



2022 AGM 8th October 2022

Chair Report

Like many organisations, this year has been a process of working out how to meet and engage post-covid. Zoom meetings enable good attendance but they create a very different atmosphere, especially when discussing issues that we all feel passionate about. The annual committee residential has in the past given us the space to really discuss and debate whilst eating, praying and relaxing together. By October 2021 we had missed two residentials due to Covid and not met in person and this had made it hard to engage in a thorough strategic review. It had also exacerbated tensions within the committee. Some members were concerned that WATCH had 'gone soft'.

Firstly, I can assure you that no one on the National committee has lost their deep concern to see a different kind of church in which women are truly equal. However, it is true that the process of changing a patriarchal institution saps energy. The committee will benefit from new energy and new perspectives.

I honour and thank those who led WATCH through the process of changing legislation. Those campaigning years were tough, but they had a sense of focus as different proposals came to synod. Now we are trying to make ourselves heard in a church that wants to believe that the 'women' issue is sorted. With women in the Episcopate the wider questions about women's place in the church slip down the agenda. We seem to be having the same conversations time and again about senior appointments, young vocations, maternity leave, resolution parishes, transparency, male language and institutional sexism. We need to keep all of this on the agenda however frustrating it is to keep finding ways to raise concerns.

There is a tendency at the moment for the hierarchy to suggest that women are just one 'minority' and we should take our turn! A bishop I challenged a few years ago about the very low numbers of stipendiary women in his diocese told me they had been concentrating on BAME. The ABC constantly responds to any concerns about women with his concerns about the under representation of disabled clergy. We want a diverse inclusive church but we constantly have to point out that there is not a shortage of women in the population. We need to ensure that there does not end up being a shortage of women in the church.

To counter the sense of dissonance in the committee we did our best to meet in person for 2022. We called on Hilary Ison again to help us refocus on what WATCH should prioritise and how we could work better as a committee. She joined our January meeting. Tensions within the committee persisted despite this and we realised that we needed to do some work on governance; developing our policies and procedures for meetings and decision making.



As I said above, it is difficult to have a sense of making progress when the church has stopped thinking there is a problem. The report from the Implementation and Dialogue Group on the Five Guiding Principles had been sat on by the House of Bishops until June 2021 and the proposed Steering Committee to take on the work was not set up until June 2022. This is not seen as a priority.

The unexpected death of William Fittal in Spring 2021 has left a vacancy for the Independent Reviewer which has not been filled. Vacancies in the PEV positions also led to proposals to reorganise the posts. We have written to the Archbishops about all of these issues and mainly received wait and see letters. We suggested that the IR should be replaced with a panel but that was not addressed in any reply. We also challenged the discrimination inherent in the CNC elections but Synod members in general seems to have let that pass accepting that this is an election - so you get what you get.

Meanwhile the Church of England is going through its own review of central services. This has meant engaging with Ministry Division has changed. TRIG, one of the main vehicles for WATCH to challenge and campaign within the Church, was less active over this period.

As chair, I had a number of very helpful conversations with Ruth, Bishop of Taunton Chair of TRIG and Bishop Chris head of Ministry Division. Both were very clear that they needed to maintain an active relationship with WATCH and TRIG to ensure that issues concerning women were taken seriously. By the late Spring a meeting of TRIG was held (on line) and proposals to keep this active have been given. This will continue to be a useful forum for WATCH. However, there have been many cuts to central services which limits the capacity to take on issues. We continue to struggle with the reality that you can agree things centrally, but that does not necessarily mean policies are rolled out in dioceses. The central maternity policy is an example of this. There is apparently no mechanism for even monitoring whether this is being implemented.

As Chair, I met with Em Coley, the national youth vocations adviser, to talk about the concerning lack of younger female vocations. Amongst other topics we discussed the need to analyse what works. Can the church do some basic research, finding out if the younger women who are in training attended vocation days for women? What actually helps? I hope that our new Chair can follow up this conversation.

Changes to Synod meetings have also been a byproduct of Covid and cost cuttings. One of the difficulties is that there is no longer a mechanism for distributing hard copies of material to all synod members even when the meeting is in person. This means that we need to rethink how we distribute information. Synod fringe meetings have been useful ways of keeping in touch with members and supporters, but again these are harder to timetable than they used to be.

This all means that the new committee needs to succeed where I have failed, that is to improve our website and communications. We have been doing the preliminary work about what we need so I hope that decisions will be made going forward to enable better online presence.



I was delighted to be able to attend the NADAWM conference for 24 hours in the Spring. It was a very well organised and inspiring event with real energy in the room to address issues that mattered to women. I was on a panel discussing living with the 5GPs. Some of the women present had little knowledge of the journey towards women's ordination, consecration and the settlement that we live with. I was able to distribute copies of our publication on the 5GPs.

The reps for Chichester Diocese attending the NADAWM conference invited me to come and speak to a gathering of clergywomen in Chichester diocese. I took the theme, 'Knowing our foremothers, Supporting our sisters and inspiring our daughters'. We had a good day. What struck me was how women have learnt to suppress any sense of outrage at the views of those who do not recognise their ministry. The priority of kindness and good working relationships meant that questioning and challenging negative views was discouraged.

Whilst thinking about these issues I had been asked to review a book for possible publication. It's author Dr Sharon Jagger, a sociologist at York St. John was someone I had been hoping to contact. This book, which will be published in 2024, coinciding with the 30th anniversary of the first cohort of women priests, looks at how women clergy live with the 2014 settlement. She observes how women collude with what oppresses them for lots of reasons and notes the lack of active outrage. I am delighted that Sharon's interest is now to look at the experience of some lay women. In collaboration with WATCH she has drawn up a research proposal to look at the experience of lay women in evangelical parishes that do not support women's full ministry. This has at last provided us with a quality project to support through the Hodel Jones legacy money. We are encouraging individuals with research proposals to get in touch to see where we can partner the work.

It was with deep sadness that I learnt at the end of the summer, of the sudden death of Stephen France. I agreed to take on the role of Chair of WATCH because Stephen promised to support me as Vice Chair. He did this remarkably well bringing organisational skills and a wonderful flair to the role. He was invaluable in our response to the Independent Reviewer after Philip North's appointment and withdrawal from Sheffield. Sadly, his acute mental health problems meant that he withdrew from WATCH. We had just reconnected earlier this summer and had hoped to meet but sadly other health issues arose and he has died far too young. WATCH owes him a great deal.

As I step down from the role as Chair I want to pay tribute to all of those I have worked alongside. We are all deeply motivated and often frustrated as we work for a Church which really values women. I am grateful for the ways in which my own understanding has been enriched by those I have worked with. Over this last year I am particularly grateful for the wisdom and support of the Vice Chairs Cath and Rosalind. I could not have managed this role without the incredibly sane Claire Creese. She has a wonderful capacity to ensure that we do things properly. She also has a calm kindness that has been very precious.

My last external event as Chair of WATCH was in Brisbane, Australia where I was the keynote speaker on a day to reflect on 30 years. November marks 30 years since the vote to



allow women's ordination as priests in both the C of E and the Church of Australia, they also had the first ordinations that year.

It is a real joy for me to have Bishop Christine Hardman here today. As a young curate I attended MOW meetings with her in St. Alban's diocese. On November 11th 1992 I stood outside Church House holding up one of the letters in the word WAITING. On 23rd April 1994 she and I were ordained as priests in St Alban's Abbey. We have come a long way in 30 years, but we still have far to go.

My next chapter is still being finalised. In the short term I am off to spend 5 weeks at Virginia Theological Seminary, reading, writing and recovering. I will of course remain a member of WATCH and hope to continue to contribute to its important work.

Emma Percy

