

A new Archbishop and a new agenda?



Editorial: The Rev'd Dr. Nicholas Henderson

So, thus far the new Archbishop of Canterbury has been through three of the four stages of appointment.

These are:

The Crown Appointment - nomination by the Crown Nominations Commission after months of tedious discernment and interviews held behind the proverbial closed doors. This is followed by the Prime Minister advising the King of two names and the King accepting one of them – again a secretive process.

Then comes **The Canonical Election** by the College of Canons of Canterbury Cathedral who go through the legal fiction (they are obliged by church law to do so) of electing the King's chosen candidate. This is not secret.

Next the decisive legal act of the **Confirmation of Election** when a special court is held in the church of St Mary-le-Bow, which is historically the home of the Archbishop's own ecclesiastical court. This court is known as the Court of Arches from the Norman arches in the church. This is a legal and not a ritual process.

Lastly, there is **The Enthronement** (Installation) by the Archdeacon of Canterbury in the Chair of St Augustine in Canterbury Cathedral; this only after all the invitations, rehearsals and security arrangements, etc, have been made. This will take place for the new Archbishop on Wednesday 25th March 2026. It is probably no coincidence that this date is that of the Feast of the Annunciation, which closely involves another woman who has had a major role in the Church. However, the ceremony is strictly speaking ceremonial only. Nevertheless, it'll be worth watching as a spectacle in its own right.

Sarah Mullaly is therefore already legally Archbishop of Canterbury despite not yet having been enthroned. Thus, there is no longer any hiding of views and/or direction of leadership.

At the General Synod (9th – 13th February held in London)ⁱ the new Archbishop set out as her first declared priority a reflection on GS2429, which in plainer English is a General Synod paper on safeguarding reform.ⁱⁱ She described the proposals in the paper as offering “a constructive way forward through what has seemed like an intractable challenge.” Online responses have reported this as a clear endorsement of the plan to create a more independent safeguarding structure.ⁱⁱⁱ

Well, that's probably a good start, although introspective and reactive to the current terrible reputation of the Church – not only the Church of England.

Of course, a far greater frisson of excitement and emotional tension was inevitably generated by the failure of the House of Bishops to endorse the two-year long process of 'Living in Love and Faith' (LLF) that has occupied many lay people and clergy in earnest, and we hope prayerful discussion aimed at finding common ground over the question put crudely of 'what to do with gay people who fall in love.'

It now remains the case that if they are clergy they may enter into the farce of being in Civil Partnerships, being led to lie or be ambivalent about their physical relationships and lose their licences if they dare sign a piece of legal paper converting to marital status. If such people are lay, they cannot expect their marriages to be conducted in church and can only receive a highly caveated prayers after their wedding at a main service – but not strictly speaking a blessing. All of this is casuistry in its true meaning; most clergy have at times, blessed building projects, pets, equipment and vehicles and more but not (publicly anyway) same-sex unions.

As the Archbishop of York, the Most Rev'd Stephen Cottrell said at the same February Synod "LLF has seen a failure of process." "We say LLF as a project to be delivered – this was probably a mistake. Sometimes we sought solace in ambiguity, when clarity was needed."

Indeed, and behind all of this is also weakness and fear in the upper echelons of the Church in the face of the ever-growing power and influence of the conservative Evangelical wing of the Church. These latter-day C of E Christians have repeatedly strained the Scriptures to have Jesus condemning gay marriage when manifestly there is actually only St Paul and the 'visionaries' of the Old Testament who have opined on anything near the matter.

To the general public the new Archbishop is something of an unknown and little notice will be taken of her until at least the grand ceremony of the Canterbury enthronement is made visible on television and online. In the meantime that doyen of moral rectitude, namely the American president, is far more consequential, wielding real political power for good or often ill, in the way that the medieval forebears of the Archbishop could and did.

Perhaps we should give Archbishop Sarah the benefit of the doubt in the face of the impossible task she has ahead of her? Nevertheless, please, please, Sarah we've just had ten years of being 'managed and organised' from the top; can we now get back to what the Church can be really good at – pastoral care and prayer especially in the parishes – that could resolve a great deal and say something positive to a disillusioned world that is turning elsewhere in despair.

*Nicholas Henderson
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Ash Wednesday 2026*

ⁱ The Church of England's elected parliament – elected incidentally by Proportional Representation; British parliament please take note as this method is a fairer system, unlike the current 'first past the post' for general parliamentary elections.

ⁱⁱ <https://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/speeches/synod-archbishop-canterburys-speech-church-safeguarding-structures>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://anglican.ink/2026/02/12/coe-general-synod-archbishop-of-canterburys-speech-on-church-safeguarding-structures>