

Conclusion – Will it be possible to have women bishops?

The previous chapters have traced the involvement of women in ministry since the early 19th century, through to the twenty-first century and have also looked at the arguments surrounding the ordination of women, from deaconess to priest. This final chapter hopes to outline the problems with and possibilities for the ordaining of women bishops, looking at the impact on the Church of England and its congregations. It will also include a personal evaluation and areas for further study.

There are many things to bring from the previous chapter, regarding the ordination of women to the episcopate. The debate is still raging across the country, with both sides of the argument being heard by the General Synod. There are many conclusions to gather from the debate too. The supporters of the move to ordain women bishops have allowed others to see that Biblical context is an important matter as well as the full representation of Christ in male and female priests becoming a matter if the Church wants to reach out to everyone in today's society. The Catholic Anglican and Conservative Evangelical opposition has shown the concern for unity among the Churches of Rome and England and that women's involvement in the early church is unconvincing. Overall the arguments are balanced and well thought out. It is important for the Church of England to allow each position a fair hearing and discuss the matter thoroughly.

The conclusions that I have drawn from the previous chapters have lead me to agree with the 'pro' stance, when discussing the issue of female bishops in the Church of England. Women have shown their competence in ministry since the late 19th century. They have allowed the church to explore new expressions of church and ministry for

a long time now and I do not see any reason for this involvement to cease. There are many avenues into ministry, all of which will grow and develop at their own rate, where men and women should be equal, no matter which ministry they chose, this of course included women's introduction into the Episcopate.

The Catholic Anglican perspective is, in my view, backward in its thinking. Although the Church of England needs to have some ecumenical agreement with the Church of Rome, it should not feel that it has to be governed by the Vatican. Also the idea of an iconic priest is lost throughout the Church of England, particularly in the more liberal branches. On the subject of women in leadership or authority, I find the Catholic Anglican perspective argument unconvincing. Far from being a reaction to society the introduction of women to the Episcopate is a step that needs to be taken and not questioned because of the female aspect. The Conservative Evangelical perspective holds more weight in this particular argument and is more conscious of the current situation in the Church of England. I disagree with the 'maleness of Christ' and the 'feminization of the Church' in this argument because I feel that the gender of a vicar is irrelevant for many in the Church of England and that an equal amount of male and female clergy will not see a decline in the numbers of male members. However I agree that doctrinal issues cannot be agreed by a vote in each house, nor should the decision be made too quickly.

I agree with most of the points put forward by those who want to see women in the Episcopate. I disagree with the notion that this issue was resolved in 1992. There needs to be further discussion in the General Synod before anything is decided. It is important for the Church to look at the Bible with new eyes, understanding that

Biblical context is an important issue when interpreting a piece of Scripture. I also feel that the involvement of women in the Early Church is approached in a better manner than those who dismiss passages that clearly include women. Of all of the points put forward the most important one for the Church of England to consider is using that the gifts of the women who have been welcomed into the Holy Orders to their full extent. I feel that not allowing women to become bishops creates a glass ceiling effect that will not produce a healthy image for the church. It is also important for the Church to bear full witness of Christ, with the knowledge that this is achieved by every member in the church's body, not just the priest who conducts communion. Equality is important for those who share in the Anglican Communion and the ordination of female bishops should allow this to happen.

As the debate continues the Church is slowly moving towards allowing women into the exclusive position of Bishop. The current situation in the Church of England is an exciting one. For the past year the Church has begun to remove the barriers that stop women from becoming bishops. In July 2006 the General Synod will meet to discuss the topic, once again searching for provisions for those who disagree, just as they did in 1992. This time is also an important one, if a vote takes place the Church will soon find out if it will be receiving female bishops early in the next decade. The national newspapers are already speculating who may be the first to take the position of Bishop, even Archbishop.ⁱ Whatever the outcome, the vote is going to have a profound affect on the Church of England.

Though this impact on the Church will only be able to be fully assessed after the fact. As with the ordaining of women priests, the exodus of male clergy may well be

echoed if there is a majority vote in favour of women becoming bishops. Despite this, the effect on the congregations and other clergy since the vote in 1992 has been mainly positive. There have been several case studies that show the number of people who agree with the ordination of women as priests has grown since 1992.ⁱⁱ These case studies also show that congregations and clergy agree to a greater extent on the matter of women bishops.ⁱⁱⁱ The female respondents feel that they have been welcomed into the Holy Orders and that their ministry is complimentary to their male counterparts. The women who have gained the experience of being in ordained ministry feel that the only thing left now is the move towards bishops.^{iv} Currently the agreement amongst those who have received female clergy is close to unanimous with most strongly agreeing to wanting female bishops.^v

This dissertation has allowed an insight into the struggle that women have encountered when coming up against a religion that has been ruled mainly by men since its beginning. There is more of a sense of compassion for the women who have worked so hard in the past to be heard by the men who believe that women have no place in the church. Rather than being merely a historical account of women's struggle to be included in the church, it has shown the development of their ministry and how they can be allowed to move into the Episcopate. There is no doubt that the position of priest cannot be taken away from women who have spent so long fighting for the recognition, title and collar. I am ever grateful to the respondents who are included in my studies, having an inside view of female ministry is invaluable for a project of this nature.

Personally, I feel that this dissertation would have included more of women's and men's experience, focusing on the similarities and differences of their ministry. I would have spoken to congregations to gauge their personal reactions and communicated with members of other denominations to look at the impact on their views of the Church of England. The reaction of male clergy would also be included, asking those who moved away from the church why they did so and would they consider returning after seeing how women had progressed in their ministry. I would also contact Bishops and Archbishops to gather the consensus among a position that is exclusive to men. It is also important to consider the reaction of those who do not attend church on a regular basis, from my qualitative research one can see that those who are not members of the church have an important opinion too.

There is scope for a more in depth study of the bible passages each argument uses, the theology of Christology and the importance of the incarnate icon during communion. I would also endeavour to study other theologies and the position of women across the religious world, discovering, in particular, the Roman Catholic and Evangelical positions on this matter, which would allow for a proper ecumenical discussion. It would also be interesting to look at the Anglican churches that have already made the decision to ordain women as bishops and speak to those who have been through the process, particularly in America. I feel that it would also be appropriate to look at the churches that have not yet allowed women into any form of ordained ministry and discover the reasons and discussions taking place with regards to their opposition and the Church of England's current position.

There are many questions to ask, in regards to theology, personal opinion and where the current debate is heading. There are a great deal of questions the Church has to ask before it can consider allowing women into Episcopal ministry. The Church of England has to be aware of the reaction since the decision in 1992 and that the opposition to female bishops still finds itself in many reports. I feel that having no knowledge of the current position of the debate has allowed me to make my own conclusion but also has made me aware that opinions could be changing within the Church, both with clergy and laity.

Women who have become ordained have taken a brave step into a world that is dominated by male opinion. Female clergy are beginning to find their feet amid a time of uncertainty in the body of the Church, where there is the threat of a schism when the vote is taken, no matter what is decided. Fourteen years on from the decision to ordain women as priests, the Church of England has allowed women to make tracks. They can now take maternity leave and are forging the way to a part-time ministry. The Church has discovered what it is like to be an equal opportunities employer and has gained the gifts of over a thousand women in the last twelve years, with numbers growing. The position of bishop could work for many women, though those who responded to my questionnaire feel that God would have to put a clear calling on their lives for them to take up such a privileged position.

The answer to the question posed in the title of this dissertation has allowed me to discover where the Church of England is heading and how women have showed their worth. I feel that women can become bishops, in their own time. It is a decision that needs to be made soon and provisions put in place for those who cannot accept the

authority of female bishops. However it is important that the Church works towards an agreement on female priests first. The next few years will be a complicated time for many clergy, least of all the women who are pushing to become the first female bishop. God has put a calling on his Church to show righteousness and justice to the world, so it is only right and just that women are allowed to become bishops just as men are.

ⁱ The Times newspaper, 17th Feb 2006

ⁱⁱ Ibid. p.188

ⁱⁱⁱ Jones, I., *Women and Priesthood in the Church of England: Ten Years on*, (Church House Publishing, 2004) p.188

^{iv} Appendix 1

^v Jones, I., Op. Cit. p.188