

Speaker snubs Church to appoint first black Vicar of Westminster -the girl from Montego Bay

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Rev Rose Hudson-Wilkin has been appointed as chaplain to the House of Commons. The Queen was last night dragged into a bitter row over the appointment of a black woman as Chaplain to the House of Commons.

Commons Speaker John Bercow has refused to give the job to the candidate picked by the Dean of Westminster Abbey, the Very Rev Dr John Hall, who answers to the Queen. He has chosen instead the Rev Rose Hudson-Wilkin, a Jamaican-born vicar in one of the poorest parts of East London. Sources say he objected to appointing 'another predictable middle-aged white man'.

Mr Bercow was so determined to win the power struggle that he has cut the ties between Parliament and the Abbey, where state funerals, weddings and coronations take place effectively splitting the Chaplain's historic role in two. The Abbey authorities have responded by refusing to give Mrs Hudson-Wilkin the palatial grace-and-favour apartment in the Abbey cloisters where the current Commons Chaplain lives.

The man snubbed by Mr Bercow, 46-year-old Andrew Tremlett, currently a Canon at Bristol Cathedral, is to be made a Canon at Westminster Abbey as a 'consolation prize' by the Queen. But he will have to make do with half the salary of the Commons Chaplain.

The move will be seen by some as the Speaker showing support for those campaigning to force the Church of England to allow women to become bishops, as well for helping ethnic minorities achieve high-profile public posts.

Outspoken Mrs Hudson-Wilkin, 49 – who is married with three children – has already been tipped to be the first woman bishop.

A controversial figure, she led calls for the Church of England to apologise for its role in slavery and has lambasted racism in the clergy. A friend said her views were ‘radical, Left of centre’.

But the row has divided opinion at Westminster, where by custom the Commons Chaplain fulfils a dual role, acting as ‘Vicar of Parliament’ while also being Sub-Dean of Westminster Abbey and the Rector of St Margaret’s Church in Parliament Square.



Speaker John Bercow and wife Sally: Sources say he objected to appointing ‘another predictable middle-aged white man’

One senior parliamentarian said: ‘It is a tragic mistake for the Speaker to cut the ties with the Abbey. He seems to have done it on a whim because other people did not think Mrs Hudson-Wilkin was the best candidate.’

A Church of England source said: ‘This is a shame. This post may seem to some like a historical anomaly but it has survived and it works.

‘It would be better if it was not split in two. Modernising everything is not always a good thing. Sometimes it is the result of someone throwing their weight around.’



Dr John Hall was the Dean of Westminster's choice for the role as Chaplain to the House of Commons

The source said he did not know if the Queen had formed a view but that it could concern her, adding: ‘She tends to be conservative in these things.’

However, a source close to Mr Bercow maintained: ‘We did not want yet another predictable, middle-aged, white man who is like a mini Archbishop of Canterbury.’

‘Many MPs went to the Chaplain for advice and comfort over the expenses affair or the Iraq War. They need someone they can talk to, not someone who can quote theological texts to them.’

The appointment is the latest controversy for Mr Bercow, whose wife Sally caused outrage by confessing in interviews to casual sex as a result of alcohol. His religious status is described by friends as ‘Jewish by ethnicity’.

The appointment of Mrs Hudson-Wilkin, who is a friend of Archbishop of York Dr John Sentamu, follows the retirement of Commons Chaplain Canon Robert Wright.

A selection panel, led by Dr Hall and including representatives of Buckingham Palace, Downing Street, the Speaker’s office and Lambeth Palace, drew up a shortlist of six, including Canon Tremlett and Mrs Hudson-Wilkin.

Dr Hall picked Canon Tremlett and recommended him to the Queen. Usually, the Speaker rubber-stamps the Dean’s – and by extension the Queen’s – choice, but not this time. When the two men failed to agree, Mr Bercow said he would split from the Abbey and appoint Mrs Hudson-Wilkin as Commons Chaplain alone. Mr Tremlett will take

over the duties at the Abbey and as Rector of St Margaret's. Mrs Hudson-Wilkin will receive the £25,000 Commons Chaplain's salary, but not the £20,000 wage that goes with the Abbey post. That will go to Mr Tremlett, who will also be given the grace-and-favour home in the Abbey. One of the key tasks at Westminster for Mrs Hudson-Wilkin, who intends to retain her parish in Hackney, East London, is to read the prayers at the start of each day's sitting.

The Hebrew scholar

Canon Andrew Tremlett is a quintessentially English cleric. Born in Devon, he took a degree in classics at Cambridge before training for the priesthood at Oxford, where he specialised in Biblical Hebrew. He moved to Bristol Cathedral in 2008 where he became Canon for development, responsible for the buildings, development of the Cathedral's 'strategy', and pastoral care of congregations. Married with three children, his interests include playing the piano and learning Arabic. Canon Tremlett was ordained in 1989 and his roles have since included being Chaplain to the English Church in Rotterdam, Holland.

The girl from Montego Bay

In stark contrast to Canon Tremlett, the Rev Rose Hudson-Wilkin routinely confronts knife crime and gang culture in one of East London's poorest parishes. Mrs Hudson-Wilkin said at the time of her appointment as vicar in Hackney in 1998: 'Some members struggled with me. They had been told that no priest worth anything would want to come here.'

On top of that I'm a woman and black.' A good friend of the first black archbishop, Dr John Sentamu, she is a rising star in the Church. She was brought up in Montego Bay and travelled to England to join the Church Army aged 18. She is now regularly tipped to become the Church's first woman bishop if, as many expect, the current ban is lifted.