

REVEREND JACQUELINE LITTLEWOOD

In 1994, Reverend Jacqueline Littlewood made history as one of the first women ordained in the Church of England. The following article, originally published by Rochester Cathedral, reflects on Jacqueline's pioneering journey in women's ministry and the challenges she faced in breaking down barriers of discrimination within the Church.

Just as AI is reshaping technology today, Jacqueline's ordination shattered long-standing beliefs and paved the way for a more inclusive and equal church. Her story shows how innovation, whether in technology, society, or institutions, can reshape the future for the better.

A pioneer of women's ministry

This year marks the 30th anniversary of women being admitted to the priesthood in the Church of England. In 1994, the Rev

Jacqueline Littlewood was one of the first women in the Diocese of Rochester to be ordained a priest. In this anniversary year, we asked her about her reflections on her ministry and of that historic occasion.

When did you start to sense a calling to the ministry?

In 1970 I had a conversation about the possibility of training for licensed lay ministry in the Church Army — a Christian organisation seeking to transform society through faith — but the thought of a vocation and full-time training at theological college did not fully germinate until later on in the 1970s.

What happened?

Well, I really think the Holy Spirit was moving during

the 1970s, waiting for me to answer the call and not letting me go. In January 1977 I attended an ACCM three-day residential conference where the selection panel conducted interviews. This appraised the different forms of ministry available to the laity, along with call and experience. Then in August, it was recommended that I should train to become a licensed Parish Worker.

Your vocation journey continued and you went on to become a Deacon. What is a Deacon?

A Deacon is the foundation of all ordained ministry. For most clergy, after a year, they will be ordained as priest. For me as a woman at the time, it was as far as I was able to go.

Was it still pretty rare for a woman to be a Deacon?

Yes. I remember getting robed for the service. It was the first time that women were allowed to wear a dog collar. We no longer had

to wear the blue cassock and Deaconess (a lay role in the church) cross and chain. We would now be called Reverend. There was a real feeling of the power of the Holy Spirit moving within the service, and there was tremendous prayerful support from the congregation.

What was it like for you to be a Deacon then?

There were people who were point blank in their opposition to women's ministry. This included refusing to receive the chalice I was administering, which they also did when women chalice assistants were administering. It was a different type of rejection and exclusion to that I had experienced in previous years. It was not easy. But that was my calling. My cross so to speak.

Then, in 1992, General Synod — the decision-making body of the Church of England — voted for women to be admitted to the priesthood.

Yes. It followed years of countless debate and votes on whether women should be ordained as Priests, but the vote felt spirit-led to me.

You were one of the first women to be ordained a priest in Rochester Cathedral in 1994. What was that like?

Being ordained a priest was such an affirming experience and full of joy. At the end of the service we could see people with banners and I and others in the procession wondered if they were protestors — we were greatly relieved to find they were members of the Catholic Women's Ordination Group who had come to support us. On reflection it was a day which heralded new challenges, particularly if someone refused my ministry when I was presiding at the Eucharist and other sacraments of the church.

How did that affect you?

It hurt but I had to carry on. I suppose it was breaking new ground, so to speak, and some people just needed more time to acclimatise to change than others. There still continues to be difference of opinion on women's ministry and their holding positions of authority.

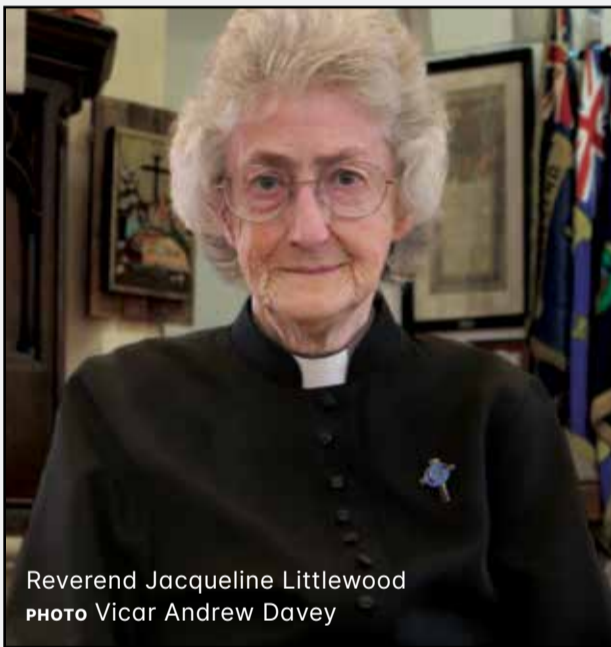
You have received a number of honours in recognition of your ministry.

Yes, and these include when I was kindly invited to a Buckingham Palace Garden Party in 2016 in recognition of my chaplaincy ministry and service. Then last year, I was presented with the Royal Maundy Money by King Charles III in York Minster in recognition of my Christian service. Both events were so unexpected but so joyful and such amazing privileges.

What has sustained you?

Making time for spiritual reading, private prayer, visiting places and doing things that will be enjoyed. Jesus has been my focus and strength. My rock along with dear family and friends, many who have sadly died, who have accompanied me along the way. I have also been assisted with, as my friends might say, a distinct blast of stubbornness... grim determination... and being an indomitable spirit!!! ■

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Reverend Jacqueline Littlewood
PHOTO Vicar Andrew Davey

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