EARRINGS BEHIND THE ALTAR?
ANGLICAN EXPECTATIONS OF THE ORDINATION
OF WOMEN AS PRIESTS

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1. Introduction

The historic vote to allow women to be ordained as priests in the Church of England took place, amidst unusual public interest, on 11 November 1992. For the waiting women and their supporters, the day brought a mixture of relief, jubilation and hope for a more representative church. Meanwhile, opponents mourned for a church they felt had been changed beyond recognition by the decision; some resolved to fight on to preserve the tradition of an all-male priesthood. Ten years on, women made up almost one in five licensed Church of England ministers and had been accepted as priests by an increasingly large proportion of clergy and congregations — although perhaps not yet universally on the same terms as male clergy. Indeed, around seven per cent of parishes continued to exercise their right to opt out of a woman’s priestly ministry under the terms of the Priests (Ordination of Women) Measure and the subsequent Episcopal Ministry Act of Synod (both 1993). Moreover, several issues remained unresolved, not least whether in the future women would also be consecrated to the episcopate.

1 I wish to thank participants in the British-Dutch Colloquium on The Pastor Bonus for their interest in, and comments on, this research, and particularly to W.M. Jacob for reading and commenting on a draft of this contribution. Any shortcomings, of course, remain my own.
2 For a good introduction to the ordination of women debate in the Church of England, see Sean Gill, Women and the Church of England, from the Eighteenth Century to the Present (London, 1994), chapter 10.
4 This thesis is developed further in Ian Jones, Women and Priesthood in the Church of England: Ten Years On (forthcoming).
Even before the first women were priested in the Church of England in 1994, historians, sociologists and cultural commentators began to pick over the significance of the change. This article addresses just one aspect of this debate: what an examination of the Church of England’s experience of ordaining of women as priests can tell us about changing conceptions of the pastor bonus in late twentieth-century England. It focuses specifically on Anglicans’ expectations of their clergy in practice. Of course, women’s ordination as priests entailed a much wider set of theological and ecclesiological questions (quite apart from the reception of women priests in reality), and these questions have been discussed extensively, both around the time of the debate and since. However, this article leaves this area largely to one side, and considers the ways in which Anglicans hoped or feared that women would change the nature and appearance of priesthood in reality. Through an examination of the popular literature of the debate, the results of a questionnaire survey and oral testimony from both clergy and congregations, the article focuses on changes and continuities in four aspects of the good minister: leadership, professionalism, the performance of a key role in worship, and pastoral work. In particular, it is suggested that understanding what the pastor bonus looked like to late twentieth-century English churchgoers might reveal some important insights as to why women were comparatively quickly accepted as priests by a majority of the Church of England.