

WOMEN BISHOPS—THE TASK AHEAD

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For some, the possibility of women bishops in the Church of England is to be resisted. For others, it would be a natural progression from women's ordination, first as deacons and then as priests. Last year, General Synod called on the House of Bishops to initiate further theological study on the episcopate in preparation for a debate on the ordination of women as bishops. The resulting working party, which I am to chair, will report during 2002. But what are the theological issues with which we have to grapple?

In at least some of the early churches, the bishop emerged as a presiding-presbyter from a council of presbyters. If such is the case, the order of bishops cannot be seen as an entirely different order from that of priests, the presbyterate. The argument that there are 'no theological reasons against the ordination of women to the priesthood' would also hold for their ordination as bishops.

The same would then be true of all the reasons given for ordaining women to the priesthood. Lord Runcie, when Archbishop of Canterbury, said the incarnation involves solidarity with the whole human race, for 'what he did not become, he did not save'. The humanity of the Risen and Glorified Lord, moreover, is a humanity that includes all believers; people of every race and both genders. Because of this, the ministerial priesthood, which represents not only the Church but also Christ as Head and High Priest, should also be inclusive. If bishops are seen as presiding presbyters, such an argument would be true of episcopal ministry as well.

There is, however, another tradition in the Church which sees bishops not so much as presidents of a college but as successors, even if in a limited way, of the apostles themselves. While the western Churches seem to have been mainly 'presbyteral', the Churches of South Western Asia appear to have been 'episcopal' from the start. Ignatius certainly regarded the episcopate (along with the presbyterate and diaconate) as essential to the Church and he also thought of it as already universal.

Scholars such as Bishop Charles Gore have suggested that before a localised episcopate emerged in the 'presbyteral' Churches, there were peripatetic apostolic figures - prophets and teachers - exercising oversight, even in relation to the council of presbyters. Eventually, their ministry became localised in the person of the bishop, who may also have been the presiding-presbyter.

Such a derivation of episcopal order may require that discussion about the ordination of women bishops involves more than a repetition of the arguments for their ordination to the priesthood. Should apostolic, teaching and prophetic ministry be as inclusive as presbyteral and pastoral ministry? Certainly, the argument that any ministry that claims to represent the Risen and Ascended Lord must be inclusive appears to hold in this case also. Are there indications, however, to support such a conclusion in an admittedly patriarchal tradition?

There are 'apostolic' women in the New Testament itself. Tradition refers to Mary Magdalene as 'the apostle to the apostles' because she took news of the Resurrection to them. The feminist theologian Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza speaks of the mis-

sionary couples mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles and in the Pauline epistles. Later, there are accounts of women like Thecla, commissioned by the apostles themselves to preach the word of God.

The 'House Churches' were important centres in early Christianity, and the New Testament specifically refers to the role of women in their leadership.

The Acts of the Apostles refers to women prophets and in 1 Corinthians the apostle Paul attempts to regulate the activities of women prophets, though not to prevent them. Charles Gore tells us that just as there were 'prophetesses' in the apostolic Church, so there were in the second and third centuries. Gore himself derives the episcopal office from the ministries of apostles, teachers and prophets.

In delegating their oversight to priests, are bishops delegating only the pastoral task, or are the apostolic, teaching and prophetic tasks also delegated? The ordination service makes it clear that the latter *are* included. If women priests can be *delegated* these aspects of the episcopal office, why they should not exercise them in their own right?

In a divided Church, and with disagreement within the Anglican Communion, there are practical difficulties. Dr Carey pointed out, when Bishop of Bath and Wells, that if women bishops are not recognised throughout the Communion, or within a province, this would place strains on episcopal collegiality.

With some Anglican provinces not recognising the orders of women priests, the difficulty becomes even more acute in the case of women bishops. Some will not recognise the orders of both men and women ordained by them. There will be repercussions, too, on links between dioceses and provinces. Dr Carey recognised that communion is impaired in these cases, but then asks if it is not more impaired by excluding women.

A bishop is also a focus of unity in the local church. Those unable to recognise a woman as bishop would feel excluded. In particular, some priests will feel they cannot belong to a college with a woman as its head. Some, clergy and lay, who disagree with the ordination of women priests, feel they can still join in church life because the bishop remains male. With women bishops, they would be further marginalised.

Ecumenically, too, there would be serious consequences. At present, mostly male Anglican bishops can meet with their Roman Catholic and Orthodox counterparts. If more Anglican provinces open the episcopate to women, agreements made in recent years may be jeopardised. Models of unity that see a gradual 'growing together' as a way forward may be halted and some developments perhaps reversed. On the other hand, there are some ecumenical conversations which seem to demand that women be allowed in leadership positions.

The Church of England will have to decide whether or not the theological arguments for inclusivity are so great that the difficulties produced by the ordination of women bishops will have to be tolerated. Some will argue that such a price has to be paid if theological integrity demands it. Others, particularly those who look to Rome and to Orthodoxy, will mourn the passing of an ecumenical age.