



Women Bishops in the Church of England?

A report of the House of Bishops' Working Party
on Women in the Episcopate



Archdeacon Judith Rose's General Synod Motion

That this Synod ask the House of Bishops to initiate further theological study on the episcopate, focusing on the issues that need to be addressed in preparation for the debate on women in the episcopate in the Church of England, and to make a progress report on this study to Synod in the next two years.

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Reading the biblical texts

The debate about the ministry of women has to be about a properly biblical view of women and men in creation and in the Church. It also needs to take account of a number of key biblical texts, including:

Genesis 1-3

Romans 16.1-16

1 Corinthians 11.2-12, 14.34-38

Galatians 3.26-29

Ephesians 5.21-33

Philippians 4.2-3

1 Timothy 2.9-15

The report suggests that if we are to handle texts like these in a responsible fashion we have to consider:

- ◆ the cultural and historical context of the biblical writings;
- ◆ how particular texts function within the books of which they are a part;
- ◆ how these texts fit into the overall biblical witness;
- ◆ how these texts have been understood down the centuries;
- ◆ how what the Bible says addresses our cultural and historical situation, which is different from the one that the biblical writers first addressed.

Tradition and reason

The report suggests that in seeking to understand the biblical witness and its contemporary significance we have to take seriously the importance of tradition, the understanding of God and his will by previous generations as manifested in the life of the Church as a whole. We also have to take account of reason, which is both the general human capacity for rational thought and the specific intellectual framework of our own particular culture. However, both tradition and reason have always to be tested against the biblical witness, which has ultimate authority.

Reception

The term 'reception' is one that is often used in relation to the debate about the ordination of women. The report explains that in Anglican usage this term has come to mean something very specific. It does not mean the process by which the ministry of women is accepted in the Church. Instead it is used to refer to the process in which the Church of England reflects with the universal Church on the authenticity of its decision to ordain women.

Part of the current discussion about the proposal to ordain women bishops centres on two questions:

- ◆ Would it be right for this further step to be taken while the decision to ordain women priests is still in a period of reception?
- ◆ Would a decision to ordain women as bishops necessarily bring this period of reception to an end?

Reading the report

1 Introduction

In order for the debate in the Church of England about whether to ordain women as bishops to be a fruitful one, it needs to be well-informed. The report seeks to set out as comprehensively as possible the fundamental issues that will need to be addressed.

It looks at the answers that are given – by those on different sides in the debate – to four key questions:

- ◆ Would it be right in principle for women to be bishops?
- ◆ If the answer is ‘yes’, is this the right time for the Church of England to ordain women bishops?
- ◆ If this is the right time, how should women bishops be introduced?
- ◆ Should provisions be made for those conscientiously unable to accept women bishops and, if so, what form should these take?

2 Episcopacy in the Church of England

Chapter 2 explains the role of bishops in the Church of England. It looks at three issues.

- ◆ How did bishops emerge in the Early Church and what was their role?
- ◆ How has the bishop’s role developed and been understood in the history of the Church of England?
- ◆ How is the bishop’s role understood by the Church of England today?

3 How should we approach the issue of whether women should be bishops?

Chapter 3 sets out some guidelines for a theologically responsible debate on women and the episcopate.

It advocates an approach that is rooted in Scripture but also makes proper use of tradition and reason. It also looks at the issues of how we assess proposed developments in the life of the Church and what is meant by the ‘reception’ of women’s ministry.

4 The development of women’s ministry in the Church of England

Chapter 4 explains the historical background to the current debate about women bishops. It looks particularly at the history of the ordination of women and the arrangements that were put in place when women were admitted to the priesthood. It finishes by looking at the situation today, ten years after the first women priests were ordained.

5 Can it be right in principle for women to be consecrated as bishops in the Church of England?

Chapter 5 explains the arguments for and against having women bishops.

It looks at the arguments put forward from a Catholic Anglican and an Evangelical Anglican perspective for retaining the status quo. It then looks at the arguments put forward by those advocating change. Finally, the chapter sets out the critical questions that are raised by the arguments on both sides of the debate.

6 The issue of timing

As well as the basic issue of whether it would be right in principle for women to be bishops, the question of timing also has to be considered. *Chapter 6* explains the arguments for and against delaying the ordination of women bishops until there is greater agreement for this move both within the Church of England and ecumenically.

7 The theological and practical issues raised by possible options for the future

In the light of the previous chapters, what are the choices facing the Church of England? *Chapter 7* looks in turn at each of the options facing the Church. These include maintaining the status quo, making specific arrangements within the Church for those who cannot conscientiously accept women bishops, or the creation of another province for such people. It examines the theological and pastoral issues raised by each option.

8 Would the ordination of women as bishops be a legitimate development in the Church of England?

In *Chapter 8* the threads of the report are pulled together. It lays out the basic Christian understanding of the God-given differentiation between men and women. It then summarizes the arguments for and against the ordination of women bishops before finally making some suggestions as to how the Church of England should handle the debate on this issue.

Annex 1 Ordination of women in the Anglican Communion and other Churches

The current state of play regarding women's ministry within the Anglican Communion and among the Church of England's ecumenical partners

Annex 2 Possible pastoral arrangements – a summary

A table of the options considered in Chapter 7

Annex 3 What does a bishop do?

Examples from the diaries of two bishops, given in response to requests for more detail about a bishop's task.