

## Interviews with Rt Rev. Dr Jill Duff, a female bishop in the Church of England

*Entretiens avec Jill Duff, une femme évêque de l'Église anglicane*

15 July 2024.

**Edwige Camp-Pietrain**

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PREO

# Interviews with Rt Rev. Dr Jill Duff, a female bishop in the Church of England

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## **Textes et contextes**

15 July 2024.

19-1 | 2024

**L'entre-deux, une recomposition des représentations. Regards transdisciplinaires et transfrontaliers**

**Edwige Camp-Pietrain**

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1. A female bishop
  2. Working in deprived areas
  3. A scientific background
  4. A former executive with an oil company
  5. A bishop of the Established Church
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- 1 Bishop Jill Duff embodies the *entre-deux* theme in many respects. She was appointed in 2018 as the 13<sup>th</sup> female bishop in the Church of England, England's established Church since 1534, long dominated by men. She was ordained after a complete training in science with a rational perspective. In addition, she started her career as an executive in the oil industry before choosing deprived areas for her ministry in the North-West of England (Lancashire). She is prepared to defend her views on some contemporary issues that may diverge from her Church's position. The editor of this issue carried out three online interviews with her in 2022 and 2023.<sup>1</sup>

# 1. A female bishop

**Edwige Camp-Pietrain (ECP): How many female bishops are there?**

**Bishop Jill Duff (BJD):** There are 30 female bishops.<sup>2</sup>

**ECP: Is there a willingness to promote women in senior positions within the Church of England (CofE)?**

**BJD:** There is a bias towards women, people are actively looking for women especially in suffragan roles, not bosses. There are only 6 female diocesan bishops (Bristol, Derby, London, Newcastle, Gloucester, Chelmsford and [in 2024], Peterborough) out of 44, so it is still a challenge. I am being asked to apply but being a Diocesan bishop is not what I want at the moment with family still at home.

**ECP: What is the proportion of priests refusing to be led by a woman?**

**BJD:** 5% in the whole church, 10% in my diocese. There are two main reasons for refusing to be overseen by a woman: because the Catholic church doesn't agree or because of your reading of the Bible.<sup>3</sup> My colleague Philip North wouldn't agree with women being priests or bishops.<sup>4</sup>

I have good friends among them, they respect my leadership, although in bishop Philip's tradition, you wouldn't receive any communion or be ordained by me.<sup>5</sup> At the other end of the spectrum, you can't preach, teach. People struggle with the principle when they meet the person, it makes a big difference.

**ECP: What are the remaining difficulties within the CofE when it comes to accepting women's authority?**

**BJD:** In practice, I find:

1. when people disagree with me being a bishop, it is like the Holy Spirit brings new ways of relating. There is more energy in my conversations with Bishop Philip than with other bishops.
2. in England, the Church is quite female—a lot of church-goers are women. Having clear roles for women in those churches, attract more people.

**ECP: How do you cope with misogyny in your own faith, especially when you are in the community where you interact?**

**BJD:** My experience of misogyny is rarely from men who don't agree I should be a bishop. Bishop Philip has been one of the most supportive. He is so tender, encouraging, positive, he talks with women. He wants them to flourish. And he is very good at many things: missions, schools, teaching, preaching, pastoral work. And that area where it is not ideal. Me and others are pragmatic.

Misogyny comes where you don't expect it. It is common in quite a lot of organisations, a little bit hidden. 1. When a man is new in his post, people accept his authority, it takes longer as a woman to be taken seriously. 2. People comment on what you wear in a way they would never comment on a man's clothes. 3. Last week [in October 2022] there was a gathering of women priests. We said that it hurts us as women that Liz Truss is not doing a good job.<sup>6</sup> Most men would say it doesn't hurt them if a man—like Boris Johnson —makes us all feel bad.

**ECP: Another issue is about the Equality Act 2010, as religious organisations are excepted from it**

**BJD:** Bishop Philip's appointment was criticised, not within our diocese but by some campaigning groups. A woman said that there was discrimination because he won't ordain women. But within a Christian framework we can conceive different roles for men and women, I don't agree with that position, but I want to respect it as it has been mainstream for 200 years.

**ECP: Does your gender give you a different outlook on people, work, faith?**

**BJD:** It does make a difference. In very male organisations, there are very clear roles. Women can get round some all-male structures, women can bring relationships and ease; women are often quite good at relationships, they can get more done as women, they can get round of these clear roles.

## 2. Working in deprived areas

**ECP: Child poverty rates are very high in some of the places you have worked in. Why did you choose such areas, beginning with Liverpool?**

**BJD:** I chose them on purpose.<sup>7</sup> God is closer to the poor. The poor are more open to his work. It is more rewarding for priests. I thought living on a council estate after living in Oxford would be easy, but it was a real culture shock, I hadn't expected the sort of people I met, their broken lives. Their egos have been crushed by lots of things, they have more room for God, whereas my own ego is inflated, I can manage my life depending on my abilities. More dramatic things happen, ordinary miracles, healings, like in the Bible. I believe that to see the renewal of the nation, you can start in poorest places. This happens in the wider world. In the rich West, the Church is declining.

**ECP: What kind of relationships do you develop with deprived communities in Lancashire?**

**BJD:** 12 of the worst areas are in Blackpool. We have vicars in all the poorest areas. They live there. We try to put in more resources, more people. They help those with addictions, loving these people. They run food banks. It could be us, it could be me. In places, there are some gates of hell, and some gates of heaven. It is dark, and full of hope as well. People respond on the street. The church is a safe place for some people, it feels like family, like the beacon bring hope in the darkness.

**ECP: Is it easier for these people to relate to you as a woman?**

**BJD:** It can be an ease, less frightening. On the other hand, there is an important dynamic in poor communities that can be quite matriarchal: unwanted fathers, prisoners, men can be ignored and dominated by women. You need a balance. Poor communities also appreciate male outdoor culture; for example, there is a Christian outdoor adventure course which is brilliant at reaching men through adventure.

**ECP: As a mother as well?**

**BJD:** That helps. A lot of people in senior jobs like them work long hours and it seems they have been spoilt. You build relations, you talk. I can't work the same hours. That's compelling for people. People think you can't be a super woman all the time.

Recently, I attended a New Wine conference with 1800 Church people.<sup>8</sup> Some women came to see me saying that it was great to see a woman on stage, with nice shoes, talking about her boys. I am conscious of that role model, especially with younger women. There are different ways to be a bishop. Leaders are not all male.

### **3. A scientific background**

**ECP:** Your own philosophy seems to be between the rational and the spiritual. Are you comfortable with that? Does that create some kind of momentum?

**BJD:** I have a PhD in science.<sup>9</sup> I am very rationally trained, I think rationally. When I was growing up, a lot of my spiritual life was hidden, I had to apologize. As I got older, I realised the rational was only a small part of that, things that give me light, joy, hope, fire in my heart, are in the spiritual element. A lot of words are spiritual. We use them to talk about relationships ("chemical"), films, music. In normal life, we are happy with spiritual words, but in the academic world, we describe them only rationally.

**ECP:** Does your scientific background have an impact on you as a bishop?

**BJD:** In some ways yes. I am a scientist but I am also passionate about miracles. People who know less about science would say this can't happen because of science. I know that science only answers some questions, it can't explain everything, it is quite limited. It is based on theory, people change things if they don't match the data. Old-generation bishops in particular would say that miracles are not for today, in a scientific world whereas I think the opposite: miracles seem to break the law of science. Scientists are used to that, it gives me more freedom, a bigger canvass of what might be possible.

**ECP:** Would you say that your scientific background and your current position complement one another?

**BJD:** Yes but they also feed each other. The scientist can feed important data, evidence like academics. I bring a sense of data on the ground. When it is argued that people don't believe in God, I ask: what is the data on the ground?

I am glad I did a PhD: it gives more confidence as an academic. Bishops must read a lot of papers. I can read fast, I have more confidence in expressing an opinion. It is an intellectual job, it is not just theology, papers deal with all sorts of things, from the war in Ukraine, to schools, prisons, finances. With a scientific and academic background, you can assimilate quickly and ask questions.<sup>10</sup>

## 4. A former executive with an oil company

**ECP: Do you miss your former position with Esso?**

**BJD:** I miss the adrenaline, the intellectual stimulation, getting to grips with all areas. But there are different seasons for things.

**ECP: Do you work with many people with other experiences?**

**BJD:** The longer you have been in the Church, the more chances you have. If you are ordained at 45, you don't have time to reach senior places in industry. On my senior team, 5 of us, I am the only one who had a serious career outside. Everybody else only worked for the church, except for one teacher.

Having been in organisations that work differently, an academic environment in Oxford or Esso, gives me a confidence they don't have. With a number of different roles, you can see other things, this is helpful. Being *entre-deux* gives you a wonderful insight.

**ECP: What would you say about ethical values within a major oil company like Esso that aims at boosting profits and those of the CofE?**

**BJD:** I wrestle with that, what does it mean to be a Christian and work for a multinational oil company. Their profits pay our pensions. We are glad they make profits, we don't always like how they make profits. My dissertation at Oxford was about this topic.<sup>11</sup> Most Christian theology finds it hard to say much about what is a good business,

except the Roman Catholic Church, what it means to run a good business. I discovered this. Over the past one hundred years, popes have written a lot about this. They say people, relationships are the most important in an organisation, in a country, not profits. The more we invest in people, the better the country, the oil company. Justin Welby [the Archbishop of Canterbury] wrote a book where he talks about God of Mammon.<sup>12</sup> In England we worship the economy, it's very visible in what Liz Truss is saying, but it's people that matter. I want to put a lot of my energy into building up people. Then you get a better economy.

## 5. A bishop of the Established Church

**ECP: The CofE is established in England. In recent years, MPs have been trying to influence it over the ordination of women. A few weeks ago [in January 2023], a debate on blessings for same-sex marriages took place in the House of Commons before General Synod.**

**BJD:** It was a very small debate, hardly any MP.<sup>13</sup> MPs don't speak out about the traditional view of marriages, it is hidden. Many MPs agree quietly with the traditional way, it is hard to say that in the Chamber. Kate Forbes<sup>14</sup> supports the traditional view on marriage. Initially she got a backlash, now it's played out quite well. Progressives can come across critical. She says what she thinks, she has the right to hold that view. For us she's been an important counterbalance.<sup>15</sup>

**ECP: Yet you might expect MPs to speak against discrimination.<sup>16</sup>**

**BJD:** It is interesting how you define discrimination. You could say there should be protection for religious conscience. I support same-sex civil partnerships, people getting married because they want to. What is a problem, I don't think it is a Christian view of marriage, I hold a more conservative view. Christianity is different from culture in a lot of ways. Jesus was radically welcoming: he also set radically challenging ethical standards. There are ethical standards in any religion, a sense of holiness. Changing the doctrine of the Church over the place of sex within marriage, and marriage between a man and a woman, would mean changing doctrine which has been in place since

the beginning. It would be out of step with most churches in the worlds.<sup>17</sup>

**ECP: MPs also argue that the national church has to be for everyone, it has a mission to appeal to minorities.**

**BJD:** That's the challenge. A national institution conducting secular marriages should offer same-sex marriages.<sup>18</sup> As a Christian church, with its conscience and doctrine, we shouldn't. Funerals are for everyone, you don't ask questions.

**ECP: MPs have reminded the CoFE that Parliament was sovereign and could interfere in any matter.**

**BJD:** Yes MPs could try to force disestablishment, that may well happen, there are certainly regular attempts. My answer is that there has been gradual disestablishment during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1920 General Synod was introduced so that lay people had a view.<sup>19</sup> Since the 1990s bishops are no longer appointed by Prime Ministers. Until then, there were two names, the PM would pick up one. Now we got rid of that, it's just the Church which decides.

I think we ought to step back from our right to marry couples in Church. It is no longer appropriate that because I am ordained, I can act as a registrar to marry in law. In other churches, you get married legally the day before, then you can have a Christian marriage the next day. We should let go of that privilege because of this issue of same-sex marriages. Otherwise, we're trying to say that we are a national church, but we won't marry some people.

We could find a middle way, that's the way the CoE has survived for 400 years. We are giving up some of our rights. You leave privileges but you gain freedom of expression. It is complex.

**ECP: What about bishops in the House of Lords?**<sup>20</sup>

**BJD:** Having bishops in the House of Lords is symbolic: we want to be nation where faith flourishes, where faith is part of national discourse. Having bishops in the House of Lords helps create an atmosphere where faith is valid, on the agenda even if some of our views may seem discriminatory from a secular point of view.

Bishops cover quite big areas, they have contact in parishes, in hospitals, schools, prisons, with the poorest. They have a broad reach, a lot of knowledge. People working in industries, academics might not

have these contacts on the grounds. Often there is a bias against these people. Bishops can have a voice to represent people and bring in spiritual values, ethical values. All the data helps rather than hinder society. I think Christianity has a positive influence on society.

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1 The interviews were carried out on the internet (BBB) on 17 October 2022 (as part of an academic seminar) and 17 March 2023. They were supplemented by quotations from her book Duff Jill (2023).

2 They account for one-quarter of bishops. Women were first appointed as deacons (1987), then as priests (1993) and finally as bishops (2014). See Charlot Claire and Charlot Monica 1994.

3 She refers respectively to the Anglo-catholic tradition—that puts emphasis on the ritual and the authority of the priest, like the Roman Catholic Church—and the evangelical wing—that relies on the Scriptures. Both of them (formerly called high church and low church) can find common ground against a more liberal trend (Chapman).

4 Philip North had to withdraw when he was about to be appointed as bishop of Sheffield in 2017, for he would not let male bishops who had taken part in the ordination of the first female bishops lay his hands on him. He was then appointed in Jill Duff's diocese, first as suffragan bishop of Burnley before being promoted as diocesan bishop in 2023 (Percy 2017; Fry 2021).

5 In order to accommodate diverging views, the CofE decided that priests disapproving of female bishops would be transferred to specially-appointed bishops.

6 Liz Truss was a Conservative Prime Minister in September-October 2022. She was forced to resign because of controversies over the financial policies that she intended to enforce.

7 Bishop Jill Duff was ordained as a deacon (2003) then as a priest (2004), becoming a bishop in 2018. She lived with her family in Liverpool for seven years, first on a council estate in north Liverpool (Litherland), then near the Cathedral. They then moved to the centre of Widnes, an ex-chemical industry town on the river Mersey, as her husband was the vicar of St Paul's Church. In her book, she provides a glimpse of her life: "I recall [these] days. We came super-low on the deprivation indices. We just about managed to

pull off Christmas dinner in our Church hall for those who find the day difficult” (Duff 2023: 22).

8 New Wine is a Christian evangelical organisation, based on the charismatic movement.

9 Although her parents were not religious, she attended a CofE school. Then she studied natural sciences for a BA in Cambridge University (Christ’s College), before being awarded a doctorate in chemistry by Oxford University (Worcester College).

10 In her book, she added “there is a beautiful resonance between science (which is answering the question: how?) and faith (which is answering the question: why?)” (Duff 2023: 61), thus echoing the distinction made by Kant.

11 She went back to Oxford University to study theology (in Wycliffe Hall, an evangelical college).

12 Welby 2016. He is the head of the Church of England. With his BA in history and law, Justin Welby worked in the financial division of Elf Aquitaine in the headquarters in Paris, and then for Enterprise Oil in the UK. He quit in 1989 to study theology.

13 The debate was held on 24 January 2023 while the General Synod was due to gather in February. Most of those who spoke contended that the Church should conduct these marriages and some of them hinted that Parliament might force the CofE to endorse such a reform (House of Commons, 2023a and 2023b).

14 Kate Forbes was one of the candidates to succeed Nicola Sturgeon as SNP leader and Scotland’s First Minister in March 2023. She belongs to the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland. She gained 48% of the vote against Humza Yousaf who won the contest.

15 Jill Duff had taken an active part in the debate conducted within her Church over this issue, as part of the Living In Love and Faith Project.

16 MPs had also been outspoken about Church divisions when it came to appointing female bishops. House of Commons 2012 and 2014.

17 In April 2023, ten provinces of the Anglican communion out of 42 voiced their disagreement, claiming that the Archbishop of Canterbury was no longer their leader (Sherwood 2023).

18 There are secular marriages (before registrars) and religious marriages (before ministers of religion mostly).

19 Under the *Church of England (Powers) Act 1919*, decisions are made by the General Synod composed of three Houses: bishops, the clergy and the laity. It is the CofE's legislative body. Its measures must be endorsed by every House, with two-third majorities for the most important ones. They are then submitted to Parliament's ecclesiastical committee (a Joint Committee) for consideration, before being approved by the whole House (Torrance 2023). On possible disestablishment, see Picton (2014).

20 There have always been representatives of the established Church in Parliament. Their number was set at 26 in 1847. Bishop David Urquhart, who was their convener between 2015 and 2023, explains that they are free, individual people, who do not have to comply with a CofE line (Urquhart 2023). They can raise issues through debates (the Archbishop of Canterbury on asylum seekers, House of Lords 2022), or, occasionally, through a private member's bill, such as Lord bishop of Durham's bill removing the two-child limit of the universal credit in 2023 (House of Lords 2023). They talk to MPs of all political persuasions in their diocese, encouraging them to defy party lines should the case arise.

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### English

Jill Duff was appointed as one of the first female bishops in the Church of England. She embodies different sorts of "*entre-deux*", through her position and her own path. In these interviews, she deals with her ministry as a woman, working in deprived communities, as part of an established Church. She also explains how she conciliates the legacy of her initial training as a scientist and early career in the oil industry with her current position. She regards these specificities as assets that enrich her work.

### Français

Jill Duff est l'une des premières femmes évêques de l'Église anglicane. Elle incarne de multiples « *entre-deux* », liés autant à sa fonction qu'à son parcours personnel. Dans ces entretiens, elle évoque l'exercice de son ministère, en tant que femme, travaillant dans des quartiers pauvres, au sein de l'Église officielle en Angleterre. Elle revient également sur sa façon de concilier cette fonction avec sa formation scientifique initiale et son début de carrière dans l'industrie pétrolière. Elle considère ces spécificités comme des sources d'enrichissement.

**Mots-clés**

Église anglicane, Duff (Jill), Église établie, femmes, pauvreté, sciences

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