

Impact of pope's decree begins to dawn on Church of England members

- [Riazat Butt](#)
- [guardian.co.uk](#), Sunday 25 October 2009 22.07 GMT
- [Article history](#)



Clergy at St Augustine's - which will not accept a female priest - before the service. Photograph: David Levene

For many sitting in the pews of Saint Augustine's Anglican church in north London it was a particularly special Sunday. There were three confirmations and one man received his first communion.

But amid the applause and smart outfits there was another sense of occasion, with people coming to terms with one of the biggest developments in Christendom since the Reformation.

Last week's decree from Pope Benedict, announcing the creation of a special section in the Roman Catholic church for ex-Anglican communities, has aroused strong opinions among traditionalist clergy. It has cast doubt on the authority of the archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, and the future of the Anglican Communion.

And the impact of the announcement is beginning to dawn on rank and file members of the Church of England.

"I've been a member of this congregation for years and this is exciting news, it's really hopeful for us," said Rachel Graham, a parishioner at St Augustine's in Kilburn. "We appreciate that we are able to have worshipful integrity here. When this church was built there was a hope for unity with Rome. We're not here by mistake."

It was too early to make a decision about the pope's decree – which would allow Anglicans to move to the Catholic church, but keep their own liturgy and married priests – she said. The Vatican has released no further details about the decree, an apostolic constitution, but its very existence has given Graham and other parishioners plenty to think about.

"We hope we can all come together and be looked after by the bishop of Rome."

Graham, a mother of five, is not in a minority at Saint Augustine's. Before the general synod meeting in July 2008 – "when it all went wrong", she said, and the Church of England's governing body threw out all concession to traditionalists – a petition was circulated among the parish's female members objecting to the introduction of women bishops. Only four did not sign.

"My problem with women [clergy] is that they don't understand it's not about discrimination, but the church," Graham said. "They take offence at being seen as not good enough, but there's no tradition of women in the priesthood. There's nothing in scripture. It's not reasonable that women stand as priests." There were many other roles that women could play in the life of the church, she added.

Her friend and fellow parishioner Cecilia Anim also spoke of her support for the pope's initiative. "It reaffirms our belief that the holy father is putting us in the direction we want to go in to keep the sacrament sacred."

"We're sending man to the moon, but you can't change God's word or the Bible. Jesus chose 12 men as his apostles."

Saint Augustine's has sought alternative oversight from the bishop of Fulham, the Right Rev John Broadhurst, and will not accept a female priest as an incumbent or team vicar.

While feelings on the subject vary, the congregation generally sticks to the ABC line, according to the Rev Canon Anthony Yates, who said the pope's decree had not distracted him or the rest of the Saint Augustine team from their daily business. "At the back of the church is the Vatican statement and we're going to consider it.

"We had hoped unity [between Rome and the Anglican church] might be reached, but that's not possible because of recent events," he said.

There was a significant group within the Anglican Communion who would be happy to move to [Catholicism](#) if some provision were made for them, he said, before adding: "We think of group or groups, rather than the whole Anglican Communion." We do welcome the pope's response. I'm not one to criticise it."

Broadhurst, the bishop of Fulham, who was the principal celebrant and preacher at today's mass, would not say whether he would move to Catholicism.

As chair of Forward in Faith, the group pushing hardest at the Vatican's door, he said he would consider the question with his members. "The pope's offer is very impressive and very generous and, in a sense, it has taken the initiative and will force us to consider our future together."

He did not share the feelings voiced yesterday by the former archbishop of Canterbury, Lord Carey, that the Vatican had behaved inexcusably towards Williams for not informing him of the decree until two weeks before its publication.

Nor did he believe the decree's arrival was the fault of Williams. "You can't have a secret document and share it with everybody. The trouble with Rowan is his heart is conservative Catholic, but his brain is liberal progressive. There's a spat between the two sides of a very interesting man."

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/oct/25/popes-decree-church-of-england>