

## **Women Bishops – The Real Threat.**

*From a talk given by Hilary Cotton to London WATCH on 15<sup>th</sup> June 2009*

### **Introduction.**

#### **1. Where are we in the process?**

The proposals 'on the table' are draft legislation that would allow women to be bishops, and includes arrangements for those who will not accept them, or who will still not accept women priests. These proposals are currently being looked at by a General Synod Revision Committee, who are discussing a large number of amendments suggested from all quarters of the Church.

They will bring revised proposals to General Synod next February (2010); Synod may ask them to revise them some more. Once Synod is happy then the proposals go for debate at Diocesan Synods; they then come back to General Synod for final approval, then are presented to Parliament for approval. Finally they receive Royal Assent and General Synod 'signs them off'.

2. The Church of England claims exemption from the 1975 Sex Discrimination Act (under section 19), and will claim a similar exemption from the Equality Bill currently before Parliament. WATCH is working with our Parliamentary supporters to challenge whether the Established church should continue to be exempt from such equality legislation, but we don't expect that to change imminently.

3. In all that I say I aim to remember that those who think that women should not/cannot be bishops are trying just as hard as we are to be faithful.

#### **Why are the Proposals as they are?**

General Synod has said three times that it believes that it is the will of the Church of England for women to be allowed to be bishops (in July 2005, 2006, 2008). So the principle is established.

However, in the debates at Synod it was clear that Synod was saying 'Yes, but...'

#### **There are 3 such 'buts':**

1. '...but we may be wrong.' (a theological 'but')

Some members of the Church keep telling us that we are. And they quote from the Lambeth Conference resolution of 1998 that '.....those who dissent from, as well as those who assent to, the ordination of women to the priesthood and episcopate are both loyal Anglicans'.

#### **Response**

Yes, we may be wrong (in fact we will be in some measure, because our understanding and insight is always partial this side of heaven)

But we mustn't carry that doubt into the Church's structures and orders – we mustn't doubt people's priesthood within the same Church. Already there are some clergy who will not accept communion from their diocesan bishop because he ordains women.

2. '...but we have lots of faithful clergy who are doing good work, some in difficult parishes, who think we are wrong, and it would cause us real problems if they left.' (a pragmatic 'but')

### **Response**

Yes, there may be problems (but probably fewer will leave than say they will)

Is this a good enough reason to divide the House of Bishops and separate parish from parish under different bishops?

3. '....but it's not fair to change the rules for those who have served for many years as faithful priests in a church they love.' (a moral 'but')

### **Response**

This is indeed reasonable: National WATCH and others recognise this and acknowledge that there need to be arrangements for such expectations. In all other Anglican Provinces with women bishops these arrangements are informal and made after discussion between the Diocesan bishop and parishes concerned: the Church of England is the only Province proposing that such arrangements need to be made in law. I do not believe that legislating for such arrangements is the best way of building good relationships between parishes and bishops: the law tends to divide rather than bring together.

We have a responsibility to build trust with each other so that such informal arrangements work for the good of all.

However, such arrangements should only apply to those already ordained: we must not continue to ordain those who will not recognise the orders of or work harmoniously with female colleagues.

To these 'buts' the General Synod Legislative Drafting Group has responded with the current proposals – in a typical Anglican middle way or perhaps 'fudge'.

### **What are the proposals?**

The proposals in the draft law include the following clauses:

#### **1. Women may be bishops.**

This is effectively a 'single clause measure', since alongside this Measure the 1993 Measure (containing Resolutions A and B) will be repealed, and the Act of Synod, (leading to so-called Resolution C) will be rescinded.

#### **2. Any male bishop may declare he won't consecrate and/or ordain women as bishops/priests.**

This is the clause that introduces the idea of 'taint': that anyone who ordains women as priests or bishops is 'tainted' by those actions, and therefore 'unacceptable' to those opposed.

If opposition is about whether a bishop is male or female, then any male bishop would do for those opposed, and statements like this will not be necessary. But this being part of the Measure endorses in law that for many of those opposed it is not sufficient to have the ministry of a male rather than a female bishop, but that the only acceptable bishops are those who have kept themselves separate from their episcopal colleagues in not ordaining women as priests or bishops. This is a powerful declaration of separation.

### **3. There will be 'flying' bishops for as long as the Measure remains.**

Under this clause the Archbishops of Canterbury and York shall (ie must) appoint such bishops.

4. **A Code of Practice must be written** under which bishops will be able to (expected to) delegate the care of parishes and individual clergy who won't accept them to a male bishop – 'flying' if requested.

**In my view these clauses put into the law of the land the Act of Synod (including Resolution C). In effect we will be making the Act permanent.**

**What threats do these proposals hold?**

**Threats to the Church of England.**

#### **1. We will be led by a divided House of Bishops.**

This is not about being divided in their beliefs about the ordination of women: the House lives harmoniously with a diversity of belief about many things already

It is about being divided by whether they recognise each other as bishops

The corollary of some not recognising their female colleagues, is that they won't recognise those (men) whom their female colleagues ordain as priests

The eventual outcome would be the need for priests to carry a 'pedigree' as to the 'line' of their ordination.

In my experience in other fields of work, such a fundamental division leads to poor leadership. Legitimised groupings form, based on a particular issue, and from then on suspicions arise as to the motives for support on other issues. Groups become factions. Poorer decisions are made because of a lack of trust. Building good relationships helps, of course, but is no substitute for 'good order'.

#### **2. Dioceses will lose their geographical integrity,**

parishes being ministered to by 'complementary'/flying bishops will in effect permanently 'belong' to that bishop.

#### **3. Clergy ministry will be permanently undermined.**

Since it is officially ok to believe that women are not priests or bishops, and it is officially sanctioned to avoid women priests or bishops, it is from there only a small step to thinking it is ok to treat clergywomen with scorn or rudeness, or to ignore them. This culture is now endemic in some pockets of the Church of England, and, to their cost, some women have assimilated it in order to make it less hurtful. This leads to them becoming more cautious and wary, less confident in standing up for themselves because they are not sure if senior staff will support them.

This applies to men too: Catholic male priests have experienced not being recognised as such by their colleagues opposed to women's priestly ministry, and treated as traitors if they support the ordination of women. Similarly, evangelical clergymen have been dismissed as 'unsound'.

#### **4. The seeping away of faithful people.**

The stated aim of the current proposals is 'for as many people as possible to remain within the Church of England'. The problem is that we don't hear about those who have drifted away because the way women are treated by the church is no longer tenable or bearable for them; and that's just those who leave. How many are holding on by their fingertips? The mission of the church is seriously compromised by what is seen by society as continuing sex discrimination.

#### **Threats to the Gospel.**

1. Theological threat – these proposals are based on a fundamentally wrong Christian anthropology. In truth the Church believes that men and women are equal before God, and equally made in the image of God.

These proposals dignify the idea that women are inferior to men, and are 'not quite' made in image of God. This is understandable at one level, since the Church has been implying this (and sometimes stating it) for 2000 years. We won't undo that heritage in just fifteen years of women's priesthood.

#### **2. Pragmatic threat – these proposals will set in place a continual waste of talent.**

We need the experience, wisdom, insight and gifts of our most able clergywomen in the House of Bishops and other senior posts, and these proposals will deter women from serving the Church in these forms of ministry. It is hard enough to be 'the first' woman in any role, with the heightened visibility and expectations of others, as well as dealing with others' anxieties. How often still do clergywomen receive the comment 'oh, you're a woman'? But when the institution of the Church itself says you may not be whom you say you are – in effect creating 'episcopacy-lite' – then is it even possible to take on the role successfully?

3. **Moral threat – we must not protect the minority at the cost of the whole Church and the gospel.**

Sometimes we must draw a line and say 'thus far and no further – it will be too costly if we allow these proposals to go through'. We must make a beginning to setting right the way women have been disregarded and mis-regarded by the Church. Acknowledging that will be painful for all of us.

But most importantly, we must not create separation in law: we must always allow for growing together – we must leave space for grace.

### **What happens next?**

If the Proposals currently on the table are presented to General Synod next February without significant amendment, then the task for General Synod will be to weigh up if it's worth it. Is it worth having women as bishops in this way, with these risks attached?

### **What can you do?**

If you are concerned about what the current proposals will do to the Church, the Gospel, women and the episcopacy, then please contact:

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To read the proposals in full go to

<http://www.cofe.anglican.org/info/papers/womenbishopsdebate/furtherreport/g1708.pdf>

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