

## Smashing the stained-glass ceiling

Bishop of Stockport Libby Lane talks to [Liam Mullally](#) about becoming one of the first female Anglican bishops and the challenges facing the Church in the future

Monday 14 September 2015



Image: Kippa Matthews

The morning of the consecration of first two female bishops at Canterbury cathedral (one of whom, I should probably admit at the outset, was my mother) held an atmosphere of both anticipation and nervousness. Since the Church of England voted to allow female bishops last year, both consecrations at York Minster had been interrupted by some kind of protest. It was under these conditions, in the dining room of the bishop's palace with a view of the cathedral's two western towers that I met with Libby Lane, the Bishop of Stockport, who had been consecrated seven months earlier in York, making her the first female bishop in the Church of England.

Lane's career is one constantly at the forefront of what was available to women within the church. She was ordained as a priest in 1994, among the first wave of women to have been trained. About three years later she came to the

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diocese of York and after a few years of parental leave went on to be a team vicar in Stockport, she then went on to be assistant director of ordinands and later an incumbent in two parishes in the diocese of

Chester and the dean of women in ministry. Consequently she nominated to be one of eight female observers in the house of bishops and in November was interviewed for the role of bishop of Stockport.

Despite this position at the vanguard of women's priesthood, Lane does not feel that she has personally faced too much institutional opposition: "I have been extraordinarily blessed that the church happens to have reached its place of transition at the same time that I have". Although she does clarify this; she does not wish to "underplay the struggle of those who have come before [her]," rather it is because of those who have come before her that she has been offered such opportunities. Lane was able to come straight from university into training for priesthood, and as she reached the right point in her career, women have been allowed to become bishops. It is apparent that, with the exception of taking parental leave (which Lane insists, along with any moves that they have taken for careers, was an equal decision between her and her husband), her career has been allowed to carry on unimpeded by individuals or the institution as a result of her gender.

This does not mean, however, that she has escaped the vitriol of some of the more traditional members of the Church, especially since being thrust into the public eye. Lane's consecration was not entirely straightforward, at the time the objection that occurred during the service made a prominent, if not unexpected, piece for the media (with a similar event occurring several months later at the consecration of Alison White). Lane has also evidently received a large number of letters and emails from people who are "clearly very hurt and angry, and sometimes unpleasant." The focus on her consecration from both the religious and secular world has been immense: seventy five media outlets

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both from the UK and abroad covered it. I remember seeing it by chance in a campus bar (and it's not often that you see an event from the institutional church broadcast in a student bar). Overall she seems relatively untroubled by the attention. While clearly it was a massive transition, going quickly from being anonymous, to being regularly "recognised and approached by strangers," Lane seems to have emerged unfazed: "It's remarkable how quickly you get used to having cameras pointing at you."

Lane is also adamant that the group within the church who oppose female ministry (those, for instance, who do not wish to serve beneath a female bishop) should be able to hold their position and have their view heard. She speaks of the "provision that is in place" as being a necessary for them to be able "to dissent with honour and retain their place in the communion." Even the more extreme reactions do not seem to have had a significant effect on Lane. She says that while "it's not nice to have someone denounce you publicly," or to "receive letters and emails...[she has] never felt personally threatened and [doesn't] feel diminished by it." She adds: "I'm confident in my place in God's love...that's not significantly undermined by people disagreeing with that."

Lane has faced criticism from a less expected source; it comes "not only from those who disagree...There has been an enormously high expectation, particularly from those who have been fighting for a long time." This group have

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displayed a degree of disappointment, fearing the change has not been radical enough. Their hope, it seems, was that the appointment would spark significant change at all levels of women's ministry, and that Lane would have a very active role in this. Clearly, while it stands as a milestone for progress within the Church, the appointment of female bishops has not caused a sudden and total rebirth for all areas of it. Defending her position, Lane claims that she "can't shoulder the responsibility for the renewal and

transformation of the church on my own...it would be astoundingly arrogant to think I could." Clearly for Lane the process is a gradual and collective one. Indeed, it is probably wise, with such attention focused on her, to avoid attempting to elicit sudden change, particularly at a time when some people may be searching to paint senior female ministry as disastrous.

Lane does not appear to be concerned about the rate of progress within the church. While "it [the period of time between women being allowed to become priests and to become bishops] felt like a very long time for the people who were living through those twenty years," realistically, she says, within the lifetime of the church it is quite brief. At the point that I spoke to Lane both diocesan and suffragan (in any diocese the diocesan bishop will have one or two suffragan bishops who serve as assistants) appointments had been exactly equal between men and women. While she doubts that this would continue to be quite so even for the near future, Lane takes this as a positive sign. She does not even doubt that there will eventually be a female archbishop. While she doesn't know how long it will take, she points out that the Archbishop of Canterbury has significance within the whole of the Anglican Communion, not just the Church of England, and so resistance from outside may well delay it. However, she thinks the volume of talent of women in the church will eventually hit a "viable critical mass" and an appointment at some point is an inevitability. Lane also doesn't see it happening immediately: "I'm not going to feel like we've failed if we haven't got there in five years or fifty years". To Lane the appointment of a female archbishop would be a less significant boundary to cross than the initial admission of women into the higher echelons of the church, and one that will take time. After all, archbishop posts do not come around often.

Gender is not the only, or even the most significant glass ceiling that Lane perceives within the Church. After all, all three four women appointed thus far have been white, middle-aged and middle-class (not exactly characteristics representative of the whole church going community, or one likely to inspire young people to join their ranks). She points out that a female archbishop wouldn't be quite as revolutionary as one who doesn't come from the UK or a privileged background. While these may not be as "visible as being a man or a woman," she thinks they require a significant "cultural shift" in the Church, admitting that: "I'm mould-breaking in that I'm a woman, but I'm not in that I'm white and middle class and as it happens Oxford educated." She thinks the church needs to be able to engage with the portions of the nation which she does not represent.

There is still a huge weight to shift within the Church of England, there are after all now only four women among over one hundred bishops. But, as Lane points out, the tide is certainly turning, particularly in the context of the age of the church. More importantly, she highlights, the church is unrepresentative in ways which are not yet being addressed. Perhaps to public eye should look towards the imbalances of class and race which exist alongside gender among the Church's more authoritative members.



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## One comment

Tom Harle

16 Sep '15 at 11:39 am

Outstanding headline

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