

WATCH AGM 2015

Chair's report

It is such a delight to be able to report that 7 women have been appointed as bishops over the past year. They are:

Stockport (Chester diocese)- Libby Lane
Hull (York)- Alison White
Gloucester - Rachel Treweek
Taunton (Bath & Wells) - Ruth Worsley
Crediton (Exeter) - Sarah Mullally
Aston (Birmingham) - Anne Hollinghurst
Newcastle - Christine Hardman

During the same period 2 men were appointed as Diocesan bishops and 8 men as suffragans, so parity within the House and College of Bishops is still a long way off.

Attending consecrations has been a very moving experience, full of joy, relief and hope for the future. Most recently, the Bishop of Gloucester was 'introduced' to the House of Lords on 26th October: an historic moment that was greeted with rare applause by her peers. WATCH sent a tea towel to each member of the House of Bishops when they met in September for the first time with women present as full members. We have received a number of appreciative letters in response - from men as well as women. The Church of England has indeed begun to change to a new normal.

Following the success of the campaign for women to be bishops, we have begun to extend our focus to other areas, as you will have seen in Outlook and the accompanying 'Just getting started' poster. Other AGM reports cover those activities: it is exciting to see the work begin, and to have an increasing number of members joining Task Forces with relevant expertise and enthusiasm. Our day for laywomen in March was a particular highlight, initiating some important work on what are laywomen for and what do they want?

"Gender - the Inclusive Church resource" - was published in March as part of the series on issues of inclusion, and is a really valuable read, covering the essentials as well as a wide variety of experience of gender - female, male and trans.

The flurry of media interest in June about God being named as 'she' as well as 'he' was unexpected but very welcome. The divide between those for whom this is an old argument - mainly clergy - and those for whom it is new - mainly laypeople - was very stark, and we aim to keep the Church of England moving on this. We took this issue as our theme at Greenbelt, which is always a great place of encouragement - both for us, and for those who come to tell us their own stories - and this year was full of debate and interest.

The new WATCH website was launched in July and is beginning to give better and wider access to our work and resources, as well as linking with others working on gender in the churches.

We reported our concern about the continuing existence of 'alternative' chrisms masses to the Independent Reviewer, who did not agree with us that such events did not accord with the 5 guiding principles and the House of Bishops Declaration. Since then, we have contributed to his consultation on how he fulfills his duties, including commenting on how power continues to be wielded in an institution created by men.

The newly elected General Synod has more women than previously in each of the three Houses. We have lost, through retirement, some stalwart (and exhausted!) campaigners, amongst them Christina Rees and Hugh Lee. Christina was awarded a richly deserved CBE for her unstinting work on Synod and as a campaigner. The Church of England owes a great deal to all those who picked up the baton of campaigning for women's ordination over the past twenty and more years. For the next Synod, we intend to hold the Reform and Renewal programme to account on gender issues wherever necessary.

Some are suggesting that the Church of England has 'done' gender, through having women as bishops. History in all parallel institutions proves otherwise: making sure that the experience, skills and gifts of women are fully valued and used requires real and constant intention and attention. WATCH will continue to challenge, encourage and support such vital work, for the enrichment of all God's creation.

Hilary Cotton
November 2015