



WOMEN BISHOPS

Are the current proposals by General Synod acceptable to us?

EALING DEANERY SYNOD REPORT

Ealing Deanery Synod met on Wednesday 22 June to discuss the proposals regarding women bishops. As Rev'd Christopher Ramsay, the Area Dean of Ealing, explained at the start of the meeting, the purpose was not to debate the rights or wrongs of women bishops but to gauge the feeling of the church towards the current proposals.

Mr Clive Scowen, a member of General Synod, provided an overview of the issues. The principle of women being appointed as bishops has been accepted. As a result, the current debate concerns the provision for those who, for theological reasons, cannot accept the Episcopal oversight of a female bishop. The proposed legislation obliges each diocesan bishop to organise a scheme to provide care to parishes who request a male bishops, with regard to a national code of practice.

Following this introduction, the Ven. Rachel Treweek, Archdeacon of Northolt, (who was invited to speak in her role as a general Synod member rather than in her role as Archdeacon), spoke in favour of the proposed legislation. She noted that there are already 28 women bishops in the Anglican Communion and their place in the Episcopate is all about Christ's mission and the kingdom of God and not due to a secular agenda based on human rights. Men and women are both wonderfully created to be equal but not interchangeable and are able to fulfil the same roles in different ways. Paul, in his writings, did not promote a church where all distinctions are blurred but one where each member made a unique contribution. It is clear that he sent greetings to women in positions in authority in the church, such as Priscilla and Julia. Paul was passionate about spreading the gospel and was prepared to be counter-cultural as the Holy Spirit revealed truth to him. It took time for members of the early church to accept that Gentiles could be Christians. It took longer for Christians to realise that slavery is not acceptable. Rachel commented that we are currently falling short of our calling to share the good news of Christ because a church that does not accept that women are equally able, is not a church that many people want to be a part of. She described the proposed legislation as a gracious compromise that leaves space for those who cannot in conscience accept women bishops. In her conclusion, Rachel stated that the question of women priests and bishops has very little to do with the modern concept of 'moving with the times' but everything to do with the challenge of understanding the times. The Holy Spirit has always been in the business of calling the church to understand the times as part of its mandate to proclaim the faith afresh in each generation.

In response, Mr Clive Scowen spoke against the proposed legislation. He explained that many members of the Church of England are not in favour of women bishops, but even some of those who are in favour do not want to approve the legislation in its current form. The New Testament leads conservative evangelicals to believe that women should not be bishops. There is the radical understanding that male and female, like Jews and Gentiles, are equal but there is a differentiation in terms of leadership. Firstly, no female apostles were appointed. Secondly, in the family, the man is to lay down his life for his wife who, in turn, is to submit to him,

and the same dynamic is present in the church family. Traditional Catholics believe that church order was revealed by God. The priest presiding at the Eucharist should be male, for example, because Jesus was male. If the Holy Spirit really was leading such a change in order, it would mean change in the Catholic and Orthodox traditions too. Both the Lambeth Conference and General Synod confirm that those who cannot accept women bishops are still loyal Anglicans. Provision to meet their needs must be adequate for them to not just stay within the church but to flourish. Clive described this as requiring statutory entitlement to be covered – and not by delegation – by a male bishop who neither ordains women nor was ordained by a woman. The proposed legislation merely requires an as yet unwritten code of practice, without guarantees that its principles will be honoured. Even if the code is followed, any bishop providing oversight will not have jurisdiction of their own, which is a breach of catholic order. Clive concluded that there is a way of ‘squaring the circle’ over this issue, but the current proposals do not achieve that yet.

In opening the discussion to responses from Synod members and visitors, Revd Ramsay asked everyone to listen with their hearts to one another.

During the discussion, many speakers affirmed the value and contribution of women in ministry. Those in favour of the proposed legislation welcomed the opportunity to make the appointment of female bishops possible after many years of debate. One person commented that “We need to recognise that the Anglican Church is in very troubled times. Many good people out there will have nothing to do with the church but will listen to Richard Dawkins. We need excellent leaders and we cannot rule people out because of their gender. If the motion is turned down, it will take a long time to come back again and my fear is that there will be no church here for women to be bishops of.”

However, those against the proposed legislation urged that the measures be reconsidered amid concerns that people – clergy and laity – could be driven out of the church. One person commented that “There will always be people with different views and we have to keep everyone together. This legislation does not keep people together . . . It is possible to cater for everybody. A bishop does not have to be in jurisdiction over a geographical area – a bishop can be bishop of a particular kind of people . . . I don’t think we should be satisfied [with the current proposals] because it will divide the church.”

Members of the clergy and lay representatives voted on the motion to approve the proposals, with the following results:

	In favour	Against	Abstained
Clergy	23	24	0
Laity	35	5	1

The motion was carried in both houses. A second motion was proposed, that “We urge the House of Bishops to improve the legislation so as to make more adequate provision for those who cannot in conscience accept the ministry of women bishops.” A vote on the second motion returned the following results:

	In favour	Against	Abstained
Clergy	3	11	5
Laity	6	24	11

The second motion was not carried. Consequently, Ealing Deanery Synod approved the current proposals regarding women bishops without proposing any further motions. Revd Ramsay concluded the meeting by thanking everyone for their honesty and vulnerability in stating their views on the issue.

Revd. Christopher Ramsay
Area Dean