

In Conversation with the Very Reverend Dean Vivienne Faull, First Woman Dean of York Minster

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Across the UK, the position of women in senior roles and positions within 'the establishment' remains elusive. For instance, the Equality and Human Rights Commission found in 2011 that women held only 12.5 per cent of FTSE 100 non-executive directorships, 22.2 per cent of MPS, 6.7 per cent of media heads, and 12.9 per cent of senior judiciary appointments. It has been estimated that it will be at least 70 years before women and men have equality in these roles.

In contrast, and after some one thousand years, Dean Vivienne Faull's appointment as Dean of York Minster breaks the tradition and legacy of male appointments to this key position.

Even so, her appointment to this venerable and pivotal role within the Anglican Church coincides with profound discussion and, against the controversy of the General Synod meeting in November 2012, unresolved debate about the future role of women bishops within the more senior hierarchy of the Church.

About Dean Vivienne

Ordained deaconess in 1982 and priest in 1994 Dean Vivienne served first at St Matthew and St James, Mossley Hill and then as Chaplain at Clare College, Cambridge. From 1990-2000, she was on the staff at Gloucester Cathedral. Her appointment as Provost of Leicester Cathedral in May 2000 marked the first and only female cathedral provost installation in Church of England history. Since 2002, when her job title changed, she has been the Dean of Leicester – with that change of title, she became the first female Dean in the Church of England.

In addition to responsibility for the cathedral, which has developed its buildings and outreach considerably over the last decade, Dean Vivienne acted as deputy for the Bishop of Leicester and was trustee of Leicester College, a large General Further Education (GFE) College, and Leicester Theatre Trust, which runs Curve, Leicester's new theatre. For the last four years she has chaired the Association of English Cathedrals, the cathedrals' representative body

In December 2012, Dean Vivienne Faull was appointed as the first woman Dean to York Minster.

“*When and how did you come to recognise your vocation and desire to be ordained within the church?*

Probably others recognised it before I did ... I tended to run away from it at first, and spent several years working in India. As it got more serious, both my mother and my school headmistress felt that I would be wasting my education going into the Church. But then I was eventually admitted to a theological college (though not one of the three at the time which was training women). And so began a long relationship with the Church which is both affectionate and subversive.

That sounds rather radical . . .

In some ways I suppose it is. My family background was both politically aware and in some senses marginal – so we could say it was radical. And it was noticeably – at that time – joining a man’s world. There

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were notices on the door to say that you were breaking the rules if, as a woman, you entered – but it was there. I might add that once I was ordained, my mother was very supportive of my position.

And if your career had not been within the Church, where would you be now, and why?

My peer group graduated in 1977 – not an easy time – but went into commercial life, law and the charity sector. Over the past ten years, I have spent a lot of time reviewing legal documents, and I suppose that one of my regrets is not having studied law in more depth. But the Church has very much given me the space to develop in many other directions over time.

In commercial life, it is often said that a woman has to work harder than a man in order to be seen as successful. How does this compare and contrast with that of a woman priest?

I’m not sure it’s about working harder than a man. In my first twenty or so years as a woman priest, you had some independence, but if you did something badly, it tended to be put down to the fact that you were a woman. And if you did well it was simply down to you as an individual. Performance is always being judged, but as a woman you are more vulnerable in this judgment.

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This is despite the fact that as a member of the clergy, you do work with a sense of autonomy, so it is subtly different from the corporate world.

...But in corporate life you do get feedback...

That’s true and I feel that more honest and open feedback to the clergy will come in due course. However, one of the challenges here is what makes you effective as a member of the clergy? There is a theological background to this, but it still begs the question, what is ‘effective’ in a church setting? We may be asked to work in a sacrificial way – and something which may at first appear ineffective may actually be highly effective in the longer term – so we have the issue of ‘deferred effectiveness’. There is a major debate within the church about what effectiveness is about. Our primary funders – the Church Commissioners – are asking whether it is actually possible or right to have success indicators, and, if so, what these should be.

Against that backcloth, and a decline in church attendance in general, people are actually flooding into cathedrals, and we have seen a big increase in attendance in recent years.

For instance, when I was Dean of Leicester, part of that increase has been because of the work which has been done to develop the place of the cathedral for all faiths – indeed, one member of the Hindu community here has said that the cathedral feels like their cathedral, and so the city feels like their city.

And if we do find that the remains which are being excavated in Leicester are actually those of Richard III, he will be reinterred in Leicester Cathedral and that will attract a different type of interest to the cathedral.

And are there aspects of your role where you feel it may be more advantageous to be a woman and a priest?

Most women clergy – because of the training they have received – want to be themselves, rather than follow male stereotypes. A curious illustration of this when women were first appointed was behaviour in processions – men tend to look serious; whilst women tend to come over as more human – and so more approachable.

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But we have challenges too. A woman clergy colleague of mine was not allowed to do funeral services when she was first ordained, because the local population took the view that if a woman led the funeral service, how would you know that you were properly dead!

...So do you feel that some of the research about women in management having to act in a masculine way in a man's world, or women as 'impostors' in how they view their roles does not reflect church life experience?

I think the issue of feeling you are an impostor is quite widespread throughout the senior clergy, whether male or female. In the early days when women were appointed to the clergy, I think they did then adopt masculine profiles, whilst, if anything, the male clergy at the time tended to adopt feminine traits! Lesley Francis at Warwick has done a wide range of research on personality, leadership, and other issues on clergy. Currently the church is attracting few women in their 20s into ministry: most are waiting until their children are grown. This means that the pool of candidates for senior posts will be restricted.

In autumn 2012, the Anglican General Synod again considered the appointment of woman priests. Can we start to see the Church coming together eventually, or will there be a protracted schism on the issue of woman priests?

The failure of the legislation to permit the consecration of women as Bishops in the November Synod by a very small number of votes was a shock, and the national response has shown how women are now welcomed as priests. The House of Bishops has resolved to try to bring a new legislative proposal to Synod in July. It is too early to say if this is feasible, but it is clear that parliament is concerned about any further delay.

And if the appointment of women priests is about accepting equality and diversity within the Church, can we expect the church to offer same-sex marriages in the future?

Fairly soon, I think the church will begin work to authorise blessings for those in Civil Partnerships. But I think that the issue of same sex marriage within the church will take longer to debate and resolve. I have my own views on this, and they tend to be at the more liberal end of the argument but I am committed to further discussion with those who hold very different views.

Even so I do think the UK government has been mistaken to drive this debate and discussion so quickly when many people are still finding their own way, understanding and beliefs on sexuality within society. So there is some anxiety on this within the church. In the end however, and probably within a generation, I do feel that same sex marriage within some of the church (if not the Church of England) will be available, and the opportunity for same sex partners to share and flourish in the life of the Church.

And on a separate note, I think it will eventually be inevitable that the Roman Catholic Church will introduce women priests.

I would like to turn now to discuss the role of church, and faith, in contemporary society.

The International Labour Organisation found in 2011 that there was a perceived increase in global experience of discrimination on the grounds of religious belief. Also in 2011, the UK Equality and Human Rights Commission found that those with religious beliefs, other than Christians, were ten times more likely to fear harassment or attack.

Is the Christian church really doing enough to promote respect across religious beliefs? Is there more it could and should do in this area?

I think the church is already working very hard together with other faith communities. For example, when I was at Leicester, after the New York 9/11 attacks, the Bishop of Leicester led a public declaration with all the local faith leaders. The emphasis was to stand together as a faith community and the message after this was that an attack on one faith was an attack on all faiths. In this way, we wanted to be united to protect all faiths in Leicester, and all places of worship, whether churches, temples, mosques and so on.

Similarly, Leicester has a large Somali community. After the 7/7 bombings in London, the Police used the church's close contacts with other faith communities to develop strong community contacts and offer protection and safeguarding to communities which were feeling very vulnerable at the time.

And even since then, there was a Sikh and Muslim racially motivated conflict at De Montfort University. In resolving it, the Police first came to the Christian Chaplain as a gateway to resolving the issue. But we have to be realistic too and recognise that race and faith issues still simmer – as was recently demonstrated in a recent long-drawn out community debate about plans for a scout hut to be transferred to a Muslim community.

In Leicester, the cathedral acts as a focal point both for multi faith groups and ethnic minorities. The building is a significant unifying factor, and the cathedral has twice hosted multi faith gatherings when the English Defence League¹ has visited the city. The faith Leaders (and the Secularists too) stood together to articulate and celebrate a sign and this was very reaffirming. It gave the Muslim community leaders the confidence to provide genuine reassurance to their own communities that as Faith communities, we were united against racism in the city.

In his recent book, Faith in the Public Square, Archbishop Rowan Williams says that 'no theologian has an automatic skill in economics, but there is an ethical perspective [to commercial life]'.

But as well as asking the awkward questions and delivering critique – in this case on ethics – has the church waited too long to offer practical, informed, and timely guidance on contemporary business ethics?

¹ A right wing organisation which has organised protest rallies, and describes its mission as 'Peacefully Protesting Against Militant Islam'

I am sure that the short answer to that question is 'yes': the church has waited too long. And the same is true when we look at faith and science.

Perhaps we have trouble in finding the right time and opportunity to articulate a lead on this. It is also true that there are a limited number of people within the church with the knowledge to give an informed opinion on some of these very complex issues.

As a church, we also need to find an appropriate balance between – for example – giving our views about business ethics, and wider pastoral care. For example, we may criticise banks, but we cannot overlook the fact that a wider community was eager to access cheap and plentiful borrowing.

So we can say that it is one finger pointing forwards...and three fingers pointing back.

And looking to your appointment as Dean of York Minster, what are your key aspirations within this role?

A cathedral is a very iconic building – and York especially so because of its position in the City, in Yorkshire, regionally and nationally. I am very aware of the need for York Minster to flourish as a community. Especially in difficult times, York Minster is a place not just for worship but for deeper roots to develop across a

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wider community as well. For example, in September, York hosted the Annual Police Memorial day, at a particularly poignant time following the killings of PCs Fiona Bone and Nicola Hughes in Manchester in 2012. So on that day, the cathedral gave articulation to grief amongst the Police and the wider public. At a time when the wider community felt vulnerable, there was a sense in which the Cathedral represents a view that because the Cathedral is still here, things will be OK.

As Dean I have responsibility for the worshipping community at the cathedral. But the Cathedral is also a place for the Archbishop of York to be and to flourish. The Dean is not directly answerable to the Archbishop so that from a managerial perspective there is a degree of built in creative tension. In other cathedrals, the relationships between the Dean and the Bishop has been a source of conflict – indeed, even discussing the issue in some ways undermines the respective positions of power.

At York, the Archbishop John Sentamu is brilliant at bringing the Church's message into focus with dramatic gestures. So part of my own role will be to work creatively with this, whilst balancing the pastoral needs of the Minster's own church community as well.

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Other challenges? Certainly to develop the culture and the team at York further, where we have 160 staff and 600 volunteers to manage.

But I also want to develop a stronger vision and identity for cathedrals – what they are there for and how they fulfil that role. This needs resourcing as well, so the challenge is how to progress without continuing to drain the financial resources. ”