings

This report explores why women are underrepresented in senior positions under a number of key themes and concludes with recommendations that we believe would, if implemented, improve overall diversity, and benefit the whole Church. Our specific focus is on women in senior leadership roles, but we note that there are connections we could make with BAME and disability representation and all who would thrive in a more flexible working structure than has historically been the case.

THE KEY THEMES ARE:

- Being intentional in the recruitment of women makes a positive difference, but intentionality varies widely from diocese to diocese. Intentionality is relevant at all stages of ministry and includes the implementation of attractive HR policies (Maternity, Dignity at Work) and flexible working patterns;
- Recruitment processes, both for senior and more junior positions create added barriers for women. The wording of advertisements, variable provision of unconscious bias training across the dioceses, and a default model of ministry (full time stipendiary incumbency) work together to exclude many talented women;
- Provisions to support women to develop and flourish in leadership differ significantly across the country. The support for the role and status of the Bishops' Advisers in Women's Ministry or the Deans of Women's Ministry varies enormously from diocese to diocese, and there is similar variation in the numbers of women being sent on Leadership development programs.

The lack of senior women within the Church is not just a symptom of the application process for senior jobs, but often has its roots earlier on in ministry. You cannot get good senior leaders unless they come up earlier! Many of the women interviewed spoke of the difficulty of a lack of role models, issues around childcare, where statistically women are more likely to care for children than men, and the default model of ministry of a 6-day week incumbency that may be off-putting to talented women at certain stages of life. At that stage

they may opt for part time or sector ministries, and then find themselves less qualified for senior roles later on. Even earlier in the process some women may have been limited by a BAP recommendation based on the ministry for which they have applied rather than the ministry which the Church thinks they are capable of, or could grow into. Whether women, BAME candidates, people with disabilities, less conventionally educated... if people cannot see 'people like us' doing ministry it is harder to imagine that public ministry is for us, even if the reality is that the Church needs us all and is poorer without such diversity. Although there are 5 Guiding Principles for ordained ministry, our work has shown that many women experience these principles to be a significant barrier to their flourishing in ministry.

However, we were also told of significant encouragements which have helped women to aspire to and be appointed to senior positions. These encouragements include:

- Positive female role models which have played a significant part in many women's journey to senior posts;
- Direct encouragement for women to apply for senior roles, be that from a woman or a man, have encouraged women to think about jobs for which they may not have otherwise applied;
- Intentional leadership training, especially the 'Leading Women' course.

STATISTICAL CONTEXT

The following statistics published by WATCH as at the end of 2019 highlighted the lack of gender diversity in senior posts.

According to WATCH the following percentage of senior staff were women:

12.5%

**Diocesan
Bishops**

27%

**Suffragan
Bishops**

30%

Archdeacons

14%¹

Deans

The data also highlighted some concerning issues within the pipeline for senior jobs. In two dioceses as few as 8% or 10% respectively of Area Deans were women and of all 43 dioceses none had 50% of incumbent status jobs undertaken by women, and 13 of the 43 dioceses had less than 25% female incumbent status clergy.

With these roles being recognized as an important training ground for leaders of the future, it is a concern that so few of these positions are currently occupied by women.

RESEARCH UNDERTAKEN

Our team interviewed a number of senior women and men in strategic positions within the Church of England. In all we conducted more than 25 interviews which included a diocesan bishop, suffragan bishops, deans, archdeacons, theological college staff, and ordinands, as well as a number of other senior women in HR and DDO teams. Members of our team attended meetings of TRIG and the Transformations Group and liaised with NADAWM and WATCH.

Looking back at these interviews our team is concerned that many interviewees were fearful about being identified or quoted. They did not feel that the culture is sufficiently safe for them to talk freely about their experiences. We have made every effort not to identify experiences or opinions in this report, but we are saddened to note that this is the context in which this report is written.

THEOLOGY

The insights of feminist theology over the last five decades mean that a variety of female biblical role models are now more visible and available for women leaders- and potential women leaders- in the Church to draw on. Historically, male figures like Moses or Isaiah have always been cited as examples of vocation and calling. Yet from Deborah in the book of Judges leading the people of

¹ <https://womenandthechurch.org/resource-category/monitoring-and-statistics/>

God out to battle, to Mary of Bethany sitting in the place of the rabbis at Jesus' feet, or the apostle Junia in Paul's Letter to the Romans, or the first evangelist Mary Magdalene, sent to tell the disciples the good news of the resurrection and designated "Apostle to the apostles" in the Early Church, this recovery of interest in scriptural women who have led other men and women spiritually in their communities has kept pace with growth in numbers of actual women role models in the clergy in the Church today.

At the same time, some male and female scholars have challenged arguments about 'male headship' based on particular readings of scripture, and taken a more egalitarian view. There is still a need for a publicly accessible debate on the exegesis of the passages concerned.

In some of the conversations we had, interviewees made a direct link between 'headship theology' and the lack of opportunities for women to lead larger conservative evangelical Churches.

Arguments against women's priesthood on the more Catholic side have traditionally held Christ's maleness to be essential. Since the 1990s, feminist theologians have been arguing that, according to Greek patristic theology at least, there is no basis for regarding gender as a fundamental category. Many in the Church today, drawing on the insights of pioneering feminist theologians argue that if women can be saved and baptised in Christ, then it is illogical that they could not be priests or represent Christ at the altar. However, women are still struggling to be represented in senior leadership roles of the Church, a recent report shows that the number of female professors in Theology and Religious Studies departments in the UK has decreased to 16%.²

² <https://trs.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Gender-in-TRS-Project-Report-Final.pdf>



**Key themes
emerging
from our work**

DIOCESAN INTENTIONALITY

Many women we spoke to highlighted the importance of diocesan intentionality in seeking to be diverse in their appointments at every stage in the vocational journey. Some dioceses are clear that they wish to encourage applications to senior posts from women, be it in their conversations with potential applicants, or paperwork prepared for the appointment process. Such intentionality appeared not only to signal that it would be 'okay' for a woman to apply but went further actively to encourage women to apply for that post in their diocese.

Some of the women we interviewed spoke of banter, posturing, showing off and even sexism within the work place, and even in bishop's staff meetings and so it is likely that intentionality in recruitment might be perceived by women as evidence that a good culture exists within that diocese. We were told that some bishop's staff meetings have yet to have women as regular attendees or members and it is therefore more challenging for a woman to consider being part of such a team. It was also noted that our society at large does not always have women in senior positions and therefore such intentionality is all the more important in encouraging women to senior positions within the Church. It was felt by some that there has been a 'tick box' approach to achieve percentages of bishops who are women. It was noted that a similar approach did not appear evident in the appointment of deans, for example.



A key part of intentional recruitment of women is an attractive maternity policy and a flexible attitude to working hours and patterns of work, including job shares.

The differing maternity provisions from diocese to diocese was noted by many of the women we spoke to. It was clear that the provision of maternity and paternity cover and the availability of flexible working did not just affect those women who currently hold senior posts and have young children, but also can deter women at every stage. Some may never feel able to go forward for ordination in the first place because they cannot see how to make the vocational demands of ordained ministry and family. In consequence, the number of possible women candidates for senior roles is reduced right from the beginning. It was also noted by many interviewed that time spent nurturing children was not valued by the Church; it was seen simply as time lost away from front line ministry, rather than time spent developing valuable qualities and skills.

Men and women may all have ongoing family responsibilities at different stages of life; adult children may still need support and elderly relatives may need ongoing care, but women often bear a greater share of such responsibilities and may refrain from 'bigger' jobs in order to fulfill these family roles. Flexible working, including job share or part time work, can go a long way in encouraging talented people with other responsibilities to consider putting themselves forward for senior roles. However, it usually takes a confident applicant to be the first to raise the possibility and many would simply not apply in the first place. An intentional policy would make clear the possibilities for flexible working from the outset.

RECRUITMENT

In our interviews people shared with us a number of barriers to recruitment which could disadvantage women or discourage them from applying for posts all through their ministry. Some of these issues are not necessarily connected with senior positions, but if women are deterred from applying for earlier posts it can be hard to fulfill the requirements for senior roles later on.

These barriers include:

- The choice of language in job adverts; a study in the USA³ has reported that language can hinder diverse recruitment and that certain phrases or words in an advert would make women less likely to apply. St Albans Diocese have created a helpful short paper seeking to guide those recruiting to use language which seeks to minimize the number of people deterred from applying for a position. For example, an advert which ask for 'someone to work with the PCC in discerning God's vision for our community' might get a greater diversity of applicants than an advert which asks for 'someone to spearhead our strategy and embed it in all levels of our Church'. A number of women also pointed to adverts which welcomed applicants from 'women and men' rather than 'men and women' as being a small but significant encouragement to apply.
- Reticence is seen by many as a possible barrier to senior positions. The appointment process requires applicants to put themselves forward but it can be hard to imagine yourself in a senior role if the role models are few. Equally, some well qualified women may still feel uncertain about applying if they have a bit less experience in a very few areas of the job description where others might apply anyway. For some, a theology of servant leadership where the first are last may militate against putting yourself forward for a senior role when you have not been invited or encouraged to do so.
- Secrecy in episcopal appointment interviews was also seen as an off-putting process. Instead people talked about creating a genuinely open process under God where candidates and panel together seek God's will for the right person for each role. A more vocational and prayerful shared interview process was seen positively.
- In preparation for interviews, unconscious bias training is inconsistently delivered across the dioceses. In some dioceses all panel members are trained ahead of an appointment process. In some dioceses it is just the

³ Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 2011, Vol.101, No 1, 109-128 Evidence that Gendered Wording in Job Advertisements Exists and Sustains Gender Inequality, Gaucher, Friesen and Kay



senior staff, area deans, and lay chairs, and in others it is only the senior staff. With a number of dioceses undertaking recruitment without everyone on the panel being trained in unconscious bias there is a concern that diversity of all sorts may be hampered.

- At interview women have reported questions being asked about home arrangements which may not be asked similarly of men and are therefore not legal. One woman in a senior post spoke of how at every interview she had had in the Church of England she had been asked about her 'domestic arrangements' given that there would be evening meetings. Rather than challenge this question in her last interview she felt that she had to answer the question rather than ruin her chances of appointment. The interview panel clearly contained senior figures but the question was not challenged and was allowed to stand. The woman in question (who wishes to remain anonymous) thought it unlikely that a man being interviewed would be asked such a question. A woman in an interview for a senior post was also asked when she had last been admitted to hospital, the answer to which was "when she had had her last child."

However, as a slight counter to some of the barriers, it was also believed that whilst women are less likely to apply for senior positions, that when they do, they are more likely to get the position.

PROVISIONS TO SUPPORT WOMEN DEVELOP AND FLOURISH IN LEADERSHIP

Almost every diocese has either a dean of women's ministry or a bishop's adviser in women's ministry, though some people think there is no longer any need for this role. The deans or advisers are all members of the National Association of Deans and Advisers in Women's Ministry (NADAWM) which offers significant national support. Within each diocese the deans or advisers can be significant strategically and in terms of support and encouragement of women but there is significant diocesan variation in their status and role descriptions which affects how much their voices are heard and how much they can realistically achieve. The national co-ordination in NADAWM is clearly helpful in sharing best practice and providing a coordinated and more influential voice. However, where dioceses have made most progress in fostering gender diversity, discussions have been diocese-wide and not just led by the deans or advisers. It is important for the diocese as a whole to own the commitment to diversity.

The 'Leading Women' course (a programme for women priest in the Church of England who have the potential to develop into senior leaders and may at some stage wish to consider senior appointments) was cited by many senior women as a key reason why they were in the senior position that they currently hold. The course seems to have worked particularly well as it has provided a safe place for women to develop, allowed women to develop positive networks with other women and provided some exposure to key female role models. The independence of the course was seen by many as one of its strengths – that it is not provided by the 'hierarchy' but rather that it is led by women for women.

Positive female role models are seen by many as particularly important in fostering more senior vocations. Shadowing a woman in senior leadership can be a particularly helpful experience. It was noted that women often find senior roles unattractive and providing women with the opportunity to experience what a senior role is like in practice can help people envisage how roles could work for them. An interesting reflection is how role models have changed over

the decades since 1985. Those who were first ordained priests had to fight for each stage and were formed by the process whereas subsequent generations have experienced and been formed by different challenges. The need for senior women to 'pull others up the ladder' was noted (eg <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/apr/11/every-woman-boardroom-pull-more-up>) A number of those interviewed raised concern about the lack of women in leadership in evangelical churches which also pointed to the lack of role models for evangelical women.

DIRECT ENCOURAGEMENT

Many women in senior positions spoke of the importance of direct encouragement in being asked to apply for a specific senior role. Often the encouragement came from a diocesan bishop, but not always. Clearly direct encouragement can improve the number of applications to senior positions from any group of people, but this has proved a particularly fruitful way of increasing diversity, at least in applications for jobs. Encouragement to apply was seen by many as helpful, however it was also noted that anyone being offered a job, perhaps especially women, would want to know that they had been offered the position on merit alone. One Statement of Need for a senior position was seen by some as going too far in promoting female candidates in that it was read as actively discouraging male applicants. Secular recruitment professionals agree that when direct encouragement is given well it is clearly a powerful tool in improving the quality of applicants to a post. (We noted that this is not at all about returning to the 'old boy network'; a tap on the shoulder in this context is an invitation to apply for a job in a robust and open process and, if appointed, to get the job on merit).

In terms of supporting and flourishing in ministry it was widely felt that the '5 Guiding Principles' might be frequently spoken about by those in senior positions but are not that integrated into the life of the whole Church. When the Church tries to apply them in hard circumstances they are not experienced as providing an affirming environment which fosters the flourishing of diversity in ministry.

Recommendations

Whilst a number of possible recommendations could come out of this report, we would like to highlight five which we think could have a significant influence on diversity and bring benefit to the Church as a whole.

1 Intentionality as a primary mindset in encouraging women at every stage from vocational discernment through to senior roles. We would encourage each diocese actively to consider making a strategic plan to increase the representation of women in senior roles. In practical terms this might include any or all of the following: a gold standard maternity policy (the ACAS policy is a good example: <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2017-11/Parental%20Pay%20and%20Leave%20Advice%20December%202015.pdf>), openness to creativity and flexibility in patterns of work, effective use of the adviser or dean of women's ministry, active promotion of positive role modelling, positive encouragement in recruitment, and learning good practice from beyond Church circles. Being intentional is critical to making things change.

2 Creating a Culture of Trust so that women are able to tell their stories without fear of losing their jobs or their hopes of future ministries.

3 Unconscious Bias Training should be a normal requirement for every member of an interview panel, certainly for senior roles but also for roles at earlier stages of ministry. The hidden biases of language in adverts and role descriptions should also be explored with those who do the drafting.

4 The Leading Women course should continue to be funded and its profile raised especially among dioceses who have not sent (m)any participants. Financial support should not affect its independent status.

5 SDF funding bids should be required to set out how their project might improve diversity.

Embedding a level playing field in the culture of the Church of England is essential. A more diverse Church reflects the God in whose image we are all made. It is our prayer that this report and its recommendations might lead to benefits for women in ministry, BAME sisters and brothers, those who are differently abled, and all who struggle to find their place in the Church.

There is no 'quick fix' solution here, but a journey of honesty and openness, repentance and forgiveness, holding on to a vision of the Kingdom of God in whom: *"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" Galatians 3:28*⁴

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⁴ New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.



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