

Introduction

The ministry of women has been of interest to me since I began working with the Church of England at the age of 18. I have been a member of the Church of England all of my life but only began to form my own faith at the age of sixteen. Since women were invited into the Holy Orders in 1992 and the first women were ordained in 1994 much has happened in my life and the life of the church I worship in. I was only eight years old when members of the Houses of Laity, Clergy and Bishops voted, so I do not remember much of the television reports or the controversy that surrounded the historical decision, I do not even remember my own parents talking about it.

Since I began my own form of ministry I have been confronted with many questions, some that have baffled me more than others, however I have never questioned the place of women as priests in the Church. I have only encountered such questions since beginning my degree and I only have an understanding of the Roman Catholic view of the maleness of Christ and the iconic position of the priest at Holy Communion through my degree. Some of the theology I have studied has helped me to understand the notion of a feminine God and has allowed me question the place of gender in the Church and ministry. My position is yet to be fully formed, in regards to women in ministry and as bishops, as I have not had sufficient contact with members of the church who have agreed or disagreed with the decision the Church of England has made. I am also uncertain about the Biblical exegesis that has taken place when considering women's ministry as there is only a small amount of the New Testament that refers to women and the early church.

I found that there was not very much information on the history of women in the Church and the decisions made after 1992, with regards to bishops. This spurred me on to look for reasons and arguments why women had not been made bishops yet. It seemed that the church had taken time to create a ministry that was safe for women but still had restrictions in place. This has confused me but has allowed me to explore why it is still the case that women are not allowed into the Episcopate.

This dissertation looks at the history of the Church of England spanning the last two hundred years, showing how the ministry of women has progressed since the 1800's and looking at the changes in society that have occurred since that time. The third chapter looks at the ministry of women and their experiences as members of clergy across the country and for varying amounts of time. The chapter then goes on to explain the argument concerning the introduction of women into the Episcopate. It takes the shape of three points of view – the Catholic Anglican perspective, the Evangelical Conservative perspective and the argument for introducing women bishops. The final chapter gathers a conclusion from chapters two and three, drawing together the main points and discussing the possibilities for women who wish to become bishops in the future.

Literature about women in the Church is sparse. The history of the Church has been written by men, for men and it has only been in recent years that this trend has changed. The rise of feminist theology has allowed women to explore Biblical and modern history in more depth, in search of female ministry and inclusion in the life of the Early Church. As the focus of this dissertation is on the last two hundred years the main sources have been Brian Heeney and Sean Gill, who have both written full

accounts of the work of women in the church since the 18th Century. Both of these look at the discussions taken place over the last two hundred years and show the important figures in the fight to get women's causes and ministry recognised. The account written by Jacqueline Field-Bibb, *Women towards Priesthood*, allowed me to see a woman's perspective. I have found that there is a notable difference between those who agree with the ordination of women and those who disagree, Church history books until recently only had a page or so about women. The two reports that are the source for all of my recent figures and arguments are produced by the Church of England, both of which were published in 2004. There are very few books on the theology of women in the church. Much of the focus is on the history and involvement of women in the Early Church, often trying to prove that there is no basis for women's ministry in the church today. There are many more books and reports that I have used to form this dissertation, though there are not that many books that describe the current situation or any personal experiences in great depth.

The personal experiences in chapter three of women's time in ministry has come from a variety of sources and has given me some idea of what it is like to work in an environment where women are not always accepted. The questionnaire that was sent to various members of clergy asked about their personal ministry and their thoughts on the argument surrounding female bishops. Appendix 1 holds some interesting thoughts and a variety of experiences which have helped shape a ministry that is full of gifts and joy for the women who are living their lives as priests in the Church of England. It shows that women have been competent in the Church for at least thirty years and have helped change the minds of those around them, from negative to positive.

The place of the Church in May 2006 is interesting. It is still in a period of reception, fourteen years after the original decision to ordain women as priests. There are many people pushing towards the ordaining of women as bishops but still others saying that fourteen years is not a long enough period of time to gauge a proper reaction. Historically, women have always been in the background, this dissertation tracks their progress into the foreground, how their ministry has developed and how they will continue to be a part of the Church of England's outreach and ministry for a long time to come.