



WATCH response to GS 1886 'Women in the Episcopate – New Legislative Proposals'

Summary of WATCH's response:

WATCH is very encouraged by this report by the Archbishops with its very welcome commitment to opening all orders of ministry to women, without equivocation. The proposals that they are asking General Synod to support in July are, in essence, ones that WATCH can fully endorse.

(1) Following the meeting of the House of Bishops on 20-21 May, the report of the Working Party on Women in the Episcopate, together with a report by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York on behalf of the House, was issued on 25th May. The WATCH committee has taken time to consider the implications of the report, before issuing this response.

(2) We wish to register our thanks to the House of Bishops and the Working Party for seeking an early resolution within the Church's own processes to a situation which is undesirable and untenable for the Church of England, and which hinders our mission and credibility in society at large.

(3) Members of General Synod will devote a significant proportion of the July group of sessions to discussion of the matter, and we urge General Synod to support the motion as proposed in the report, following the House of Bishops' guidance in seeking to frame legislation within the parameters of the Working Group's 'option one'.

(4) The Archbishops' report displays a significant change in tone towards the prospect of having women in the episcopate, and we are greatly encouraged by the positive commitment to this now being demonstrated by the House of Bishops. This, we hope, may go some way to repairing the damage done by the outcome of the Synod vote in November, which is noted in paragraphs 1 and 2 of the report.

We are particularly heartened by paragraph 21 which says:

"The conviction of the House [of Bishops] is that the Church of England should now commit itself fully and unequivocally to all orders of ministry being open to all, without reference to gender. It would, in the view of the House sit very uncomfortably with that if the [General] Synod were to enshrine in legislation a series of rights, duties and definitions that would inevitably be seen as qualifying that commitment."

(5) The principles underlying the Working Party's thinking (namely, simplicity, reciprocity and mutuality [Annex para. 32f]) seem to us broadly good ones, and we recognise the challenge inherent in moving from principle to legislation.

(6) We welcome particularly the Working Party's recognition that support for women's ministry is grounded in theological conviction (Annex paras 37 and 53), something which seems often to have been regarded as the preserve of opponents of the ordained ministry of women.

(7) In this vein, we welcome the commitment to avoiding 'unacceptable theological or ecclesiological confusion for the whole Church of England' (Annex para. 31) as we regard such confusion as detrimental to the health and mission of the whole Church of England. For this reason, we are pleased to see noted as elements of the vision in Annex para. 24 (copied in the Archbishops' report para. 12) that:

- Once legislation has passed to enable women to become bishops the Church of England will be fully and unequivocally committed to all orders of ministry being equally open to all, without reference to gender, and will hold that those whom it has duly ordained and appointed to the office are the true and lawful holders of the office which they occupy and thus deserve due respect and canonical obedience;
- Anyone who ministers within the Church of England must then be prepared to acknowledge that the Church of England has reached a clear decision on the matter.

It seems to us very important that, as Annex para. 39 notes, 'There should no longer be any dioceses where none of the serving bishops ordains women as priests.'

(8) Should General Synod follow the House of Bishops' leadership in commending Option One, the question will arise as to what should be the nature of the provision for those unable to accept the ordained ministry of women, a House of Bishops' Declaration or an Act of Synod. It seems to us that there would be merits and drawbacks to each, and that (as for all parties) the detail of the content would be paramount.

(9) We were encouraged to see that there was little support in the House of Bishops for Options 3 and 4, and we would find ourselves unable to support Option 2. The strong support among laity and clergy alike at every synodical level for the previous draft legislation, together with the 2/3 majority achieved in Synod last July in favour of the adjournment of the debate to allow reconsideration of the first iteration of Clause 5(1)(c), convince us that there is no appetite in the Church at large for enshrining discrimination in statute. Even if such discriminatory provision could command the requisite majorities in any General Synod, it is clear that the Ecclesiastical Committee would be unable to recommend such a Measure in Parliament. We are therefore convinced that the wisest course would be for Synod to follow the House of Bishops' lead in eschewing any discrimination in law, and thus to allow the Church of England to resolve the matter via her own processes.

(10) Encouraged as we are by the positive tone of the Archbishops' report, we nevertheless retain some concerns about assumptions. In particular, we again wish to highlight the use of 'majority/minority' as shorthand for 'support/opposition' to the ordination of women. It is clearly true that, in numerical terms, these are equivalent; however, as we have previously pointed out, ordained women constitute a cultural minority within the Church of England, particularly as regards senior and stipendiary posts. Moreover, we are concerned that such shorthand pays little regard to those – most especially lay people – in favour of women's ministry in areas where the diocesan hierarchy is predominantly opposed. It seems to us that any pastoral care for 'minorities' must, on the basis of reciprocity, take this into serious account. In this connection, we note with concern the overwhelmingly clerical emphasis of the Working Party's report.

(11) We are interested by the recurrent language of 'mutual flourishing'. 'Flourishing' is, we note, a word with uncertain biblical and liturgical resonances, normally indicating (as in the Prayer Book and Common Worship burial and funeral orders!) impermanence and transience. We wonder whether it might be more helpful and hopeful for all parties to consider the health of the whole Church, growing together: such growth together in Christ demands coherence of orders, necessitates proper regard for weaker and more vulnerable members (determined on bases other than simply numerical ones) and would enable us to be more credible and more effective for the society we all seek to serve.

WATCH National Committee 10th June 2013