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A Brief History of the Legislation

The proposed legislation has arisen out of many years of debate and exploration regarding the appointment of women bishops. There have been several reports on this subject plus discussions in General Synod. In no sense could it ever be said this has been a rushed process.

General Synod voted in favour of women bishops 5 times since 2005 and overwhelmingly confirmed its support since then. In the General Synod debate in July 2010 no one spoke against the first clause in the legislation that says, 'Women can be bishops'.

The key issue for the Church of England now is how can:

- women bishops be appointed in a way that maintains the traditional understanding of the role of bishops
- space be made for those who are opposed and cannot accept women as priests and bishops
- discrimination against women be avoided that, if allowed, would lead to a two tier episcopate, which would be unacceptable

In 2009 a Revision Committee, consisting of bishops, clergy and lay people of differing opinions was appointed by General Synod and given the task of drawing up proposals for admitting women to the episcopate.

The committee's work took place over nearly two years; many meetings were held. Evidence was taken from people who represented different groups both for and against. The committee explored seriously and in great depth the proposals put to them by those opposed in order to try and find a way to help them stay within the Church of England.

Early on the Revision Committee announced that it had decided to accommodate opposing parishes by transferring the authority of the Diocesan to an alternative Diocesan who will meet their needs. This was what the opposition wanted but the Revision Committee subsequently found (as had all the other Committees before it) that this proposal was impossible to implement. Alternative proposals were then worked up to provide for those against women bishops. These are now part of the proposed legislation that will be discussed in parishes, deaneries and eventually in the dioceses.

In no sense is it true that those opposed are being driven away from the Church of England. Much time and consideration has been given to finding ways of providing concessions for them.

Those of us in favour of women bishops, including senior women clergy, went along with the proposed

legislation out of a spirit of generosity towards those who were against in spite of the fact all of us would have preferred a simple measure saying nothing more than 'women will be Bishops'.

It is important that everyone knows what these provisions are as so much attention is paid in the media to those against rather than the concessions made by those who are in favour.

The provisions are that:

- Every Diocesan bishop has to draw up and publish a scheme under which she or he will delegate to a male bishop the ecclesiastical oversight of those parishes who request it and will allow for the appointment of a male clergy where that is requested. She or he must consult with the Diocesan Synod and must publish the scheme within one year of her or his appointment;
- A Code of Practice will be drawn up by a committee appointed by the House of Bishops. The Code will contain guidelines for each diocesan bishop on which to base the Scheme outlining the arrangements for any parish who wishes to have only a male bishop or vicar;
- These parishes will be required to write a 'Letter of Request' stating why they do not wish to have a woman priest and why they wish to have ecclesiastical oversight from an alternative bishop which may (and usually will) occur even where the diocesan bishop is male;
- The former Provincial Episcopal Visitors ('flying bishops') will no longer be in place but other male bishops will be available to such parishes.

Arguments for and Against

It is this last point that has proved a problem for one group, who are referred to as Traditional Catholics (who are not representative of Anglo Catholics as a whole most of whom do support women priests and bishops). This group not only reject the idea of women bishops, because of Tradition as they interpret it, but also state they will refuse the ministrations of a male bishop if he has ordained a woman or taken part in the consecration of a women bishop. They will also refuse the ministrations of a male clergy if a woman has ordained him. This has been strongly criticised by men and women alike as it gives a view of women as being in some way tainted along with those men who have supported them. Having 'pedigree priests and bishops' would create a church within a church.

Further, the traditionalists cannot accept the ministrations even of an acceptable male bishop if his authority has been delegated by a woman bishop or an unacceptable male bishop, because that would imply that ultimate authority resides in that unacceptable bishop. They want that authority to reside in 'their' bishop directly by virtue of the Measure. This is what the Revision Committee could not grant without setting up 'virtual dioceses' and leaving holes in the Diocese a traditional parish has left. General Synod has consistently opposed this type of arrangement.

There is also an inconsistency in the argument that the ministry of those male priests ordained by a woman, for example, is invalid. The issue is that the 'direct line' of ordination from St Peter is broken. However, the view of the Vatican is that all Anglican orders are 'utterly null and void' which would imply that the direct line is broken regardless of the ordination of women. On the other hand, our other sisters and brothers in, for example, the Methodist church cannot further pursue union with the Anglican church unless and until the episcopate is open to all ordained persons.

There is one other group within the Evangelical Tradition who are against women priests and bishops because they believe in 'Headship', meaning that women should not have authority over men or teach in public. But this group is not representative of Evangelicals as a whole; a senior evangelical priest recently affirmed his complete support for women bishops saying he was, 'completely convinced of the biblical basis for women's ordained ministry seeing its impact within (his) parish' (Church of England Newspaper Friday Nov 19th edition).

Biblical Context

The views expressed by both of these groups are felt to be contradicting the essential Christian teaching that, 'in Christ we are all One'. Throughout his life and teaching Christ broke many taboos of his day with regard to women. He spoke at length to the Samaritan woman; he healed the women with a haemorrhage; encouraged Mary (Martha's sister) to sit at his feet in a public place and listen to his teaching; he rebuked those with whom he was eating when he was anointed with oil by a woman who they wanted to send away and, most significantly, he appeared to a woman (Mary Magdalene) at his resurrection and entrusted her with the task of telling the disciples that he had Risen (at a time when women could not be legal witnesses). In the Church it is the tradition to regard Mary Magdalene as, 'the apostle to the apostles'. It was women who maintained a faithful presence alongside Christ in all aspects of his life and death, staying with him throughout his Crucifixion and anointing him for burial. Equally there are many examples of St Paul (who was not the misogynist he is often made out to be) sending new converts to women to be taught by them and thanking them for their support and care (1 Cor 11-15). The same St Paul also called Junia an apostle and acknowledged all the work she had done (Romans 6).

The question raised about Tradition is an interesting one, as we all owe much to the Tradition into which we are born and raised. But, Tradition is never static, if it was it would become fossilised and wither away. All Traditions change and develop over time. Greater biblical scholarship brings more awareness of the meaning of the Gospels and the context in which they were written; the revelation and experiences of each age and its people develop with regard to attitudes that were once thought of as biblically based, such as slavery that have brought about huge changes of perception and behaviour. And, of course, we have a belief in the Holy Spirit working through our lives and communities often in unpredictable and unexpected ways.

It is hoped that the proposed legislation is passed by all Dioceses and that no other amendments are slipped in at the end to limit the role of women as Bishops as happened after the 1992 vote for women priests by the Act of Synod which created 'No-go' areas for women priests. If this were to happen, it may well be that women clergy and supporters of women's ministry could not accept it and the Measure could fail. Further, as the Revision Committee established, it would be impossible to accommodate such amendments.

The Church of England needs to embrace the whole Ministry and priesthood of women at every level. In doing so it will send signals to our Society in general, as well as the Church in particular, that the gifts and vocations of women and men as priests and bishops are joyfully welcomed, as well as valued, in the furtherance of the Good News of the Gospel; that we are indeed all 'One in Christ'.

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