

## ***Women Bishops: The Final Divide?***

### **1. Introduction**

This October when representatives from around Australia meet in Perth at the General Synod of the Anglican Church of Australia (ACA) the divisive issue of women bishops is again to be considered.

The innovation of women bishops has been debated and rejected by previous General Synods<sup>1</sup> and is a controversial issue both here and abroad, most significantly because it is contrary to the Bible's teaching about the different responsibilities of men and women in the church, but also because it represents a departure from Anglican tradition, and poses a serious threat to the unity of the Anglican Church within the worldwide communion, the national Church, individual dioceses and even parish churches.<sup>2</sup>

### **2. History of the Debate**

The feminist push for identical ministries for men and women within the Anglican Church of Australia began in the mid 1970s, with the last thirty years bringing countless reports and debates, strain on personal relationships, unhelpful press coverage, division within Christian fellowships at all levels and sadly, the departure of some from the Biblical model of relationships between men and women, in the hope ending a damaging and distracting debate.

The first step towards identical ministries for men and women was the ordination of women to the diaconate in 1980s. Then in 1992, even before the General Synod had voted on the matter, Archbishop Peter Carnley took matters into his own hands and ordained women to the priesthood. The General Synod then followed suit accepting the ordination of women to the priesthood and dividing the national church at the crucial point of its ministry. Many dioceses have proceeded to allow women to be ordained to the presbyterate, others however have sought to remain faithful to Scriptural teaching and Anglican tradition and have not changed the nature of ordained ministry; others whilst having no real objection have not introduced women priests. As a consequence, although there was once a common ordained ministry shared by all dioceses in the ACA, this is no longer the case.

As it now stands, women can be ordained as deacons and priests, and can preach and lead parishes in most dioceses around Australia. In other dioceses their ordained ministry is not welcome or recognised. However even within those dioceses where women are ordained, there are individual churches that do not believe women should have identical ministries with men, and within individual churches, there are people who believe the same. That is, acceptance has been far from uniform. At every level from the national church right down to the person in the pew, there are those who have remained faithful to the Scriptural pattern of

<sup>1</sup> This is the third General Synod in a row to debate the issue. Allan Reeder, 'Latest Push for Women Bishops,' *Market-Place*, (5 May, 2004) p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> It would also threaten ongoing dialogue with the Lutheran Church, Orthodox Church and Roman Catholic Church. Bishop Hough, Ballarat, 'Women and the Episcopal Ministry,' June 2004.

differing ministries for men and women and not departed from this Biblical pattern or Anglican tradition.

The question now before the General Synod is whether to remove all gender distinctions in ministry and allow women to be bishops. For those pushing for identical ministries for men and women the acceptance of women to the episcopate would be the completion of their goal.

However this would be a serious denial of the clear teaching of Scripture and we are asking all those who value Biblical truth and who submit to the authority of God's word, to make your opposition to this innovation known.

### **3. The Teaching of the Bible**

Scripture teaches that God has given complementary responsibilities to women and men in the family and the church. These different roles and responsibilities reflect differences that God instituted in the creation of humanity. Whilst men and women are equally created, fallen, loved and redeemed by God, the differences are part of the fabric of who we are and who we are called to be 'in Christ' (cf. 1 Cor. 11:3-16).

In the family, these differences are expressed in the trusting submission of the wife and the loving leadership of the husband (Eph. 5:21-33; 1 Pet. 3:1-7; Col. 3:18-19).<sup>3</sup>

In the church family, these differences are maintained in the male leadership of the congregation. This leadership is expressed in the key tasks of the elder (ie. presbyter) most particularly in the exercise of authoritative teaching (1 Tim. 3:1-2; 5:17; Tit. 1:6-9; 1 Pet. 5:1-3; cf. Matt. 28:19-20; Acts 20:28-31; 1 Cor. 16:15-16; Eph. 4:11-12; 1 Thess. 5:12-13; 2 Tim. 2:2; Js. 3:1).

Thus, whilst women's contributions to the congregation are recognised, valued and encouraged in Scripture (Tit. 2:3-5; Col. 3:16; 1 Cor. 11:4-16; cf. Phil. 4:2-3), their ministry is not to be identical with that of men, and so certain prohibitions are given (1 Tim. 2:11-15; 1 Cor. 14:33-35). These find their genesis in the ordered relationships between male and female established in creation (Gen. 1-2), which in some way reflect the relationship between Christ and the church (Eph 5:23-32) and the relations between the Father and the Son (1 Cor. 11:3).

These prohibitions cannot be explained and rejected on the basis of first century culture or possible reconstructions of certain New Testament church situations. Instead, they express principles that are as necessary and obligatory for us today, as they were in the early church.

It is this teaching from God about relationships that has been progressively denied over the past 30 years, as the distinctive ministries of women and men have been lost within the

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<sup>3</sup> These distinctions are evident in the *Book of Common Prayer* (BCP) service for the Solemnization of Matrimony. The Constitution of the Anglican Church states that the *BCP* and *39 Articles of Religion*, 'be regarded as the authorized standard of worship and doctrine in this church, and no alteration in or permitted variations from the services or Articles therein contained shall contravene any principle of doctrine or worship laid down in such standard'. *Anglican Church of Australia Constitution Act 1961*, Part 1, Chapter 2.4.

ACA.

Those wanting to justify identical ministries for men and women from the Bible often claim theirs' is an equally valid interpretation of the relevant texts and that they should be given liberty to express this diversity of views.<sup>4</sup> However, liberty and diversity in this matter are a false trail. Two opposing interpretations of the same Scripture cannot both be right. God's truth is not a waxen nose that can be moulded to say two opposing things, and somehow remain true to its original meaning.

If identical ministries for men and women are right, then to preclude women from any form of ordained ministry is wrong. Conversely, if the principle of male leadership restricts oversight of congregations to men, then to allow women priests and bishops is wrong.

Some members of the women's ordination lobby openly recognise that Scripture does not support their views. Scottish Bishop Richard Holloway, outspoken proponent of women's ordination and homosexual rights, claims

The Anglican Communion has long since departed from any commitment to it [ie. the inerrancy of Scripture]. The single, most potent sign of that departure has been the ordination of women. There is far more in scripture about the subordination of women than there is about the theological status of gay and lesbian people.<sup>5</sup>

The cry for liberty and diversity may sound Biblical but in the face of the clear teaching of Scripture it is misguided. Whereas the apostle Paul allowed freedom and diversity as regards the eating of food, when gender inter-changeability was threatening Christian worship he demanded conformity (1 Cor. 10:14–11:16). Appeals to liberty and diversity cannot be used to sideline or obfuscate the plain teaching of Scripture.

Furthermore, maintaining gender distinctions in ministry does not imply an underlying belief that women are in some way inferior to men. The Bible teaches, and our experience confirms, that men and women are equally capable and productive in all human endeavours and (more importantly) that they are equally created, fallen, loved and redeemed by our Saviour. Observing the gender distinctions created and ordained by God, does not make women 'second class citizens.'<sup>6</sup>

In addition to these arguments, there are some who oppose women bishops because they believe maleness in the priesthood is necessary for the validity of ministerial Order and hence, the Sacraments, or that the maleness of the apostles provides a pattern for Christian ministry.

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<sup>4</sup> eg. Julia Baird, Chris Forbes, Keith Mason, Stuart Piggin, *A Message to the Members of the 1997 (Sydney) Synod from the Supporters of the Ordination of Women*, p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Holloway, 'After Lambeth – An Address to the LGCM Anglican Forum, University of Derby, February 6, 1999,' *Modern Believing*, 40/3 (1999) p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> As is claimed by proponents of women's ordination. Judy Little, 'Why I am still here,' *The MOW Report*, Vol. 4 No. 1 (April, 2004) p. 4.

With such firmly held convictions, it is abundantly clear that although some people have suggested that those currently opposed to women in the episcopate will eventually ‘come around’ this, under God, will not and indeed has not happened. Such thinking represents a failure to understand that God’s Word is unchanging and that there will be no clearer expression of God’s mind than that in Scripture. Those whose consciences are bound to the Word of God will not be changed.

#### **4. The Role of the Bishop**

In the service for the *Ordering of Priests* the ordinand is asked to exercise discipline, cure and charge. That is, the priest is responsible for leadership of the congregation. This is why those committed to the Biblical pattern of relationships have opposed the introduction of women priests. Now the push is to allow women priests to be consecrated as bishops.

In the *Form of Ordaining or Consecrating of an Archbishop or Bishop* the service mentions the duties of discipline, charge and authority, and prays that the candidate will ‘shepherd the flock of Christ’ and the people will ‘obediently follow.’ Bishops are the ‘Pastors of [God’s] Church’ and as such they have a responsibility of leadership of God’s people. Furthermore bishops have additional leadership responsibility for they lead those who lead others. To many, the bishop is also the ‘minister of order’ within a diocese and ‘its visible sign of unity’.<sup>7</sup>

Within a diocese it is the bishop who ordains, licences and disciplines clergy, presides over the Synod of the diocese, has pastoral responsibility and authority over the clergy, schools, organisations and parishes of a diocese, and performs confirmations.

Despite the introduction of women to the priesthood, the ACA still recognises the differences of men and women by restricting the episcopate to men. This difference is not one of competence or value, nor of expedience, or tradition alone. It reflects the principle of male leadership found throughout the Scriptures, and particularly in the New Testament. Currently our polity reflects this Biblical distinction, albeit in a diminished way.

The introduction of women bishops would remove any expression of the Biblical principle of ‘male leadership’ from the ACA. It is sometimes argued that gender role interchangeability is necessary for our contemporary context. However, the effectiveness of God’s people is directly linked to our obedience to God’s Word, and therefore such a move is not in the best interests of either God’s people or our society.

#### **5. Relations with the Anglican Church of Australia**

Sadly, already there is a diversity of opinion within the ACA concerning women in the priesthood and episcopate. In places where the innovation of women priests has been introduced, some Anglicans have felt conscience bound to leave their parish church and attend a neighbouring Anglican church, or if that is not possible to leave the Anglican Church altogether and join another denomination. The situation of these brothers and sister is increasingly difficult in regional centres where churches are few.

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<sup>7</sup> Archbishop Peter Carnley, ‘Women in the Episcopate in the Anglican Church of Australia,’ in *Women Bishops in Australia? If so, how?: The Interim Report of the General Synod Working Group on Women Bishops*, p. 27

The introduction of women bishops would be even more problematic for those who are convinced from Scripture, that church leadership should be male. To require these clergy and laity to deny the Biblical pattern of male 'leadership' and submit to a female bishop would cause a crisis of conscience. Furthermore, this crisis would be unavoidable for, unlike the church-based ministry of women priests, the ministry of a bishop currently encompasses an entire diocese.

General Synod itself recognised in 1998<sup>8</sup> that the Christian conscience ought to be bound by Holy Scripture and be safeguarded in the matter of women bishops. Currently those who maintain the Scriptural distinctions between men and women, in dioceses where women are ordained, are usually able to avoid a compromise of conscience by attending a church with those of like conviction, since the pattern of ministry practised in a church is determined by the senior minister.

However, the oversight of a bishop is not as easily avoided. All clergy are required to submit to the authority of their diocesan bishop in diocesan decisions, licensing, synods, matters of discipline etc. Even with the provision of visiting or suffragan bishops for ordinations and confirmations,<sup>9</sup> clergy and laity with conscientious objections to women bishops would still be required to submit to the authority of their female bishop. That is, a clergyman might find himself required to submit to a women bishop whose ministry as bishop he does not recognise as conforming to Biblical principles.

Bishops who might be called upon to provide alternative Episcopal ministry in such a situation, who themselves maintain the Biblical and traditional Anglican view, would not be able to minister in a diocese with a woman bishop, because visiting bishops have to submit to the ministry and authority of a diocesan bishop as they seek their good will for their visit and ministry.

Consequently only those male bishops supporting women in the episcopate would be able to submit to a women bishop and therefore visit clergy and parishes in that diocese and provide alternative Episcopal ministry. Clearly, this is inadequate and unworkable.

Indeed, not all bishops would recognise the consecration, authority or ministry of women bishops. Two diocesan bishops have recently stated they would not regard clergy ordained by a women bishop as validly ordained, and so would need to re-ordain such clergy for ministry in their dioceses.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> General Synod, resolution 52/98.

<sup>9</sup> Eg. similar to the arrangement of 'flying bishops' in the UK.

<sup>10</sup> Bishop Davies of The Murray, is quoted saying 'I would need to reordain any man purportedly ordained by a woman bishop before I could license him' by Barney Zwartz, 'Bishop rejects priests ordained by woman,' *The Age*, (30 May, 2004). Bishop Hough of Ballarat, 'Women and the Episcopal Ministry,' (June, 2004).

Additionally, while a bishop is now the ‘visible sign of unity,’<sup>11</sup> because each diocese is united under the ministry of its bishop and the bishop represents his diocese to the Anglican Communion, if women are accepted to the episcopate, their role as bishop would be the source of disunity rather than unity, since those maintaining the Biblical pattern of ministry would not be able to submit to her authority.

Hence, the acceptance of women bishops would therefore, profoundly alter the ACA by changing the nature of ordained ministry at its highest level and by seriously dividing the church. The General Synod Working Group on women bishops acknowledged as much when they wrote:

Whatever provision is made for Alternative Episcopal Oversight in this country, the consecration of women bishops will not be recognised as valid by all members of the Anglican Church of Australia. It seems inevitable that some members of the House of Bishops will not recognise the validity of the orders of women bishops, and that there will be further impairment of communion.<sup>12</sup>

Overseas experience indicates that inadequate or no provision has been made to allow for those with conscientious objections to women priests and bishops (cf. 1 Cor. 8), and that the feminist agenda and identical ministries for men and women have been forced on those opposed<sup>13</sup> and have become a requirement for candidates for ordination, thus preventing those who hold to the Biblical pattern entering ordained ministry.

To ignore the consciences of all those committed to the Biblical pattern of male leadership and opposed to inter-changeable ministries for men and women, and introduce women bishops, will result in an intolerable restriction of the freedom of bishops, clergy and laypeople to engage in gospel ministry. And since Christians are commanded both to engage in gospel ministry and guard their consciences, this will present a serious obstacle to obedience.

Consequently, for the sake of their consciences and their freedom to obey Scripture and engage in Christian ministry, a great deal is at stake as the issue of women bishops is debated in October this year.

## **6. Way Forward?**

<sup>11</sup> Whether this is conceived in a theological or purely structural sense.

<sup>12</sup> *Women Bishops in Australia? If so, how?: The Interim Report of the General Synod Working Group on Women Bishops*, p. 5.

<sup>13</sup> Jeremy Halcrow, ‘America: brave and free, perhaps – Women priests “compulsory”’, *Southern Cross Newspaper*, July/August, 1996. p. 14. Resolution A053a passed in 1997 by the Episcopal Church of the United States (member of the Anglican Communion) gave bishops who had previously refused to ordain or license women until 1999 to do so (see also amended canons of ECUSA: iii.8.1; iii.16.1d; 111.16.2; iii.17.3). Robert Doyle, ‘Option One: Complete Alternative Episcopal Jurisdiction,’ in *Women Bishops in Australia? If so, how?: The Interim Report of the General Synod Working Group on Women Bishops*, p. 15.

As we approach the General Synod in October this year, it is essential for the sake of the unity and integrity of the ACA and for ongoing gospel ministry in this country that our objections to women bishops are made known, and that this departure from Biblical teaching and traditional Anglicanism not proceed.

Should the legislation be passed, the unity of the ACA will be further impaired than it currently is with the ordination of women priests.

There are many clergy and parishes who are opposed to identical ministries for men and women who find themselves in a minority in their dioceses, who may not have the opportunity to make their objections known on the floor of General Synod.

Currently an inadequate model of alternative Episcopal 'ministry' has been suggested for those opposed to women bishops,<sup>14</sup> but even the more satisfactory model of complete alternative Episcopal oversight proposed by some, would not prevent further impairment of Communion or division.

We hope to collect the signatures of women from as many dioceses throughout Australia as possible, on a statement opposing the introduction of women to the episcopate on the basis of the Bible's teaching, the nature of episcopal ministry and the relationships within the ACA.

This statement will express to the General Synod that the introduction of women bishops would place unavoidable and intolerable strain on the consciences of those opposed to the introduction of women to the episcopate and pose a considerable threat to the unity of the Anglican Church of Australia.

*Claire Smith*  
(*Equal but Different Journal*, June 2004)

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<sup>14</sup> Allan Reeder, 'Latest push for women bishops,' *Market-Place*, (5 May, 2004) p. 3.