

Barbara Harris, first woman ordained in Anglican Communion, dies at 89

by [Adelle M. Banks](#) in the [April 8, 2020](#) issue



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Barbara Harris, the first woman to be ordained and consecrated as a bishop in the worldwide Anglican Communion, died on March 13 at a hospice house after a recent hospitalization. She was 89.

Harris, who was known for quoting the words “Hallelujah anyhow” from a gospel song, served as suffragan bishop in the Diocese of Massachusetts from 1989 until she retired in 2002. She then served as assisting bishop in the Diocese of Washington from 2003 to 2007.

“Bishop Barbara Harris was not large of physical stature,” said Episcopal Church presiding bishop Michael Curry in a tweeted statement. “In fact, the opposite. But she was larger than life. She was larger than life because she lived it fully with her God and with us. She did it by actually living the love of God that Jesus taught us about.”

The great-granddaughter of a woman born into slavery, Harris described herself as a “fiercely independent” child and grew up to take a nontraditional path to the episcopacy, according to a remembrance posted on the website of the Diocese of Massachusetts. The Philadelphia native joined the Selma-to-Montgomery civil rights march, became president of a black-owned public relations firm, and was ordained a priest at age 50 in 1980, four years after the Episcopal Church began officially recognizing women in that role.

She broke numerous stereotypes as she became the first female Anglican bishop while also being an African American, a divorcée, and a person who had not graduated from seminary.

“The temptation we have,” she said in her first sermon as bishop, “is to play it safe, don’t make waves.

“But if Jesus had played it safe, we would not be saved,” she continued, according to 1989 coverage in the *Los Angeles Times*. “If the Diocese of Massachusetts had played it safe, I would not be standing here clothed in rochet and chimere and wearing a pectoral cross.”

In a 2004 sermon, “A Circle of Concern,” she urged not only that congregants pray for people with AIDS and those who were hungry or homeless but that they act on those prayers.

“Our circle of concern must enlarge itself over and over and over again to include all of God’s people—especially those who seem hard to love,” she said in a sermon cited in the anthology *Preaching with Sacred Fire*. “For when we love those who seem hard to love, we may be loving ourselves as well.” —Religion News Service