News



The Confirmation of Election ceremony legally confirming Dame Sarah Mullally as the new Archbishop of Canterbury, at St Paul's Cathedral, central London, Wednesday Jan. 28, 2026. (Pool via AP/Gareth Fuller)

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Sarah Mullally walked into St. Paul's Cathedral on Wednesday morning as the bishop of London. When she walked out in the afternoon as bells rang out, she was the spiritual leader of millions of Anglicans around the world.

Mullally, 63, became the archbishop of Canterbury, making her the first woman to lead the Church of England. The worldwide Anglican Communion, which includes the Episcopal Church in the U.S., has no formal head, but the archbishop traditionally has been seen as its spiritual leader.

As the choir sang an anthem by Edward Elgar, the cancer nurse turned cleric officially took up the responsibilities of her new job as bewigged judges presided over a legal ceremony confirming her appointment, which was announced almost four months ago.

As the lengthy process came to a close and her election was confirmed, Mullally stood and faced the congregation to loud applause.

"We welcome you," the bishops surrounding her shouted in unison.

The so-called Confirmation of Election service marks a major milestone for the Church of England, which ordained its first female priests in 1994 and its first female bishop in 2015. The church traces its roots to the 16th century when the English church broke away from the Roman Catholic Church during the reign of King Henry VIII.

George Gross, an expert on theology and the monarchy at King's College London, highlighted the church's continuing divergence from the Catholic Church, which forbids women from being ordained as priests, much less as serving as the religion's global spiritual leader.

"It is a big contrast," Gross said. "And in terms of the position of women in society, this is a big statement."

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But Mullally's appointment may deepen rifts within the Anglican Communion, whose 100 million members in 165 countries are deeply divided over issues such as the

role of women and the treatment of LGBTQ people.

She will also have to confront concerns that the Church of England hasn't done enough to stamp out the sexual abuse scandals that have dogged it for more than a decade.

Gafcon, a global organization of conservative Anglicans, says Mullally's appointment is divisive because a majority of the Anglican Communion still believes only men should be bishops.

Rwandan Archbishop Laurent Mbanda, chairman of the Gafcon council of senior bishops, known as primates, also criticized Mullally's support for the blessing of same-sex marriages.

"Since the newly appointed archbishop of Canterbury has failed to guard the faith and is complicit in introducing practices and beliefs that violate both the 'plain and canonical sense' of Scripture and 'the Church's historic and consensual' interpretation of it, she cannot provide leadership to the Anglican Communion," Mbanda said in October.

As part of the ceremony, a cleric announced that no one had raised legitimate opposition to Mullally's confirmation. A heckler began shouting and was escorted from the cathedral.

The bishops declared that no objection had been made in a timely way and Mullally took her oath of allegiance to the British crown and the church.

Mullally replaces former Archbishop Justin Welby, who announced his resignation in November 2024, after he was criticized for failing to tell police about allegations of physical and sexual abuse by a volunteer at a church-affiliated summer camp.

She was nominated by a 17-member commission composed of clerics and lay people and her appointment was confirmed by King Charles III, who is the supreme governor of the church.

But there is still one more step in the long process of appointing the new archbishop.

On March 25 at Canterbury Cathedral, Mullally will be formally installed as bishop of the diocese of Canterbury in a ceremony marking the beginning of her new role. After that, her public-facing ministry begins.