



‘I am not a problem: I am your sister in Christ’.

So says a friend of mine to her male clergy colleagues when engaged in yet another discussion about ‘the problem of women bishops’. It is a recurring phenomenon for minorities – if they want to be valued equally, change is required and that creates a problem for the majority. And once they start to be valued, those who do not agree with valuing them elbow their way to centre stage and take the focus away from that emerging valuing. So, if we talk about making changes so that women as well as men can be bishops, women are seen as creating a problem for the Church. As soon as we moved towards the possibility of consecrating women as well as men as bishops, the focus switched to the (mostly) men who will not accept them – but not as a problem: as a minority group needing to be cared for and protected. So women in the Church are either a problem, or are less important than those who will find their presence in leadership unacceptable. In response, first let us recall that women are not a minority. Second, let us remind ourselves – and the Church – that we are making something happen here that we expect to change the Church and the world for the better. Much good will come from women being visible in the national leadership of the Church, contributing their Godly gifts and experience in Diocesan leadership and in the deliberations of the House of Bishops. They will join with their sister-bishops from other parts of the Anglican Communion in proclaiming that women and men are of equal value in God’s wonderful creation, and that women should be accorded respect as such in societies where gender-based violence is endemic and women are still trafficked as slaves, left uneducated, and regarded only as goods and chattels. Only then will the Church of England be able to talk about these abuses towards women with any real credibility.

Discussions about women’s ordination have been taking place in the Church of England since the Lambeth Conference of 1920, so this is not an innovation¹. Consecrating women as bishops, first raised in the Church Assembly in 1966, has been formally debated in the General Synod since 2000. The problem for the Church is that some faithful and committed members of the Church of England, including amongst them clergy and bishops, will not accept bishops who are female, and the General Synod has decided to make formal accommodation for them. This problem was described in the Manchester Report, looking at possible legislative ways forward, in April 2008 as:

‘How shall we appoint women as bishops in a way that –

- Maintains the traditional understanding and role of bishops
- Leaves space for those who in conscience cannot accept women as priests or bishops
- Avoids any flavour of discrimination or half-heartedness by the Church towards women priests and bishops?’²

Over the past five years four different General Synod committees and working groups have considered this problem and presented their conclusions to General Synod and the House of Bishops³. Twice Synod has decided against all other options than the current one: that provisions for those who will not accept female bishops should be contained in a national statutory Code of Practice⁴. In July 2010 this provision was expanded to include the creation of Diocesan Schemes within the Measure itself. All this provision is far more legally powerful than that of the Episcopal Act of Synod of 1993.

In July 2012 we expect the final approval vote to be taken in General Synod on legislation that will allow the Church of England to consecrate women as bishops. So what might be the key factors that will lead to a vote to proceed?

1. The results of the national consultation currently in progress.

All 44 Dioceses will have voted by mid-November 2011. Early signs are that the Measure is overwhelmingly supported, with over 80% of laity and clergy voting in favour in the first twelve Dioceses to hold debates. If this is 'the people' voting, the message seems to be 'get on with it, and this legislation is the right way forward'. This conclusion is supported by the fate of Following Motions calling for even more provisions for those who will not accept women as bishops, which have also been soundly defeated. If, as we expect, the great majority of Diocesan Synods vote to support the draft legislation, it would be puzzling for General Synod to turn its back on that national endorsement.

2. Will the House of Bishops resist pressure to amend the legislation to make even more provision for those opposed to women bishops?

The House of Bishops has the right to amend Article 8 legislation as it sees fit, before the final approval vote, and there is a great deal of pressure for it to do so. One Following Motion asking for this is being proposed in many Dioceses, sponsored by the Church of England Evangelical Council. The wording is this:

'This Synod

- 1. desires that all faithful Anglicans remain and thrive together in the Church of England*
- 2. calls upon the House of Bishops to bring forward amendments to the draft Bishops and Priests (Consecration and Ordination of Women) Measure to ensure that those unable on theological grounds to accept the ministry of women bishops are able to receive Episcopal oversight from a bishop with authority (ie ordinary jurisdiction) conferred by the Measure rather than by delegation from a Diocesan Bishop.'*

This is a return to a plea for statutory transfer of jurisdiction which General Synod has rejected twice by large majorities – and would be expected so to do again if such amendment was made. The effect of such an amendment would be that a female bishop would be forced to transfer her authority to a male bishop caring for parishes in her Diocese who so request, rather than choosing to delegate that authority and thus retaining ultimate authority over the whole geographical Diocese. This would also apply to male bishops who ordain women (they, too, are unacceptable). We would then have the bizarre situation that the only bishops legally available to minister across the entire Church of England would be the few male bishops who do not ordain women.

Why is this important? Historically, the Church of England's dioceses have always been geographical territories, many of them all-but co-terminous with Counties. If parishes were to opt-out of the jurisdiction of their diocesan bishop this would create a set of Swiss-cheese dioceses: the Bishop of (say) Chichester would also have some parishes in, and therefore be the Diocesan bishop of, parts of Guildford, Portsmouth, Southwark etc. We would have a situation where the authority of Archdeacons, Diocesan officers, and even churchwardens would be unclear – for they all operate with the delegated jurisdiction of the Diocesan bishop. Re-organisation of parishes, issues around parish church schools, parish share discussions would all become impossible. We would in effect be creating a separate church within a church, defined by its attitude towards women. This would certainly not be a united church in which 'all faithful Anglicans remain and thrive together.'

3. The contents of the draft Code of Practice.

This Code will accompany the legislation but cannot be legally ratified until the Measure is enacted. The Code of Practice Drafting Group is expected to present a draft Code to the House of Bishops for its December meeting, which will be available to General Synod members in time for their February sessions. Since there can be nothing in the Code that will frustrate the Measure, the Code is not a 'blank cheque', but there are a number of points at issue that may make the Code a problem for one group or another. Supporters of women bishops are clear that if the Code restricts the authority, decisions, actions or ministry of female bishops too much then they will not be able to support it. In particular, anything in the Code that gives parishes rights over their choice of bishop (other than that he should be male) would be unacceptable. Under the Measure a parish may write a Letter of Request (in a particular format, detailed in the Measure) asking for the ministry of a male bishop. But if, for example, the Code says that the Diocesan bishop MUST accede to an additional request from a parish that the male bishop concerned should be one who does not ordain women, this would be

unacceptable. For this would curtail the discretion of the Diocesan bishop further than the Measure intended. Of course, if this is what a parish wants then they will no doubt talk to their Diocesan bishop about this, and she (or he) will make an appropriate pastoral decision in response. That process of conversation allows for trust to develop and grace to grow between those who have deeply different views on this issue, which is surely how the Church should be.

4. The part that Parliament plays in the process.

Legislation for women bishops has to be scrutinised by the Ecclesiastical Committee of Parliament and approved in both Houses before it can be enacted. Tony Baldry MP, as the Second Church Estates Commissioner, is the member of the Government responsible for taking legislation approved by General Synod through the majority of the Parliamentary process. He is also ex officio a member of General Synod, and reflected the Parliamentary mood about such legislation in the General Synod debate of July 2010. He said that Synod should

‘be under no illusion about one thing: a difficult task could well become impossible if I had to steer through the House of Commons any Measure which left a scintilla of a suggestion that women bishops were in some way to be second-class bishops.’⁸

Some members of Synod, and of the wider Church of England, want no better thing than to create further conflict with Parliament over anything to do with equalities legislation: they view Parliament as pursuing a secularist (ungodly) agenda and Christians as being persecuted in current society. But for the majority in Synod and the Church the warning from the Government about any Measure on women bishops is helpful. Indeed, it may be that if the Code of Practice, which is itself (secondary) legislation, is too restrictive of the ministry of women as bishops, Parliament may find the whole legislative package unacceptable. In 1993 the Ecclesiastical Committee played a key role in altering the settlement that the Church of England had agreed in order to allow women to be priests: the Episcopal Act of Synod was a direct result of their intervention⁹. In 2012 their scrutiny may require the Church to adopt a settlement this time around that is closer to the equality law that applies to all other institutions and individuals.

5. How the ‘alternatives’ for those who will not accept women bishops are played out.

Already, some from the Anglo-Catholic wing of the Church have moved to the Ordinariate, and others may follow in due course. Fewer have left than might have been expected, and the parishes from which they are leaving are finding their way back into the mainstream Church of England – using Common Worship rather than the Roman Missal, for example. The appointment of two new Provincial Episcopal Visitors (PEVs) for the Province of Canterbury is an indication from the Archbishop of Canterbury that he wishes to honour the decision of those who have chosen to remain Anglicans. Although the role of PEV will disappear when the Episcopal Act of Synod is rescinded (once the Measure is enacted), those two bishops (along with the Bishop of Beverley in the Province of York) will remain as bishops. They will need to be incorporated into the mainstream work of Church of England bishops, but will no doubt be available to continue their support of parishes they currently serve. It is worth noting that PEVs currently minister in parishes at the invitation of the Diocesan bishop and with the delegated authority of the Archbishop of their Province, who himself ordains women as priests. Their continued ministry under the Measure for women bishops would be on that same basis – at the invitation of a Diocesan bishop, with her or his delegated authority as someone who ordains women. So it is not clear why they require extra provision.

In June 2011 the Anglican Mission in England was announced by conservative evangelical groups within the Church of England¹⁰. Parishes are welcome to join in with its work, in particular if they are in impaired communion with their Diocesan bishop: this group has its own panel of Church of England bishops. Whilst still operating within the Church of England at present, the founders have marked out some boundaries which may mean separation in the future, including the conditions under which women are made bishops. The stumbling block for the priests of this constituency is that they swear oaths to their Diocesan bishop, and if she were female they would find that compromising to their conscience.

Within this constituency the language is of ‘equal but different’: that women are of course of equal value in God’s sight, but they have been created with different, complementary, gifts and therefore

roles from men. In response, research across many disciplines on the nature and formation of differences between women and men continues to produce evidence on both sides of the argument. But when those differences lead to inequalities of power and control over women's lives, then that is not the gospel of Christ. In equality and diversity practice it is known that you can't 'do' diversity until you have 'done' equality, because otherwise those with power define what diversity means and the values underpinning it. Power has to be shared equally first, and then difference can be properly valued.

6. How well will the Church listen to women over the next 9 months?

It seems inconceivable to anyone engaged in equality and diversity work in other contexts that the Church would make the decision about consecrating women as bishops without seriously engaging during this last phase with those who will be most directly affected by that decision. The networks of senior clergywomen in the Church (NADAWM - the National Association of Diocesan Advisers in Women's Ministry - and DARC - Deans, Archdeacons and Residentiary Canons) were instrumental in creating the Measure as it stands. Before the key General Synod debate in July 2008 they petitioned the House of Bishops indicating that statutory transfer of jurisdiction would be unacceptable; and on the last-minute intervention of the Archbishops in June 2010, with their amendment suggesting coordinate jurisdiction, they wrote again saying that they would not be willing to take up appointments as bishops under those restrictions. On both occasions they made clear that their reasoning was twofold: the undermining of the place of all women if they were to be consecrated second-class bishops; and the damage such restriction would make to the historical understanding of Anglican Episcopacy.

Over the next nine months decisions about the Code of Practice will be made by the House of Bishops with no women present. They will also decide whether to amend the legislation to accord with the wishes of those who will not accept women as bishops, again with no women present. Their speeches in General Synod in July 2012 will be hugely influential on the final voting. If those speeches and their decisions are to be seen as wise and credible by a Church where women are the majority of attenders, and where so many women (and indeed men) are disengaged at anything other than a local level of the Church because of the bar on women as bishops, then they must be based on a thorough engagement with women - clergy and lay - for whom this issue is one of identity and not just role. This is not because 'We will only believe you have truly listened to us when you agree with us', but rather 'You are not women: so for you to make decisions about us without involving us and truly understanding what this change symbolises to us, makes it less likely that you will make decisions that we can support'.

7. How the members of General Synod decide to vote.

After the election of a new Synod in October 2010 the opponents of women bishops declared that they had a 'blocking minority' in the House of Laity¹¹. In other words, they were sure that more than one third of the members of the House of Laity would not support the Measure as it stands. But most voting decisions are taken rather nearer to the time of the actual vote, and probably after listening carefully to the debate directly before the vote. General Synod members are not delegates: they vote according to their own consciences, not as representatives of the views of their Diocese or constituency. So even if Diocesan support is overwhelming, the Measure may fall. It will be important that all Synod members weigh up their voting decisions in the context of the mission of the Church of England and its future as a place where grace abounds and women and men flourish together.

If the Measure is given final approval by General Synod next July, and the draft Code of Practice is accepted, then we can expect to rejoice in the consecration of the first women as bishops in 2014, after the necessary Parliamentary process. If the Measure were to fail at final approval, then a crucial opportunity will have been lost to move forward a situation that is both anomalous in the eyes of the world and deeply at odds with the most fundamental tenets of Christ's teaching. It would be nothing less than disastrous for the Church and its mission.

In conclusion, the decision to consecrate women as bishops is both a minor and a major one. It is minor because it is only one box to be ticked on the list of ways in which God is drawing the Church forward in the service of the Kingdom, and indeed only one small way in which the equal presence of

women in leadership will begin to transform the Church from its traditions built around male-dominance. It is major because it involves declarations about God's relationship with humanity, with women and men as equally made in God's image, equally gifted by the Spirit at Pentecost, and equal in Christ through baptism.

All women are diminished by patriarchy, and all men are damaged by it. Consecrating women as bishops in the Church of England will be one step towards transforming that.

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¹See 'History of progress timeline' at www.womenandthechurch.org/resourcesfordebates.htm

²GS1685 Report of the Women bishops legislative drafting group, April 2008

³The following reports delineate the process of working through a variety of solutions to the problem posed in the Manchester report:

GS1605 The Guildford Report,

GS Misc 826 The Guildford and Gloucester Report,

GS1707 WOMEN IN THE EPISCOPATE Further Report from the Legislative Drafting Group,

GS1708-09Y The Revision Committee report

All are available online at www.churchofengland.org

⁴General Synod reports of proceedings July 2008 Vol 39 no 2; July 2010 Vol 41 no 2

available online at www.churchofengland.org

⁵For material exploring the arguments and in support of the draft Measure see

www.womenandthechurch.org/resourcesfordebates.htm

⁶Diocesan Synods cannot amend the draft measure, but they can offer an opinion or ask for changes via a Following Motion, debated separately from the draft measure.

⁷See the CEEC website for further detail and the rationale for this wording.

www.ceec.info/library/positional/Following%20Motion%20and%20Explanatory%20Memorandum.pdf

⁸General Synod report of proceedings July 2010 Vol 41 no 2 pp 98-9

⁹See Chapman, Maltby and Whyte, *The Established Church, Past, present and Future* (Mowbray 2011), pp98-123 for a detailed analysis of this intervention.

¹⁰See <http://anglicanmissioninengland.org/>

¹¹See <http://reform.org.uk/news/src/archive/12-2010>

www.womenandthechurch.org

www.modchurchunion.org