

By Thomas Colsy

Crisis in the Anglican Communion Amid Female Archbishop Appointment, Cathedral Graffiti Controversy, Nigerian Province's Schism Threat

An October 3 announcement has confirmed that for the first time in its history a woman will assume the role of leading cleric in the Protestant state religion of the United Kingdom, after appointment by a secular committee led by Britain's former intelligence agency chief.

The news that Dame Sarah Mullally, formerly the Anglican Bishop of London, will become the recognised Archbishop of Canterbury in the Church of England follows longstanding controversy within the Anglican Communion, now marked by fresh turmoil including a wave of global outrage over a controversial graffiti exhibition at Canterbury Cathedral and a major African province's declaration of "spiritual independence" from Lambeth Palace, accelerating fears of outright schism.

The 63-year-old Bishop of London, approved by King Charles III and announced on Friday, succeeds Justin Welby, who resigned last year over a child abuse scandal. Her election is due before Christmas, with installation in March 2026, amid deep divisions over women's ordination that threaten the global Anglican Communion's unity.

Mullally's career spans nursing and the clergy, and reflects the Church of England's shift toward progressive leadership. A former cancer nurse, she was ordained deacon in 2001 and vicar in 2006, she served as rector in south London before becoming Bishop of Crediton in 2015 and the historic Bishop of London in 2018.

Prime Minister Keir Starmer hailed the "milestone," while the king praised her role in the 85-million-member Communion.

Congratulations was also offered by prominent Catholics, including by Cardinal Kurt Koch, Prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity. Cardinal Koch informed Mullally that it was his "fervent hope that such closeness may continue in the years ahead as [they] continue to walk together on the way."

Koch's congratulations drew criticism for ignoring the official Vatican and Catholic magisterial position that female ordination is an ontological impossibility and that Anglican clerical orders are "absolutely null and utterly void" as per Pope Leo XIII's pronouncement in *Apostolicae Curae*.

Fabrizio Mastrofini, Communications director of the Vatican's Pontifical Academy for Life,

also tweeted celebratory marks at news of Mullally's appointment: "GREAT decision. Very Important. A positive, inclusive sign for Europe, for the whole world and Religions [sic]."

These remarks drew criticism from commentators such as Vatican correspondent Michael Haynes, who pointed out that Mullally has a history of voicing pro-abortion and LGBTQ-sympathetic opinions.

The appointment, moreover, lays bare Anglicanism's longstanding fractures, rooted in the ordination of women – a reform that has eroded sacramental unity and driven schisms since the 1970s.

A 1975 General Synod motion found "no fundamental objections" to female deacons, leading to priestly ordinations approved in 1992 and enacted with 32 women at Bristol Cathedral in 1994. Critics, citing 1 Timothy 2:12 and the male apostolic tradition, condemned it as a break from Christ's spousal priesthood (Ephesians 5:25-32), prompting mass clerical and lay defections to Rome, which increased after the 2009 Personal Ordinariate of Our Lady of Walsingham – which enabled married Anglican vicars to be ordained Catholic priests and celebrate Mass in their own sacramentally-recognised and valid rite.

To mitigate fallout, the 1993 Episcopal Ministry Act created "flying bishops" – Provincial Episcopal Visitors (PEVs) – offering male oversight to over 1,000 dissenting parishes. But the 2014 vote allowing women bishops, passed 378-131 after earlier failures, deepened the rift.

The House of Bishops' Declaration and "Five Guiding Principles" affirmed women's orders as "true and lawful" while vowing "mutual flourishing" for opponents – a compromise that has fueled tensions. Male bishops like Philip North oversee female clergy they view as invalidly ordained, while women's groups like WATCH call it discriminatory, despite Equality Act exemptions.

This situation explained the prevalence of so-called "flying" suffragan or PEV bishops to mitigate the rift which existed across the Anglican communion over the issue of women's ordination. In practice, it means that in various dioceses, there often exist at once multiple episcopal authorities within the same jurisdiction depending on the theological preference of the clergy. Something which has been widely criticised internally and externally to the Church of England for exacerbating disunity.

Once dominant, polls confirm that fewer than 2% of the English population today are practising Anglicans, while Catholicism experiences a boom. Anglican church attendance has fallen 30% since 2000 to under 800,000 weekly, with polls showing public perception of

a body more aligned with secular politics than worship.

Globally, where 70% of Anglicans live in conservative African provinces, resistance is fierce. GAFCON, now 75 million strong, rejects female leadership as unscriptural in its 2024 Kigali Commitment. Rwanda's Archbishop Laurent Mbanda warned Reuters the appointment "will not unite the Communion," as provinces like Nigeria and Uganda divert funds from Lambeth Palace.

Mullally, who led the "Living in Love and Faith" process blessing same-sex unions and describes herself as a "feminist", inherits a synod debating female quotas amid boycott threats. Contentions surrounding marriage and sexual morality are set to remain central in Anglican discourse and policy into the future.

Adding to the controversy, just days after Mullally's announcement, the Very Rev. David Monteith - the openly gay Dean of Canterbury Cathedral (the mother church of the Anglican Communion) who is in a same-sex civil partnership and previously organized a 2023 nightclub rave in the cathedral - unveiled a provocative temporary graffiti-style art installation titled "Hear Us."

The exhibition, created in collaboration with "marginalized" communities including "punjabi, black and brown diaspora, neurodivergent, and LGBTQIA+ groups," features bold, disruptive decals on the cathedral's ancient stone pillars, walls, and floors, posing raw questions to God such as "Are you there?" and "Why did you create hate when love is by far more powerful?"

Monteith defended the work as "unfiltered and not sanitised," saying it "intentionally builds bridges between cultures, styles and genres and... allows us to receive the gifts of younger people who have much to say and from whom we need to hear much."

The installation officially opens October 17 and runs through January 2026, but has already sparked visceral backlash, with visitors calling it "sacrilegious" and likening the UNESCO World Heritage site- founded in 597 AD by St. Augustine, a missionary of Pope St. Gregory the Great - to an "underground car park in Peckham."

US Vice President JD Vance amplified the uproar in a viral X post, slamming the exhibit for making a "beautiful historical building really ugly" and highlighting the "irony of honoring 'marginalized communities'" through such defacement. Elon Musk reposted Vance's comment with the single word "shameful," fueling international debate.

Compounding the crisis, on October 7, the Primate of the Church of Nigeria - Archbishop

Henry Ndukuba, leading the world's largest Anglican province with some 25 million members – formally declared “spiritual independence” from Lambeth Palace (the historic residence of the Archbishop of Canterbury), severing doctrinal and spiritual ties with the Church of England over Mullally's appointment and its embrace of same-sex marriage blessings.

In a stark statement from Abuja according to the local Nigerian press, Ndukuba called the move “the final confirmation of moral decay” in Canterbury's leadership, reaffirming allegiance to conservative networks like GAFCON and vowing to prioritize “biblical authority” over “revisionist innovations.”

The crisis has since reached a climax with GAFCON declaring that it “is the Anglican Communion” severing ties with the Archbishop of Canterbury. The Anglicans have officially broken into two.