

The Ordination of Women to the Priesthood and the Episcopate: A Review of Developments and Prospects for the Future.

Arriving in Nairobi, I was taken straight from the airport to preach at the 11.00 am Cathedral service. As we drove up, it was clear that an earlier service was still in progress. The building was jam-packed with young people and the service was being broadcast to the overspill outside. A young woman was preaching and I learnt later that youth and children's work is the responsibility of the woman priest who is the Chaplain.

It is worth remembering that the Church of England is a comparative late-comer in the matter of women's ordination to the priesthood. After all, it was the Bishop of Hong Kong who, in war-time, ordained Florence Li-Tim Oi as the first woman priest ever. His action was disowned by the 1948 Lambeth Conference but a renewed request for the Anglican Communion to consider ordaining women came again from the diocese of Hong Kong to the newly-constituted Anglican Consultative Council. This Council, at its first meeting in Limuru, Kenya in 1971, passed a resolution that such ordinations would be acceptable to it and that the Council would do everything to encourage the maintenance of communion in these circumstances. By the time the Council met again in Dublin, the Bishop of Hong Kong had already ordained two women to the priesthood, Jane Hwang and a CMS Mission- partner, Joyce Bennett.

In the United States, the opposition of General Convention resulted in the irregular ordinations of Philadelphia 1974. These were regularised in 1977 and since then the number of women priests in the Episcopal Church has grown exponentially. Similar stories can be told of Provinces such as Canada, New Zealand and Australia. In Africa there are women priests in South Africa, Uganda and Kenya but not, for example, in Central Africa or Tanzania. While the Churches of North and South India ordain women, the Episcopal Church in the Middle-East does not. In the Pacific area also, the situation is mixed. In churches, such as the Episcopal Church in the USA, women priests have gradually come to be accepted, even if there are still pockets of opposition. In other provinces, such as Canada or New Zealand, there has never been significant opposition, while in yet others, the issue has not even been considered.

It cannot be denied that changing attitudes to women in society, and the new status for women which they have brought, have alerted the Church to the dignity and rôle of women in the Church. Every Christian tradition is being affected by these changes and Christians of all kinds are having to reflect on the questions being raised. It is sometimes the case that cultural changes highlight an aspect of the Tradition which has hitherto been neglected. The movement against slavery, for instance, was both inspired by the Bible's vision of human dignity and equality and led to a greater emphasis on this dimension of Christian faith. In South America, Christian solidarity with the poor led to an increasing appreciation of the

poor in the Bible. In a similar way, the changing rôle of women in the wider world, is leading the Church to re-receive the Pauline teaching, that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female but that we are all one (Gal 3:28).

Robert Runcie, when he was Archbishop of Canterbury, in his correspondence with the Vatican on the subject of Women's ordination, pointed out that the incarnation involves solidarity with the whole human race. As Gregory of Nazianzus has taught, "what he did not assume, he did not heal". The humanity of the Risen and Glorified Lord, moreover, is a humanity that includes all believers; people of every race and of both genders (Eph 2:6). Because of this, the ministerial priesthood, which represents not only the Church but also Christ as Head and High Priest, should also be inclusive.

Such arguments, from the inclusiveness of the Risen Lord and of the Church to an inclusiveness of Christian Ministry, appear to apply to all kinds of ministry which is, according to Article 26, carried out in Christ's name. They would, therefore, apply to episcopal ministry as well. Is that, therefore, the end of the matter? If women can be priests, must it follow that they should also be able to be bishops, or are there aspects of the episcopal office which might lead in another direction? It is clear that in the emergence of the historic episcopate, as we have received it, bishops were seen as presiding presbyters and thus what can be said of presbyters can also be said of bishops. There are, however, other aspects of episcopal ministry. The bishop inherited not only the presidency of the presbyteral college but also the role of apostle and prophet in the early church. Can women be called to such an apostolic and prophetic role as well?

Richard Bauckham's new book Gospel Women: Studies of the Named Women in the Gospels (reviewed in the Church Times, 18 October) is the latest of a series of works which points to apostolic women in the New Testament itself. The case of Junia (Rom16:7) has, particularly, caught the public imagination but we can also mention the long-standing tradition, in both East and West, of regarding Mary Magdalene as 'the apostle to the apostles' because she took news of the Resurrection to them. Some recent research has also highlighted the importance of missionary couples, such as Prisca and Aquila, in the Acts of the Apostles and in the letters of St. Paul. The so-called 'House Churches' were important centres for early Christianity and the role of women in leadership in such churches is increasingly well-documented.

The Acts also mention women prophets and, in 1 Corinthians, St Paul attempts to regulate (though not to prevent) the activities of such prophets. In his monumental work on the origins of Christian Ministry, Bishop Charles Gore both relates the episcopal office to the work of prophets in the early Church and points out that there were women prophets until the end of the second or beginning of the third century. In sharing their tasks with clergy, bishops are not only sharing their pastoral responsibility but also the apostolic, teaching and prophetic aspects of

their ministry. The question is then asked: if women priests can be delegated these aspects of the episcopal office, why can they not exercise them in their own right?

There are difficulties, of course. One of the bishop's most important tasks is to maintain and further the unity of the local church. In a divided church, where there is disagreement on the issue, there will be those who are unable to recognise a woman as bishop. Indeed, there may well be priests who feel they cannot belong to a presbyteral college which has a women president. Whilst the bishop remains male, at least some of those opposed to the ordination of women feel they can still join in church life. This will not be possible for them with a woman bishop and communion will be further impaired. However, as Dr George Carey pointed out when he was Bishop of Bath and Wells, some feel that communion is also impaired by excluding women from the Church's ministry.

If all members of the College of bishops cannot recognise the orders of a woman bishop, this will certainly place strains on episcopal collegiality. As we have seen, some Anglican provinces have not ordained women to the priesthood. With women bishops, there may be more acute difficulties for these provinces. For example, such provinces may not recognise the orders of both men and women who have been ordained by a woman bishop. There will be consequences too for links between dioceses and provinces.

Ecumenically, there are both opportunities and problems. Some of our partners, such as the Methodists, will not draw closer unless we open all ordained ministry to women. Others such as the Roman Catholics and the two families of Orthodox churches, will almost certainly regard women bishops as a serious obstacle to unity and even as raising questions about agreements already reached.

Just as the Church of England was not the first to ordain women to the priesthood, so also it will not be the first to ordain them bishops, if it decides to do so. The 1988 Lambeth Conference gave the green light for women bishops through a permissive resolution. Since then, the Episcopal Church in the USA, Canada and New Zealand has proceeded to ordain women bishops. The Scottish Episcopal Church may well do so in the near future. The 1988 Conference asked the Archbishop of Canterbury to establish a communion-wide commission to consider all the implications of women in the episcopate, both between and within the different provinces of the Anglican Communion. The Eames Commission (of which I was co-secretary) sought to understand the differences on the question of women's ordination within an ecclesiological framework: that is to say, how the whole body of Christ's Church deals with change and how developments in faith or practice are either ultimately received or not received in the light of the Apostolic Tradition which the Church has a duty to hand on from one generation to another. Such an understanding of 'reception' has become controversial in some circles, but 'Eames' firmly believed in both the integrity of the doctrine and the practicality of the process. If women bishops are ordained in the Church of England, and if

neither parliamentary nor synodical legislation is deemed appropriate in providing for those who disagree, the Eames proposals for pastoral arrangements, regarding appropriate episcopal care, may well come to the fore.

If the Church decides to ordain women to the episcopate, it must be because it believes that theological integrity demands it. It must be convinced that divine revelation, as well as the challenge of mission in our times, require a ministry of oversight which is inclusive of both women and men. If it comes to such a conclusion, it should be prepared for the difficulties identified above and for the need to make provision for those who disagree. As with all developments, Eames saw that this one also should be open to the process of reception in the Anglican Communion and in the universal Church.

+Michael Nazir-Ali
October 2002