

# “I had a male chaplain, a male bishop visitor ... it galled me”



**HELEN HAMILTON, SCOTLAND'S FIRST FEMALE BISHOP**

INTERVIEWED BY REBECCA McQUILLAN

**A**RRIVING at the Normandy Hotel in Renfrew to meet the woman who is to become Scotland's first female bishop, there is a moment's anxiety. In this huge hotel, a stopover for travellers coming through Glasgow Airport, how will I tell her apart from the accountants and business executives, I wonder. Did she get my email about wearing a dog collar?

Then all doubt evaporates. Seated in a booth having a bowl of soup is a woman wearing not only a dog collar but a purple clergy shirt and striking silver cross. It has taken nearly 50 years for Hamilton to fulfil her lifelong calling to become a priest and she is not hiding her new-found identity.

Hamilton, 62, is a priest with the UK Province of the Open Episcopal Church which has few adherents when compared to the established churches but is "fast-growing", according to Hamilton.

Set up in England in 2001 at the instigation of Jonathan Blake, a former Anglican priest, it combines the Catholic creeds with a liberal attitude, calling itself "the small church with a big heart" and placing a heavy emphasis on inclusivity. The UK Open Episcopal Church, for instance, supports gay marriage.

The church came to prominence for its Post-the-host initiative in 2009, mailing out consecrated communion wafers, and for the wedding blessing Blake performed for the late reality TV star, Jade Goody.

Hamilton is currently designated by the Archbishop's Council of the UK church as bishop-elect of Scotland and is due to be formally consecrated by Blake, the archbishop, at a Highland ceremony on June 7.

Yet she does so against the backdrop of discord between the UK Province of the Open Episcopal Church and the man who already bears the title of bishop of the Open Episcopal Church in Scotland, David Gillham.

Gillham, who has been bishop since 2006, along with the Diocesan Council in Scotland, severed ties with the UK archbishop and his council last year. Hamilton will be calling herself bishop of the Open Episcopal Church while Gillham already carries the title of bishop of the Open Episcopal Church in Scotland, a confusing state of affairs for would-be adherents, to say the least.

Hamilton, though, gives no sign of quaking at the thought. For her, she says calmly, what matters is practising her ministry.

When we sit down together over coffee, she explains she always wanted to be a priest, even though in her childhood and youth it wasn't possible for women to be ordained.

"I was always radical, even as a child," she says, in the Essex accent she's retained since her schooldays. Her father, who worked for the communications technology company Marconi, and her mother, were Methodists, but their daughter was always attracted to Anglicanism. "My first memory of a sermon was a minister preaching about hell and I remember saying to my grandfather later 'that's not the God I believe in or I know'."

"My first real memory is of playing with God as a child. I was, I suppose, very fey; I had this sense of the mystery and also the companionship of God."



PICTURE: NICK PONTY

While her elder brother became a Methodist minister, Hamilton became an Anglican. "I had a strong sense of God in architecture and beauty, which you never got in the Methodist church," she recalls. "Whenever my parents lost me, they knew they'd find me in a beautiful building, preferably a church."

After qualifying as a teacher in Birmingham and working with young offenders, she started working in the psychology department of Coldingley men's prison in Surrey, assessing the capabilities of life prisoners. Then one day, the prison governor asked if she would consider applying to train as a governor.

She did, and after working briefly on the landings at Wormwood Scrubs as part of her training, went to Holloway women's prison in 1981 as assistant governor, before moving on to Dover senior boys' borstal and Canterbury men's prison as deputy governor, where she helped manage a staff of 250.

She was then approached by the chief inspector of prisons, who was seeking a woman to join the inspectorate. Hamilton started work as a prisons inspector in 1988.

Though she loved working in prisons, she was "horrified" by what she saw, such as violence and self-harm among prisoners. "The sights and smells will stay with me for the rest of my life," she reflects. "Seeing the brutality of prisoners to other prisoners was an awful shock."

Feeling she could no longer continue, she

made a life-changing decision: to enter a religious order. Embracing vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, she felt, would be an act of intercession on behalf of prisoners.

It was to prove profoundly challenging. The Anglican Community of St Mary the Virgin in Oxfordshire, which Hamilton entered in 1990, was not entirely closed but leaving the convent was highly restricted. "We wore the traditional habit, black, down to the ground, and a veil." For years, Hamilton's days consisted of manual work, prayer and study, starting at 6.15am and ending at 8.45pm with Compline, the final service of the day, followed by silence until the next morning.

The community had over 100 women, but they were ministered to by men, which was a bone of contention with Hamilton.

"It had a male chaplain, a male bishop visitor and I just ..." she hesitates, shuddering with frustration. "It galled me."

While there, the Anglican Church ruled to allow women to become priests. She asked if she could train as a priest while remaining part of the community but was told she couldn't. Eventually, after 13 years, she left.

Hamilton calls her time in a religious order "the hardest thing I ever did in my life". She says: "I can see that it contributed greatly to the person that I am now, and I value that, but it wasn't an enjoyable experience because of my personality, which is that I'm a leader. I love showing initiative and just couldn't do that."

"It certainly helped me to have tremendous sympathy for people who are in prison."

Did it make her a stronger person? She laughs. "I don't think I needed to become a stronger person," she counters. "It's fuelled the fire in me to work for the rights of people who are devalued by society. It was very hard leaving people who were my friends and almost family."

The next step was to train as a priest, but while training Hamilton says she felt the church was still at that time "hidebound about what women could do and couldn't do". She adds that she was also concerned about some of the attitudes towards gay people she came across. So she declined to seek ordination into the Anglican church.

**A**SPELL followed as warden of the cathedral and college on the Isle of Cumbrae, from which she was made redundant, and then on the suggestion of a Church of Scotland minister she became a locum minister in that church. Her first posting was South Ronaldsay and Burray, which she loved, but admits "I did find the churchmanship difficult". An Episcopalian at heart, she then heard about the Open Episcopal Church and decided to put herself forward for ordination. She was finally ordained as a priest in the Open Episcopal Church in July 2010 at St Magnus Cathedral, with many members of the Church of Scotland in attendance (as well as a lot of local golfers, Hamilton being a keen golfer herself).

Hamilton, who is not married - "I couldn't

have done what I've done if I had been" - has since moved to the Isle of Luing, near Oban. Her recent work, she says, has focused on networking across Scotland to identify people who could be leaders or priests in the young church, and trying to set up "centres of hospitality", encouraging leaders to open their homes to others. She holds services in her own home.

"I believe very firmly if we are really going to spread the good news throughout the country it's got to be done through personal hospitality and personal care," she explains. "I don't think nowadays people want to get up at 11am on a Sunday and go to church. It doesn't mean to say they don't believe, but it's not meeting their spiritual needs."

It is that flexibility that attracted Hamilton to the Open Episcopal Church.

"It's open to everybody of whatever race, sexuality, gender, no holds barred," says Hamilton.

The public schism between the UK and Scottish churches, however, means that her term will begin in difficult circumstances.

How did this rift come about? I ask. Hamilton looks pained and tells me it all happened before she was made bishop-elect. Anyone searching the term "Open Episcopal Church" and "Scotland" online, however, will bring up the website set up by Bishop Gillham, who registered the church as a charity in 2006, with its own set of trustees. A quick read makes clear the split was not an amicable one. Gillham insists any attempt by Blake and Hamilton to use the name of the Open Episcopal Church in Scotland could be an offence "if they also attempt to fool members of the public into thinking that they are the charity of the same name".

Blake, however, points out that neither he nor Hamilton have any intention of impersonating, nor any desire to be associated with, the charity, and says they have been assured by the Office of the Scottish Charities Regulator that their organisation and the charity are regarded as two separate organisations.

Hamilton, for her part, is focusing on the ministry. "I'm very excited by it," she says. "I'm not underestimating the difficulties, but I believe that God has called me to this vocation right from a child. This is part of the journey."

## LIFE AND LOVES

**Career high:** Being ordained in St Magnus Cathedral, Kirkwall.

**Career low:** Being made redundant.

**Favourite meal:** Kung po beef with cashew nuts.

**Best holiday:** When someone gave me a week on the Hebridean Princess as a present. That was so kind.

**Worst holiday:** Being taken ill in Spain with food poisoning.

**Favourite film:** Babette's Feast, by Karen Blixen.

**Favourite music:** Concerto for Two Violins in D minor by JS Bach.

**Last book read:** The Private Patient by PD James, right.

**Best personality trait:** I hope

it's a warm, outgoing personality.

**Worst personality trait:** Stubbornness.

**Biggest influence in my life:** Living for 12 years in an Anglican religious order.

**Dinner guests:** Dr Ed Kessler, founder of the Woolf Institute which works sharing faith between Muslims, Jews and



Christians; PD James; St Brendan; Susan Howatch, author; Archbishop Desmond Tutu; Archbishop Michael Ramsay; Nelson Mandela.

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