

Fighting for women's right to preach

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On 4 May the Reverend Emily Koltveit was licensed by the Bishop of Edmonton as Interim Priest In Charge of the Parish of Saint Jude-on-the-Hill. The first Vicar, the Reverend Basil Bouchier, did not support the ordination of women. The Suburb's founder, Dame Henrietta Barnett, probably would have done, as her views on the role women should play in the church were widely different from Mr Bouchier's. On the bookshelves of Suburb Archives is a volume by Dame Henrietta entitled 'Matters that Matter'. Published in 1930, our copy is inscribed by her to Mary Fraser with the hope that "she will use her imagination to help the sadness of ignorance in the world." The Bishop of London, Dr Arthur Winnington-Ingram, in his Preface, expressed the hope that people would read it "from end to end", noting that whatever she wrote was worth reading "even if her readers do not agree with her opinions."

One of the chapters is entitled 'Women Preaching'. It contains a number of sermons she preached, including at St Jude's and on ships. Women were not generally permitted to preach in church in those days. Henrietta was not going to be deterred by that. She records a conversation with a 'big-wig' about her desire to preach.

"But you are a woman,"
 "Yes; and I have a letter from the Bishop of London giving me his episcopal permission to preach."

Dr Winnington-Ingram probably knew Henrietta too well to turn her down. When she was living at St Jude's Whitechapel, where her husband Samuel was Vicar, she used to send him to bed on a Sunday evening and conduct a worship hour, a mixture of prayer and music. She says she told the Bishop (Bishop Walsham How), but he – as he himself put it

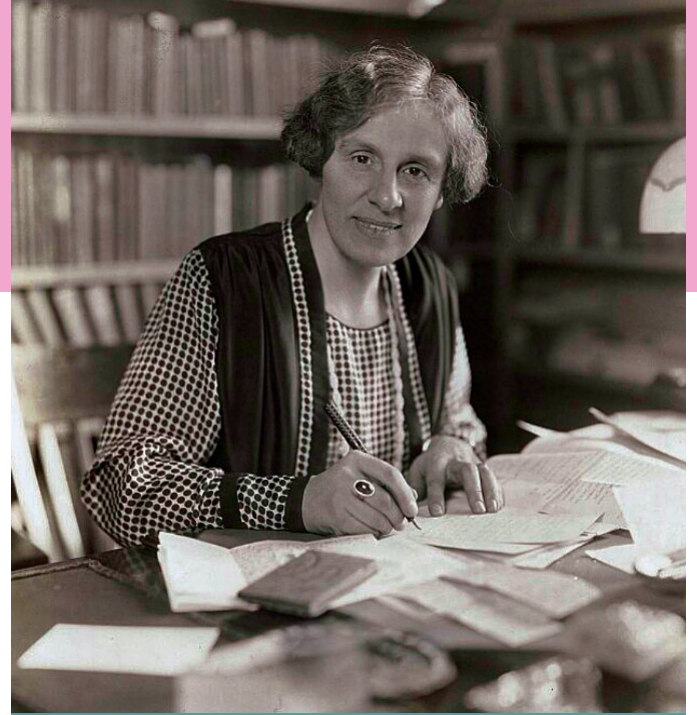
– simply 'winked' at it. Writing about women preaching in 1916 Mr Bouchier had asserted that "No bishop has any authority to permit such a practice", but by the time Henrietta delivered the sermon at St Jude-on-the-Hill, he must have modified his view. She took as her text a passage from the Old Testament: "And the ass saw the Angel of the Lord" (Numbers 22:23). She said that if an ass could see the angel, we should all take comfort because who could not say at some point in their lives "write me down an ass". She went on to speak of the need for reconciliation after the Great War and hoped the churches would follow the lead of the League of Nations (the predecessor of today's United Nations) in seeking unity. She feared they would lag behind as 'too often' they had in the past and not show a 'progressive spirit'. She quoted her late husband (he died in 1913) who had worked to unite:

High and low,
 Rich and poor,
 Old and young,
 Ignorant and learned,
 Labour and Capital,
 Jew and Gentile,
 Established and Free Churches.

The War, of course, had brought about a shift in perceptions of women's role in society, most notably the widening of the right to vote. On 14 January 1919 a debate was held at the Hampstead Garden Suburb Institute on the subject To What Extent (if at all) should Women be Admitted to the Public Ministry of the Church. The motion was proposed by Mabel St Clair Stobart, who had gone with Basil Bouchier to Belgium during the war with a medical team of women. Mr Bouchier opposed the motion. Mrs Stobart addressed the possible arguments against, including that it would be contrary to scripture, pointing out that the Bible did not authorise women to work as munitions workers or

surgeons but that did not stop them doing so during the war. Mr Bouchier relied on the classic arguments, including that the church should not be compared with other organisations. The motion was defeated 29 to 21. It is not recorded whether Henrietta was in the audience, but she no doubt paid close attention to the result.

Between 1919 and 1922 the right of women to preach in church was debated annually by the Canterbury Convocation (the collective decision-making body of the Church of England at the time). The outcome was that women's right to speak and lead prayers in consecrated buildings was 'normally' to be confined to congregations of women and children. Unsurprisingly, Henrietta was not happy with this decision. In 1920 the Bishop of London had asked her not to accept any more invitations to preach until the Lambeth Conference of Bishops held later that year had discussed the matter. She complied, but expressed her views on the topic in an interview with the Church Family Newspaper in March 1921. She thought the decision was prompted by the 'vain hope of reconciling the irreconcilables'. The church, she said, was always lagging behind "in acceptance of the discoveries of science, in social readjustments." That the latest development was connected with sex distinction, said the interviewer, was 'unfortunate'. Henrietta exclaimed: "Unfortunate – the word is not strong enough. The English world has gone mad on sex. It is like a delusion, seen or apprehended, whether it is there or not. In plays, cinemas, fiction, press jokes, it is treated as if it were the one subject worth considering, instead of one of the incidents of mammalian existence. What an opportunity for the Church in effect to say that the spiritual is so much higher and stronger than the material..." This sounds all



(Agnes) Maude Royden, who lived at 2 South Square (Photo: Underwood & Underwood, National Portrait Gallery)



Dame Henrietta Barnett, who lived at 1 South Square (Photo: Source unknown)

too familiar: 100 years on the same sentiments still resonate.

Next door to Henrietta, at 2 South Square, lived the ardent suffragist and church feminist Maude Royden (in a somewhat complex domestic arrangement with the Rev. G. W. Hudson Shaw and his wife Effie). Maude openly rebelled against the 1920s ban, which led to her international fame. The limited progress towards the ordination of women made in the early twentieth century stalled in the 1930s and only in 1992, after a long campaign, did the General Synod of the Church of England decide to allow the ordination of women. Church Secretary Elinor Delaney preached at St Jude's in the 1980s when exploring ministry (before she was asked to stand

down). The Reverend Marie-Elsa Bragg preached at midnight mass in 2010 at the invitation of the then Vicar the Reverend Alan Walker. The first time a woman presided at St Jude's was on 29 May 2022. St Jude's has a long-standing association with the parish church of St John the Evangelist at Jawalla in Guyana and the Reverend Roxanne Franklin-Hunte preached and presided at St Jude's at the annual Guyana Sunday service.

In 2023 St Jude's, and the Suburb, enters a new era. Henrietta Barnett may be regarded as old-fashioned on some issues, but on the role of women in the church, she was bang up to date.

I am grateful to Alan Walker for his assistance in writing this article.

MARGERY + RICHARD

