

Editorial Matters

As a long-standing supporter of the view there is a biblical basis for removing restrictions on women in Christian ministry I have been surprised at my reaction to the decision of General Synod on 7th July to proceed with legislation for women bishops by provision of a statutory national code of practice. Although 7/7 in 2008 is not as significant as 11/11 in 2002 – there is still a long way to go – I am still trying to work out exactly why, far from being elated, I am deeply concerned and whether I should expect other evangelicals supportive of women bishops to share such concerns.

As I've tried to make sense of my reaction, I've grouped the concerns into three broad headings – the political, the ecclesiological and the moral. The *political* concerns relate both to the debate itself and its possible political implications. The final motion, after many hours of debate and after over a dozen votes on amendments, was not significantly different from that put forward by the House of Bishops. Although it had a clear majority in all three houses, in the House of Laity it fell short of the 2/3 support that would be needed for final approval. More disconcerting were other details, easily lost in this broadbrush summary. The amendment from the Bishop of Ripon and Leeds which would have allowed consideration of statutory transfer of specified responsibilities was lost but divided the bishops down the middle (21-21) and had a majority among the laity. More significantly, overall more Synod members voted for it than against it. According to some accounts, once that vote was lost and Synod reconvened after dinner the atmosphere changed. Certainly it appears nearly 5% of those present gave up on the marathon as although 413 members voted for that amendment, in subsequent votes no more than 394 voted. Just before the final vote, to the surprise and horror of many, the Bishop of Durham moved the debate be adjourned. Although this was lost (180 for, 203 against, 9 abstentions) it was closer than many would have predicted. Furthermore, if the post-dinner absentees were mainly opponents the vote might have been a lot closer and, though not noticed at the time, a majority of bishops (22-18) voted for the adjournment including the Archbishop of Canterbury. Episcopal voting on the final motion was also significant in that, although only 12 voted against, that amounted to almost 30% of the bishops and included the three most senior bishops (London, Durham and Winchester) while the Archbishop of Canterbury was the sole episcopal abstention.

Of course, Synod votes, particularly on such contentious issues and with so many procedural complexities, are often messy but this lack of consensus – especially among bishops – is rather ominous. My more serious political concern, however, is the possible effect of proceeding by means of a code of conduct on the future shape of the Church of England and its Synod. To understand this it is necessary to try to see the bigger picture. Traditionally, the Church of England has sought to be comprehensive and is often characterised as embracing evangelical, catholic and liberal traditions. As Oliver O'Donovan has recently

argued,¹ one of the changes in recent decades has been in the nature of liberalism and the impact of this on Anglicanism. Although focussing on the homosexuality debate, his analysis must be brought to bear on the debates about women bishops. He argues that

the crisis in Anglican Christianity is quite specifically a crisis in its hegemonic tradition and the manner in which it has managed and controlled differences in the past. The church's old habits of negotiating stubborn oppositions by synthesising them within a central, undogmatic stream of opinion – let us follow the convention and call the paradigm 'liberal', without prejudice to any person or group claiming that title as their own – seem to have fallen away.

In the past, this 'liberal' approach 'mediated effectively between antithetical dogmatic poles, catholic and evangelical, that marked the extremes of Anglican identity since the Oxford movement in the 1830's' but now 'the historically centripetal middle had become a new centrifugal pole'. In particular, he argues, liberal Christianity failed to have a 'critical purchase on moral intuitions comparable to that which it had on doctrinal judgments' and 'reached for narratives of emancipation to give its cause fresh propulsion'. These narratives, he says, provided 'a matrix by which the present could be presented as standing in perpetual judgment on the past' and Western liberalism 'became identified with one kind of moral cause to the exclusion of others'. One result was that it became 'a church-party proper, a specific agenda to pit against other agendas'.

The debate over women bishops has seen significant parts of those two 'antithetical dogmatic poles, catholic and evangelical' united in their opposition to this development and discovering they have much in common in terms of commitment to orthodox Christian faith and morals and the need for a distinctive Christian witness in contemporary society. In the light of the decision to proceed with women bishops by means of a code of practice, there is the real risk that 'traditional' or 'conservative' catholics and evangelicals will feel further alienated from the Church of England and dis-engage further. Already there is much speculation that the 'flying bishops' (and perhaps a diocesan bishop or two from the catholic tradition) will seek to find arrangements with Rome and that conservative evangelicals will look to the GAFCON Primates in the wider Communion if the Church of England continues down this path. Should this happen the delicate eco-system of the Church of England would be seriously disrupted and there would be the real danger that the consequent fracturing of the historic evangelical and catholic parties will result in the new liberal church-party gaining hegemony here as it has to such disastrous effect in North America. O'Donovan's description of this new form of liberalism explains why all those committed to biblically faithful Christian witness and mission to our world should be worried were this to happen as a result of proceeding to women bishops in this way:

In the interests of finding the modern world God-enchanted, it [the liberal tradition] closed down on the serious deliberation with which Christians ought

¹ The text here is taken from the first of his 'Sermons on the Subject of the Day' available from <http://www.fulcrum-anglican.org.uk/page.cfm?ID=130>. See also

now his book based on these, *Church in Crisis: The Gay Controversy and the Anglican Communion* (Wipf and Stock, 2008).

to weigh their stance of witness in the world. Potentially world-critical questions were suppressed. Liberal moral commitments, though sometimes urged with a passion verging on outright moralism, were not steered from the helm of discursive enquiry, but set adrift on the moral currents of the day.

Turning now to my *theological*, or strictly *ecclesiological*, concerns I fear that one major question appears to be being left unaddressed in this debate and an opportunity for radical thinking about episcopacy is also being missed. The major question goes beyond the issue of whether a code of conduct is sufficient as it relates to any move to consecrate women bishops. It was raised most sharply by Cardinal Kasper in his address to all serving Church of England bishops two years ago.² In essence it highlights the fact that given the Anglican (and wider catholic) understanding that full communion between bishops is a necessary part of the visible unity of the church, the move to consecrate women bishops presents the Church of England with a fundamental dilemma. *Either* that understanding needs to be revised so that we can still speak of a united church even when some (male) bishops refuse to recognise other (female) bishops as bishops *or* there can be no bishops consecrated whose conscientious judgment is such that they cannot recognise women as true bishops and so cannot accept the validity of their sacramental or other episcopal acts.

Here one sees the practical difficulty in evangelicals resolving differences over this issue by categorising it as 'second order'. There is much to be said for this theologically and biblically and it should certainly not become a matter of division among evangelicals, though sadly it is becoming such through hardening stances on both more conservative and more open wings of evangelicalism. However, our current Anglican structures and official ecclesiology mean that in practice it is hard to see how this is a question on which bishops can simply 'agree to differ' and thus it may be the case that doctrinally 'second order' matters can become politically 'first order' ones. We will, in other words, face the bizarre situation that while bishops can have different and mutually contradictory views on a whole range of (sometimes quite fundamental) matters, there are clear and well-policed boundaries in relation to women bishops. The paradox is here blatantly obvious – a more inclusive church must, in order to exist, become more rigidly exclusive. The alternative way through the dilemma would require revision of our ecclesiology especially in relation to episcopal collegiality and unity. Sadly this is something evangelicals are not particularly interested in exploring and others will resist as either a departure from catholic order or a form of discrimination and institutional sexism.

It may be that this is the circle which it proves impossible to square but there are other forms of ecclesiological rethinking that may be theologically valuable and practically helpful if the church could seriously think about episcopacy and not just about women bishops. If one turns from the Kasper problem of unity among bishops to the problem of others who cannot accept the ministry of women bishops (and of course traditional ecclesiology also teaches that visible unity also requires all clergy and laity to be in communion with their bishops), there are two fundamental practical challenges that arise in opening up the episcopate to women

2 Text at <http://www.cofe.anglican.org/news/pr6006b.html>. See also *Women in the Episcopate? An Anglican-Roman Catholic Dialogue*, GS Misc 885

that are not as easily solved (or at least 'got round' in some way) as they were in relation to women priests. Lay Anglicans opposed to women priests could, if their parish accepted the priestly ministry of women, easily move to worship in another parish (such transfer out of the geographical parish to worship being very common for many varied reasons). Alternatively, they could restrict their involvement in church life to occasions when women were not fulfilling responsibilities they believed unbiblical or contrary to catholic order. The move to ordain women bishops not only presents new dilemmas for many serving Anglican clergy which were not raised before but also makes it more or less impossible for these 'opt outs' to be extended due to the size of a diocese compared to a parish and the nature of episcopal jurisdiction. Serious engagement with this challenge would therefore require rethinking our pattern of geographical dioceses and/or the tradition of mono-episcopacy. Such rethinking is also encouraged by ecumenical pressures (notably in what way Methodists may be recognised as having episcopal ministry and something akin to an Anglican diocese), the wider breakdown of geographical bases for church life both in the Church of England and the Communion, and the fact that at parish level geographical boundaries are less important and clergy are increasingly working in teams. Although these points have all been raised in various official reports on women bishops from Rochester onwards they have not been seriously engaged with theologically by the wider church. Inevitably, the concerns are that (as with the introduction of 'flying bishops') they are looked at primarily in relation to solving the problems of those unwilling to accept women bishops rather than in their own right and that any short-term solution to this problem will therefore come to be seen by many as incoherent, unsustainable and creating further problems.

Many evangelicals concluded that for them the main problem with debates about 'women priests' through the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s was that the church didn't agree about priesthood but refused to think seriously about this basic question. The danger is – especially now the choice has been made for a single clause with only a code of practice – that a similar opportunity will now be lost in relation to bishops. Despite our renewed focus since those earlier debates on mission, fresh expressions, emerging church etc, the question of what patterns and structures of episcopal ministry the church needs today now risks being lost in the desire to ensure that those women who are gifted and called to exercise *episcopate* are canonically enabled to do so. Perhaps one of the contributions that we evangelical Anglicans can provide over coming years is a serious discussion – across our own divisions over women bishops – on such matters.

Although the political and ecclesiological concerns raise deeper issues, it is I think the *moral* questions I have about the proposed way forward that cause me most concern. These can be expressed in two ways. First, by removing all the safeguards created when the church welcomed women priests – not just 'flying bishops' created by the Act of Synod but also resolution A and resolution B enshrined in the original Measure – the church is going back on assurances given at that time. Some in the Synod debate sought to justify this, arguing that they were promises that could not be kept because they bound the Church to history

and not to eschatology. Even were such arguments theologically coherent they fail to give due weight to the fact such promises were sincerely made and trusted in 1992 (and that the vote then probably only succeeded, certainly in the House of Laity, because of them) and that trust is now being betrayed. This sense of betrayal is hardly fertile soil for the call to trust a code of conduct. While some concerns may be able to be met once the content of the proposed code becomes clear, it seems fairly certain that the code will not provide those of the minority integrity with the safeguards they currently have. It also seems it will not be sufficient to enable most of them to believe they do indeed remain valued and loyal members of the Anglican family and that their views about the ordination of women to the priesthood and episcopate can continue to be held with integrity within the Church of England.

Framing the moral challenge in that way leads to the second and most serious way of expressing the problem. When faced with what appear difficult moral decisions, one of the most illuminating ways of clarifying what should be done is the simple test of the Golden Rule of the Sermon on the Mount – ‘So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets’ (Matt. 7:12). What if I put myself in the shoes of those with whom I disagree on this issue and who believe – whether because of a view of biblical teaching on headship or the tradition of the church or the need for these developments to be received more widely in the catholic church – it is wrong to consecrate women as bishops? Would I be able to live with the decision of Synod? The question can be put even more fundamentally. I need to acknowledge that what is being proposed is a significant development which overturns centuries of tradition and the wider current consensus of the Christian church. I happen to believe it is biblical and so a proper reformation of the church but what should I do for those who do not share this perspective? What would I want done for me should the General Synod of the Church of England seek a similar development and overturning of tradition in other areas where I believe the change to be deformation not reformation? The provision of a statutory code of practice would, in most cases, not suffice. It certainly would not if the development entailed that all those holding my beliefs would in future be excluded from the episcopal leadership of the church.

This raises, of course, the difficult question of whether reform can ever be instituted without breaching the Golden Rule and, as in the Great Ejection of 1662, effectively requiring departures from the church. Here perhaps is a more fundamental question we need to wrestle with as Anglicans who often fail to recognise our alleged tradition of ‘diversity’ and ‘inclusivity’ is also strongly shaped by attempts at enforced uniformity. The Windsor Report is one recent discussion of some of these matters and its discussion of *adiaphora* and the need to consider ‘the weak’ contained a paragraph (para 93) that at the time left me wondering about its implications for women bishops:

Whenever, therefore, a claim is made that a particular theological or ethical stance is something ‘indifferent’, and that people should be free to follow it without the Church being thereby split, there are two questions to be asked.

First, is this in fact the kind of matter which can count as 'inessential', or does it touch on something vital? Second, if it is indeed 'adiaphora', is it something that, nevertheless, a sufficient number of other Christians will find scandalous and offensive, either in the sense that they will be led into acting against their own consciences or that they will be forced, for conscience's sake, to break fellowship with those who go ahead? If the answer to the latter question is 'yes', the biblical guidelines insist that those who have no scruples about the proposed action should nevertheless refrain from going ahead.

Unless those of us who support women bishops are going to insist that this is in fact a matter which is essential and touches on something so vital that freedom to follow a belief that only men should be bishops no longer has any place in the future of the Church of England, we must (if we are to be faithful to Pauline teaching in Rom. 14, 1 Cor. 8 and 1 Cor. 10:23-33) proceed to consecrate women bishops in a way that is not scandalous or offensive to those holding such views. All the signs are that the current proposal will fail that test. Alternatives must therefore continue to be seriously explored, particularly by those of us who are convinced that God's purpose is *both* that his calling of women to serve him and his people in a ministry of oversight be recognised by his church *and* that in coming to that recognition the whole church must 'be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love and make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace' (Eph 4:2,3).

In this issue

I am delighted that, following our recent engagement with Chris Wright's book *The Mission of God* and our last guest edited issue on Anglicans in Mission, this issue also has a strong focus on mission theology. The Oxford Centre for Christianity and Culture, based at Regents Park College in Oxford, last year hosted a series of lectures entitled 'New Directions and Metaphors in Mission'. With the help of Cathy Ross who organised the series, I am delighted we are publishing articles based on three of those lectures in this issue. Cathy's own piece helps us think about the nature and character of mission by reflecting creatively on hospitality as a metaphor for mission. This is followed by Kirsteen Kim's stimulating discussion of how we understand the work of the Spirit with challenges that draw on a diverse range of contexts and experiences including Asian theology and missiology and charismatic understandings of mission and spiritual warfare. Tim Dakin's contribution, to be concluded in the next issue of *Anvil*, opens up the changing context and challenges of world mission drawing on the experience of CMS. In the final article (not part of the lecture series), Philip Tovey explores the different models of mission found in Church of England baptism liturgies and encourages us to recognise and utilise the developments evident in the latest *Common Worship* liturgies.

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