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Pioneer paved way for women

WHEN Jean Crook became the first woman Reader in our diocese 33 years ago, she had quite a responsibility.

As a pioneer, not only would her ministry pave the way for other female Readers, but it helped people accept the idea of women priests too.

She spent the first five years of her ministry at the Church of the Resurrection in Drayton, and has been at St Faith's, Lee-on-Solent, ever since. In the past few years, she's been

around other parishes to preach."

She was licensed in September 1974 alongside one other Reader in the bishop's chapel. A few days later, she led her first service – and had to be coached to lead Evensong because of her lack of confidence in her singing voice.

"I think I only ever had one person who wasn't keen on taking Communion from me, but otherwise I had no problem as a woman," she said. "In fact, at the Church of the Resurrection, I was treated like a deacon and assisted with Communion.

Five years after becoming a Reader, she married John and moved to Lee-on-Solent. She continued teaching at Langstone First School in Portsmouth past her official retirement age, only stepping down after 19 years of service.

She has started to lead funeral services since the arrival of the current vicar of St Faith's, the Rev Peter Sutton, and enjoys being able to help bereaved families through their loss. She has also encouraged people to bring food to church to help feed homeless people from Fareham and Gosport.

More recently, she suffered a slight stroke in January and took a break from her Reader ministry. She has now been given the status of Reader Emeritus and will retire from her duties.

"It's a wonderful congregation to be involved in, and it is certainly swelling," she said. "It's difficult to get a seat at Christmas, as it's so full! Peter Sutton has made such a difference, and he's treated me as if I'm a special person and a member of his team."

Among the highlights of the past 33 years

are a pilgrimage to Canterbury in 1983, when she was chosen to be a chalice assistant alongside Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

my faith

Jean Crook has just celebrated 33 years as Reader. As the first female Reader in our diocese, she was a pioneer – both for other women Readers and also for women priests

developing her skills – trying her hand at new aspects of the role.

And the 77-year-old great-grandmother was among Readers from across the diocese who re-affirmed their vows at a special thanksgiving service in our cathedral last month.

"I grew up in the congregation at Drayton, and wanted to be involved," she said. "I wasn't very good at singing, so I couldn't join the choir, but then it came up in PCC that women were going to be able to become Readers. The Rev Oswald Stills was my vicar and he was very encouraging.

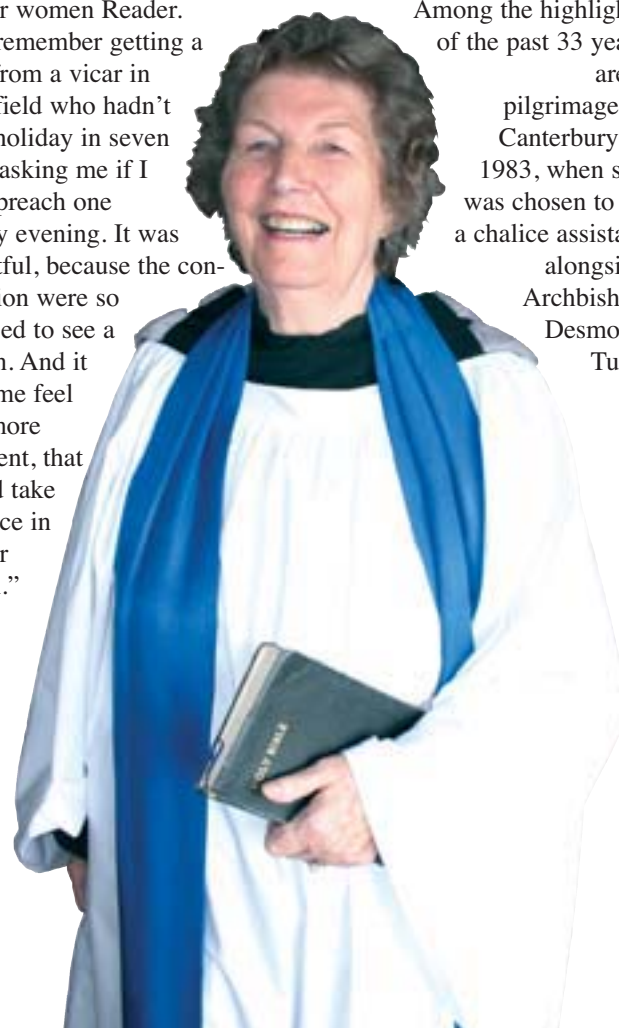
"I was training to be a teacher at Bishop Otter College in Chichester, so was studying there in the daytime and studying to be a Reader in the evening. I had to do 2,000-word essays as part of my training, but really enjoyed it.

"I also had to travel to the north of England to practice preaching with 23 others who wanted to be Readers. We couldn't be licensed until we'd done that.

"We were in a retreat house next to the cathedral and had to analyse each other's sermons. These days, they have a different system and you travel

"Oswald Stills built up my confidence, and I also preached, led services and took services in people's homes. I really enjoyed being part of the worship. But it was five years before there was another women Reader.

"I remember getting a letter from a vicar in Petersfield who hadn't had a holiday in seven years, asking me if I could preach one Sunday evening. It was delightful, because the congregation were so surprised to see a woman. And it made me feel even more confident, that I could take a service in another church."



Jean Crook at the time of her licensing in September 1974; below: Jean Crook as she is today

There was also a large open-air service in Guildhall Square under the previous Bishop of Portsmouth, Timothy Bavin, at which all Readers assisted with Communion.

"Bishop Timothy also came to a Readers' retreat at Wickham – the predecessor to the Readers' conferences they have now – and made us very welcome," she said. "And Bishop Kenneth has also been a great help and inspiration to all of us Readers.

"The last 30 years have been the happiest in the service of the church and in my personal life. All sorts of things have happened to do with my faith, which have kept me going."

"I had an operation five or six years ago, and people in church and elsewhere were praying for me. I really felt that God had kept me on Earth for something – he had a reason for keeping me here. It was faith and people's prayers that made the difference. In fact, I don't think I could live without my faith."

● Around 90 Readers and another 60 supporters attended the service of thanksgiving for Reader ministry at our cathedral last month. The service was led by Canon David Issac, and the Ven Peter Hancock, Archdeacon of the Meon, preached.

The work of Readers was explained using a giant jigsaw, and Readers were commissioned for their work in our parishes.