



The Churchfield Trust

*advancing women's ministries + equipping women for leadership + raising awareness of gender issues
in church & society*

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A Response to the Archbishops' Amendments

The content, timing and process of the Archbishops' amendments have generated a great deal of comment. This response is offered to help clarify the issues surrounding the amendments.

A first question to ask might be, **for whom is it primarily intended?** The initial reaction to the Archbishops' amendments on the part of those who wish to see women as bishops has been largely negative. The initial reaction on the part of traditionalist Anglo Catholics and conservative Evangelicals has been largely positive, although people from each of those positions have commented that the amendments, while helpful, do not go far enough to secure the legal provisions they want.

The Archbishops' proposals seem to have been designed to keep a small minority of people in the Church rather than to attract those who are not yet part of the Church or to do what is right for the Church overall at this time. **It is important to remember the context:** over 5,000 women have been ordained since 1994 and some have been ministering as priests for 16 years. A large number of these women, prior to their ordination, had been ministering for many years as deacons and deaconesses. Some had also reached senior positions of leadership in other professions, such as education and law. **If the legislation passed in General Synod in 1992 that made it possible for women to be priests had not also explicitly made it illegal for women to be bishops, it is certain that there would have been a number of women serving as bishops in the Church of England for the past decade.**

The House and College of Bishops, the Church overall and the wider society have been missing out on all the gifts and experience women bishops would have brought and on the positive message that the Church values women as well as men.

An underlying assumption of the Archbishops' amendments seems to be that keeping certain people in, namely, those who oppose having women as bishops, in this instance, is the 'greater good'. It would seem that following the understanding – which has been repeatedly tested – of God's will for our Church on the issue of including women in all three orders, and the policy of the Church in how it traditionally chooses and appoints bishops, has been lost sight of in the process of responding to the demands of a minority of people.

A viewpoint held by the majority does not make it necessarily right, but the manner in which the views on having women as bishops have been repeatedly discerned and tested by General Synod can give us confidence that, in this case, the majority would appear to be expressing what the Church now believes about women's ability and suitability to be ordained to all three orders.

We know that both Archbishops are in favour of opening the episcopate to women, but if their amendments are passed, the resulting compromise to the authority of bishops who are women, and also to the majority of male bishops who currently ordain and con-celebrate with women and who will co-consecrate women, would be devastating. Not only would all future women bishops

be relegated, the overwhelming majority of all bishops would be relegated: only those few male bishops who themselves do not ordain women would be exempt from the possibility of having their authority and functions questioned and limited.

A Church that recognises in law the views of those who hold that consecrated women are not really bishops, and that consecrated men who minister with those women can be rendered legally unacceptable, is not a Church that is preaching the Good News of Christ with any authenticity in this generation. Sadly, it seems that it is those who are opposed to having women as bishops who are privileged by the Archbishops' amendments.

Lack of Clarity

A number of questions have already been raised about what the draft amendments imply. These include:

- What precisely does 'co-ordinating the exercise of Episcopal ministry' mean?
- If a so-called 'nominated bishop' has jurisdiction by virtue of the Measure rather than by delegation, isn't this transfer by another name?
- If it is not transfer by another name, then is it actually delegation by another name?
- Will the 'nominated' bishops be chosen from existing diocesan and suffragans or appointed specially?
- If appointed specially, does this not enshrine in law the concept of taint contained in the Act of Synod?
- What will happen when both archbishops have taken part in consecrating women?
- Will the 'functions' mentioned in the amendment to Clause 2(3) apply only to tasks or will it include issues concerning the authority of a bishop?
- Doesn't the retention of "his or her" in Clause 2(1) mean that all male bishops who ordain and consecrate women will also be rendered unacceptable?
- In situations of parish reorganisation, or differences of opinion between parishes in multi-parish benefices, with whom would authority lie?
- In matters of dispute between the diocesan and the 'nominated' bishop, who has the final say?

It is evident that no one knows exactly what might be the consequences, intended or unintended, of the amendments, but **the underlying theology and ecclesiology, and the ecumenical, practical and legal implications need to be questioned.** There is not space in this paper to repeat the theological arguments, only to mention briefly **the understanding of the equality of male and female in our creation, baptism and in the ongoing life of the Holy Spirit.** Likewise with questions of our ecumenism; for instance, **how would this affect our deepening relationship with the Methodist Church?** In terms of our ecclesiology, **what would this imply about our understanding of Episcopal authority?**

If the amendments are passed, the Church will be in a position of allowing that it is legally acceptable to recognise that women are bishops – and equally acceptable to insist that they are not. The message that this would communicate to Church members as well as to the wider society is one of confusion at best, and at worst, gross discrimination and prejudice against women and the inescapable conclusion that their contribution is of lesser value.

dity and worth than that of males. **The damaging and undermining effect this would have on women's ministries and on the mission and message of the Church overall is incalculable.**

Vocabulary and Tone

During the debates on opening the episcopate to women, words have come to have different meanings. 'Honoured position' seems to mean only the positions of those who dissent from the decisions of General Synod on women bishops. It does not seem to refer to the position of women clergy or those who minister faithfully who support women's consecration as bishops. The word 'faithful' has also developed to refer only to those who oppose women's ordained ministries.

Likewise, 'loyal Anglicans' are now those who oppose women bishops: the position of those who support having women as bishops is never described as 'loyal'. When those opposed state objections to women's ordination and consecration, they are termed 'theological objections', yet when those in favour of women priests and bishops state objections, they are rarely described as being 'theological'. Also, those opposed have numerous references made about their 'consciences', while it is rarely, if ever, acknowledged that those in favour of women bishops also have 'consciences'. **The effect of this use of language has been to give greater theological and moral weight to those opposed to having women as bishops. Those in favour are characterised as being motivated by less valid – and less Christian – reasons. Even the great Biblical concept of God's justice, so beautifully expressed by Isaiah, among others, has been twisted to mean a dubious secular feminist expediency.**

Process

It is perhaps the process surrounding the Archbishops' amendments that has generated the most criticism. Whatever their intentions, the Archbishops' public statement about their amendments launched at the pre-Synod press briefing has angered bishops, clergy and laity alike. It has been a particular 'slap in the face' (as it has been described) to those on the Revision Committee who have spent the last year and a half painstakingly discussing every submission received by the deadline of 16th March 2009, and the main options for the way ahead.

Each clause and sub-clause of the draft Measure has been meticulously scrutinised and debated – and voted upon by the members of the Revision Committee. Of course, this does not imply in and of itself that the Draft Measure is perfect or perfectly acceptable, but it does show the high level of attention to detail given by the Revision Committee.

To submit these amendments, which have not been discussed before by the Revision Committee, is to take them out of the careful process and puts the Synod in the position of voting on something that has not been subject to the same degree of scrutiny that all the other submissions have been subject to. As several people have observed, this is reminiscent of the process surrounding the passing of the Act of Synod in November 1993, when General Synod was presented with proposals it had not had time to debate before in Synod or in the dioceses. The Act of Synod was presented as a solution by the bishops and General Synod was put under immense pressure to pass it. If nothing else, we should have learned from that experience, that if something does not make theological sense, don't do it.

Another response you may find helpful can be found at:

<http://www.fulcrum-anglican.org.uk/page.cfm?ID=545>

Christina Rees

Contact Details

Tel: +44(0)1763-848-822

Mob: +44(0)7768-051-646

ISDN: +44(0)1763-848-023

Email Christina@MediaMaxima.com

Photo at: <http://www.MediaMaxima.com/chmr11.jpg>