

Proposed Resolution Regarding Commemorating The Philadelphia Eleven in the Church Calendar

Resolved, that the 128th Annual Convention of the Diocese of Los Angeles submit the following resolution to the 81st General Convention of the Episcopal Church meeting in 2024:

Resolved, the House of _____ concurring, that the 81st General Convention include and enter The Philadelphia Eleven to the Lesser Feasts & Fasts Calendar of the Church Year to be celebrated on July 29.

Explanation:

This commemoration celebrates The Philadelphia Eleven -- the first eleven women ordained to the priesthood in The Episcopal Church on July 29, 1974 at the Church Advocate in Philadelphia.

Through most of the history of the Christian Church, women were relegated to positions secondary to those held by men and excluded from leadership roles. During the first half of the twentieth century that began to shift as the Episcopal Church experienced an expansion of the participation of women in the church as "Deaconesses" -- a separate order from male Deacons. Deaconesses were set apart to care for "the sick, the afflicted, and the poor" but precluded from functioning liturgically.

In 1970, laywomen were seated for the first time in General Convention as Deputies with voice and vote. Calling for a vote to eliminate the canonical distinctions between male deacons and female deaconesses, their intent was to make clear that women seeking ordination should be recognized as full and equal deacons. Once that motion was adopted, The Episcopal Church was presented with the issue of whether to ordain women as priests and bishops too.

A resolution was put forward by the women deputies at the 1970 General Convention to approve women's ordination to the priesthood and episcopate. It failed to pass the House of Deputies, but nonetheless had much positive support. A similar resolution narrowly failed to pass at the next General Convention in 1973.

By July 1974, supporters of women's ordination to the priesthood grew restless with the stalled legislative process and an ordination service was scheduled to ordain women to the priesthood by three retired bishops: Daniel Corrigan, retired bishop suffragan of Colorado; Robert L. DeWitt, recently resigned Bishop of Pennsylvania; and Edward R. Welles, retired Bishop of West Missouri.

Eleven women who were deacons presented themselves as ready for ordination to the priesthood, and plans for the service proceeded. These women, who came to be called the "The Philadelphia Eleven", were Merrill Bittner, Alla Bozarth-Campbell, Alison Cheek, Emily Hewitt,

Carter Heyward, Suzanne Hiatt, Marie Moorefield, Jeannette Piccard, Betty Schiess, Katrina Swanson, and Nancy Wittig. They were ordained on July 29, 1974 at the Church of the Advocate in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

The ordinations inspired both celebration and controversy in the Episcopal Church. The House of Bishops declared them “irregular” and the Philadelphia Eleven were prohibited from officially exercising priestly functions. Nevertheless, the movement for the ordination of women continued to move forward. At the 65th General Convention in September 1976, the ordination of women to the priesthood was approved to begin on January 1, 1977, the previous “irregular” ordinations were regularized, and the way was opened for women to respond to the call to ordination in the Episcopal Church.

Respectfully submitted by:

The Very Rev. Kay Sylvester

Endorsed by:

The Rev. Michelle Baker-Wright

The Rev. Canon Kelli Grace Kurtz

The Rev. Dr. Rachel Nyback