

Eastern Orthodox Church ordains Zimbabwean woman as its first deaconess

by [Fiona André](#)

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Parishioners of St. Nektarios Mission Parish near Harare, Zimbabwe, congratulate Angelic Molen, center right, following her ordination as a deaconess on May 2. (Photo courtesy of St. Phoebe Center for the Deaconess/Annie Frost)

On May 2, the Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria and all of Africa ordained in Zimbabwe the first deaconess of any patriarchate in the global Eastern Orthodox Church, marking the culmination of years of efforts to revive the female diaconate.

The Archbishop of Zimbabwe, Metropolitan Serafim, ordained Angelic Molen at the St. Nektarios Mission Parish near Harare, the capital of the southern African country. The ceremony took place on Holy Thursday, a few days before the start of Orthodox Easter. The service's liturgy focused on the meaning of the eucharist, which the new deaconess will distribute to the faithful as part of her new role, explained Serafim.

"At first, I was nervous about going into the altar, but when Metropolitan Serafim blessed me to enter the altar as part of my preparation this week, those feelings went away, and I felt comfortable. I am ready," said Molen about her ordination.

For years, debates over the ordination of deaconesses have divided Orthodox Christians worldwide. Some see it as a revival of an ancient practice that existed in the early days of the church. Others see the female diaconate as a break from tradition and believe it undermines the Orthodox hierarchy.

In a press release announcing the ordination, the St. Phoebe Center for the Deaconess, an advocacy group for the revival of the female diaconate, noted Molen's ordination was a historic moment and would set a precedent for other branches of the Orthodox Church.

"Being the first to do anything is always a challenge, but the Patriarchate of Alexandria has courageously chosen to lead the way with Metropolitan Serafim laying his hands on Deaconess Angelic," wrote Carrie Frost, the chair of St. Phoebe's board.

In recent years, the Patriarchate of Alexandria and Africa has intensified efforts to establish the female diaconate on the continent. After unanimously voting to revive the female diaconate at its synod in Alexandria in 2016, the Patriarchate ordained six sub-deaconesses in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 2017.

Molen's ordination as a full deaconess goes further. Her responsibilities, and those of future deaconesses, will include assisting priests in the liturgy and sacraments and addressing the specific needs of parishes in her country, explained Serafim.

In its press release, the St. Phoebe Center noted that Molen's ordination was a response to the growing need for priests and deacons in African parishes.

"The Alexandrian Patriarchate in Africa felt the need to revive this order to serve the daily pastoral needs of Orthodox Christians in Africa," read the press release.

[According to a 2017 Pew Research Center article](#), Orthodox Christians in Sub-Saharan Africa represent 15 percent of the global Orthodox Christian population. The share of African Orthodox Christians has grown significantly over the last century, most residing in Eritrea and Ethiopia.

Molen is currently studying geography and environmental studies and has served Orthodox Christians in Zimbabwe for years, working with youth and establishing church schools. She has also created a number of mother's groups to serve women.

According to the St. Phoebe Center, reviving the female diaconate could help congregations address the needs and concerns of women in churches. [In November 2023](#), the center organized a conference on the revival of the female diaconate and highlighted that deaconesses could "help overworked priests" and offer "woman-to-women ministry for many issues."

"The whole Church will also benefit from the influx of women's unique gifts as persons and unique experience as women; we need this ministry restored in order to move together into a hopeful future," Frost said in an email.

Jeanne Constantinou, an Orthodox Christian and a retired professor of Biblical studies, doubts the Molen's ordination will inspire other churches. Changes are unusual and happen very slowly in the Orthodox Church, she said.

"What makes an Orthodox Christian 'Orthodox' is that they follow tradition and they don't change it . . . We don't accept innovations in the church, and so that's why even though this happened, you cannot expect to see any kind of a ripple effect in the rest of the Orthodox world," she said.

Because the decision of the Patriarchate of Alexandria and all Africa wasn't taken in consultation with other autocephalous, or self-governing, patriarchates in the Orthodox Church, it bears no legitimacy in the Orthodox world, she said.

Molen's ordination should also be understood in the African context, where a growing number of faithful demand the recruitment of more priests and deacons, she said; whereas, in the US, said Constantinou, the push for a female diaconate has been motivated by women demanding equal opportunities with men in the Church and more visibility in the liturgy.

John G. Panagiotou, an Orthodox theologian, said, in his opinion, a change this important should have been decided in consultation with other branches of the Orthodox Church.

“I think that for the sake of unity, this wasn’t the way to do it. This wasn’t the cleanest way to do it because you didn’t have everybody at the table,” he said, adding that Molen’s ordination isn’t a continuation of the role of a deaconess in the church’s early days, when they were primarily readers and altar attendants. Molen’s role brings her closer to the first rank of the priesthood, in his mind.

For her part, Frost insists Molen’s ordination isn’t a step toward priesthood.

“Having more deaconesses in the Orthodox Church will allow it to better live out its mission of service and love in the world by giving certain women the vetting, training, authority, oversight, and support of the Church,” she said by email.

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