

Church of England may allow women bishops despite threats of split:

Mixed reactions

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The Church of England is facing the threat of a major split and years of turmoil over a vote by the church's General Synod to allow the consecration of women as Anglican bishops.

The vote on July 7 authorized the formation of a group to draft a code to be put to a Synod vote next year. A ballot of dioceses in England will be required before a further vote by the General Synod in 2012 at the earliest.

Opening the path toward allowing women bishops was criticized as having negative effects on ecumenical relations, according to statements from the Vatican and from the Moscow patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church. Some European Lutherans praised the step.

Women priests have been ordained in the Church of England since 1994.

Elsewhere in the Anglican Communion, ten provinces allow women bishops, but only four—the Episcopal Church in the U.S. and Anglican churches in Canada, Australia and New Zealand—currently have women serving as bishops.

At the Synod meeting last month, bishops voted 28 to 12 to move forward on the issue of female bishops; the clergy voted 124-44 and the laity 111-68 in favor.

The debate prompted the church's No. 2 official, Archbishop of York John Sentamu, to lambaste the church for wasting time on internal politics while ignoring the problems of the world outside.

"Jesus Christ is in the streets weeping," Sentamu fumed in a separate speech before the vote. "Did you see the newspaper that said the church is navel-gazing while our children are being slaughtered and killed?"

Meanwhile, in a letter to Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, more than 1,300 clergy, including 11 bishops, threatened to leave the Church of England if women are permitted to become bishops. The letter's signatories said they have begun "thinking very hard about the way ahead" and that "we will inevitably be asking whether we can, in conscience, continue as bishops, priests and deacons in the Church of England which has been our home."

The embattled archbishop insisted that he has no intention of limiting the authority of women within the church, saying, "I am deeply unhappy with any scheme or any solution to this which ends, as it were, structurally humiliating women who might be nominated."

The Vatican called the Synod vote a setback. "This decision will have consequences on the future of dialogue, which had up until now borne fruit," said the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity in a July 8 statement.

"Such a decision signifies a break with the apostolic tradition maintained by all of the churches since the first millennium and is, therefore, a further obstacle to reconciliation between the Catholic Church and the Church of England," said the Vatican statement.

A Russian Orthodox Church priest-spokesperson said the decision in London "is further alienating the Anglican community from the apostolic tradition."

Igor Vyzhanov, secretary of the patriarchate's external church relations, was quoted by the Interfax news agency as saying: "The decision was predictable because the tendency of total liberalization unfortunately dominates in many Christian churches, including the Anglican community."

However, German Bishop Maria Jepsen of Hamburg, who in 1992 became the world's first female Lutheran bishop, described the Church of England decision as "overdue," the German Protestant news agency epd reported. "It is also logical, because, after all, women have for many years been serving as priests," said Jepsen.

Bishop Margot Kässmann of Hanover also praised the decision, saying she was "looking forward" to having female colleagues from the Church of England. She added, "My experience has been that as the number of women in episcopal ministry increases, so does the respect in which they are held."

Norwegian Lutheran leaders praised the Anglican step toward consecration of women bishops. "The Church of Norway, having gone through a similar process some years ago, and having been much blessed by its fruits, will accompany the Church of England, as a sister church in communion, with gratitude and with prayers of God's blessing and guidance in the time to come," the church said July 10 in a press release. *-Religion News Service, Ecumenical News International*