

## BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS

**ARNEY, Reverend (“Betty”) Elizabeth E.** (1932 – ). The first woman to become a priest in the Anglican Church of Australia. Ordained with nine other women at St. George’s Cathedral, Perth, on Saturday, 7 March 1992.

Betty was educated at Presbyterian Ladies College (Perth). She worked as a secretary and was involved in charity work before marrying architect Peter Arney in 1955. Some fifteen years later when the youngest of her four sons started school Betty was able to begin studying fine arts part-time, completing a diploma in painting and sculpture in 1974. Although she had been brought up as a Christian it was not until her eldest son travelled to India that Christianity “jelled” for her. She was worried about him travelling alone, prayed for his safety, and began reading Indian philosophy to understand his spiritual quest. This led her to embark upon a Bachelor of Arts degree in Theology at Murdoch University which she completed in 1990.

Betty was appointed as a deacon to the Anglican Church in 1991. Women had been granted permission to assist male priests in the role of deacons since 1986. They were allowed to read the holy scriptures in church, administer the sacraments, preach and teach, but they were not permitted to give the absolution or blessing, consecrate the sacraments, or hear confessions. Anglican congregations quickly adapted to being ministered to by women. Occasionally, however, the new recruits had to endure somewhat misogynistic treatment at the hands of the male clergy. Betty’s case was illustrative. Her first placement as a deacon was from 1991 to 1992 in the parish of Leeming. This was a newly developed suburb of Perth which did not have a church building. Consequently, the congregation worshipped in a recreation centre. The parish priest begrudgingly agreed to accept Betty in her assigned role of assistant curate, but refused to allow her any space in the clergy office. This meant she had to work out of her car and use the toilet of a local shopping centre.

In the meantime, however, the movement for the ordination of women priests had been gathering momentum. Moreover, there were those among the male clergy who were actively supporting the women in their aspirations. Among them was the Archbishop of Perth, the Most Reverend Dr. Peter Carnley (later to become Primate of the Anglican Church in Australia).

By the beginning of 1992 Dr Carnley had accepted ten women candidates for ordination. One week before the event was scheduled to take place, however, a group of conservatives in the eastern states led by the former Dean of Perth, Canon David Robarts, and QC Ian Spry of Melbourne took out an interim injunction in the Supreme Court of Western Australia restraining the Archbishop from ordaining the women. It was nearly five o’clock on the Friday night of 6 March when the presiding Judge Kerry White gave his verdict upholding the right of Archbishop Carnley to proceed with the ordination. The women, who were in seclusion on a five day pre-ordination retreat, had been left in limbo not knowing whether their ordination would go ahead. Nonetheless, most were quietly confident that things would unfold according to God’s will. They had continued to prepare themselves in prayer and by practising giving the sacraments. When a telephone call came through informing them of the outcome of the court case the women exploded into a spontaneous cheer and then said a prayer of thanks.

The events leading up to the ordination of the first women priests in the Anglican Church had generated considerable interest in the press. The ordination was reported both nationally and internationally, including a cover story that appeared in *The Bulletin* magazine (April 1992, p 36f) containing several photographs of Betty and the other women. Unfortunately, however, her joy and triumph at being ordained a priest was again marred by an unsupportive male colleague. In February 1992 Betty had been assigned to work in the Como-Manning parish with a priest who had made it quite clear to her that he was against women's ordination and the working environment was, to say the least, tense. During the Sunday service after the first women's ordination he pointedly avoided making any mention to the congregation that his female colleague had been ordained to the priesthood the previous day. When a television cameraman who had been assigned to cover a newly-ordained women priest officiating at her first Sunday communion service turned up he was smartly sent packing by the male churchwarden.

After enduring several months of antagonism Betty requested to be moved to another parish. She was then appointed to the parish of Murdoch-Winthrop, and part-time Chaplain at Murdoch University. Here she was accepted collegially and warmly welcomed by the parishioners. She continued serving at Murdoch-Winthrop Parish until 1997 when she resigned, and later that same year, retired due to ill health. In 1999 she began working as a chaplain with Silver Chain Hospice Service. A few months later, however, ill-health precluded Betty from continuing in active ministry altogether.

The first women priests were true pioneers in the Anglican Church, paving the way for a number of other women who were to follow in their footsteps.