



Honest Church
Toolkit ●

Women's Roles
#HonestChurch

The problem

Lots of churches don't let on whether they are affirming and welcoming of LGBTQ+ people. And, although all churches welcome women, some don't let on about the ways in which they limit the roles of women in church. Some churches say everyone is welcome, but then turn out to have hostile theology that comes as a surprise. Some churches are largely affirming, but don't feel they are doing enough to warrant putting a rainbow on their website so they might get overlooked. Some churches have no limits on women's ministry and value women equally, but how can you easily know this?

Everyone needs to be able to find the right place to worship and grow as a Christian in safety. Honesty is the beginning of being able to do that.

The campaign

Honest Church is a campaign of the Student Christian Movement originally designed to encourage greater honesty about the true welcome that LGBTQ+ people receive in a church. And, as of March 2023, we're thrilled to be joined by our friends at WATCH (Women and the Church) to help us extend the campaign to include honesty about women's roles in church.

The aim is to prompt and enable churches to be more specific in their communication about LGBTQ+ welcome and women's roles, both in their publicity and when students, graduates and others come and ask questions about the inclusiveness of the welcome.

The Toolkit

This toolkit is for people who are wanting to broach the topic of women's roles with a church leader but might not know where to start, and for church leaders who want to consider limits or opportunities for women in their church and how to communicate their position. Inside you'll find suggested questions to ask a church leader, questions for church leaders to contemplate, the Honest Church Spectrum of Limits on Women's Roles, and some suggestions of how to improve the opportunities for women in your church if that's something you'd like to do. We hope you find this resource empowering and helpful!

Here's to being honest.

Questions to ask as a newcomer/congregation member

This is by no means an exhaustive list of questions, but we recognise that this process can be hard for both sides and so have kept the list simple. We believe these questions will give you a strong indication of what limits, if any, are placed on women's roles so that you can then decide whether you're happy to attend the church, and how to take the conversation forward if you wish to.

If asking these questions in person is too hard you could email the church leader the list, or ask people in the congregation what limits they believe the church puts on women's roles.

- Do you have any limits on the roles of women in your church?
- Would your church allow a female priest to lead a service or preside over communion?
- Would your church allow a woman to be the vicar or the main church leader?
- Can and do women preach to mixed-sex congregations? Can and do women lead mixed-sex Bible study groups? Are they limited to leading children's and young people's groups?
- What do you teach about the role of women in the church and home? Do you have a 'complementarian' understanding of the distinctive roles of men and women in the church and at home (sometimes referred to as headship theology) meaning that men are ultimately in authority over women in church and at home?
- Are women Deacons/Churchwardens/Stewards/Elders?

Questions for church leaders to consider

Again, this is not an exhaustive list but we think it is a good place to start. Once you've considered this list check out the Honest Church Spectrum of Limits on Women's Roles.

- Do people in your congregation know what opportunities or limits there are for women in your church?
- If your church is Church of England and has passed a Resolution or has a policy to limit women's roles in any way, has this been reviewed and openly debated recently? Do you know what the congregation as a whole thinks?
- Do you regularly preach and communicate clearly what your church believes about women's roles?
- If you do have limits on the roles of women, does your public communication (newsletter, noticeboards, website) make this clear? If it does, do you use language that is not church "jargon"?
- If your church embraces full opportunities for women would a newcomer be able to tell that easily from your external communications?

Spectrum of Limits on Women's Roles

Now that you've considered some questions about your church, it's time to see where you fall on the Spectrum of Limits on Women's Roles. Have a read through our descriptions of the churches below and think about which church sounds most like yours. It's likely that none of them will be a perfect fit, but it will hopefully give you an idea of where you're at.

All denominations vary nationally and locally in their opportunities and limits on women's roles. We've mentioned the ones we are aware have national rules and regulations which affect what a local church can choose to do, and as such might effect how you'd describe your church. As with our Spectrum of LGBTQ+ Welcome, the list below is only intended as a tool to help you be honest and describe your church - other words may be more accurate and more honest for you, so feel free to take what is helpful and leave what isn't.

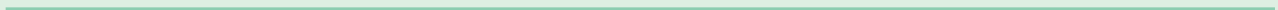
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This is a church where there is church law that prohibits women from some roles, for example, in the Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches women are not allowed to be priests. Nonetheless, there are groups challenging these positions like Women's Ordination Worldwide (WOW) which you might find are well supported in your local church. The official and public teaching of the local church is unlikely to challenge the formal position but there may be efforts made to preach about or encourage women's equality in other areas of church leadership and in the wider world.

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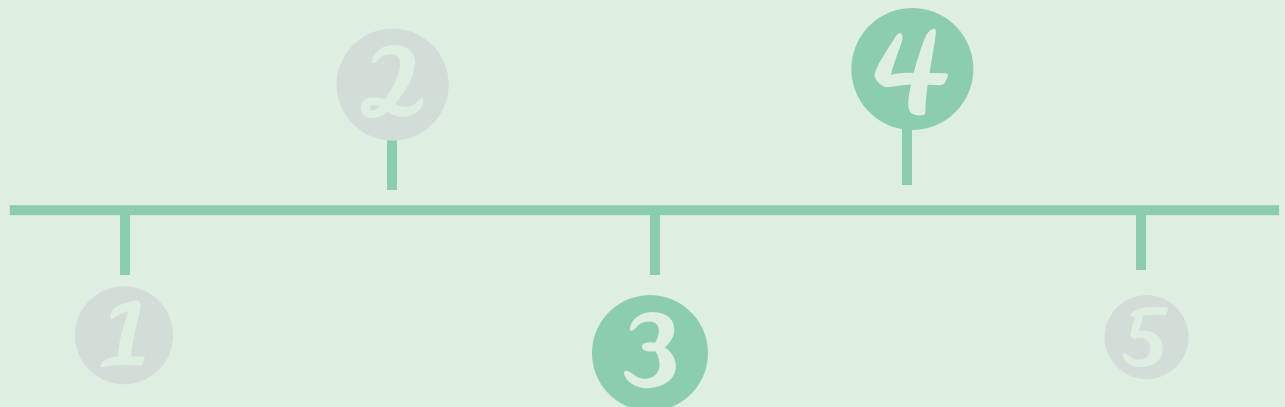


This is a church where church law allows women to qualify for all roles but also allows individual churches to limit women's roles, for example the Church of England, and this local church is exercising its right to limit women's roles. It may have a church leader who does not accept that the Church has the right to ordain women. It may have a church leader who does not believe women should have positions of authority over men, such as being vicars or bishops. Very often these churches will publicly affirm equality of the sexes but structure themselves so that men and women have different roles - with men able to do all roles, and women not being able to do some such as priestly or leadership roles. Some who don't accept women as priests or lead pastor may, however, allow them to preach. And some who don't accept women as church leaders may accept them as priests, such as a female curate under the authority of a man. There are groups challenging these positions like Women and the Church (WATCH) which you may find supporters of in the congregation.

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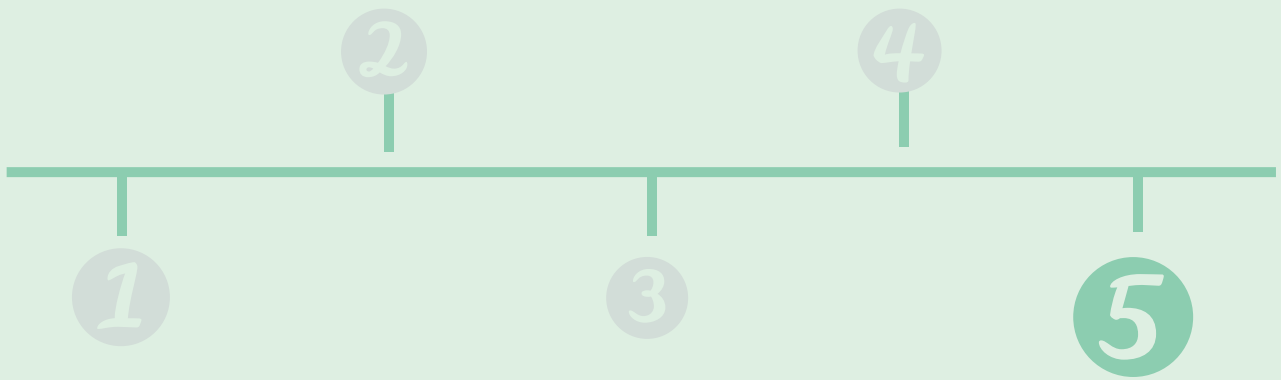
This is a church where there is no official law or policy to limit women's roles, but it is the case that men tend to be doing the leadership and teaching roles in a way which is not questioned and no effort is being made to increase diversity. In this church you might find that women take on roles such as making tea and coffee and washing up or leading children's work whereas men are asked to undertake physical volunteering such as mowing the lawns, or setting out the chairs. Men are also generally asked to serve as Deacons or Church Wardens as well as to preach and lead Bible study. When employing a minister, the recruiting committee have always chosen a man. There may be people in the congregation who would affirm this situation theologically or in terms of tradition, but there may also be many who do not have a strong opinion either way. There may also be people in the congregation who would like to see greater equality.



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This is a church in which there are no limits on the roles that women can play. There may be a woman minister and women in other leadership roles. Teaching about women's roles may not be common and there may be some features of gendered thinking in terms of who is offered opportunities. There may also be people who view equality as something which has been 'dealt with' by past generations and that no further self-examination is necessary. There will probably also be people who are very firm about the importance of equality and inclusion and who will speak up to say so.



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This is a church in which there are no limits on the roles that women can play and where people are intentionally seeking to encourage women to use gifts that they may not have been encouraged to use in other settings. Gender stereotypes are avoided and would be critiqued if they emerged. Members and leaders are also attentive to the intersection of gender issues with discrimination against other groups, such as on grounds of sexual orientation and race.

Further support and resources

If you are a student or recent graduate you can become a member of the Student Christian Movement and be part of a welcoming and affirming community who believe in full gender equality.

www.movement.org.uk/membership

If you want to campaign for greater equality in the Church of England, Women and the Church (WATCH) are a national organisation working actively for gender justice, equality and inclusion in the Church of England.

www.womenandthechurch.org

If you want to campaign for greater equality in the Roman Catholic Church, Women's Ordination Worldwide (WOW) is an ecumenical network of national and international groups whose primary mission at this time is the admission of Roman Catholic women to all ordained ministries.

www.womensordinationcampaign.org/

If you are looking for an inclusive church community, Inclusive Church has searchable directory of churches.

www.inclusive-church.org

