

Soroptimists London Chilterns Region

Regional Meeting & Annual General Meeting

Saturday 9th October 2021

I have never thought of myself as a pioneer, but I was the youngest woman to be appointed as the Government's Chief Nursing Officer for England, the fourth woman to be ordained Bishop in the Church of England and the first bishop of London to be a woman. I see myself as ordinary and I recognize in doing so I give baggage to my daughter.

It has not passed me by that I was installed in 2018 as the first bishop of London who is a woman, in the year when we marked 100 years after some women were given the vote, and in the week when, 150 years before, suffragettes placed a bomb under the seat in which I was enthroned. Vergers were just as eagle eyed then as they are now, and the bomb didn't go off.

I am not naturally subversive, but I am aware that as the first woman Bishop of London I am subversive just by being a woman – and it's a necessity that I have sought to embrace.

At my consecration as a bishop on the feast of Mary Magdalene, the former Bishop of Stepney, Bishop Adrian, preached and encouraged me to socialize and subvert.

He reminded us then that Jesus chooses outsiders not so much as to disturb the comfortable, but to disturb the conventional, and that it is through the disturbance of people like Mary Magdalene that we learn to see the world and God afresh. I recognize that because of who I am, not just because of my gender, my appointment holds the opportunity to see the world, London, God and His Church differently.

I just have to turn up and the world has changed – my question is always: how then do I use this disturbance for good?

Let me share something of the Church of England in London. It is the settled position of the Church of England that there are those who do not accept women as priests and therefore Bishops, and the Church makes provision for them. In London there is probably the highest concentration – with 13% of priest and parishes not accepting me as a bishop or priest because I am a woman.

In the Church of England, we have had female priests only since 1994. In 2015, the Rt Revd Libby Lane was consecrated and installed as Bishop of Stockport, a suffragan (assistant) bishop in the Diocese of Chester, becoming our first female bishop.

2019 marked 25 years since the first women were ordained priest. In early 2020 the campaigning organisation, WATCH, Women and the Church, reported that numbers are slowly increasing, and some dioceses have reached what is arguably a tipping point with around one third of their stipendiary (paid) clergy being women.

But others – including London, for multiple inter-related reasons - were still hovering at around the 15% mark.

I am also conscious of the responsibility that I have as a woman in this role. I am watched, people project onto me their expectations which I am certain I won't live up to. I am conscious that - as someone has written - my selfhood begins when I walk away from the expectations of others.

I am very different from my predecessor which is a gift but people still say of me that I have big shoes to fill, my voice needs to be deeper, that it must be hard not being as tall as he was or even having his beard – I remind myself and others that I am not going to grow taller or a beard and I have my own shoes and my own voice and I have to be faithful to who I am and who God has called me to be. Maybe it is not so important that I have my own shoes but rather what I do in them. As Madeleine Albright said "It took me quite a long time to develop a voice, and now I that I have it I am not going to be silent".

People often comment that I have been successful in two careers, and I have to admit that I do not see myself as ambitious, but I have always sought to do the role that I am in to my very best and to take every opportunity which comes my way. I am conscious that I have a comprehensive school background, I went to a polytechnic and my ordination training was undertaken on a part time residential programme – no whiff of private education or Oxbridge and I have therefore often seen myself as the outsider – in the Department of Health and in the Church. I have often felt that those I worked with didn't always get me – a nurse and Senior civil servant wanting to minister in the Church. And I couldn't always see people like me.

What I have come to realize is that we should have confidence in who we are, in our difference and if we can't see anyone like us then maybe that's because there is an us-shaped hole waiting to be filled.

And we need to recognize our unconscious bias – Dame Mary Beard in her book *Women and Power* says that when we think of a powerful person even, we think of a white middle class man. It may be my unconscious bias which is holding me back as well as others.

And as those who find themselves in places of power, we must not pull up the ladder. We need to be people who support those who come behind us – giving away our power, mentoring and coaching others. The changes that we have seen will only be established if we encourage and give confidence to the next generation of women and to women across the globe.

Some might take the view that feminism has achieved its agenda, at least in the developed world. Gender equality is, after all, enshrined in key legislation in numerous ways but we must recognise that globally it is quite obviously not the case.

In 2017 the Gender Strategy of the NGO Christian Aid cited that in many societies, even before birth, a boy child is valued more than a girl child. The World Bank estimates that gender-selective infanticide accounts for 1.56 million missing girls.

At school, girls' completion of primary and secondary education is still far below that of boys, and it is estimated that only 42% of girls with a disability complete primary education.

Even when women do complete schooling, they are still likely to be paid less than men, hold jobs more insecure than those of men and are far less likely to hold management positions.

1 in 3 girls will be affected by domestic abuse, most likely from an intimate partner.

And I guess that is where my contribution to United Nations Commission on Status of Women 64 which I attended this year comes in, where I hoped to raise awareness of five ongoing areas of work relating to the status of women: women's health; modern day slavery; asylum seekers and refugees; violence against women; women in leadership. The UK government, NGOs and faith-based organisations are already collaborating on these issues but there is a long way to go.

Faith communities are uniquely placed to know the lived experience of society's most vulnerable people because places of worship are present in every locality. Historically many activists for social and political change have been motivated by their religious faith.

'The concept of gender justice is rooted in the Biblical vision that women and men are created in the image of God (Genesis 1.27), made one in Christ (Galatians 3.28), and called and equipped by the Spirit to proclaim the good news of God's saving love (Acts 2.17-18), seeking first the righteousness and justice of the Kingdom of God (Matthew 6.33).

Gender justice is for all people, for the health and wellbeing of individuals, the church and the world. Working for gender justice is an instrumental part of building healthy, interdependent relationships and communities.

It is a mission imperative that the Church of England should seek to transform its own structures as well as those of the society it serves. The Church can provide essential leadership on this vital issue by working together to promote gender justice at every level, for everyone.'

As pointed out in the statement 'Faith in Beijing+25, a collective of faith actors advocating for gender justice', 84% of the world's population identify as a member of a religious group and faith-based organisations often exist in communities where even governments have difficulty in reaching. There are at least 40 million victims of modern day slavery in the world today, and tens of thousands in the UK. It really is incredible that we live in London, one of the wealthiest cities in the world, a capital city heralded for its history and culture – and yet modern slavery is thriving. Hundreds of people are trapped by domestic servitude, forced labour or sexual exploitation, all in plain sight of Londoners. Many more are at risk of falling through the cracks, hidden from the view of the authorities, charities and the church.

But behind those statistics there are real people. It has been a privilege to visit safe houses and projects such as Tamar which support women, and to meet the individuals – made in the image of God - and hear their stories.

Therefore, two years ago our Lent Appeal in the Diocese of London was focused around Modern Day Slavery.

There were two parts to that:

Firstly, we encouraged parishes to raise awareness of this issue, and to equip people with the skills to spot the signs and take action on an issue that is "hidden in plain sight."

Secondly, we also partnered with 5 charities that are already working to end Modern Day Slavery in London, dealing with women and young people who have been trafficked for sexual exploitation, forced labour or domestic servitude.¹ We asked all our parishes to prayerfully consider how we could join together and raise funds to support them.²

After the success of the Lent campaign, we wanted to develop and expand the pastoral response that churches can make to those identified as being caught up in Modern Day Slavery. A number of churches in London have identified people in their congregations who are caught up in or susceptible to Modern Day Slavery. Others are reaching out to sex workers or other particularly vulnerable groups.

But many volunteers in our churches across the city understand little about the possibility of exploitation, even though the services that they offer may cause them to cross the path of many vulnerable individuals. They run projects for the vulnerably housed, foodbanks, provide refugee work and money advice centres. And we know that vulnerability *of any kind* can make you more susceptible to exploitation which can lead to modern day slavery. We wanted to discern and develop best practice in walking alongside people in these situations.

I asked a number of key leaders and thinkers to form a steering group to work on this. It includes pastors who are seeking to minister to people, professional trainers, and those involved in managing safe houses. We hope that together we can make a dent in a huge problem.

Despite COVID-19, that group have been meeting and discerning a way forward. The results so far are a new online training programme, 'Hidden Voices', for church groups wanting to be better equipped to volunteer in this area. It is this type of community mobilisation that equips people to identify modern slavery in their location and to act on it.

We are also exploring the possibility of a pilot project that will consist of identifying a church and community that might become a centre of excellence in training and support for victims of modern-day slavery in London. A place that becomes expert at triaging victims, supporting them to understand the services available to them such as the National Referral Mechanism, providing advocacy so that their own voices can be heard and crucially, providing the general pastoral support that is so needed to have the confidence to take next steps.

Alongside other Bishops in the House of Lords I co-sponsored and spoke to three amendments to what is now the Domestic Abuse Act 2021. These aimed to 1) highlight the importance of safe reporting pathways specifically for migrant women domestic abuse survivors; 2) criminalise non-fatal strangulation/suffocation as an indictable offence and 3)

¹ • **Ella's Home** working with women in London trafficked for Sexual Exploitation

• **Kalayaan** which supports migrant domestic workers in London who have been subjected to forced labour or have been trafficked to the UK for domestic servitude

• **Love 146** which supports young people in London who have been (or may be at risk of being) trafficked

• **The Rise Project** of The Children's Society which supports boys and young men aged 11-17 in London who have been trafficked.

• And **Tamar** – who work with women in Westminster trafficked for Sexual Exploitation

² All of this was building on the work of the Clewer Initiative, which is part of the national church's approach to eradicating modern day slavery, which was launched by Archbishop Justin in October 2017. The focus of that initiative is to encourage a community wide response to modern slavery – by developing partnerships between the Church, statutory and non-statutory agencies to create a network of advocates seeking to end Modern Day Slavery.

remove financial impediments on the path to justice when survivors seek evidence letters from healthcare professionals, in that they should not be charged a fee.

I have also sought to bring pressure on the UK Government to ratify the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, better known as the Istanbul Convention. This is a human rights treaty aiming at the prevention of violence against women, victim protection and ending the impunity of perpetrators. In signing but not yet ratifying the Convention, the UK Government is not legally bound to implement the measures it says it supports.

As I have already said, faith communities and networks are uniquely placed to engage with social issues on the ground. We also have an urgent responsibility to put things right, eg where false theologies have been used to encourage women to remain in relationships with abusers.

A worshipping community or faith-based organisation which does not seek to embed gender justice in its structures and relationships is failing to live as a community reflecting God's glory in the world, failing to live out God's grace as imaged and manifest in Jesus Christ, failing to work for God's Kingdom.

I have the privilege of meeting women every day of my life across this city and I am humbled by their courage and tenacity – do not underestimate your ability to inspire others, giving courage to others to act.

I will end with the words of Amelia Earhart "The most difficult thing is the decision to act, the rest is merely tenacity."

Rt Revd & Rt Hon Dame Sarah Mullally DBE, Bishop of London

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