News



The Archbishop of Canterbury Dame Sarah Mullally poses for a photo after an 87-mile pilgrimage from London to Canterbury Cathedral, in Canterbury, England, Sunday, March 22, 2026. (PA via AP/Gareth Fuller)

Danica Kirka

View Author Profile

Associated Press

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

London — March 25, 2026

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

A former cancer nurse who became a priest at the age of 40 will be installed as archbishop of Canterbury on Wednesday, publicly celebrating her election as the first woman to lead the Church of England.

Although Sarah Mullally, 63, formally became the archbishop of Canterbury in January, Wednesday's event marks the beginning of her public ministry as both the head of the Church of England and spiritual leader of the worldwide Anglican Communion. The communion is an association of independent churches, including the Episcopal Church in the U.S., that together have more than 100 million members.

"I intend to be a shepherd who enables everyone's ministry and vocation to flourish, whatever our tradition,'' Mullally said when named last year. "Today I give thanks for all the women and men ... who have paved the way for this moment. And to all the women that have gone before me, thank you for your support and your inspiration."

The ceremony will be attended by Prince William, Princess Catherine, U.K. Prime Minister Keir Starmer and representatives from many of the communion's 42 member churches. Representatives from the Vatican and the Orthodox church will also attend.

In a nod to Mullally's historic appointment, the service is taking place on the Feast of the Annunciation, which marks the moment Mary was told she had been chosen to be the mother of Jesus. It is a day on which the church says it celebrates "one of the great women of the Bible and thinks about how we can respond to God's call."

The celebration marks a major milestone for the Church of England, which traces its roots to the year 597, when the pope sent St. Augustine to Britain to convert the population to Christianity. He is now recognized as the first archbishop of Canterbury. The English church broke away from the Roman Catholic Church in the 1530s, during the reign of King Henry VIII.

The church ordained its first female priests in 1994 and its first female bishop in 2015.

Mullally begins her tenure as archbishop at a difficult time for the Church of England and the Anglican Communion.

Her appointment may deepen rifts within the Anglican Communion, whose members 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 has failed to stamp out the sexual abuse scandals that have dogged it and caused strife for more than a decade.

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

Advertisement

Born in Woking, southwest of London in 1962, Mullally attended local schools and worked as a nurse in Britain's National Health Service until she was named chief nursing officer for England at the age of 37, the youngest person ever to hold the post.

While still working in that job, she began training for the ministry.

She was named a bishop in 2015, becoming the fourth woman in the Church of England to reach that rank. Three years later, she was named bishop of London, one of the most prominent positions in the church.

But on Wednesday she will also remember her life before the church, securing her ceremonial cloak with a clasp decorated by the buckle from the belt she wore as a nurse.

The service will also acknowledge the Anglican Communion's worldwide reach, with Archbishop Albert Chama of Zambia offering a prayer in the Bemba language and Bishop Alba Sally Sue Hernández García of Mexico providing a Bible reading in Spanish. The Kyrie prayer will be sung in Urdu.

George Gross, an expert on theology and the monarchy at King's College London, said Mullally's appointment instantly makes her one of the most recognized Christian figures in the world, alongside the pope.

"I think it's huge, absolutely massive," he told The Associated Press. "But it matters because, as we've talked before, the stained glass ceiling is smashed. And that, in the world we're in, when we talk of equality, (it's) hard to have that if you have unattainable positions."