

The following paper is one of a series written by members of WATCH (Women and the Church) in response to proposals contained in the Report of the Women Bishops Legislative Drafting Group (GS 1685, April 2008) and the Draft Bishops and Priests (Consecration and Ordination of Women) Measure (GS 1708, December 2008).

The papers focus on the proposals, some of which imply an underlying concept of taint with regard to women priests and bishops, and others which, if passed, would further erode the unity and damage the historic episcopacy of the Church of England.

Comments on Further Report of the Legislative Drafting Group on Women in the Episcopate

by Revd Joanna Collicutt

I wish to make four points, none of them original, about the context and content of the Legislative Drafting Group (LDG) document.

1. The LDG is hamstrung by the task set for it through the resolution passed by the General Synod in July 2008. The criticisms of the LDG's proposals set out below should be read primarily as criticisms of the resolution.
2. The resolution (point b) talks of the 'theological conviction' of 'those who will not be able to receive the ministry of women as bishops or priests.' This notion is endorsed and elaborated by the LDG Further Report, first by including the term 'genuine' (point 9) and second by including the term 'with a good conscience' (point 12, which proposes a form of words to be incorporated into para 4 of the proposed Canon A4). This rests on a completely spurious rationale that if an individual or group feels that its motivation for belief is not malicious or duplicitous then the belief is valid. Yet we know from overwhelming scientific evidence (see for instance T. Wilson's 2002 book *Strangers to Ourselves*) that human beings have very poor insight into their own motives and tend to give rationalisations, plausible to both themselves and others, for decisions unconsciously made on the basis of bias and prejudice. The criteria of 'genuine' and 'held in good conscience' are not relevant to any argument about the acceptability of a theological conviction. On the other hand, the point that people who mean well should not be vilified, while an important practical consideration in the management of conflict, does not justify giving credence to the convictions they espouse, especially where these convictions cause significant damage to other interested parties. Those who are unwilling to receive the ministry of women priest or bishops in the church are simply wrong (the considered and prayerful discernment of the General Synod is that the theological argument for women bishops is convincing). The sincerity of their belief does not make them right.

3. At various points the LDG Further Report talks of 'squaring the circle' and, using the language of rights, states that there are **two** conflicting rights to be set alongside each other: the right of women to exercise priestly and Episcopal ministry versus the right of those who are opposed to this on the basis of 'theological conviction'. This is, again, spurious. There are **three** rights that need to be taken into account. These are the two already mentioned, along with a third: the right of people to be members of a Church which does not institutionally discriminate and oppress women. I am a priest, I have no personal desire to exercise an Episcopal ministry, but I would seriously consider resigning my orders if the Code of Practice set out in the LDG Further Report is implemented because I could not 'in conscience' collude with an institution tainted in this manner, and I could not preach the Gospel as good news to women inside and outside the church with any integrity.
4. If this Code of Practice is implemented the Church of England will have made a bad ecclesiological situation (extended Episcopal oversight), which has been tolerated as a temporary measure, into a disastrous ecclesiological situation. It will institutionalise the discrimination that occurs naturally in a way comparable to the work of apartheid in relation to racism.

What is the correct response? In my opinion the only possible response is absolute opposition to the LDG proposals. Either women are bishops in the Church of England or they are not. Any other arrangement will result in a situation where there are real bishops and lady-bishops.

Joanna Collicutt
17th January 2009

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and may not reflect the agreed policies and opinions of National WATCH.

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