

Tears at Synod as Church says surprise 'No' to women bishops: Knife-edge vote causes massive rift

- **Church's bishops describe outcome as 'disastrous' and 'gravely damaging'**
- **Move backed by bishops & clergy but 'third house' of lay members fell short**
- **Blow to Rowan Williams who will soon step down leaving Church in turmoil**
- **Bishop of Chelmsford: 'Church in danger of being national embarrassment'**

By [Steve Doughty](#)

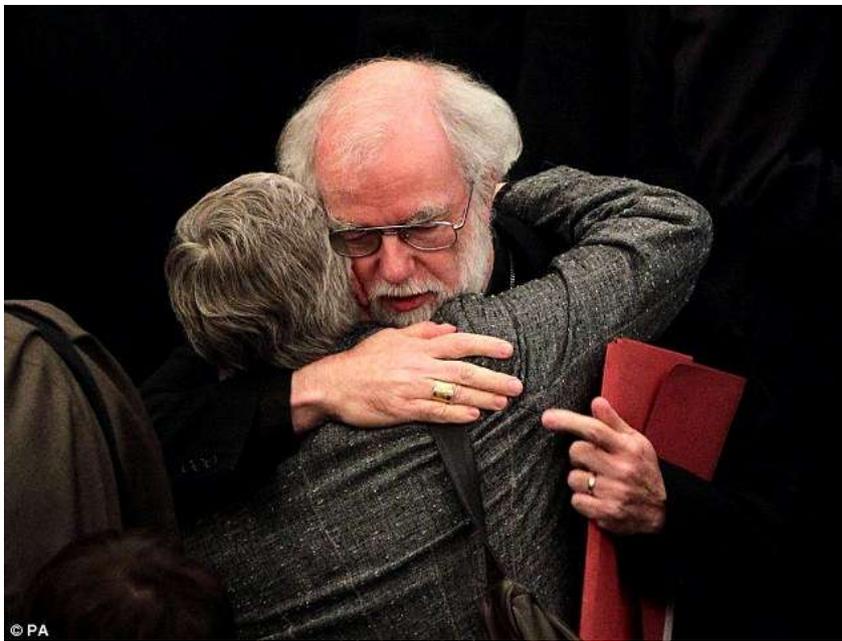
The Church of England's General Synod rejected women bishops last night in a stunning rebuff to its own leaders.

A 12-year push to allow women to move into the senior positions ended in one minute of electronic voting – and was lost by the narrowest of margins.

Bishops and clergy had overwhelmingly backed the move, but the Church's 'third house', made up of lay members, fell just six votes short.



Before and after: Reverend Sally Hitchiner, a senior chaplain at Brunel University in London, was hopeful the vote would go through (left). She shows her disappointment as she leaves Church House (right)



Hopes dashed: Dr Rowan Williams, the outgoing Archbishop of Canterbury, comforts a colleague after the Church voted against women bishops. He had also campaigned for legislation approving women bishops

Last night the Church's bishops described the outcome as 'disastrous', 'gravely damaging' and a 'national embarrassment'.



Sorrow: Dr Canon Paula Gooder reacts to the decision alongside Dr Rowan Williams

It was a crushing blow to the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, whose decade in office has been overshadowed by the arguments over women.

Dr Williams now steps down at the end of the year leaving his Church in turmoil. He described the outcome as 'a deep personal sadness'.

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It also means the shortest of honeymoons for his successor, the Right Reverend Justin Welby, who was appointed as the new Anglican Primate 12 days ago.

Dr Welby, who made a punchy speech urging the Synod to back women bishops, now goes to Lambeth Palace having to deal with widespread disappointment across his Church.

After the Synod vote, which followed a seven-hour debate at Church House in Westminster, a string of bishops acknowledged that most people would not understand the rejection of women.

The Bishop of Chelmsford, the Right Reverend Stephen Cottrell, said: 'This is going to be very hard to sell to people.

'People were expecting this to go through and it is going to be very difficult to explain to them that it

hasn't. It is bad news for the Church. There is a danger that the Church will become a national embarrassment over this.'



Faith: A general view of the Assembly Hall of Church House, during a meeting of the General Synod of the Church of England



Disappointment: Rt Rev Justin Welby (centre), at the meeting of the General Synod. He had campaigned for a 'yes' vote



Heartbreak: Reverend Rachel Wier (left) and Marie-Elsa Bragg, who had both been campaigning for a 'yes' vote

No new attempt to push the issue through can take place until a new Synod is elected in 2015. Bishops will meet in emergency session this morning to decide how to deal with the setback.

'We're absolutely devastated. Not just devastated on behalf of clergy women – it's awful for their morale – but it's a disaster for the Church of England'

The Rev Rachel Weir, of the campaign group Women and the Church

It was not clear last night how many women had voted against the move, but the Church's third 'lay' house has a higher proportion of women than the house of clergy.

The Rev Rachel Weir, of the campaign group Women and the Church, said: 'We're absolutely devastated. 'Not just devastated on behalf of clergy women – it's awful for their morale – but it's a disaster for the Church of England. There's something badly wrong with the system.'

The Church agreed that women could be ordained as priests in 1993. The final lifting of the barriers to allow them to become bishops began with a high-level report in 2000.

However two key groups have remained firmly opposed to women priests, let alone their promotion to the rank of bishop.



Hope: A female member of the clergy talks on the phone outside Church House just before the vote



Technology: The voting handset used to decide the fate of women clergy in the Church of England

The traditionalists include Anglo-Catholics, who say there is no historic or theological justification for women bishops, and conservative evangelicals from the Protestant tradition, who say there are no grounds in the Bible to accept women priests.



Comfort: Disappointed women clergy seen outside after the vote. Pictured here is Marie-Elsa Bragg (right), a campaigner for women bishops

In the Synod they argued that traditionalists make up nearly one in three churchgoers.

They said no firm guarantees have been given that they will be able to continue to worship without the influence of women bishops in charge of their dioceses.

To succeed, the women bishops legislation needed to win a two-thirds majority in each of the Church's three 'houses': one for the bishops, one for other clergy, and the third for lay church members.

Bishops voted in favour by 44 to three, with two abstentions. Among the clergy, the vote went in favour of women bishops by 148 to 45.

But among the laity, 132 voted for women bishops and 74 against. That meant the necessary two thirds majority – or 138 votes – had not been won.

The Rt Rev Christopher Lowson, the Bishop of Lincoln, said: 'This is a very sad day indeed, not just for those of us who support the ministry of women, but for the future of the Church, which might very well be gravely damaged by this.'

The plan rejected yesterday would have allowed parishes to write 'letters of request' to a bishop asking for their wish not to have women priests or the supervision of women bishops acknowledged.

Bishop would have had to 'respect' such requests. However, crucially, a code of practice to govern the operation of the new system had yet to be written.



Disagreement: The Church has struggled to reach a compromise between those campaigning in favour of women bishops and traditionalists threatening a walk-out over the issue. St Paul's Cathedral is pictured

THOSE WHO ARGUED FOR ... AND THOSE AGAINST

'The Church of England needs to show how we can develop the mission of the Church in a way that demonstrates that we can manage diversity of view without division - diversity in amity, not diversity in enmity.'

The Rt Revd Justin Welby, Bishop of Durham and next Archbishop of Canterbury.

'The truth is that without women in leadership we are no longer able to serve the people in the parishes of England...I now believe that for the mission of God to the people of England it is right for women to take up their place in this House of Bishops sitting before you now.'

The Rt Revd James Jones, Bishop of Liverpool

'We are required to accept something that we don't believe the Bible teaches. The legislation requires us conservative evangelicals to accept women as bishops when the Bible says they should not be in that position.'

The Rev Prebendary Rod Thomas, chairman of the conservative evangelical group Reform and a vicar in Plymouth

'We are all desperate to move on from the sad infighting of the last few years - but this legislation does not provide a clear way forward. This is not a debate about whether we are in favour of women bishops in principle; it is about whether this is the right legislation for introducing women bishops.'

Canon Simon Killwick, vicar in Moss Side, Manchester, chairman of the Catholic Group in the Synod