

What is in the Draft Legislation for women bishops?

Clause 1 makes it possible for the Church of England to consecrate women as well as men as bishops.

There was no debate on this clause at General Synod in July 2010: even those opposed didn't challenge this.

Clauses 2, 3, 5 and 7 comprise provisions for those who will not accept women as bishops (or, in some cases, priests).

The inclusion of these clauses is a considerable compromise for supporters of women bishops: there will still be parishes where women are not invited to serve.

Under **Clause 2** each Diocesan bishop will set up a local Scheme to make suitable arrangements for any parish that wants to have a male bishop and/or a male vicar. **Clause 3** describes how a parish can write a Letter of Request asking for such arrangements to be made.

Any duties passed to a male bishop will be delegated rather than transferred, so the Diocesan bishop retains full authority over the whole Diocese.

Clause 5 outlines the scope of the statutory national Code of Practice to which all Schemes must adhere.

The Code cannot expand or reduce what is in the legislation, but there will be debate about what that means in practice. The Code is being prepared now, to go to the House of Bishops in Autumn 2011 and General Synod in draft in February 2012. Technically it cannot be approved until after the legislation is passed.

Clause 7 grants the Church of England additional exemption from the Equality Act 2010. At present, the Church is exempt as long as it has no women bishops, but as soon as there ARE women bishops then any provisions for those opposed fall foul of the Equality Act.

We oppose any exemption from sex equality law, but concede the need for it in this case. Any arrangements, including the Code of Practice, must not go beyond a 'proportionate' response to the needs of those opposed.

The other Clauses are technical clauses or deal with specific situations.

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A WOMAN'S PLACE IS IN THE HOUSE OF BISHOPS

I thought women could already be bishops....

No – when the Church of England agreed to ordain women as priests in 1992 it explicitly disallowed them from being bishops. That is why we are going around many of the same arguments again.

The Church now has over 3000 female priests. If your parish doesn't have one, a neighbouring parish probably will. There are four female Deans of Cathedrals and many in others in senior posts.

Why does it matter?

Because the Church has kept women 'in their place' for too long, wasting their gifts and allowing women to be treated as second-class.

Because the Bible says that women and men are both made in God's image – and share an equal responsibility for the care of God's creation. Therefore they should lead the Church together in mission and care.

Because most younger people find the way the Church treats women unacceptable, and are therefore deaf to the Church telling the Good News of God's love for them.

Because being a bishop is difficult. The Church needs to choose bishops with as wide a range of gifts, skills and experience as possible: why limit that to men?

What are the arguments against women being bishops?

Some people are still opposed to women priests, so opposing women bishops follows logically. But one-in-three priests is female, and the number of parishes opposing women priests is very small.

Some interpret the Bible as saying that women should never be in authority over men, so women cannot lead churches or dioceses. But Jesus treated women in ways that over-turned the traditions of his day in teaching them, speaking to them as equals, and making Mary the first witness to his resurrection.

Some believe that women bishops will make unity with the Roman Catholic Church even less likely. But as the Roman Catholic Church does not even recognise our male priests as valid priests, having women bishops will make little difference.

Might having women bishops split the Church?

Only a very small number of parishes continue to be opposed to women as priests and bishops – only 3 % of parishes have asked to be looked after by a ‘flying bishop’ or PEV.

Even those opposed to women bishops recognise that it will happen: what they are pressing for is more restrictions on female bishops so that they can avoid them.

Some of those opposed have already taken up the Pope’s invitation to join the Ordinariate – a sort of ‘Anglican’ part of the Roman Catholic Church.

So what are these debates about?

Dioceses, deaneries and parishes are asked to debate the legislation that General Synod (the Church’s Parliament) has prepared. This legislation does two things:

- it will mean women can be appointed as bishops
- it includes provisions for those who will not accept them

The key question is:

How shall we appoint women as bishops in a way that

- *maintains the traditional understanding and role of bishops*
- *leaves space for those who in conscience cannot accept women as priests or bishops*
- *avoids any flavour of discrimination or half-heartedness by the Church towards women priests and bishops?*
(General Synod Manchester Report April 2008)

After four years of thoroughly exploring this question, most of the General Synod believes that the legislation is ‘good enough’: perhaps a typical Anglican compromise.

It is a compromise for those in favour, as there will still be parishes where women will not be invited to serve as priests or bishops

It is a compromise for those against, as it does not create the separation from the rest of the Church that they would ideally like.

The provisions in this legislation are the most the Church can offer without discriminating against women or undermining the role of the bishop in an unacceptable way.

What happens next?

Diocesan Synods have to vote on the legislation by November 2011. Provided more than half of them support it then there will be a final debate and vote in General Synod, probably in July 2012. Deaneries and Parishes are asked to discuss and debate the legislation – but it is Diocesan Synod voting that counts.

If you want women bishops – say ‘Yes’ to this legislation and ‘No’ to any further provisions, which would delay women bishops for another ten years at least.