

Women in Ministry – experiences and the chance to become bishops

Of all the women that replied to my questionnaireⁱ very few experienced a negative reaction when the motion to ordain women was carried on 11th November 1992.

Many who gave their opinions to me were among the first to become priests in the Church of England. This chapter hopes to discuss their experience and look at the current debate surrounding the ordination of female bishops, discussing both sides of the argument and drawing experience and argument to create the basis of the concluding chapter.

The research that is quoted in the following chapter has come from a variety of sources. I contacted Ridley College, in Cambridgeshire, the University of Gloucestershire chaplain and a female curate who is placed in Cheltenham. Two of the women have been in ministry since the late 1970's and have a first hand account of being the first women to become ordained. I received six replies and feel that as a piece of qualitative research; they act as a clear indicator of the feeling amongst women of their position in ministry. Although all of these women are part of the 'pro' argument their experiences and points of view are important when it comes to understanding the place of women in the Holy Order of the Church of England. I have changed the names of the women for ethical reasons.

Since the first women were ordained in 1994, the church has seen various reactions from its members. The most shocking of statistics is that almost three hundred male clergy had left the ministryⁱⁱ by the August of 1994.ⁱⁱⁱ Most of the individuals who left the Church of England sought sanctuary in the Roman Catholic or Orthodox Church.^{iv} They received appropriate but generous amounts of compensation from the

Church Commission.^v For those who opposed the decision but stayed in the church there were other options. Although there were congregations who wondered whether they should be received into another denomination,^{vi} many waited to see what the church would do for those who had made their position clear.

For the churches who found themselves in complete opposition the Act of Synod created ‘Flying Bishops’,^{vii} who had or would never ordain women, as well as other special measures, which were pushed through the houses by the dissenters. The provisions made by the 1992 Priests (Ordaining of Women) Measure for the parishes who disagreed with their own Bishop on the subject allowed Parochial Church Councils to bar women celebrating communion or pronouncing absolution within the parish (known as Resolution A) or working as an incumbent in that parish (known as Resolution B).^{viii} These resolutions are still in place today though the measure that allowed Bishops to make the decision not to ordain women was quickly superseded by the Episcopal Ministry Act of Synod, which was put in place to stop ‘no-go’ areas and gave more power to parishes who wanted women in their local ministry even if their Bishop did not agree.^{ix} At the last count 810 parishes had opted for resolution A, 980 for resolution B and 315 parishes have been given some form of Episcopal care because they cannot accept the authority of female clergy, relating to the Bishop who oversees the parish.^x The number of parishes agreeing to these resolutions adds up to sixteen percent of the total parishes in the Church of England, so the opposition is still an issue for the church.

Others, of course, were delighted with the decision to ordain women. Much of the material that I have read has shown a great air of joy surrounding 11th November

1992. Many members of the public rejoiced with the women who had fought for a long time to get a decision. There was much excitement surrounding the motion and although some women kept their celebrations to themselves, others were told that their reactions were ‘un-Anglican’ in some way.^{xi} Since the initial reaction in 1992 the number of women priests has grown and in 2002 the figure of women in ordained ministry stood at 1,262 and of the amount of individuals admitted to training for ministry almost half are women.^{xii}

The decision to ordain women has meant that the Church of England has brought itself into line with other Anglican provinces but at the same time shows the difference with churches who still consider women priests as a theological anomaly.^{xiii} When the decision was made in 1992 many priests and bishops worried about the effect on the relationship between the Anglican Church and the Roman Catholic Church. For a long time the Roman Catholics have argued that as Jesus Christ was male so the priest represents Christ at Communion and therefore can never be female.^{xiv} This point has caused a good deal of strain in the relationship between the Churches and has been the driving force for the opposition. Both sides of the argument have been well documented by the Churches and I shall refer to these later in the chapter.

The experience of women in ministry has been interesting, though not as well documented. Joy Carroll Wallis and Margaret Webster have written about their reactions and how becoming vicars has shaped their lives. Joy Carroll Wallis’s ministry has been the inspiration of the television series *The Vicar of Dibley*, as well as being the youngest member of the House of Clergy and one of the first women to

be ordained into the Church of England. Margaret Webster was the founder of the Movement for the Ordination of Women in 1979 and tracked the debate in her book 'A New Strength, a New Song: Journey to Women's Priesthood', until the agreement by Parliament in 1993. Both these women have their own way of doing the job they have been called to, both have shown that the inclusion of women is a positive move and how it has helped many congregations and members. Other women I have emailed have given a positive response of their time in ministry. They come from a variety of backgrounds and work in different ministries across the country, some for years while others have only been in post for a short time.^{xv} A majority of the information below can be found in Appendix 1, unless otherwise stated.

From reading the women's responses and Joy Carroll Wallis's book the only feelings that one receives from the women are of happiness and relief that they are accepted and tested in the same way their male incumbents are, as well as being supported in their own ministry. Many of the women who replied agreed that the selection process was daunting but affirming never the less. Others enjoyed the process, even if they came up against men who disagreed with the ordination of women. I have come across a few women who were among the first to be ordained as priests in May 1994 and have been in ministry since that day. Many have been in ministry for years, knowing that God had called them, even if, as in one case, they had decided that they did not want to become a minister in the Church of England. Some of the women had experienced the same training alongside men who were to become priests. Carroll Wallis recalled her experience when she was training as a deacon in Cranmer Hall, St. John's College, Durham, in the late 1980's, as an 'odd situation' because although

she was receiving the same training as her male counter-parts, she was not allowed to go into ordained ministry as they were.^{xvi}

One of the questions posed to the women was asking if they felt their ministry differed from their male colleagues. All of the respondents feel that their ministry is not any different from that of a man's and that there is a sense of equality among those in ministry, describing their own ministry as complimentary and seeing that each member works in their own strengths. From the answers I received all of the women felt that they had been given an equal share in the work of their churches, as well as being asked to hold funerals or other services specifically because they were female. The reaction of the people around them since selection and ordination has been positive on the whole, often mentioning that the attitude of colleagues and congregations has changed since they began their ministry, becoming more welcoming and understanding that a woman in the position of priest has its benefits. Ian Jones mentions some reactions to ministry where both sexes were present, many members felt that worship had become more relaxed, that the ministry itself was enriched and balanced, taking in the feminine and masculine sides of Christianity.^{xvii} At least three of the women who shared their experiences told of how a few members of their congregations would not receive the bread and wine at Holy Communion from them. One woman was told directly that she was not allowed to become a priest because Jesus Christ was male and still finds opposition in the parish she lives in.^{xviii}

These women also find that they are more involved with the congregation of women in the Church. There is a great sense of empathy among women in any situation, but it shows particularly in a church setting. Three of the respondents found that they

could have conversations with members of their congregations that men would not understand. Each woman who replied to the questionnaire was quick to point out that everyone is different, and that the focus should not be so much on gender. Their experience has been shaped by their God given gifts and in understanding their own strengths and weaknesses as well as seeing where other members of clergy are gifted. Female clergy are often seen as more compassionate than men and find that those of the same sex are more willing to tell a whole story, where they would not if they were speaking to a male clergy member. Many members of clergy feel that there are more gifts available to the Church and that they are also wider ranging.^{xix}

The inclusion of women in ordained ministry has created some problems that have to be promptly addressed by the wider governing body of the church. Maternity leave for Sue brought problems to the table that the Church had not encountered before, she was the first woman deacon to have a child, and when she had her second child the policy was reviewed. The outcome was that, although there are guidelines in place for those who are pregnant, the Church is still trying to find a way for women to have some part-time responsibility at the end of maternity leave. There has been a long fight for a change in the way ministry works for those who have children. Over the last twelve years, Sue is still fighting for a part-time capacity and has only seen things begin to change over the last twelve months.^{xx}

The question of female bishops

After asking about the experience of being a woman in ordained ministry, the questionnaire went on to ask about the place of Bishops in the Church of England and if it was possible for women to take their place alongside the men already in

office. There is still a distinct cry for equality among the women who replied although they know that the route to women becoming Bishops will be a tough one, fraught with problems. A passage from the Bible that was mentioned regularly was Galatians 3:26-28. It was written by Paul to the churches in Galatia. This particular passage mentions equality in Christ, for men and women. Most of the women agree that they would like to see their own gender as bishops, but see that there are problems, on the part of males and the church. Some thought that men would have problems with sharing their exclusive power, whilst others agree that it is an issue of unity, if men could not accept the authority of a woman bishop, the move would cause more harm than good. The debate about leadership in the church is also a keen topic for these women. There are positions in the church where men dominate and women are few and far between, this is shown particularly in the small amount of women who speak at conferences, in comparison to male participation.^{xxi}

The question of female bishops has been talked about since before the decision was made to ordain women as priests in 1992. The women I have questioned feel strongly about it, knowing that it is a decision that has to be made in the Church, sooner rather than later. They are also aware of the debate that is current in many minds across the country and in every church, ordained women being almost unanimous in their agreement for women in the episcopate, as well as other members of clergy showing their support.^{xxii} Over the second half of this chapter that debate will be laid out, showing the arguments of those who agree and those who are opposed, and where the Church of England is in making a decision about women bishops.

The discussion about women in the episcopate has many sides. The Catholic Anglican and the Conservative Evangelical perspective, both of which wish to retain the current situation in the Church of England and the argument for moving forward, to allow women into the episcopate as soon as possible. The debate has been set out by the House of Bishop's Working Party report, presented in 2004, which will be the main source for this argument.

Each position has found the common ground in using the authority of scripture, the notion of tradition, the ecumenical relationships between church bodies and the culture, society and mission of the church and world to put forward their own ideas and argument.^{xxiii} These four areas allow for a lengthy discussion, that has dominated the Church for some time.

The Catholic Anglican perspective starts from society and tradition, arguing that the Church should not bow to the beliefs of the society one lives in nor should it attempt to engage with secular feminism.^{xxiv} The Conservative Evangelical position is similar, but is more concerned with the feminization of the Church and the inability to reach out to men in the future, if women take their place in the episcopate.^{xxv} Both perspectives use the current lack of consensus across the Christian churches as a reason why this step should not be taken. Women bishops can not be seen as a focus of unity if the churches can not decide on whether or not they should accept women in authority and leadership.^{xxvi} For many there is an insufficient amount of agreement on this subject for the church to proceed with the ordination of women.^{xxvii} This goes hand in hand with the theological significance of the maleness of Christ. Many believe that men hold an iconographic function within the church and communion

and therefore the position of bishop should not be open to women. Men are the only ones who can properly represent the incarnate Christ as a historical particularity.^{xxviii} This is very important for the Roman Catholic Church's point of view on the ordination of women.^{xxix} The serious point that is made from this deals with the fact that the Catholic Anglican tradition would have to question the authority of the whole of the episcopate order, not just the women who become bishops. It also holds in the Conservative Evangelical view, where God the Father shows a paternal leadership, rather than a maternal one, it is therefore inappropriate for women to exercise Episcopal authority.^{xxx}

Following on from this, both parties against the ordination of women believe that their previous involvement in ministry is unfounded or very unlikely in Biblical tradition. The Catholic Anglican stance shows that the patriarchal ordering of the world is God given and that women are not seen to be in leadership during the time of the early church as it is historically unconvincing. They agree that Jesus and Paul were not interested in the equality of the sexes, which is viewed as a post-Enlightenment argument.^{xxxi} This argument is also backed by the lack of scripture that supports the ordination of women as well as the notion of leadership in the early church being different from what the current idea of leadership is today.^{xxxii} It also shows that the ordination of women bishops is not consonant with scripture and not supported by tradition and as Christ chose twelve male apostles, women should not be welcomed into ordained ministry.^{xxxiii} The Conservative Evangelical point of view is different and although is still dismissive of women's place in the church. They believe in the functional subordination of women, following the model of the trinity, where God is the head and Jesus submits to his father. This argument begins at

Genesis 1 – 2, where Adam and Eve are named. It attempts to show that there is equality but also an order to the world, this theme continues into the New Testament, where various passages are used to show the submission of women, regarding headship and marriage.^{xxxiv}

The final argument about women bishops from the Conservative Evangelical perspective stems from the 1992 vote and the period of reception for women priests that is still ongoing. It is clear to most that an issue of this nature can not be decided by a vote, and still needs to be discussed within churches who have rejected the idea of women priests and the clergy who are still undecided. The Conservative Evangelicals are still calling for discussions to take place as they believe theological or doctrinal issues cannot be decided by a majority vote.^{xxxv} The final point for the argument against the ordination of women is that the church is still in the period of receiving women priests and allowing the move to ordain women bishops would disrupt this period of the church's life.^{xxxvi}

The argument for the church to move to ordain women as bishops, welcoming them into the episcopate for the first time, is in direct reaction to the arguments against the idea. Many of the following points have the same basis and follow the same pattern as the above arguments. For many in agreement about women bishops, tradition is problematic. Tradition is seen as a developing notion and society is no longer shaped by the differences that were originally in place. There are clear indications of differences in culture, biology and psychology in men and women throughout the history of society where authority is not a characteristic only attributed to men.^{xxxvii}

The argument to ordain female bishops uses the whole of Scripture to show that the Established Church has not seen the whole picture. It calls for a different interpretation, looking at scripture with a new set of eyes in the new context set by allowing women to be ordained.^{xxxviii} This argument attempts to show that patriarchy is not the only way Biblical society existed and the equality of men and women was disrupted at the Fall of humanity. This equality is then fully resolved in the work of Christ and the Holy Spirit.^{xxxix} In the New Testament, Jesus chose his apostles to be all male because he was considerate of cultural constraints, but at the same time, he included women in his ministry. Women are found to be working alongside men in Acts, Romans and the letters of Paul to various churches in the early life of Christianity. The promoters of this argument feel that the involvement of women in the early church was extensive.^{xl} They also feel that the overall trajectory of scripture is geared towards promoting the equality of men and women, which is summed up in Galatians 3:28.^{xli} The headship of males in the Church is an issue that is addressed by this side of the argument. Genesis 1-2 is seen as a theory for male headship, but Genesis 2, in particular, is generally used to prove that men and women are equal in God's sight. The language of headship used in the New Testament is seen as irrelevant to women's role in the church.

The theological significance of Christ's maleness is almost dismissed in this argument. The view of this position is that both male and female should be allowed to represent Christ at communion. If this were to happen, Christ could be seen as fully represented in the Church and therefore the Church can be a proper witness to the rest of the world.^{xlii} The introduction of women to the episcopate would allow the Church of England to develop its own orders and step away from the Church in

Rome. This is seen as a right and an acknowledgement that the Church of England is a separate from the Church in Rome.^{xliii} This is seen as a positive step for the Church. The decision in 1992 was made so that women could become bishops at a later date, which has always been the case for those who join priest's orders and should not be any different for women. The final argument is that if women were to be ordained as bishops the church would benefit significantly from the gifts that are offered. If it does not allow this to happen the Church of England would be damaging its presentation of the gospel.^{xliv}

For many these different points of view need to be fully discussed over the coming years, to understand the benefits and the draw backs of introducing women into the episcopate. Each argument has various strengths and weaknesses and with the testimonies of the women who are experiencing ordained ministry the Church will have to think carefully about women's role in ministry and whether they can accept female bishops in the future.

ⁱ Appendix 1

ⁱⁱ Carroll-Wallis, J., *The Woman Behind the Collar*, (Crossroad Publishing, 2004) p.163

ⁱⁱⁱ Jones, I., *Women and Priesthood in the Church of England: Ten Years on*, (Church House Publishing, 2004) p.28

^{iv} *Ibid.* p.27

^v Carroll-Wallis, J., *Op. Cit.* p.163

^{vi} *Ibid.* p.28

^{vii} Carroll-Wallis, J., *Op. Cit.* p.163 ‘Flying Bishops’ did not have a diocese of their own but ‘flew’ from diocese to diocese.

^{viii} Jones, I., *Op. Cit.* p.5 Parochial Church Councils are made up of members and churchwardens of each Anglican Church in the parish and the vote had to be in majority.

^{ix} *Ibid.*

^x *Women Bishops in the Church of England?* (Church House Publishing, 2004) p.132

^{xi} *Ibid.* p.126

^{xii} *Ibid.* p.129

^{xiii} *Ibid.* p.129-130

^{xiv} Jones, I., *Op. Cit.* p.70 This is often called the ‘icon of Christ’.

^{xv} Appendix 1

^{xvi} Carroll Wallis, J., *Op. Cit.* p.86-88

^{xvii} Jones, I., *Op. Cit.* p.87

^{xviii} Appendix 1

^{xix} Jones, I., *Op. Cit.* p.87

^{xx} Appendix 1, name has been changed

^{xxi} Appendix 1

^{xxii} Jones, I., *Op. Cit.* p.188-189

^{xxiii} *Women Bishops in the Church of England?* p.137

^{xxiv} *Ibid.* p.137-138

^{xxv} *Ibid.* p.156

^{xxvi} *Ibid.* p.143, 153

^{xxvii} *Ibid.* p.143

^{xxviii} *Ibid.* p.142

^{xxix} *Ibid.* p.142

^{xxx} *Ibid.* p.152

^{xxxi} *Ibid.* p.139-140

^{xxxii} *Ibid.* p.138-139

^{xxxiii} *Ibid.* See 1 Corinthians 11:12-16, 14:34-38, 1 Timothy 2:11-15, Ephesians 5:21, Galatians 3:27-28

^{xxxiv} *Ibid.* p.149 See 1 Corinthians 11:12-16, Colossians 3:18, Ephesians 5:21-33, 1 Peter 3:1-7.

^{xxxv} *Ibid.* p.149

^{xxxvi} *Ibid.* p.155

^{xxxvii} *Ibid.* p.168-172

^{xxxviii} *Ibid.* p.157

^{xxxix} *Ibid.* p.158 Deuteronomy 29:9-18

^{xl} *Ibid.* p.160 See Acts 9:36-42, 16:14-15, 18:18-24, Romans 16:1-16, 1 Corinthians 11:5, Philippians 4.2-3, 2 Timothy 4.:19

^{xli} *Ibid.* p.161-162

^{xlii} *Ibid.* p.172

^{xliii} *Ibid.* p.173

^{xliv} *Ibid.* p.174-175 There are eight points outlined on p.174. All of these gifts are shown in appendix 1.