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 THE CHURCH
OF ENGLAND

 Diocese of
Rochester

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Dear Brothers and Sisters

The Ordination of Women to the Episcopate

You will no doubt have heard that the General Synod yesterday voted against the Measure to enable women to be ordained as bishops. The House of Bishops vote was 93% in favour of the Measure and the House of Clergy 75% in favour. However, in the House of Laity 64% voted in favour, falling short of the required 2/3 majority.

A number of my fellow bishops have already gone on record to express their deep disappointment at this decision, and I share that disappointment. The situation in which we now find ourselves is extremely difficult from all kinds of perspectives. Much of the press coverage is already less than positive, but that is perhaps the least important aspect.

My most immediate concern is the pastoral care of those – mainly but not only our ordained women – who see this decision as a serious questioning of the ordained ministry of women in our church. Already I have received messages from some of the ordained women in our Diocese expressing their deep hurt: to them it feels as if the laity of our church (as represented in General Synod) have called into question the validity of their ministries. At this point I may not be able to offer much by way of encouragement other than to express my heartfelt appreciation of and support for the ministry of ordained women within our church, but my door (whether physical or electronic) is open to any who wish to talk with me about the decision and its implications. I also intend to arrange one or more occasions for any (lay or ordained) who might wish to come together to reflect further with me – details will be made known soon.

There is also the procedural matter of where the synodical process goes from here. There are very limited circumstances in which this issue (though not the particular legislation) could come back to General Synod during the lifetime of the present Synod, but if that were to happen there would need to be a significant likelihood of the vote going a different way. During the debate, many people speaking against the Measure talked about their conviction that the Measure could be better – the implication presumably being that there might be circumstances in which they could vote in favour. The key issue is that of provision for those who could not accept the episcopal ministry of a female bishop. Hitherto the circle that we have not been able to square is making that provision in such a way that would be acceptable both to the supporters of the ordination of

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women as bishops and to the opponents. The House of Bishops and others genuinely thought that the now-rejected Measure achieved that balance. Clearly we have been proved wrong. Whether any different formulation could achieve that now needs to be tested. The House of Bishops meets in two weeks time and will give substantial time to considering the question of how the process may go forward, especially taking into account that it is the clear view of the wider Church of England that it should.

A further dimension is where this leaves us in terms of our pattern of synodical government. Some are asking serious questions about the credibility of a system in which 42 out of 44 diocesan synods voted in favour and the overall vote in General Synod was 72% in favour. Where that discussion may go I do not know, but the questions are being asked.

More personally, while I have always gone as far as I can to relate positively to those who take a different position to mine on this matter (and value my engagement with both conservative Evangelicals and traditional Catholics), I now find myself even more uncomfortable about my continued membership of a College of Bishops that does not admit women. In the eight years since I was made a bishop, I have become increasingly convinced that the single gender nature of that College is neither healthy nor right – and of course the vote shows that that College does not itself wish to be like that. While in theory I could remain a member of that College for another 14 years, I cannot see that happening unless the membership is opened to women sooner rather than later.

This matter has been the focus of a great deal of prayer and debate over recent years. It involves issues which affect people deeply and personally; it is testing personal relationships and indeed people's loyalty to the church which they may have served and supported for all of their lives. The General Synod's decision now faces us with further difficult issues. My prayer is that somehow by God's grace we will now be enabled to move forward in God's mission in unity. We face serious challenges as well as opportunities in growing our witness and service within our communities and nation. May God grant us to be both faithful and fruitful in the work to which he calls us.

With my prayers and good wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "James." The signature is written in a cursive style with a small cross-like mark to the left of the name. There are two horizontal lines above and below the name, suggesting a signature line.

James, Bishop of Rochester