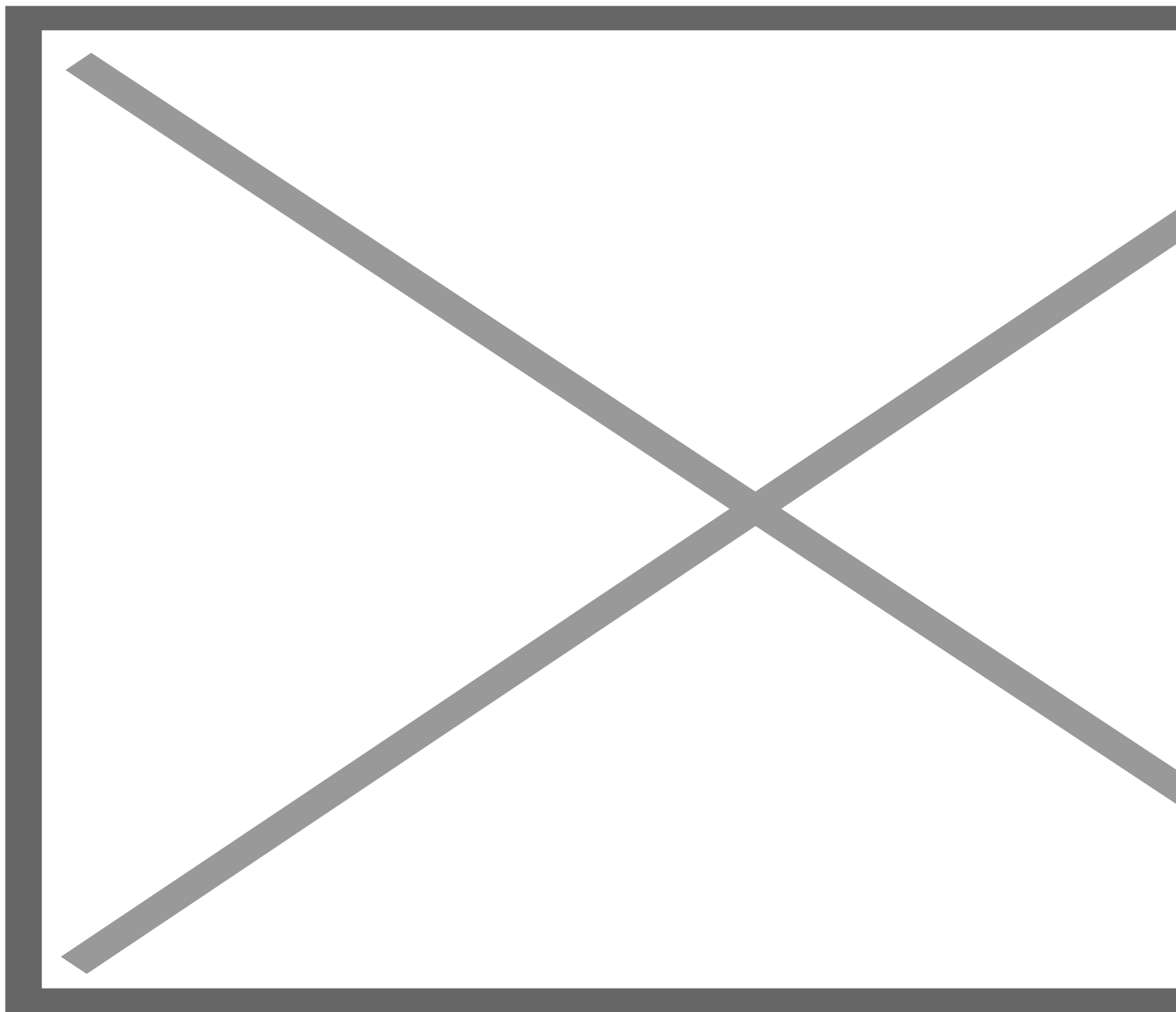


Sarah Mullally breaks the Anglican Communion's glass ceiling

I celebrate the milestone of the first woman to become archbishop of Canterbury. But I worry there's a glass cliff waiting for her.

by [Danielle Tumminio Hansen](#) in the [January 2026](#) issue
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Sarah Mullally, the new Archbishop of Canterbury, inside Canterbury Cathedral in England, October 2025. (AP Photo / Alberto Pezzali)

The shattering of any glass ceiling sets off a sparkly fireworks display for those who have waited years—sometimes a lifetime—for history to be made. That’s what happened for many of us in the Anglican Communion, including me, when Sarah Mullally was appointed the first female archbishop of Canterbury by Church of England leaders and government officials.

I’m a theologian who studies trauma; I’m also an Episcopal priest. I’ve been a faithful member of the Episcopal Church since I was a toddler. I remember when the diocese I grew up in first ordained women, and I saw the challenges they faced, the objections against both what they were doing and who they claimed to be. These women were a significant reason I could give voice to the call that already existed within me. So yes, I’m one of the many who popped a virtual champagne bottle when news of Sarah Mullally’s appointment broke. It was indeed a historic moment.

But it’s also a fraught one, because when glass ceilings shatter, the shards can cut and make us bleed.

Mullally, who will take office in January, is eminently qualified for the role. As bishop of London, she holds one of the highest-ranking positions in the Church of England. She serves on the [Privy Council of the United Kingdom](#) and participated in King Charles’s coronation. She holds both a diploma in theology and a master’s degree in pastoral theology. She has served as a priest, paid and unpaid. Prior to her ordination she was an accomplished nurse, rising to some of the government’s most senior posts. She ascends to the role of archbishop with theological expertise and a breadth of life experience that she can draw upon to lead and guide.

In stable times, these credentials would be more than enough to earn the confidence of the faithful. But this is not a particularly stable time. This is one of the most fragile periods the Anglican Communion has faced since the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. Globally, divisions within the communion have been at a fever pitch. Members cannot come to a consensus on LGBTQ issues; [many do not believe women](#) should be ordained at all. These rifts are fueled by disagreements regarding how to interpret scripture and whose experiences and knowledge should be heard, who should have power, and who should not.

These disputes have repeatedly inflamed relationships between the communion’s leaders. To take just one example, consider the bishops who [refused to receive communion](#) alongside Frank Griswold (in 2005) or Katharine Jefferts Schori (in 2007) because of the Episcopal Church leaders’ support for consecrating same-sex unions and ordaining gay priests. This inability to share the most fundamental meal in the Christian tradition is a symbol of how intense our disagreement has become: We are like a family that can’t even share a holiday dinner. We may be united by history, liturgy, mutual loyalty, and the archbishop of Canterbury, but we can’t seem to figure out how to leverage our shared past to imagine a future.

The division and hurt is just as pronounced within the Church of England. Arguments about the legitimacy of women’s leadership and same-sex unions have rattled the church since the early 2000s. Some members [disapprove of women bishops](#), which makes it somewhat surprising that Mullally was appointed at all. (This is perhaps less surprising when we take into account that [she advocates for an inclusive faith](#) that respects those who cannot support women in the episcopate.)

Raising the stakes further, the previous archbishop, Justin Welby, [resigned](#) because of his role in an abuse scandal. While he didn’t abuse anyone, his indirect involvement raised larger questions about whether the Church of England has adequate safeguarding practices or trustworthy leadership.

Mullally’s expertise as a nurse and a pastoral theologian gives her a unique set of qualifications to address such a situation. Yet her appointment also follows a pattern seen in the secular world: When the identity of “man” becomes too problematic, bring in a woman. Indeed, of more than 200 male leaders who lost jobs due to

involvement in Me Too scandals, [an impressive number of their replacements](#) were women. (This number is especially notable given [the small number of women](#) in secular leadership roles.)

There are evidence-based reasons to bring in a woman leader in times of crisis. [Research shows](#) that women are more likely to promote a collaborative work environment, to treat others fairly, and to exercise transformational leadership. In the wake of scandals, such qualities become even more desirable.

That said, the secular world's pattern of appointing women after a sexual abuse crisis reflects a wider phenomenon called the glass cliff, in which women and people of color are appointed to leadership roles following any kind of debacle. This means that they're [more likely](#) to assume such positions in precarious times. It also means they have a higher risk of failure—and if they don't succeed, their identity can be blamed instead of the circumstances. (Fun fact: White men tend to be brought in after such occurrences, a phenomenon researchers call the [savior effect](#).)

I worry that Mullally was appointed not just because of her credentials but because the church wanted to bring in a woman as a kind of ecclesial virtue signaling. Given that neither the Church of England nor the Anglican Communion unilaterally supports the ordination of women—never mind their ascension to the role of bishop—I also worry that Mullally will not be given the necessary support that someone in her position deserves. If that is the case, then it will be a failure not of Mullally but rather of the church's duty to honor the dignity of every human being.

Women faith leaders face immense struggles when it comes to people accepting their legitimacy. I know this firsthand, and I'm sure Bishop Mullally does as well, because it's something every female priest I've ever known has spoken about—the way you're apt to be infantilized, projected upon, dismissed. The way people notice the fit of your dress or the size of the ring on your finger instead of the collar around your neck or the quality of your sermon.

My hope is that the Anglican Communion will rise to the occasion of supporting Mullally's appointment and following her lead in fostering an inclusive church that values the dignity of all human beings. In so doing, they will have the chance to do something historic: to dismantle assumptions about what women can be and do at a systemic, large-scale level. They also have an opportunity to help the Anglican Communion function as a beacon of the best of what the church can be—a place where we don't all have to agree but we do have to be willing to come together to love and serve our neighbor, to share a meal, and to honor the callings that God gives to each of us.