

# It Takes ONE Woman



**The Rev Dr Florence LI Tim-Oi**

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## The story of the first Anglican woman priest

On 5 May 1907 a baby was about to be born in the fishing village of Aberdeen on Hong Kong island. Its gender was not known. Boy babies were highly prized. At that time, in that culture, a bowl of ash could be at hand to smother unwanted new-born girls. This baby was wanted. Her Christian father, a doctor turned headteacher, was delighted with the gift of a daughter and called her Tim-Oi, 'Much Beloved'. Thus began a chain of events which has changed the Church. It took ONE woman to do so.

Tim-Oi completed her primary schooling at 14, but with five brothers and two sisters there were no funds for her further schooling until she was 21. She was 27 before she left school. While a student she joined an Anglican church, and at her baptism took the Christian name Florence, because her birth-month, May, is a month of flowers, and because she admired Florence Nightingale (little knowing then that the Church

had spurned her heroine's vocation to the priesthood).

In 1931 while still at school, Tim-Oi was at the ordination in Hong Kong cathedral of an English deaconess. The Chinese preacher asked if there was a Chinese girl also willing to sacrifice herself for the Chinese church. She knelt and prayed: '*God, would you like to send me?*' That call never left her.



The Rev Li Tim-Oi, her mother, Bishop Mok, her father, Archdeacon Lee Kow Yan after her ordination as Deacon by Bishop R O Hall at St John's Cathedral, HK - Ascension Day 22 May 1941

In 1934 she started a four-year course at Union Theological College in Canton, where her New Testament tutor was Geoffrey Allen, later to be Principal of Ripon Hall and Bishop of Derby. Tim-Oi's family could not afford the college fees so they were paid by the church. While at college in Canton she led a team of students rescuing the casualties of Japanese carpet bombing, and narrowly escaped being a casualty herself - not unlike Florence Nightingale's ministry in wartime.

On Ascension Day 1941 she was made deacon by the Bishop of Hong Kong. (The Chinese Church had no separate deaconess order.) After a brief curacy in Kowloon she was appointed to the Portuguese colony of Macau, neutral territory and so crowded with war refugees. One of them records:

*“There were ten of us refugees from China, my parents and 8 children, 4 boys and 4 girls. We managed to find a single room and this remained our home for 4 years. After our father died, a young Chinese lady visited us and introduced herself as Miss Li. She explained that she was a deaconess and was in charge of the Anglican church known as the Morrison Church. We were happy to join her congregation, and with one of my brothers and a sister I also joined the choir. I remember that*



The Rev Li Tim-Oi and her church council at Morrison Chapel, Macao - Autumn 1945



*there was also a well-attended Sunday school. Life in Macao at this time was not easy. We were very short of food and sometimes were unable to find any. Miss Li visited us and managed to bring us a little rice and dried beans and we could make soup. She also visited others who needed help.” (After the war two of those brothers inspired by Li Tim-Oi became priests in South Africa.)*

Her Bishop knew that in 1943 Li Tim-Oi took a series of three meetings



Icon written by  
the Rev Dr Ellen  
Francis Poisson OSH,  
in St Martin-in-the-Fields

at a large middle school in Macao and as a result 72 girls signed cards asking to be prepared for baptism. *“No other man pastor has yet had that experience in the Anglican Church in South China, but she is not primarily an evangelist; she is a quiet competent and sympathetic pastor.”*

Macao was as far from Japanese-occupied Hong Kong as the Channel Islands are from England. No priests could make the journey, so for two years Tim-Oi was licensed by her assistant bishop to preside at Holy Communion as a deacon. Her diocesan Bishop was brought up in a Tractarian vicarage; he was not happy with what was almost lay celebration. In 1941 seven months after he had ordained Tim-Oi a deacon, he was in the United States. There he discussed

the issue of the ordination of women with Ursula and Reinhold Niebuhr. They agreed that someone needed to have the opportunity to go ahead and do it. At the end of 1943 Bishop Hall was back in the part of his diocese which was in Free China. He sent a message to Tim-Oi to ask her to meet him. She had a prolonged hazardous journey through Japanese lines. They arrived at the rendezvous within 20 minutes of each other. After much prayer and discussion, on 25 January 1944, he ordained her a Priest of God, because God had clearly shown that He had already given her the gift of priesthood.

When Peter baptised Cornelius, he did so because God had already given to Cornelius the gift of the Spirit - even though to do so was totally against the tradition of God's chosen people at that time, totally against their then understanding of God's will and teaching that Gentiles were

unclean. Peter did so because in a vision God had shown him that he was not to call unclean those whom God had made. The Church has grown immeasurably as a result.

When the Bishop ordained Li Tim-Oi, he did so because God had already given to her the charisma of priesthood - even though to do so was all against the tradition of the worldwide church at that time, all against its then understanding of God's will. He resisted the temptation to rename her Cornelia. Women too were thought, even by Christian theologians, to be unclean, defiled by menstrual bleeding and even childbirth. Some church-people still think that, yet the Church is now immeasurably enriched by the priestly ministry of women.

After the War, pressured by a 'Purple Guard', to the dismay of her Bishop, Tim-Oi resigned her licence as a Priest, but not her Holy Orders. She was put in charge of a parish near Vietnam, and there she started a large maternity home to ensure that new-born girls were not smothered at birth. Her witness to the value of every child, girl and boy, made many friends for Jesus - making friends for Jesus was her mission in life. But also she showed that *'It Takes ONE Woman'* to change the culture of her community.

With her clear calling to serve her God for the rest of her life, it must have been very hard for 30 long years in Maoist China not to be able to fulfil that calling openly. She dare not consort with those whom she knew were Christians lest she get them into trouble. Asked how she then worshipped, she replied: *"I just went up to a mountain to pray. Nobody knew!"* Under the pressure of brain-washing, she contemplated suicide, but the Holy Spirit reminded her of her priesthood, and of her commitment to serve God all her life. For a period she was sent to work on a farm where she became 'Captain of Chickens'.



Entering Westminster Abbey to celebrate the 40th Anniversary of her Priesting

The Bamboo curtain eventually lifted. Christian ministers received their back pay from the government, but, when she finally got permission to visit her family in Toronto, she left behind her savings and her pension rights. She gave them to good causes in China. Her family and others

supported her in Toronto, even so she gave £5000 to the Movement for the Ordination of Women in England. She once said that Christianity was the gift of the West to the East, and her ordination was a gift from the East to the West.

In January 1984 the 40th anniversary of her priesting was celebrated in Westminster Abbey in her presence. After another celebration in Sheffield Cathedral, she preached in Bolton Parish Church - not a congregation that readily welcomed new-fangled notions. Out of the experience of her own suffering, she knew the truth of her chosen text: *"Having loved his own, he loved them unto the end."*

On that visit she was invited to Lambeth Palace to meet Archbishop Robert Runcie, then unconvinced whether women should be ordained. After meeting her, he told the Canadian Archbishop Ted Scott: *"Who am I to say whom God can or cannot call?" 'It Takes ONE Woman'* to change the thinking of the Church.



At Lambeth Palace with Archbishop Robert Runcie

She suffered from the 'Purple Guards' who decried her orders. She suffered from the Red Guards who made her cut up her vestments with scissors. Yet as Ted Scott, the Primate of Canada, related on a TV programme: *"She was never bitter, never harboured any resentment against those who caused her suffering. She had the resources to forgive all that had been done to her."* She made no claims for herself. She didn't want to be famous. She said: *"I am just an earthen vessel with God's treasure inside me."* Her only concern was for others, not least that women should be fully valued by the Church and in society.

Tim-Oi said to Bob Browne who made a film with her back in China in 1987: *'I know I'm not a diamond. Beautiful diamonds experience many*



*cuttings and polishing.* She certainly experienced many cuts, but was polished by the grace of God into a beautiful diamond.

She was awarded two honorary Doctorates of Divinity - by General Theological Seminary, New York and by Trinity College, Toronto. Her archives are deposited at Renison University College, Waterloo, Ontario.



Li Tim-Oi died in Toronto on 26 February 1992 and is buried there. The Anglican Church of Canada in 2004 agreed to include Florence Li Tim-Oi in the Calendar of Holy Persons on the anniversary of her death. In 2003, the Episcopal Church of USA agreed to insert the Anniversary of Tim-Oi's Priesting in the Church's Calendar of Lesser Feasts and Fasts - to be observed on 24 January.

She is no doubt amazed at these commemorations. St. George's Episcopal Church, Dayton, Ohio chose Li Tim-Oi as one of two 'saints' from the 20th century to honour with a window in their building; the design recalls how she kept the faith in Maoist China, even when she was required to feed chickens instead of her fellow-Christians. Li Tim-Oi has been similarly honoured by windows in the Chapel of the Good Shepherd, Chautauqua NY, and in St Paul's School for Girls, Brocklandville MD. In a frieze at St Gregory of Nyssa Church, San Francisco she is to be seen dancing with Eleanor Roosevelt. In 2009 her sister Rita provided a window in St John's Chinese Church depicting the Annunciation: Li Tim-Oi like Mary responded to God: "*Behold the handmaid of the Lord*".

In England St Martin-in-the-Fields has two memorials to her: a Prayer Board dedicated on the Golden Jubilee of her Priesting, and an Icon dedicated on her Diamond Jubilee. A meeting room there has also been named after her, and in the new Oxford headquarters of CMS as well.



St George's,  
Dayton Ohio

Listeners to the BBC Radio 4 *Sunday* programme voted to name a *DAHLIA Florence Li Tim-Oi* in the Centenary year of her birth.

After she died, her sister Rita asked us to set up the **LI TIM-OI FOUNDATION** and generously primed its pump. What it does is to offer help to women in the Two-Thirds World who, like Tim-Oi, lack the funds for their education, women who are called to serve the church and their communities, and need to be equipped to fulfil their vocations.

Since it was launched by Archbishop Donald Coggan on the Golden Jubilee of her priesting, the Trustees have committed well over £500,000 helping more than 275 women, mostly in Africa, but also in Brazil, Fiji and Pakistan. Grants are not made for students to attend an institution abroad; training which is provided in the student's own context will be more appropriate to the needs of the student and the local church. This also allows the Trustees to help many more women.

One of the first alumnae was Edidah Mujinya. She is now a Canon and the Provincial President of the MU in Uganda. This is what she wrote on behalf of ten Ugandan 'Daughters of Li Tim-Oi':

*"We are forever grateful for the support you ungrudgingly rendered to many of us, women you have not known, who are so far away and of varied cultures. When many of us had lost hope, were helpless, and stuck in a seemingly impossible situation, you came to our rescue. We are challenged. You have given us a sense of belonging, worthiness and a position in society - things that had almost disappeared. You have truly empowered us and we are committed as change agents to empower many others."*



*DAHLIA Florence Li Tim-Oi - formally named by Bishop Barry Rogerson, who ordained the first Church of England woman priest in 1994.*

*Christopher Hall*



## ‘Daughters of Li Tim-Oi’, Kenya 2003



Find out about the Foundation on this website :

<http://www.ittakesonewoman.org/>

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*Empowering God,  
you chose one woman  
to be the mother of your Son  
and another woman  
to witness his resurrection.  
You chose your beloved daughter  
Li Tim-Oi  
to be a priest in your church.  
Where the need is greatest  
you now call women  
to be ministers of change  
in your church and their communities.  
Enable the Li Tim-Oi Foundation  
to empower each of them  
to fulfil their vocation  
that your kingdom may come  
and your will done  
on earth as in heaven  
today and in days to come.*