



FORWARD IN FAITH
DIOCESE OF LINCOLN

Newsletter

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UPDATE ON WOMEN BISHOPS

On this occasion it might be thought rather pointless to summarize the long and difficult succession of debates and discussions that took place on women bishops in the various enacting bodies of the Church of England, notably the Legislative Drafting Group, the Revision Committee and above all the General Synod itself.

Most readers of this Newsletter will by now be only too aware of the events that led up to the final debate at York in July when Synod took the penultimate step of passing the draft Measure that will both enable women to become bishops and deny traditionalists any real safeguards except those contained within the much derided code of practice.

Instead what we can (and shall) do here is to highlight those pivotal actions which have determined the precarious position in which traditionalists now find themselves, a position in which they have nothing more than a statement of intent which when worked out, may or (more likely) may not protect them as individual worshippers within their parishes and dioceses.

The Act of Synod

Writing in "Consecrated Women?" in 2004, John Broadhurst the Bishop of Fulham wrote, "It would not only be a tragedy if the Act of Synod were to be rescinded; it would be an act of betrayal and trigger a new crisis for our Church".

How prescient those words are turning out to be six years later! In accord with the present draft Measure which is on its way to the dioceses for endorsement, the Act of Synod which has served Resolution C parishes well since its inception, will be swept away. Also to be removed from current church law will be the right of parishes to pass Resolutions A and B.

From the time when the new Measure comes into force – probably in 2014 – parishes will no longer be able to petition for alternative episcopal oversight, and there will be no provincial episcopal visitors. Each parish instead will have to rely on the scant provision afforded by the code of practice about to be drawn up by the House of Bishops.

It was with this in mind that at its last meeting in July, our Administrative Council for Lincoln passed the following motion for transmission to Stephen Parkinson, asking that it should be placed on the Agenda of the National Assembly meeting in October:-

This Assembly instructs the National Council to make plans to ensure the provision of continued episcopal ministry to those individuals and parishes that have need of it.

We have made contact with Forward In Faith branches in neighbouring dioceses to support this motion if and when it is discussed at the Assembly. The time may well have arrived (if not too late) when direct action of one kind or another (which this motion implies) may be the only way for traditionalists to go.

The Broken Promise

In the period between the determining day of 11th November 1992 when it was decided by General Synod to permit women to become priests, and the time a year later when the 1993 Priests (Ordination of Women) Measure was passed, promises were made by a number of prominent individuals in the Church that proper provision would be made for those unwilling to accept the innovation, notably the then Archbishop of Canterbury George Carey, the then Bishop of Guildford Michael Adie and Professor McClean.

At first it had been proposed to put a limit of twenty years on this provision. But in the course of debate on the 1993 Measure the General Synod rejected this limit. This was because Synod wanted protection for incumbents and parishes to remain in force *for as long as anyone wanted it* (my ital.).

Sentences such as “Traditionalists should have an equal, honoured and permanent place in the Church of England as loyal Anglican” have now proved to be worthless. If, as has been pointed out elsewhere, the promise of permanent provision can be broken after fifteen years, what trust can there be in the Church by those unwilling to accept the ordained ministry of women? Given the potential deficiencies of the code of practice and much continuing hostility towards it from those on both sides of the debate, the chances of the code not being rescinded after a few years are not very great. Once trust evaporates, it becomes difficult for charitable thoughts to be exercised towards one’s opponents.

No concessions by the majority

In looking back at the debates on women bishops that have characterized the tone of this General Synod, it has been apparent both in the parent body as well as in its subordinate committees that in vote after vote on amendments seeking to strengthen provision for traditionalists (for instance in the formation of separate dioceses or identification of specific functions to be vested in nominated male bishops) Synod has been consistently rigid in refusing to move from the minimalist position.

This inflexibility of General Synod was demonstrated with startling clarity when it declined at the York Summer 2010 session to pass amendments tabled by the two archbishops to ameliorate the situation for traditionalists. Even the Bishop of Lincoln said in the course of the debate that on this occasion he was not going to support his superior! So much for accepting and following the archiepiscopal leaders of the Church!

Why has the membership of General Synod acted in this inflexible manner? We have to remember that the revisionist/liberal majorities in all three houses of Synod have been large and stable for as long as there have been women priests. Also more recently, women clergy have provided an influx into the elected ranks of elected clergy. These majorities have been unwilling to reach any form of compromise at all. Admittedly, in its turn the catholic group in Synod seems to have been unwilling to face up to the fact that no amount of argument, however convincing, was going to change anything.

Chris Sugden of Anglican Mainstream recently pointed out that the real debate in the Church of England is not about gender equality between male and female bishops. “It is about the liberty hold within the Church

of England two views about leadership in the Church which are compatible with scripture and tradition”. This sentence summarises in a few words the issue that has dominated the struggle in General Synod for sixteen years. It is this liberty which is to be denied traditionalists. The C. of E. – in the process now of discarding its proud boast to be a broad Church – is not able any more to accommodate these two contrary positions simultaneously. So much for Anglican comprehensiveness.

A Secular-Minded Synod

Listening to the debate in Synod, relayed by radio, was not an enjoyable occasion, and some sympathy has to be expressed with members in the debating chamber who had to endure several days of the same proceedings. What came across to listeners was how imbued many of the speakers were with secular values and beliefs.

In the exchange of views on women bishops where the holding of entrenched positions was paramount, this worldly stance was particularly apparent. How often were references made to “the need to achieve equality with men”, “the importance for women to occupy the most senior positions of the Church”, “the stained glass ceiling”, “sexism and gender inequality” and of course, “misogyny”. The aggressive feminist agenda which like many other innovations, came from America, could be seen as alive and thriving.

It cannot be doubted that in the past some ordained men were – as we must suppose many almost certainly are today – ambitious beyond their clerical calling. But the secular language used by many proponents of women’s consecration as bishops, takes public utterances in Synod and elsewhere to a new and unwelcome level. The campaign waged both in the General Synod and beyond has been one that puts the professional advancement of women in the Church before the calling to service. This trend was aptly described by Julian Mann who wrote, “The drive for women bishops is basically about careerism than about self-sacrificial Christian service that walks in the way of the cross of Christ”. Need one say more?

Anglican Catholicity

We don’t hear much today in the debate on women bishops about the doctrine of reception. In the early 1990s it was a different story. Then, there was considerable agreement in the higher echelons of the Church of England that the ordination of women as priests should be regarded as provisional or tentative. It was officially accepted that the innovation might or might not prove acceptable not only within the C. of E. and the Anglican Communion, but in the wider Church throughout the world. No time limit was placed on how long this period of reception, as it was called, should be.

Those supporting the ordination of women as priests did not think of the period of reception as being more than a few years during which, opponents would get used to the idea, and fall into line. However as was pointed out in the book “Consecrated Women?” (pp. 83-84) the doctrine of reception would normally be understood as having a much longer time span than just a few years. The Catholic understanding of the doctrine of reception is “the acceptance (or non-acceptance) of a development in part of the Church, by the whole Church”. Until such a development, in this case women’s ordination, could have been accepted by all (notably by the great Churches of East and West), there could be no question that the provisional nature of the innovation had yet come to an end.

In “Consecrated Women?” (p. 85) in 2004 it was maintained, “the ordination of women to the priesthood is still very far from having been accepted by all”. Six years on the position remains the same. Reception in respect of women’s ordination has not yet run its course. To date it has not been accepted or not accepted.

What changes the whole situation on reception vis-à-vis women’s priestly ordination is the recent decision made by General Synod to consecrate women. To make women bishops while there is still doubt

