

Yvonne Irvine – Team Vicar of St Luke’s 1993-1996

There are a number of significant anniversaries for women’s ministry in 2019. It is:

- the 25th anniversary of women’s ordination as priests,
- the 50th anniversary of women being made readers, and
- the fifth anniversary of women being consecrated as bishops.



In St Edmundsbury and Ipswich, the first group of women priests were ordained to the priesthood on 30 April 1994 and celebrations are being held to mark that anniversary. Those ordained that day included the Revd. Yvonne Irvine, who had been appointed the team vicar at St Luke’s following the departure of Revd. Gerald Clothier the previous year in 1993.

Whilst Yvonne’s time with us in Beccles may have been brief before her tragic death in August 1996, and being so long ago the number of us that remember her gets fewer, she was a brilliant and inspirational priest and it is fitting that, as a parish, we recall her now in this anniversary year.

A true “east ender” Yvonne married at 18 had four children, but was widowed at 36. Only 6 years later, the death of her first grandchild led to her “giving the reigns of her life to God”. At the time she was a district nurse and carried on doing “bank” nursing to pay for her studies at theological college as well as being house mistress and RE teacher for a time at Felixstowe college. Ordained Deacon in 1990, Yvonne served her curacy at Walton parish church in Felixstowe, coming to Beccles as team vicar in 1993. During her time as team vicar, Yvonne not only took care of St Luke’s, but also took care of St Michael’s in the gap between Rectors from April 1994 to mid 1995.

Throughout her time in Beccles, Yvonne was dynamic yet kind and compassionate - to quote her church times obituary she “...touched the lives of countless people inside and outside the church. Inside she was a reconciler and pastor, bringing church leaders of all denominations together for fellowship and prayer. Outside she was an evangelist and healer...” and as an acquaintance wrote “...was an ideal ambassador for the church – out there with hurting people, and prepared to get her hands dirty with them.” And that is exactly how I remember her!

Yvonne was only 54 when she died on 7th August 1996 in a tragic accident at the Nyangombe waterfall in Zimbabwe. For those of us privileged to have met her, she remains an inspirational figure and one remembered not only in the stained glass window at St Luke’s, but also in hearts and minds – and one for whose example I will be forever grateful.

Phil Cudmore

Additional note – Yvonne featured in a BBC documentary that followed her path to ordination. Brian Nursey gave me a copy of this on video and will be placing it onto DVD (when I figure out how). If anyone would like to see it, please let me know.