

WATCH National Committee response to the Independent Reviewer's Report on the Nomination to the See of Sheffield.

WATCH would like to thank Sir Philip Mawer for the time taken to listen to so many individuals and organisations. His account of the events surrounding the appointment and later withdrawal, of +Philip North as Bishop of Sheffield is clearly laid out. His conclusion that there were no villains is extremely helpful. The sense that a deeply questioning response to this appointment was not anticipated or thought through is concerning and shows how little the central church has understood the commitment of the wider church, clergy and especially laity, to the equality which is part of the law of the land and therefore part of most people's experience, including employment. Where the church differs from this it needs to be able to justify and explain.

The report focuses a great deal of attention on the articles written by Professor Percy. However, it is clear that concerns about +Philip's nomination were raised by many people, especially within the diocese of Sheffield. The review does not pay as much attention to these and thus it appears to give little room to the voices of women clergy, and those who are supportive of them, both clergy and laity. In fact the review often reads as if this is a matter for clergy with little sense of the need for the laity of a diocese to understand and welcome their bishop.

Women clergy in Sheffield are referenced in the Doncaster meeting which +Philip clearly found difficult. It is sad that the potential bishop of the diocese faced with the genuine concerns of most of these women and the real pain of some, could only receive what they were saying as 'a savaging'. It also seems strange that we are repeatedly told that the meeting had to be moved to a larger venue. Surely the number of women in the diocese was known when the venue was booked?

Before the Archbishops set up this review WATCH had raised two points of concern. These are both dealt with in the review.

1. It is a conflict of interest when a central CNC member is also an elected General Synod rep for the diocese whose vacancy is being considered. This happened in Sheffield in the person of Jane Patterson.

Sir Philip quotes at s116 Baroness Fritchie's advice on this matter and we hope that in future that will be followed.

2. We asked if all those discussing the vacancy in Sheffield had been made aware of paragraph 12 of the House of Bishops' Declaration.

Sir Philip addresses this issue in s112-114.

It is also addressed in his Recommendation 3 s200. We note that this is now included in the guidance documents of the Appointments Secretaries. Those considering the appointment of a new Bishop need to discuss the implications of that Bishop's position on the ordination of Women. This needs to include discussing with those beyond the church in the wider community how this will be received. Doing this will prevent the very public discussion of +North's views which felt so personal to him.

The Recommendations.

The Archbishops' review was wider than the procedural points and Sir Philip makes a number of recommendations which we will now comment on.

Recommendation 1: I recommend that the House of Bishops commissions a group with balanced membership to review what has been done; distil examples of good practice within dioceses; and provide resources to help dioceses, deaneries and parishes, and theological training institutions to engage in further consideration of the issues.

1. We are supportive of this and happy to be involved but we do have some concerns. In our experience 'balanced' in the Church of England seems to imply taking people with strong views from different interest groups. As there are a number of different theological reasons why some cannot accept the ordination of women as priests and bishops "balance" can often mean that these differing groups need to be present in equal numbers. Women are regarded as if they are a minority interest group which we in WATCH are to represent.

The reality is that **women are not a minority in the church, nor a "special interest group"**. A large number of the clergy working across all sectors of ministry are women. A significant proportion of laity, probably a majority, is also female. These women hold a wide range of theological views as do the men in the clergy and laity. The Church of England needs to stop talking about women as if they are a minority or an "issue" and to make sure that any groups, such as that suggested by Sir Philip, have, if possible, an equal gender balance.

2. Whilst we applaud the distilling of good practice in terms of mutual flourishing, there needs to be a clear understanding of power differentials in different circumstances. Parish clergy, chaplains and parishes will be able to share examples of constructive working with those who disagree on the issue of women's ordination and this is to be commended. These relationships are not shaped by an imbalance of power. It becomes a very different matter when women are, in practice, working for those who have authority over them, notably Archdeacons and Bishops, who cannot fully affirm their orders. In these cases there is a power imbalance.

This is why in reference to s165 of the report we maintain that there is a difference between a Diocesan and a Suffragan bishop. The authority of the former is experienced by those in the diocese differently. It is with the Diocesan that they share the cure of souls and it is the Diocesan that has oversight of their ministry. This group needs to be clear about the difference of working relationships between equals and those where there is a clear structural authority which necessitates an imbalance of power.

Recommendation 2: Since some of them go well beyond the scope of my enquiry and it would, in any event, be wrong to make changes based solely on what happened in relation to the vacancy in Sheffield without further consideration of the issues in the round, I recommend that the matters I have identified are considered alongside the outcome of the review of the Crown Nominations Commission led by Professor Oliver O'Donovan, the report of which is I understand to be received shortly. These should include the issue of the extent to which the cloak of confidentiality currently surrounding the work of the Commission can be relaxed in order to ensure the degree of preparation for the announcement of a nomination commensurate with the controversy it is likely to arouse.

We agree with Sir Philip that this report raises a number of issues that need to be considered in reviewing the CNC. Amongst the issues that need to be addressed is how to ensure the elected diocesan members reflect the breadth of the diocese (s115) and the counting of abstentions in practice as no votes. (s 119).

WATCH is concerned that the church has changed the legislation allowing women to be bishops but has not looked at how the appointment structures still discriminate against women. The fact that only two women have been appointed diocesan bishops since the legislation bears this out. Analysis of the make-up of the diocesan members of the CNC for most dioceses that have appointed since 2014 shows that the majority have no ordained women and none have more than one.

If abstentions count as no votes and, most Vacancy in See committees contain people who would not feel able to vote for a woman, then it follows that statistically, it is harder for a woman to achieve the necessary number of votes needed to be appointed. Women have a statistically harder hurdle to overcome. In any other organisation this would be considered bad practice, if not discriminatory.

Recommendation 3: I recommend that the House invites the Faith and Order Commission to examine the theological challenge which has been posed to the 2014 Settlement and that the results of this work, together with the House's response to the pastoral challenge I have identified in paragraph 192, inform the ongoing process of discussion and education about the Settlement for which I have also called.

WATCH welcomes this and would be happy to be involved and to make constructive suggestions about theologians whose scholarship on ecclesiology and gender would inform this debate.

Recommendation 4: I recommend that, together with his colleagues in the National Church Institutions, and those involved in the dioceses of Sheffield and Blackburn, the Secretary General reviews the lessons to be learned from what happened in order to avoid a similar lacuna occurring in future.

WATCH supports this and suggests that a proper consideration of the views of those beyond the church needs to be taken into consideration. There are clear mission implications from the perception that the church does not treat women equally.

Further comments

165. In saying this, I in no way withdraw the concern I have already expressed that the pastoral implications for the ministry of ordained women of appointing a non-ordaining bishop as diocesan should be addressed more fully by or on behalf of the House than they have been hitherto. I understand completely the view expressed to me by ordained women in Sheffield that saying to them simply "you have the Bishop of Doncaster to look after you" is inadequate. But in acknowledging this, I underline the fact that any such exercise will also need to address the implications of appointing a woman bishop for her pastoral relationship with the male clergy in her diocese who are unable on theological grounds to accept the sacramental validity of her orders.

WATCH fully supports this recommendation. However, we are very concerned by the apparent assumption in this recommendation and at other points in the report, that Sir Philip seems to imply that the appointment of a bishop who is a woman can be equated with the appointment of a bishop who does not ordain women as priests. He also suggests that we need further work on the pastoral relations in such situations. This is a false equivalence. The appointment of a bishop who is a woman is in practice the same as a man who ordains women and clear pastoral practices are outlined in the declaration and put into practice in dioceses across the church. The point of the legislation of 2014 was to remove any residuary assumption in the church that women and men are different sorts of priests and bishops.

A bishop, whether male or female, who ordains women as priests recognises all of the sacramental ministry carried out by the clergy of the diocese. That bishop could receive communion from any of the priests with whom the cure of souls is shared. However, some of the priests and parishes within the diocese may not feel able to receive the sacramental ministry of the bishop. They may have various reasons for not receiving from a male bishop or a female bishop, but the outcome is the same. These parishes can follow the clear guidelines to ask for alternative episcopal oversight and the diocesan bishop will make an arrangement, most often by working with one of the bishops of Richborough, Beverley, Ebbsfleet or Maidstone.

When a bishop who, for whatever theological reason, does not ordain women, is appointed to a diocese, things are different. He views the male and female priests in the diocese differently and he would not receive communion from those who are women. Thus women clergy and male clergy ordained by women are differentiated because of gender, not through any theological position they hold. They do not question his sacramental ministry, yet many feel fundamentally undermined by the difficulty he has in recognising theirs. The result is that such dioceses have lower numbers of women clergy which impacts on the laity who find it harder to access the ministry of women. The 2015 (the most recent published by Church House) figures show that Women of incumbent status make up only 12% in London and 10% in Chichester when the national average is 24%. These are the two lowest figures.

Unheard Voices

WATCH continues to be very concerned that this report, which describes events in which the views and role of ordained women and laity in parishes was so significant, gives so little space to these groups. For example, twice as many men as women were included in those consulted or who sent in their views. There is a real challenge in ensuring that those with stories to tell are given space in which to tell them, and are able to feel safe doing so.

Conclusion

This review has laid out the events surrounding the appointment and withdrawal of +Philip North to the see of Sheffield. In it Sir Philip sets out some of the history around the 2014 legislation and the five guiding principles. What he does not highlight is the long history of the church's ambivalence towards the women it ordains and whose ministry is an invaluable part of the Church of England. Many of these women, and many within the wider church and beyond, read the first two principles of the 5 guiding principles with a sense of joy. There was a real hope that the church had finally welcomed the ministry of women unconditionally, and we could stop talking about women priests and just talk about priests. The vast majority were also committed to the principle of ensuring that those who still found this difficult would be supported and sustained within the family of the church.

What has become clear is that there are very different ways of reading these principles and we agree with Sir Philip that more work is needed so that we can be clearer what the church has committed itself to, ideally in ways that are based on continuing to listen attentively to each other.

National Committee of WATCH