

More tea Archbishop?

Editorial by the Rev'd Dr. Nicholas Henderson



The Rt Rev'd and Rt Hon Dame Sarah Mullally, current Bishop of London is to be the next Archbishop of Canterbury

The appointment of a woman as the 106th Archbishop of Canterbury is to be welcomed. Apart from those in the more conservative wings of the Church, the choice of someone with two copies of the X chromosome is nowadays of little or no consequence. The Rt Rev'd and Rt Hon Dame Sarah Mullally the current Bishop of London fits the bill.

"How is it that the Roman Catholics can elect a Pope in two days of conclave, whilst it has taken the Church of England almost a year?" A fair question asked of this author, who was bound to reply "... but the Archbishop of Canterbury isn't a Pope." Indeed far from it, the post-Reformation settlement that led eventually to the wider Anglican Communion with the Church of England having the monarch as its Supreme Governor was as a result of Protestants looking carefully at their bibles and being unconvinced of a Petrine succession.

The end result of this, despite the emergent Anglo-Catholic movement of the 19th century (now widespread at least liturgically) and occasional resisted calls for a patriarch, the Archbishop of Canterbury is simply the senior bishop of the Church of England and the titular focus of unity in the wider Anglican Communion. This is, of course, the basis of an impossible job specification.

The Archbishop has to play a significant role in national life, with strident calls from secular political factions to "stay out of politics" or "to engage seriously with political issues." The automatic seat in the second chamber British House of Lords reminds us that it is the latter role that is paramount. It was after all the late, great Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa who used to say "I am puzzled about which Bible people are reading when they suggest that religion and politics don't mix."

Separately, the Archbishop has to navigate the much bigger stage of the growing worldwide Anglican Communion, in 165 countries at the last count. The Communion of 42 autonomous Provinces, each with their own primate, senior bishop, Presiding Bishop or Archbishop, never mind the few extra-provincial churches, all look to the Archbishop of Canterbury for leadership, often very critically and dependent entirely on personal influence and respect. Historically, the Communion has no official legal existence to support this but it does have so-called 'Instruments'ⁱ.

So far so good, nevertheless whilst there is often spectacular numerical growth in the so-called 'Global South'ⁱⁱⁱ this is countered by serious decline in the face of growing secularism in the West, not least in the Church of England.

In this respect another anecdote will suffice. The author was surprised when listening to reportage of the news of the announcement, on a reputable commercial radio news programme. A cursory short presentation followed an apparently much more important story about the sale of a teapot collection!

It does seem therefore that the new Archbishop has a lot of work to do as Anglicans at home and abroad pile in with their wishes, often conflicting to the point of animosity.

So Bishop Sarah's work experience, which is considerable and her time in the notoriously difficult Diocese of London, should serve her well. We know that she has the reputation of inclusive and pastoral ministry, a much-needed antidote to the managerial style of the last regime.

We know also she supports listening, reconciling and healing including support for blessing same-sex couples although she has not, thus far at least, supported same-sex marriages in church. This feels like a bit of fence-sitting but she did lead the Church of England's 'Living in Love and Faith' process 2020-23.ⁱⁱⁱ Consequently, the semi-breakaway Gafcon^{iv} grouping have already accused her of promoting 'unbiblical and revisionist teachings'. Ironically, to more liberal ways of thinking this is almost a badge of honour!

On assisted dying Sarah has announced her intention of voting against any legislation. She also describes herself as a feminist and has publicly expressed support for abortion rights. This latter will no doubt cause great excitement when she eventually makes the mandatory visit to the United States. It is doubtful whether she would wish to visit or be welcomed at the court of King Donald? On the other hand she seems like a person who won't dodge a difficult situation, or encounter, especially if it can show the love of Christ to the world.

That's more or less the current list of issues for the latest occupant of the see founded by Saint Augustine of Canterbury in 597AD.

In some ways, considering what a great Christian foundation this is, one might have expected godliness, holiness, prayerfulness, spirituality and great learning should be the top of the priorities. No doubt Bishop Sarah has all these attributes but history tells us that her burdens will actually have a strong sense of *déjà vu*. Previous occupants of the seat would consider today's struggles to be relatively benign. Archbishops have been deposed, exiled, assassinated, lynched by the mob, sent to the block, burnt at the stake and accused of murder. Latterly, the last Archbishop was the first to resign willingly.

It seems that the *realpolitik* of life when it meets the teaching of the poor carpenter of Nazareth is uncomfortable to say the very least. For Bishop Sarah her time may not encounter such violence as her predecessors (although these are increasingly dangerous days) rather she may be crushed by committee meetings, reports, naughty vicars, and sclerotic processes. In any case she is unlikely to have an easy ride with the press and online media. Who'd want the job? She may just survive and even flourish, as we shall see in the seven years before mandatory retirement at seventy.

In the meantime King Charles approved the appointment on the 3rd October and the installation/enthronement will probably be in March next year. In further response to my original questioner; it does indeed take a long time to get a new Archbishop. Indeed it does but note that the wider Church is hardly affected by the transition. Perhaps (as one churchwarden remarked) “it’s our inertia that keeps us going!” I hope and pray that it’s not quite that bad and that the new Archbishop will have the courage and the faith to lead us well.

So, as Archbishop Sarah undertakes leadership in the very Anglican way of authority to be exercised and earned without much power to support it; by way of compensation perhaps someone will buy her one of the teapots that usurped her in the newscast? Tea is very C of E after all.

Nicholas Henderson

October 2025

Editor: [Anglicanism.org](https://www.anglicanism.org)

ⁱ <https://www.anglicancommunion.org/structures/instruments-of-communion.aspx>

ⁱⁱ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Global_North_and_Global_South

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/living-love-and-faith>

^{iv} <https://gafcon.org>