



The following paper is one of a series written by members of WATCH (Women and the Church) in response to proposals contained in the Report of the Women Bishops Legislative Drafting Group (GS 1685, April 2008) and the Draft Bishops and Priests (Consecration and Ordination of Women) Measure (GS 1708, December 2008).

The papers focus on the proposals, some of which imply an underlying concept of taint with regard to women priests and bishops, and others which, if passed, would further erode the unity and damage the historic episcopacy of the Church of England.

## **Walls of Suspicion, Hatred and Taint**

by Revd Jean Mayland

### **Breaking down walls**

In 1975 the World Council of Churches held its Assembly in Nairobi with the theme, 'Jesus Christ frees and unites'. The theme song for the assembly was "*Break down the walls that separate us and unite us in a single body.*" I can still hear it ringing in my ears as it was sung in one language after another.

The walls under consideration at the time were walls of apartheid between black and white, the bamboo wall which cut off China and the Berlin wall that separated East and West in Europe. In 1981 I went to a WCC Central Committee in Dresden. Going through 'Checkpoint Charlie' was quite an ordeal – even with a special WCC letter.

After a bruising encounter with the Orthodox over the Sheffield Report on the Community of Women and Men, the women of the Central Committee gathered in the basement of a gloomy Dresden church and, holding hands in a circle, sang "We shall overcome". Some of us sang it again at 3am in the dark car park of a youth hostel as we held hands in a circle with students before boarding the bus to go to the wall once more on the way back to the airport. "See you in England", we said. "When we are old age pensioners", they replied.

### **Miracles can happen**

In November 1989 the miraculous occurred – the Berlin Wall was breached and students danced on the top. The front pages of the newspapers and the placards were full of this when we came out of Church House that night. The General Synod had just agreed the Legislation to make it possible for women to be made priests and had agreed to send it to the Dioceses. I wanted to sing that we had breached the wall between women and men in our church – a wall as divisive as that breached in Berlin.

### **But walls can be built again**

Here we are in 2009 and once more there are walls of division all over the world. A particular one that concerns many of us is the wall constructed to divide Palestinians and Israelis – a wall that makes dialogue difficult, as well as having disastrous effects for women and children delayed on their way to hospitals. Sadly, in our own Church, the time since 1989 has been used to build an-

other wall between those who accept women priests and those who will not. The provisions of the Women Priests Measure coupled with the Act of Synod have ensured that there was little or no dialogue between Forward in Faith parishes and others. Women clergy have been insulted and bullied and men in authority have shown little understanding of this and certainly given little support. We women have not yet 'overcome' in our church.

### **The current proposals to make possible the consecration of women bishops**

Certain elements in the current proposals to allow women bishops would strengthen this division and ensure that the two parts of the church each operated on parallel lines with little or no contact or dialogue between them. It would institutionalise for a long time the discrimination which has been justified as a temporary measure by such apparatus as the Act of Synod. It would strengthen the apartheid of the Church of England and build up again the walls of separation.

The Legislative Drafting Group claims that during the last 15 years since women were admitted to the priesthood "*the Church of England has managed to model the holding together within one Church of people who differ profoundly on a major theological issue*". WATCH begs to differ. What has been modelled is division, oppression, suspicion, misunderstanding and heretical ecclesiastical procedures.

The outstanding example of the latter has been the refusal of priests in Forward in Faith parishes to accept the sacramental ministry of their own canonically ordained bishops on the grounds that by ordaining women they had made themselves 'uncatholic' and therefore unfit to minister sacramentally. The Archbishop of York, John Habgood, who pushed forward the Act of Synod said it was a pastoral measure to reassure those who could not accept women priests that they were still valued. He denied that it would cause separation. But it soon did. An example of this was made public in 1997.

On 7th October of that year, BBC Radio 4 broadcast a 'File on Four' programme about the situation of women priests five years after the crucial vote in General Synod. Two Forward in Faith priests from the Diocese of Durham who were interviewed said that their spiritual allegiances were to the 'flying bishop', the

Bishop of Beverley, and not to the Bishop of Durham. One said, *“Whilst he is a bishop, as I say, in juridical terms, I’m not actually in sacramental communion with him because of the action he has taken over the issue of the ordination of women and so I find it very difficult to even contemplate receiving communion at his hands.”*

Asked about whether he would welcome the Diocesan Bishop to celebrate the Eucharist in his parish the other said *“No, he wouldn’t be welcome – not for a Eucharist. He would be welcome to attend non-eucharistic worship, but would not be allowed to celebrate at the altar...”*

**This is where we have been with the Act of Synod. Many people, including bishops, have agreed it is wrong. Certain sections of the new proposed legislation and Code of Practice would entrench and perpetuate that wrong. These sections of the legislation and Code must be resisted.**

The most unacceptable part of the proposed Measure is Clause 3 which states that:

*“The archbishop of each province shall, from time to time, nominate one or more suffragan sees in his or her province from which the holders (being men) may be selected by diocesan bishops of that province to exercise, in relation to parishes in their dioceses whose parochial church councils have, on grounds of theological conviction, requested arrangements to be made and in relation to the persons mentioned in section 4(3), episcopal functions specified in section 4 or in a Code of Practice issued under section 4.”*

### **The position of WATCH**

WATCH would have preferred a system like the American one in which women bishops graciously delegate their sacramental responsibilities to a male bishop of their choice to serve in parishes which are not prepared to receive that ministry from women. Recognising that this was not acceptable to those opposed we graciously conceded that there must be mandatory delegation of these responsibilities so it did not depend on the whim of the woman bishop. Our supporters in General Synod voted for a Statutory Code of Practice.

We expected that this delegation could be made to any male bishop. We now see in Clause 3 that it is **can also** be to certain ‘untainted’ bishops in chosen suffragan sees. These men must be ‘untainted’ by any sacramental connection with women priests or bishops in whose ordination they must have taken no part. This is a totally unacceptable slur on women. It is contrary to the expectations of society and the equality concerns of the Government.

It is also an insult to male bishops who become ‘tainted’ by having ordained women and so are not allowed to function sacramentally in dissenting parishes. The draft proposals also stipulate that these bishops are not allowed to lay hands on the special suffragan bishops although they are expected to attend their consecrations. Only special ‘untainted’ male bishops who have been consecrated solely by other ‘untainted’ male bishops may actually lay hands on these men to make them bishop. As someone once remarked in General Synod “This would be to set up a pedigree system like a kind of Ecclesiastical Crufts”. ‘Pure’ bishops must be absolutely certain that no connection with female priests or bishops has ever contaminated their apostolic succession (blood line).

### **Heretical**

This is not only insulting, it is heretical. It is modern Donatism. The Donatists repudiated the Episcopal ministrations of those whom they regarded as having betrayed the Catholic Church. They were answered by Augustine of Hippo with the theology that underlies Article 26. His arguments stand today. Such heresy should have no part in the catholic ordering of our Church.

When this suggestion was first debated in General Synod in 1987, John Arnold, then Dean of Rochester, commented on the Donatists that *“Though Orthodox in belief to start with, they soon found themselves, after breaking communion with their bishops, consorting with disreputable allies; and their schism so weakened the North African Church that eventually it fell, practically without a struggle, before militant Islam. Absit omen.”*

### **Only optional**

Some people have argued that this clause only provides an option. Archbishops do not have to nominate these special bishops and parishes not wanting a woman bishop can ask for any male one. This sounds too much like the Act of Synod all over again.

From past history this just would not work. They **‘may’** and so they will be pressured and they **‘will’**. Parishes will be **urged to demand** these special bishops – not just an ordinary male bishop and they will and we will be in just the place that we do not want to be, as it implicitly recognises taint.

This time we have to stand firm. We must break down the walls of separation and really learn to live together with difference in a much more positive way. Our mission to the nation demands that we pray *“Break down the walls that separate us and unite us in a single body”* and this time work to make it a reality.

*The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and may not reflect the agreed policies and opinions of National WATCH.*

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### *About the author*

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