THE CHANGING PUBLIC FACE
OF THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND:
THE CHANGING EXPERIENCES OF CLERGYWOMEN

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INTRODUCTION

The Church of England by its very nature is a reformed Church (Avis, 2007), but a reformed church that in many ways also remains committed to its Catholic roots. The Church of England today remains the established Church in England. In practice this gives the role of supreme governor of the Church of England to the sovereign, the appointment of bishops to the prime minister and means that Parliament has a vote on some areas of church legislation after it has been passed by General Synod (the governing body of the Church of England). In this sense the Church of England is in a unique position in England with the Archbishop of Canterbury viewed as a national figure whose sermons at certain times of the year (Easter and Christmas in particular) are reported in the national press and whose views lead to debate. For example Rowan Williams’ views on Shari’a Law sparked a not insignificant debate that led some to call for his resignation (Williams, 2008). This is a church with a public face.

The Church of England is divided into two provinces, Canterbury and York. It is then divided into forty-two mainland dioceses, each headed by a bishop. Each diocese is then divided into deaneries and finally deaneries into parishes. Avis (2007) cites the Archbishop of Canterbury as the first among equals, with essentially Church of England decisions being made by the General Synod, a democratically elected body of laity and clergy, and bishops, not so elected. The General Synod can pass some types of legislation without recourse to Parliament and other types of legislation have to be passed by Parliament after being passed by the General Synod.

The leadership of the Church has been exclusively male with the three-fold order of ministry, bishop, priest and deacon being the preserve of men until relatively recently. The first women were ordained to the diaconate in 1987 and the priesthood in 1994.
This chapter is concerned with the changing public face of clergywomen within the Church of England and explores the perceptions of the clergywomen regarding this change. Before moving to the empirical study of clergywomen, the role of women in the Church of England and the debate surrounding the ordination of women to the priesthood is explored under the following headings: parish, diocese, the national Church and the wider community. It is against this background that the clergywomen’s views on their changing public face will be explored.

**Parishes**

**Deaconesses**

Within the parish the role of women was restricted to serving as lay workers until 1862 when Elizabeth Fearad was commissioned as the first deaconess (Field-Bibb, 1991). It was the responsibility of each incumbent, to whom the deaconess was appointed, to decide what roles she could and should fulfil. The position was not secure. For example, if the incumbent was replaced, the deaconess could find her role to be greatly diminished or suddenly increased. Furthermore, if the incoming incumbent did not require her services, she was out of a job. The Church was not obliged to provide her with another placement (Fullalove, 1987). Despite this, the deaconess movement increased the visibility of women, although not consistently across the parishes. The movement provided a small beginning that would lead to women priests.

**Deacons**

The first women were ordained deacon in 1987. The role of clergywomen as permanent deacons tended to be defined in a negative way by what they were not allowed to do compared with a priest. Aldridge (1987) summed this issue up: ‘The recent decision to ordain women not as deaconesses but as deacons will expand their role only slightly, will not resolve their anomalous status and will merely confirm their subordination to the clergy’. In a study by Francis and Robbins (1999) clergywomen reported that they often experienced practical problems as a result. For example, when leading a communion service if a larger than anticipated congregation were present, the reserved sacrament would have to be divided with extreme care in order to avoid running out. With the ordination of women to the diaconate, more parishes for the first time experienced the ministry of an ordained woman (ACCM, 1990). The public face of clergywomen in the parish was expanding.