

FAQ's on Constance Coltman

Did Constance go through an interview like the one in the film?

None of Constance's personal papers or diaries have survived. The interview with Dr Selbie is based on creative imagination supported by research. At the time, theological college principals were free to choose students without a formal assessment process. The first mention of her application in the records of Mansfield College, Oxford, is when Dr Selbie brings her name to the Education Committee in 1913 as an incoming student. Two referees are named, both Presbyterian Church of England ministers. In the 1980s, 15 years after her mother's death, Constance's daughter Irene commented that her mother had always had a strong and definite sense of God's call to ordained ministry.

Are the worries about women's ministry mentioned in the film accurate?

Audibility: Press reports at the time show that many people were unsure whether a woman's voice would be audible. Considering the size of many church buildings then, and the absence of microphones and sound systems, this might seem reasonable. In fact it is a typical example of the way practical obstacles often get placed in the way of women, and others too.

Chaperones: Constance came from an affluent, upper middle class background. Dr Selbie might have feared she was totally unprepared to engage independently with men and women of all kinds and backgrounds, as ministry would require of her. Referring to a chaperone would be one way to see how confident she was. Questions about women's personal strength in ministry are still posed.

Deaconesses: The suggestion that women might be better as deaconesses keeps recurring. In the mid 1930s a Congregational Union of England and Wales report recommended a national deaconess order. This never happened but a small number of women served as deaconesses in local churches. A deaconess may be seen as less threatening than an ordained minister because her focus is on pastoral work, rather than the public leadership, preaching and teaching role of a minister. In the 1950s and 60s the women Home Missionaries from St Paul's House in Liverpool were given less academic training than a minister and sent to work in challenging settings. This was another form of women's service which was seen by some people at the time as less demanding than ordained ministry, easier to train for and perhaps more suitable for women.

Was Dr Selbie a supporter of women's ministry?

Dr Selbie was a strong supporter, which is why he is shown testing Constance's response under pressure. When he retired as principal of Mansfield College in the 1930s he wrote in positive terms about the women students who had studied there. His prediction was that they would always have limited opportunities in local ministry but would be valued in schools, education and abroad.

Why did Dr Selbie not attend Constance's ordination?

This remains a mystery. Dr Selbie may have had reservations about proper processes. The small church at Darby Street, which did not have its own church meeting, was receiving Constance and Claud as its ministers through a decision of the Kings Weigh House church meeting. Was this appropriate? It was unclear whether the London Congregational Union had been properly consulted before the ordination. Was the ordination therefore invalid? Dr Selbie may have wanted to protect Constance from accusations that her ordination should not be recognised. Either way, when an induction service took place for Constance at Darby Street in December 1917, giving retrospective

blessing to what had happened in September, he did attend. There is no record of Claud being inducted three months later, which raises other questions.

Where did Congregationalism in England and Wales stand on women's ordination at this time?

The Congregational Union of England and Wales had discussed this question in 1909 following a letter from the East Glamorgan Congregational Association. This asked whether the female leader of a Cardiff congregation could be ordained, as the local church wished. Two CUEW committees investigated the principle of women's ordination and recommended that any woman who fulfilled the same requirements for ministerial training as a man could be ordained. This provoked opposition in the CUEW Council, the idea was shelved, and the press were asked not to report the matter. Dr Selbie had been a member of the joint committee that recommended women's ordination in 1909, though not present when it was discussed. He may have been looking for someone to test the Church's potential support for this, eight years later.

What do we know of Constance's earlier story?

She was born Constance Todd, in Putney, west London, in 1889 – the eldest of four children. Her father was Scottish and a civil servant. Her mother (whose brother became Sir John Reeves Ellerman the wealthy head of the Ellerman shipping line) had trained as a doctor but not practised as one due to a disabling accident. The family belonged to the Presbyterian Church of England. Constance was educated at St Felix's School in Southwold and her parents encouraged her love of learning. She studied history at Somerville College, Oxford before training for ministry at Mansfield College.

What do we know about her ministry in the East End?

There is very little evidence about this, apart from occasional references in the minute books of the Kings Weigh House Church. For the first year of their ministry at Darby Street she and Claud lived in a terraced house near to the Docks, in a street which was probably less impoverished than the Cable Street area around the church. By 1920 they had moved to an address in north west London, suggesting that the East End living conditions were proving difficult. This would be no surprise as Constance had grown up in a privileged home and was probably quite unprepared for the poverty and deprivation in Wapping.

Where were her later ministries?

After three years at Darby Street, during which period Constance was not always active in ministry, the Coltmans had a series of joint ministries at Kilburn (1922-23); Cowley Road, Oxford (1924-32); Wolverton, Buckinghamshire (1932-40); and Haverhill, Suffolk (1940-46) before a return to the Weigh House in 1946. Constance retired in 1949. When Claud retired in 1957 they moved to Bexhill. Constance died in March 1969 and Claud in 1971.

What sort of minister was she?

Constance was a highly intelligent and thoughtful minister who was drawn to ritual and beauty in worship. She had a special interest in women and their role both within the Church and at home and often performed the baptisms and weddings in her joint ministry with Claud. In 1929 she helped to found the interdenominational Society for the Ministry of Women in the Church and supported its activities for many years. Her encouragement of younger women who felt called to ministry at home

and abroad never dimmed. In retirement she learned Swedish so as to support those women who were campaigning for ordination in the Church of Sweden.

Were the condolence letters quoted in the film really sent?

Yes. These are some of the few papers that have survived. Claud no doubt valued them greatly.

Was she really such a strong pacifist?

Yes. Throughout her life Constance supported peace movements. She joined the Fellowship of Reconciliation in 1915, as an early member, and was a vice-president of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (which also began during World War One). She and Claud marched with the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in the late 1950s and supported Christian CND.

Where did she stand on votes for women?

As a pacifist views Constance did not support aggressive campaigning methods. She was a suffragist not a suffragette.

Did the Congregational Union of England and Wales do any research into its women ministers?

Yes, in 1936 the CUEW received the findings of a Commission on the Ministry of Women, which concentrated mainly on the role of laywomen. It recommended a trained Order of Deaconesses and paid tribute to women missionaries. The 17 women ministers ordained in the CUEW since 1917, of whom 13 were in pastoral charge, had spoken positively of their ministry. Even so, there was clearly widespread reluctance by churches to consider a woman candidate when in vacancy, and several cases where women were receiving lower stipends than a man would accept. (Local churches paid the ministers direct and not all met recommended stipend levels).

In the 1960s the CUEW responded to the World Council of Churches' initiative on 'The Co-operation of Men and Women in the Church' by surveying women ministers again. Entry to training and to local ministry was now proving easier than 30 years earlier, but resistance to women in ordained ministry remained and they mainly served in smaller churches. Concerns were expressed about the loneliness and hidden, personal cost of ministry for single women in active pastoral charge. The research continues. We keep asking the questions but we don't often like the answers.

How ground breaking was Constance's ordination?

The first women ministers were ordained in the United States in the 1850s and women's church leadership was not unknown in Britain during the early 20th century. The Salvation Army had appointed women officers for over half a century. A German woman, Gertrude von Petzold, was called to be minister of a Unitarian church in Leicester in 1904. The significance of Constance Coltman lies in being the first ordained woman within a Trinitarian denomination in the UK.

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Comments on and responses to this information would be very welcome.

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