News



Sarah Mullally, the new Archbishop of Canterbury, spiritual leader of the world's 85 million Anglicans, speaks inside Canterbury Cathedral in Canterbury, England, Friday, Oct. 3, 2025. (AP/Alberto Pezzali)

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Sarah Mullally, the bishop of London, was announced Friday as Archbishop of Canterbury, the first time a woman has been chosen as the spiritual leader of the Church of England.

Mullally, 63, a former chief nursing officer for England, will face serious challenges including divisions over the treatment of women and LGBTQ people. She will also have to confront concerns that church leaders haven't done enough to stamp out the sexual abuse scandals that have dogged the church for more than a decade.

Naming a woman to the position is a major milestone for a church that ordained its first female priests in 1994 and its first female bishop in 2015. Mullally follows 105 men who have led Anglicans worldwide.

Speaking at Canterbury Cathedral shortly after the announcement Friday morning, Mullally acknowledged the pathbreaking nature of her new role.

"Some will be asking what it means for a woman to lead the Church of England and to take on the Archbishop of Canterbury's global role in the Anglican Communion," she said. "I intend to be a shepherd who enables everyone's ministry and vocation to flourish, whatever the tradition."

Prime Minister Keir Starmer welcomed the appointment of Mullally to the role and wished her success.

"The Church of England is of profound importance to this country," Starmer said. "Its churches, cathedrals, schools, and charities are part of the fabric of our communities. The Archbishop of Canterbury will play a key role in our national life."

She will replace former archbishop, Justin Welby, who announced his resignation in November after an independent investigation found he failed to tell police about serial physical and sexual abuse by a volunteer at Christian summer camps as soon as he became aware of it.

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Mullally acknowledged her predecessor's missteps and devoted a large share of her talk to the subject of sexual abuse.

"Our history of safeguarding failures have left the legacy of deep harm and mistrust, and we must be willing to have the light shone on our actions, regardless of our role in the church," she said, reading from prepared comments.

"Safeguarding is everyone's business, but for those of us in senior leadership, it carries an added weight of accountability," she added.

The new archbishop will be faced with declining church attendance, bloated management structures and clergy disagreements over sex and gender, said Andrew Graystone, an advocate for church abuse survivors, told Britain's Press Association.

"But the biggest challenge for the new archbishop is to restore trust after a decade of abuse scandals," he said.

While the choice of the new archbishop will be made in England and ratified by King Charles III, it will have ramifications around the world.

The Anglican Communion has more than 85 million members spread across 165 countries, including the Episcopal Church in the United States. While each national church has its own leader, the Archbishop of Canterbury is considered first among equals.

The process for Mullally was an 11-month marathon presided over by a committee of some 20 people chaired by the former director-general of MI5, Britain's domestic spy agency. The process only began with her naming Friday. She is expected to be voted on by fellow bishops and formally installed next year.

"At least on the last few occasions, a new pope has been selected at great speed, but to select the Archbishop of Canterbury, which is not exactly equivalent but what many might see as a relatively equivalent position, it takes months," said George Gross, an expert on monarchy and modern religious thought at King's College London.

It was not a transparent process. There was no published shortlist of candidates, nor an open vote. It was more a slow process of sounding out various interest groups to figure out which of the current bishops might be able to lead the church forward.