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The Attitudes of Asian Anglicans towards Women Bishops and the Gender Beliefs that Influence Them: A Pilot Study in Singapore

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Abstract

Regarding the ordination of women to higher spiritual leadership positions in the Anglican Church, existing studies have tended to focus on attitudes and perceptions in non-Asian countries and regions, thereby affecting the generalisability of their results to Asian countries such as Singapore. Working to close this gap, a small exploratory study using semi-structured interviews was conducted in Singapore. Eight Anglican parishioners were interviewed, and the transcripts were treated with thematic analysis. Overall, the findings suggest a seeming disconnect between attitudes towards gender equality in secular and faith-based workplaces, implying a social contextual influence on the transferability of an individual's gender-equal attitudes across secular and religious spheres. Some participants sought to manage this disconnect through the conditional support of female bishops, hinged upon them remaining subject to higher male leadership.

Keywords

Women bishops, Anglican, Singapore, (Southeast) Asia, Egalitarianism, Ordination of women

The Ordination of Women in Anglican Churches

Even as women continue to be ordained into higher Anglican spiritual leadership positions in the west, in many parts of Asia, the ordination of women continues to be viewed less favourably. For instance, as of 2017, out of two hundred and eight people who were serving as priests or deacons in Japan, only nineteen (less than 10 per cent) were women.¹ Additionally, in various parts of Asia (e.g., Singapore), deaconess seems to be the highest position in which women in Anglican church ministry are ordained.²

In contrast, Reverend Eileen Harrop has been recognized as the 'first Southeast Asian woman ordained into the Church of England'.³ However, it was noted that she was ordained and currently serves in the United Kingdom, which has a history of ordaining women since 1994.⁴ In contrast to the UK, since 1881, the Anglican Churches of Singapore, South Korea and Japan have ordained only male bishops. Due to a lack of Singapore-specific data, it is unclear if this is due to a lack of female clergy to choose a bishop from (e. g. if the percentage of ordained females matches that provided by Miki [2017] for Japan). It is also unclear to what extent, if any, the lack of post-ordination career development opportunities for women impacts their decision to exclude Anglican ministry as a viable career option and to what extent already-ordained women would have access to egalitarian or gender-blind consideration for a bishop appointment.

Wang contends that 'all three societies have traditionally been strongly male-dominated and women adhere to strict Confucian ideals of female behaviour and obligations'.⁵ This suggests that cultural gender norms may have

1 M. Miki, 'A Church with Newly-Opened Doors: The Ordination of Women Priests in the Anglican Episcopal of Japan', *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 44:1 (2017), 37-54.

2 M.K.M. Chung, *Chinese Women in Christian Ministry: An Intercultural Study* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2005).

3 'Southeast Asian Woman Ordained into Church of England', *Anglican Communion News Service*, July 4, 2012.

4 C. Tailyour, 'My fight to become a woman priest in Church of England', *bbc News*, March 12, 2019.

5 Wang, T., 'Women in South Korea, Japan and Singapore', *Dissertation* (School of Humanities & Social Sciences, Nanyang Technological University, 2012).

a mutually-reinforcing influence on (the continued adherence to) religious gender-related beliefs within the Anglican Churches in these three countries.

Gender Roles & Equality

In contrast to its past iterations, the modern workplace has improved in its capacity to provide women with increased prospects for professional achievements and personal satisfaction. Nevertheless, certain vestiges of gender disparity still persist. The (stained) glass ceiling, the old boys' club, and the glass escalator are some examples.⁶

Taken together, these are perceived as posing invisible barriers that potentially limit the career and networking opportunities available to qualified and capable women and as allowing their male peers to obtain higher wages and increased career mobility. These could be partially due to the aftereffects of persistent earlier gender roles on contemporary social norms.

These gender roles continue to influence today's social norms in various ways. For instance, lingering gender stereotypes that men make better leaders and decision-makers contribute to significant disparities in the proportion of female and male employees in the upper echelons of management.⁷ Such gender bias may be stronger in some industries and organizations⁸ and some cultures and regions than others.⁹ Conventionally, male-dominated organizations, industries and (sub)cultures, secular or religious, may be likelier to prefer (hegemonically) masculine leadership styles. Over time, such

6 L Norman, A.J. Rankin-Wright, and W Allison, "It's a Concrete Ceiling; It's Not Even Glass": Understanding Tenets of Organizational Culture that Supports the Progression of Women as Coaches and Coach Developers', *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 42:5 (2018), 393-414; see also K Amrein, S Stoisser, and M Hoffman, 'Women at Medical Conferences 2016 - Still Hitting their Head at the Glass Ceiling', *Weiner Klinische Wochenschrift*, 129 (2019), 287-288; J. S Dill, K Price-Glynn, and C Rakovski, 'Does the "glass escalator" Compensate for the Devaluation of Care Work Occupations? The Careers of Men in Low- and Middle-Skill Health Care Jobs', *Gender & Society*, 30:2 (2016), 334-360.

7 J Acker, 'From Glass Ceiling to Inequality Regimes', *Sociologie Du Travail*, 21:2 (2009), 199-217.

8 D Verhoeven, et al., 'Controlling for Openness in the Male-Dominated Collaborative Networks of the Global Film Industry', *PLoS ONE*, 15:6 (2020), e0234460; B Bagilhole, 'An Analysis of Male Cultural Hegemony in Senior Management in UK Academia', *Investigaciones Feministas*, 7:2 (2016), 9-23; R Clucas, and K Sharpe, 'Women Bishops, Equality, Rights and Disarray', *Ecclesiastical Law Journal*, 15:2 (2013), 158-174.

9 M Miki, 'A Church with Newly-Opened Doors: The Ordination of Women Priests in The Anglican Episcopal of Japan', *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 44:1 (2017), 37-54; U Froschauer, 'South African Women Ministers' Experiences of Gender Discrimination in the Lutheran Church: A Discourse Analysis', *Feminist Theology*, 22:2 (2014), 133-143.

gender-biased practices become entrenched as socially-sanctioned traditions, making it more challenging for women to access the same career opportunities and advancements as their male counterparts.

Religion and Gender Equality

In more secular societies and organizations, women seem to enjoy greater power, status, (including leadership positions) and freedoms in both the personal and professional spheres.¹⁰ Conversely, some research suggests that societies with a strong emphasis on religion may seem to impose on women lower societal and familial status and greater restrictions in lifestyle choices and freedoms.¹¹ Some religious workplaces may also impose certain gendered restrictions on their female staff.¹² Such restrictions may include limitations on career mobility, access to leadership opportunities, and gendered task allocations.

For instance, women in Protestant Christian ministry may find themselves likelier to be assigned to children's ministries, while males tend to occupy positions in higher church leadership.¹³ This reflects part of the Danvers Statement that 'some governing and teaching roles within the church are restricted to men'¹⁴ (e.g., The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood [cbmw], 1988). Perhaps as a consequence of the above, gender disparities in pay and career advancement opportunities (such as those noted by Yih, Miki, and Rois et al.,)¹⁵ remain a feature of conservative churches and denominations worldwide.

10 M Mujinga, 'Rising Against All Odds: An Analysis of the Leadership Experience of Three Female Clergy in the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe', *Hervormde Teologiese Studies*, 76:2 (2020), e1–e10; see also J Acker, 'From glass ceiling to inequality regimes', *Sociologie Du Travail*, 21:2 (2009), 199–217.

11 A Forman-Rabinovici, and U Sommer, 'An Impediment to Gender Equality?: Religion's Influence on Development and Reproductive Policy', *World Development*, 105 (2018), 48–58; see also H Rizzo, A Abdel-Latif, and K Meyer, 'The Relationship Between Gender Equality and Democracy: A Comparison of Arab Versus Non-Arab Muslim Societies', *Sociology*, 41:6 (2007), 1151–1170.

12 M Miki, 'A Church with Newly-Opened Doors: The Ordination of Women Priests in the Anglican Episcopal of Japan', *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 44:1 (2017), 37–54; see also M.K.M Chung, *Chinese Women in Christian Ministry: An Intercultural Study* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2005).

13 C Yih, 'Gender Disenfranchisement in Hong Kong Churches', *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*, 29:1 (2023), 28–44.

14 'The Danvers Statement', The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, November 1988.

15 J Rois, D Rixon, and A Faseruk, 'Organizational Perspectives on Stained Glass Ceilings for Female Bishops in the Anglican Communion: A Case Study of the Church of England', *Journal of Business Diversity*, 13:1/2 (2013), 23–39.

The Current Study

Through a comprehensive analysis of the literature, it was revealed that numerous studies have investigated the perceived gender (in)equality within the church, along with the gender-related beliefs and biblical interpretations intertwined with it. However, only a smaller number of studies have specifically explored the role of these beliefs and interpretations in shaping the support or absence thereof for the ordination of women in Anglican ministry. Additionally, the authors did not find any studies that specifically focused on the context of the Anglican Church of Singapore.

The present study explored the accounts of eight members of the Anglican Church in Singapore to understand and examine their biblical and gender beliefs, the interrelationship between both, and how these influenced the individual's perception of and support for or resistance towards the appointment of female bishops.

Research Questions

This study's overarching research question and two gender-specific sub-questions are:

1. How do Anglicans in Singapore perceive the appointment of female bishops?
 - a. Are there differences in attitudes towards the appointment of female bishops?
 - b. What kinds of gender beliefs affect a subject's attitude towards appointing female bishops?

Method and Design

Driven by the exploratory nature of the current study, a qualitative design utilizing semi-structured interviews was adopted to allow for broader and more in-depth explorations of participants' attitudes towards women bishop appointments and the reasons behind them.

Participants

Considering the potentially controversial nature of the topic, purposive snowball sampling was used to recruit participants. This approach helped to

encourage more open and effective researcher-participant communication due to connections to mutually-known others.¹⁶ While more parishioners were willing to speak with the researcher off the record without being cited, only eight agreed to participate fully.

Participants consisted equally of males and females. All were racially Chinese and, except for one, identified as solely Anglican. Except for a participant in his early twenties, the other interviewees were aged between 30s to 60s. Seven participants were lay parishioners. The duration of Anglican Church membership ranged from three to sixty-two years, and church attendance ranged from occasional to twice-weekly.

Procedure

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five participants in-person at locations of the participants' choosing. Due to participant preferences and time availability, three datasets were collected via emailed questionnaires, with further email correspondence carried out as needed for clarifications. Interviews lasted approximately thirty to sixty minutes. Interview techniques employed included using silence, observation of non-verbal communication, improvisation and prompting and funnelling to encourage synchronous communication and obtain more detailed data for analysis. To ensure a degree of thematic similarity across interviews, interviews were broadly structured into four parts. Interviewer flexibility and discretion were employed as necessary in accordance with participants' responses.

The first comprised questions regarding participants' beliefs about women and gender roles, focusing on attitudes towards gender-equal career and educational opportunities, household roles and responsibilities, and perceived trait differences in each sex's tendency for emotionality and rationality. The second comprised questions regarding participants' attitudes towards the appointment of the United Kingdom's first female bishop in 2015. Prior to interview commencement, the circumstances surrounding the appointment were briefly explained, and a short news article was provided for participants' further information.

The third section probed participants' attitudes towards the hypothetical appointments of female bishops in Singapore (e.g., willingness to accept and support female bishops within local Anglican churches in general and within

¹⁶ M Naderifar, H Goli, and F Ghaljaie, 'Snowball Sampling: A Purposeful Method of Sampling in Qualitative Research', *Strides in Development of Medical Education*, 14:3 (2017), e67670.

their own church). Participants' perceptions of gender equality in the current spiritual leadership of their church were also explored. The final portion of the interview gathered relevant demographic information (e.g., denomination, age).

Post-interview, recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim in order to facilitate data analysis. Due to one participant's refusal to allow her interview to be audio-recorded, her interview notes and quotes were used (with her consent) in place of a transcription.

Analysis

Thematic analysis was performed according to guidelines by Braun and Clarke¹⁷ and Fereday and Muir-Cochran.¹⁸ Preliminary recurring patterns were noted while reading and re-reading transcripts and listening to interview recordings. Thematic codes were then identified through systematically coding relevant data into broader classifications (e.g., career opportunities, distribution of household responsibilities) and merged into emergent themes. These were grouped into salient superordinate themes, providing a comprehensive and relevant representation of participants' collective experiences and opinions.

Ethical Approval

Ethical approval was sought and granted prior to study commencement by the governing university Human Research Ethics Committee.

Findings

Please refer to the appendix (Table 1) for a summary of themes.

¹⁷ V Braun, and V Clarke, 'Using thematic analysis in psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3 (2006), 77–101.

¹⁸ J Fereday, and E Muir-Cochran, 'Demonstrating Rigor Using Thematic Analysis: A Hybrid Approach of Inductive and Deductive Coding and Theme Development', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 5:1 (2015), 80–92.

Context and Gender Beliefs

The first superordinate theme states that context influences the impact of biblical interpretations and beliefs on an individual's gender beliefs. It consists of two emergent sub-themes. The first emergent theme stipulates that a meritocratic approach to education, training and career advancement should be adopted in the secular workplace. This first sub-theme was universally echoed among participants. All cited their belief in the importance of gender equality in the secular world as key reasons for a meritocratic approach.

I think whether it's a man or woman, anyone appointed in a senior position should have the qualifications, the ability, the giftings as well as the training. And whether it's a man or woman, the best person suited for the job should have the necessary qualities ... As far as I'm concerned, I don't think there should be any discrimination against women holding high positions.

PT: D

A universal trend across all participants was that gender should be of little importance in the appointments of individuals in higher- and high-level positions. All participants cited non-gender-related factors (e.g., an individual's competence and qualifications) as key considerations and criteria for appointments to higher-level positions. Furthermore, out of the four male participants interviewed, two expressed their willingness to work under a female manager. The collected data indicated that in a meritocratic secular workplace, there is little if any, support for gender-biased glass ceilings and escalators.

In the current day and age, depriving one of the opportunities to succeed in life for no good reason reflects a mindset of a person who has yet to understand the impact of these two factors (glass ceilings and escalators) to empower someone for the future ... A (glass) ceiling in a company would indicate that one gender is more capable than the other. The company would have missed (out) on the possibilities and opportunities that another party may bring to the table.

PT: G

Additionally, the data indicated an acknowledgement of and subscription to some of the gender roles and differences embedded in social norms and gender stereotypes. Some participants expressed a complementarian-leaning view

that such gender differences in traits lead to (assumed) gender differences in areas of professional ability and proficiency and that, in working together, men and women may be able to compensate for each other's limitations effectively.

(Men) do not think of a lot of other 'sidetrack' things like what happens if I do this?... Whereas women, they are not so rational because there is a lot of what-if ... Perhaps maybe what the man cannot think (of), the woman can help. I think it's easier in this manner (with) men and women.

PT: A

Women are generally more sensitive and emotional. God made men and women different so that we are able to fulfil His purposes.

PT: G

This universal support for a gender-neutral meritocratic approach to professional appointments was not wholly transferred to the faith-based workplace. This was reflected in the second emergent theme: In the religious workplace, women should be subject to men's leadership. Almost half of the participants (two males, one female) professed their subscription to the belief that, in the Anglican faith-based workplace, female employees should be subject to and not rise above male leadership. Two of them expressed support for the appointments of female bishops, provided that she remains subject to the authority of a male archbishop.

They say that (the) man has to have the authority ... (If) there's somebody above the bishop, then I think it's okay for the lady to be a bishop.

PT: A

As long as they (women bishops) come under the authority of a male, I do not think there is a problem ... I will have a problem if she is the only leader, no one else above her, then I think there will be a problem as far as I'm concerned.

PT: D

The third remaining participant expressed support for women in spiritual leadership but stipulated that the higher positions (e.g., bishop) should be filled only by men.

Certain things like administration, finance, anything pertaining to the church except the pulpit should be shared with women. It doesn't mean

the woman cannot go to the pulpit. She can go to the pulpit to preach; she can do everything. But for her to be the bishop, I don't agree. They can be a vicar; they can be a reverend. There are so many designations. Vector, vicar, priests, pastors and all that they can take up. But when it comes to the bishop position, it must be a man. I have no qualms about a female pastor, and I still listen to them. When they give the word from the pulpit, I still listen to them. They are not inferior to men. But not as a bishop.

PT: C

Contrastingly, there seemed to be greater transferability in four of the remaining five participants' support of a gender-neutral meritocratic system of appointments from the secular workplace to an Anglican faith-based work environment.

If the appointment was based on sound judgment and (in) alignment to what God had carved out leadership to be from the Bible, I would (support the appointment of a female bishop).

PT: G

Although only by a small margin, more female participants (three) unconditionally supported the appointments of female bishops than male participants (two). Only one participant (a male) expressed a completely neutral stance towards the appointment of female bishops.

Doesn't matter if that person is male or female as long as it doesn't violate human rights of non-believers and all that ... As long as my rights are not violated, it doesn't matter whether the bishop in the church, in my church, even if it directly affects me, is male or female

PT: E

Overall, there appears to be a significant contextual disconnect in almost half of the participants' perceptions and beliefs regarding female leadership and workplace gender equality. Reasons for this disconnect may be better explained and understood when considering the second superordinate theme.

Biblical Beliefs, Church Traditions and Support for Female Bishops

The second superordinate theme states that biblical interpretations and beliefs, and church traditions influence an individual's support for the appointment

of female bishops. It comprises two emergent themes. The first states that biblical interpretations and beliefs influence an individual's gender beliefs. This was explored within the context of gender roles in the household and the concept of wifely submission to the husband. This area of focus was chosen in light of the Danvers Statement's exhortation for wives to provide 'willing, joyful submission'.¹⁹

Out of eight participants, only one (male) expressed a lack of support for the concept of wifely obedience, citing that it was "unfair" (pt: E). This same participant had previously been the only one to express a gender-neutral stance towards the appointment of female bishops.

All of the remaining seven participants expressed agreement with the belief that husbands should be the heads of households and that wives should submit to them. All seven participants also stipulated that wifely obedience should not encompass "blind submission" (pt: F). Rather, the consensus was that wifely obedience should only be carried out in a manner aligned with what was perceived by these participants as biblical standards of morality and behaviour.

As long as the husband is fulfilling his responsibilities by providing love and care to the family and all or most of the household expenses, by nature, he is the head of the family, and the wife should not run the house against the wishes of the husband. If there is any difference of opinion, they should seek compromise. Otherwise, it would lead to strife and conflict, which is detrimental to family unity, peace, and comfort. In this sense, the word "obey" is not insulting and is in accordance with (the) law of nature and the Bible. It is not blind obedience to a sinful husband.

PT: F

Obedience is fine with certain qualifications. In the Bible, it is stated that a man is the head of the household and the woman is to obey and trust. But obedience is dependent on the Bible in that it must be in accordance with biblical principles. If it is not, then the woman should not obey.

PT: B

These seven participants also expressed that wifely submission to the husband is not unconditional but should be paired with "love" and, as expressed by two female participants, mutual obedience from the husband.

¹⁹ 'The Danvers Statement', *The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, November 1988.

Men also have to obey. Because obey is like respect. To me, obey is a (kind of) respect. It's because you respect, that's why you obey. Otherwise, you won't go and obey.

PT: A

Both male and female participants clarified that a wife's submission would hinge upon a husband's conduct, adding that the latter should be according to biblical instructions on how husbands should "love (their) wives" (Ephesians 5:25). This concept of wifely (female) submission to the husband (male) may, to an extent, explain the contextual disconnect in participants' beliefs regarding female leadership and workplace gender equality noted in the first superordinate theme. This disconnect is reflected in the second emergent theme (for this superordinate theme), which states that biblical interpretations and beliefs influence an individual's beliefs about how a household and, subsequently, how a church should be led.

As mentioned, two participants communicated a hinging of their support for the appointments of female bishops upon the condition that they remain subject to male leadership, while one participant expressed a total lack of support for the appointments of females to higher spiritual leadership positions. All three explained their lack of support for females in high or topmost spiritual leadership positions by expressing that, just as males are heads of households, males should similarly occupy positions of highest authority in churches. Of the three, one further cited church and biblical traditions.

They always find that a man should head a congregation. Just like a man should head in the family.

PT: A.

No, I won't (support a female bishop appointment) ... I think the head of the church should still be male, and he should lead, just like his forefathers and everything. A man should lead the church ... Nowhere in the Bible does it say that the woman should be a bishop. The Bible says (women) should serve and stay behind and listen to the man ... I think that although women are given opportunities in career, in everything but when it comes to the church, I think it should still be a man ... In a sense, women are equal, but when it comes to this religious matter, like the church, it should be a man. We should follow the traditions of the old in this respect. Women, though they're chosen by God to be man's partner, to be (his) helper, but for this particular type of profession, I think men should still lead the church. Not only now, from the days of old right up

till now, we have seen the men leading the church. So why all of a sudden have a woman as a bishop?... Tradition is based on the Bible, you see. The bible tradition. More the bible tradition than man's tradition, you see. Everything done by the Church is according to the Bible, the teaching of the Bible. So for that, we must not deviate from what we have been doing in the past.

PT: C

The four participants who expressed support for female bishop appointments similarly cited church and biblical traditions as some of the key reasons for what they perceived as resistance, by other Anglicans, towards ordaining women into higher spiritual leadership positions. Contrastingly, they perceived all-male leadership as merely a cultural norm of biblical times rather than a biblical command to only ordain male spiritual leaders.

There is nothing in the Bible that specifically prohibits women from becoming bishops and priests. Everybody is capable. Possible reasons why some may not accept female bishops include the appointments of only men as apostles in the Bible while female biblical figures were largely ignored.

PT: B

The leaders of the church could have recognized that the person appointed (the Most Revd. Libby Lane) was God's intended leader for that time and realized the need to change.

PT: G

Of the two participants who required female spiritual leaders to be subject to male leadership, one also cited his belief in female susceptibility to being deceived when acting without male leadership and protection. This sentiment was not expressed during the discussion of appointments of women to higher and topmost leadership positions in the secular workplace.

In my understanding of scripture, women, when they stand alone, according to (the apostle) Paul, they are more prone to deception. They need the leadership of the male as a covering over her. So as long as she willingly submits to a male leader above her, she is safe. This is nothing to do with her capability or her incapability. This is more to do with the spiritual dynamic that a woman is more susceptible to deception.

PT: D

Overall, the key influencing factors that affect an individual participant's decision to support or oppose the appointments of female bishops comprise the following: Biblical interpretations and beliefs, the gender beliefs that occur as a result of those interpretations and beliefs, as well as the degree of subscription to current church ministry traditions and practices.

Equality and Gender-Blindness in Evaluation Standards

The third superordinate theme reflects the participants' view that once elected, the same moral and religious standards and expectations should judge both female and male bishops. This was universally agreed upon among all participants, citing that the same professional duties should merit the same evaluation standards and support regardless of gender.

Doesn't matter if you are male or female. If you believe in this religion, then you have the same moral guidelines as set by the Bible. So, they should be held to the same (moral guidelines). It's still the Ten Commandments; it's still the same Saviour. So, they should be held accountable for the same things that they do ... Unless if you say the person is a religious leader, is a higher-ranking religious leader, then they'll be held to a stricter standard.

PT: E

If, I say if, there were a female bishop ... I will give the same loyalty, the same everything to her just as a male bishop ... I agree that if selected, I will give them the support, give her the support and everything.

PT: C

Overall, this finding of universal agreement among participants that bishops should be judged equally regardless of sex suggests that although gender equality in higher Anglican spiritual leadership may be controversial and potentially hard-won (if won), many individuals may be likelier to accept a woman bishop as equal to a male bishop at least in terms of adopting gender-equal religious and moral standards.

Discussion and Salient Findings

A recurring view among participants was that a man should have the highest authority in the household and the church and that, in both contexts, women

and girls must remain subject to male leadership. These findings corresponded with those obtained in other studies across international and denominational borders. In their review of the House of Laity's initial decision to reject a draft allowing the ordination of women bishops in the Church of England, Clucas and Sharpe recognized the influence of the Anglican religious right's patriarchal and heteronormative values that 'construct women as inferior to men' and its 'tradition and conservative interpretations of scripture'²⁰ that contributed to such views. Similarly, though the Lutheran Church in South Africa allows the ordination of women into ministry, Froschauer²¹ found that patriarchal, cultural, and church norms contributed to continued gender discrimination against women ministers from both parishioners and male spiritual leaders. This study's participants further viewed their gender beliefs as influenced by their biblical interpretations and beliefs; aligning with findings by Seguino that Protestant Christians tended to have 'more gender inequitable attitudes'²² than non-religious groups.

Another recurrent finding is that of conditionally supporting female bishops by simultaneously requiring that they be subject to the leadership of a male archbishop. This stance addresses the disconnect between some parishioners' simultaneous beliefs in secular gender equality and religious male authority, allowing them to tread the middle ground between both. The consequences of this middle ground are perhaps best described by Soothill's argument that while women 'may exercise spiritual 'agency', they do so within a set of institutional and discursive structures which limit and constrain their actions'.²³

Traditional Gender Roles, Complementarianism and Egalitarianism

Gender attitudes within the church can be broadly categorized into the categories of traditionalism, complementarianism, and egalitarianism. The former two tend to prescribe, subscribe to and adhere to a gender hierarchy that

²⁰ R Clucas, and K Sharpe, 'Women bishops, equality, rights and disarray', *Ecclesiastical Law Journal*, 15:2 (2013), 68.

²¹ U Froschauer, "'South African Women Ministers' Experiences of Gender Discrimination in the Lutheran Church: A Discourse Analysis', *Feminist Theology*, 22:2 (2014), 133-143.

²² S Seguino, 'Help or Hindrance? Religion's Impact on Gender Inequality in Attitudes and Outcomes', *World Development*, 39:8 (2011), 1313.

²³ J. E Soothill, 'The Problem with Women's Empowerment: Female Religiosity in Ghana's Charismatic Churches', *Studies in World Christianity*, 16:1 (2010), 96.

is perceived as ‘applicable in both home and religious contexts, in which males lead, and females follow’.²⁴ Some individuals may further interpret women’s need for male leadership as stemming from a view that ‘(women’s) nature is “defective” in some way – e.g., irrational or weak’. Scripture verses commonly cited to support this view include I Corinthians 14:34–35 (‘Women should remain silent in the churches ...’), and I Timothy 2:12 (‘I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man ...’). Contrastingly, egalitarianism ‘advocates the equality of all humankind, thus opposing any kind of hierarchy in the home, church, or society’.²⁵ Commonly-cited verses in support of this stance include Galatians 3:28 (‘There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus’).

As voiced by the participants in this study, an individual’s attitude towards gender and gender roles may be social context-dependent, and shifting across a spectrum of views between the endpoints of traditionalism/complementarianism and egalitarianism. As some participants noted, in the eyes of the religiously conservative, it might not seem or feel fair to them to conclude that religiosity leads to the diminishment of gender equality. For instance, subjective personal conceptualizations of gender equality continue to render it a term with varying definitions.²⁶ To some, gender equality may mean equality in action and ‘equal and comparable rights and resources to progress’²⁷ unimpeded by gender roles and stereotypes. To some in religious and conservative circles, gender equality may mean equality in value (e.g., an Anglican Church may refuse female spiritual leadership but still rely upon its women employees for its day-to-day running or continuation of its children’s ministries).

Furthermore, although largely Christian, Sweden and Finland are among the world’s most gender-equal countries.²⁸ There is also a disparity in Anglican ordination practices worldwide, perhaps due to the influence of the social and cultural context of each Anglican Church’s respective host country. Unlike their counterparts in Singapore, Japan and South Korea, the Anglican Churches in England, Canada, and Australia have appointed women into

²⁴ L. S. Peña, S. F. Macaluso, and G. Bailey, ‘The Attitudes Toward Gender Roles in Conservative Christian Contexts Scale: A Psychometric Assessment’, *Review of Religious Research*, 58:1 (2016), 166.

²⁵ Peña, Macaluso, and Bailey, ‘The Attitudes Toward Gender Roles in Conservative Christian Contexts Scale’, 167.

²⁶ J. Thurlow, ‘The ‘Great Offender’: Feminists and the Campaign for Women’s Ordination’, *Women’s History Review*, 23:3 (2014), 480–499.

²⁷ C. Yih, ‘Gender Disenfranchisement in Hong Kong Churches’, *Asian Journal of Women’s Studies*, 29:1 (2023), 28.

²⁸ ‘Gender inequality index’, United Nations, 2022.

the positions of both bishop and archbishop. This suggests that rather than religion as a standalone factor, gender inequality arises out of a social context that influences the treatment and subjective conceptualization of women as inferior to men.²⁹ However, a nation's cultural and social context is often influenced by its faith.³⁰ Religion thus has a significant influence on a society's propensity for gender (in)equality.

Church Policy Implications

Though independent and autonomous from the Church of England, the Anglican Church of Singapore's history and founding remain linked to the former.³¹ Despite significant cultural differences between both countries, within the confines of the Anglican Church and the debate on female bishop appointments, various common arguments seem to resonate across both sides. Major opposing concerns include the theological controversy surrounding female (higher) spiritual leadership and its contradiction of gendered church leadership traditions.³² Similarly, arguments in favour of female bishop appointments cite biblical interpretations that do not prohibit women from becoming bishops and the need for gender equality in the Church.³³ This suggests that should the ordination of women bishops be more strongly debated and (perhaps) eventually enacted in Singapore, gender-related theological issues similar to those that occurred in the Church of England may occur locally.

This study's findings suggest that one strategy for the navigation of such issues may be to provide parishioners with the reassurance of their respective

29 S.D Gurieva, T.V Kazantseva, L.V Mararitsa, and O.E Gundelakh, 'Social Perceptions of Gender Differences and the Subjective Significance of the Gender Inequality Issue', *Psychology in Russia*, 15:2 (2022), 65–82; see also H Rizzo, A Abdel-Latif, and K Meyer, 'The Relationship Between Gender Equality and Democracy: A Comparison of Arab Versus Non-Arab Muslim Societies', *Sociology*, 41:6 (2007), 1151–1170.

30 P Dahal, S.K Joshi, and K Swahnberg, 'A Qualitative Study on Gender Inequality and Gender-Based Violence in Nepal', *bmc Public Health*, 22 (2022), 2005; see also V. A Harrison, 'Modern Women, Traditional Abrahamic Religions and Interpreting Sacred Texts', *Feminist Theology*, 15 (2007), 145–159.

31 K. A Loh, *Fifty Years of the Anglican Church in Singapore Island: 1909–1959* (Singapore: The Department of History, University of Singapore, 1963).

32 R Clucas, and K Sharpe, 'Women Bishops, Equality, Rights and Disarray', *Ecclesiastical Law Journal*, 15:2 (2013), 158–174.

33 B. Lindahl, 'The Importance of Gender Equality in Religious Societies', *Nordic Labour Journal* (2015); see also J Thurlow, 'The "Great Offender": Feminists and the Campaign for Women's Ordination', *Women's History Review*, 23:3 (2014), 480–499.

church's autonomous support of such appointments. However, to warrant the necessary church and public attention for change to take place, greater public discussion of the ordination of women into higher spiritual leadership positions must first occur within the Church, for example, among parishioners as a possible initiative for bottom-up change, and among both male and female clergy as a possible means of generating and maintaining support for such changes on a top-down basis.

Future Research

The current study and its findings should be read with an awareness of its limitations. These include the relatively small sample group consisting of individuals from two separate congregations. Additionally, while the gender spread was even, most participants were aged between 30s to 60s.

Secondly, it was noted that this study's youngest participant (23 years old) was neutral towards female bishop appointments, citing his view that sex is not a viable criterion of bishop selection. This participant's dataset was considered an outlier based on his responses and demographic profile. However, his views may be recurrent among parishioners of a similar demographic. An exploration of the gender perceptions and attitudes of Anglicans in this demographic may indicate generational differences between older and younger parishioners (e.g., greater liberalism or traditionalism) and the impact of such differences on the potential for greater gender equality and representation in Anglican Church leadership in Singapore.

Additionally, parishioners indicated they would be likelier to support female bishops if they received clear indications of autonomous acceptance and support from their church leaders. As such, another area of possible future research would be to explore the perceptions and attitudes of current Anglican Church leadership towards female bishop appointments. This may offer an insider's view of the current climate of gender equality in the Anglican Church and an indication of the current potential for change from within the Church.

Conclusion

This study sought to explore the connection between one's gender and biblical beliefs and the resulting impact on one's attitude towards women in higher church leadership. Within the identified themes, there appeared to be a prevalent reflection among some participants regarding the challenge

of harmonizing the pursuit of greater gender equality in leadership positions within the Anglican Church with the simultaneous adherence to traditionalist or complementarian values. These participants seemed to attempt to address this disharmony through the belief that female bishops should be placed under the authority of male archbishops. One possible resulting implication of this (e.g., as a widespread view among the Anglicans in Singapore) would include the continued exclusion, within Singapore-based Anglican Churches, of women from archbishop selection on the basis of sex - Although such an approach may raise the height of the existing (stained) glass ceiling, it nonetheless leaves it intact to the cost of women in ministry. Given this study's exploratory nature, a larger-scale study with a wider sample (e.g., as suggested in the preceding section) may help to ascertain some of the themes uncovered in this study.

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Appendix

table 1 Superordinate and emergent themes

Superordinate themes	Emergent themes
1. Context influences the impact of biblical interpretations and beliefs on an individual's gender beliefs.	A. In the secular workplace, a meritocratic approach to education, training and career advancement should be adopted. B. In the religious workplace, women should be subject to men's leadership and should not rise above men.
2. Biblical interpretations and beliefs and church traditions influence an individual's support for the appointment of female bishops.	C. Biblical interpretations and beliefs influence an individual's gender beliefs. D. Biblical interpretations and beliefs influence an individual's beliefs about how a household should be led and subsequently, how a church should be led.
3. There should be equality in the moral and religious measures and standards used to judge both female and male bishops.	E. Once elected, female bishops should be judged by the same moral and religious standards and expectations as male bishops
