

The legislation to introduce female bishops in the Church of England -

The issues involved and the resources to address them.

1. What are the diocesan synods being asked to vote on?

What the diocesan synods are being asked to vote on is set out in GS Misc 964 *The Consecration of Women to the Episcopate – Reference of Draft Legislation to the Diocesan Synods.*¹

All diocesan synods are being asked to vote on the following motion, which must be un-amended in order to ensure consistency across the dioceses:

That this Synod approve the proposals embodied in the draft Bishops and Priests (Consecration and Ordination of Women) Measure and in draft Amending Canon No30.'

Voting for this motion involves:

- (a) supporting the introduction of female bishops into the Church of England at the present time.
- (b) being willing to accept the specific legislation set out in the motion as the way to bring this about.

This means that people should vote for the motion only if they support both (a) and (b).

- If you approve of introducing female bishops, feel that this is the right time to do it and that this legislation is the right way to do it then you should vote yes.
- If you do not approve of the introduction of female bishops you should vote no.
- If you approve of the introduction of female bishops in principle, but do not feel this is the right time or that this is the right way to do it you should vote no.

Gs Misc 964 also explains that:

It is open to a Diocesan Synod, in addition to its consideration of the business now being referred, to consider further motions (proposed by members of the diocesan synod in accordance with its standing orders) relating to the draft Bishops and Priests (Consecration and Ordination of Women) Measure or to the draft Amending Canon.

¹ <http://www.churchofengland.org/about-us/structure/general-synod/about-general-synod/references-to-dioceses.aspx>

This means that although diocesan synods cannot vote to amend the draft legislation they do have the ability to formally comment on it, or on matters relating to it, and to pass on these comments to the General Synod.

Although the dioceses are not legally bound to refer the matter to deanery synods they have been strongly encouraged to do so. It would obviously be sensible for them to vote on the same motion as the diocesan synods in order to provide a consistent basis for the debate at the diocesan level. They too are free to add their own following motions.

2. What is proposed?

The draft legislation on which the synods will be voting the *Draft Bishops and Priests (Consecration and Ordination of Women) Measure*, and *Draft Amending Canon No 30* contains five key elements:

- It abolishes the current legislation, the *Priests (Ordination of Women) Measure 1993*.
- It makes it lawful for General Synod to make provision by Canon for women to be ordained as priests and consecrated as bishops if they satisfy the relevant requirements of Canon law.
- It imposes a duty on each diocesan bishop to make and publish a scheme containing arrangements for a male bishop acting as his or her delegate to provide sacramental ministry and pastoral care to clergy and parishes who request it. Where bishops have stated that they will not ordain women as priests the scheme will also make provision for their ordination and for providing them with ministerial support and pastoral care.
- It sets out arrangements for Parochial Church Councils to make such a request and to pass a resolution requesting that only a male priest be appointed as the incumbent or priest in charge.
- It mandates the House of Bishops to draw up a Code of Practice which will give guidance about the implementation of the Measure to which bishops and others 'shall be under a duty to have regard.'

3. The Theological Issues

What I am going to outline for you today are the theological issues that you will need to address when considering the draft legislation for the introduction of female bishops into the Church of England and the resources that are available to help you address them.

The first point that needs to be made is that the question of whether the Church of England should admit women to the episcopate is still an open question. It has been widely suggested in the media and also by some within the Church that this question has already been decided as a result of the debates that have already taken place in General Synod. This suggestion is mistaken for two reasons

(i) The Church of England has not changed its position on this issue. Until a measure admitting women to the episcopate receives final approval from General Synod and then becomes law, the Church of England's position remains what it always has been, namely, that it is not right for women to be bishops. At the moment the idea that women should be bishops has only the status of a debatable opinion.

(ii) Even if the Church of England does finally decide that women should be admitted to the episcopate this will remain a minority opinion in terms of the history of the Church and in terms of the worldwide Church today and there will remain those in the Church of England who will think that it made the wrong decision. This means that the question of whether it is right to have women bishops is one that will remain disputed for the foreseeable future.

The second point that needs to be made is that closer examination of the question 'Should we support the current proposal to admit women to the episcopate?' shows that in order for it to be answered properly a whole series of questions need to be addressed.

a. What is the role of a bishop?

We cannot begin to address the issue of whether women should be bishops in the Church of England unless we have an idea of what a bishop is and what a bishop does.

As many of you will know, there are a range of opinions within the Church of England about the precise nature of the episcopate, but there is, nonetheless an accepted Church of England position that says that:

- A Church of England bishop is the principal minister of word and sacrament of the local church and has overall pastoral responsibility for his clergy and laity. Like a bishop in the Early Church, he exercises his ministry with the assistance of his priests and deacons.
- A Church of England bishop is an instrument of unity for his diocese and for the wider Church. As the 1990 Church of England report *Episcopal Ministry* puts it:

In the local church the bishop focuses and nurtures the unity of his people; in his sharing in the collegiality of bishops the local church is bound together with other local churches; and, through the succession of bishops the local community is related to the Church through the ages. Thus the bishop in his own person in the diocese; and in his collegial relations in the wider church; and through his place in the succession of bishops in their communities in faithfulness to the Gospel, is a sign and focus of the unity of the Church.

- A Church of England bishop is called to declare and uphold the apostolic faith which is revealed in Scripture and to which the Tradition of the Church bears witness.

- As in the Early Church it is bishops who have the sole right to ordain other bishops and priests and deacons.
- Like a bishop in the Early Church a Church of England bishop is called to be a leader in mission.

What the debate about women in the episcopate involves, therefore, is a consideration of whether a woman could, or should, exercise any, or all, of this five fold ministry. This consideration involves theological questions, such as whether it would be right for a woman to exercise episcopal authority over men, and the practical question of whether a woman could effectively exercise an episcopal ministry in circumstances where there would be clergy and congregations who would be unable to accept her ministry.

b. Would appointing women bishops be a legitimate development?

Because the Church of England has never had female bishops admitting women bishops would be a development in its theology and practice. What has to be decided is whether this would be a legitimate development (like, for example, the introduction of a vernacular Bible and a vernacular liturgy in the 16th century) or an illegitimate development (like, for example, a decision by the Church of England that it was no longer going to baptise people).

According to the accepted theological approach of the Church of England there are three criteria for deciding whether admitting women to the episcopate would be a legitimate development:

(i) Is this development biblically based?

The Church of England, in common with the orthodox Christian tradition in general, believes that the Bible witness forms the basis for Christian doctrine and therefore any development that is not grounded in Scripture cannot be permissible. In the words of the Scottish theologian James Orr:

There may be disputes about the authority of Scripture, but there ought to be no dispute about this, that whatever has no place in Scripture, or cannot be legitimately deduced from it, is no part of the truth of revelation for which the Church is set as 'the ground and pillar' [1Tim 3:15]. (James Orr, *The Progress of Dogma*)

In terms of the debate about the ordination of women as bishops this means that the proposal to allow women to be bishops can be seen as legitimate if it:

- Has explicit or implicit support in specific biblical texts.

For example, it has been suggested that the place of women in leadership in the Church is given explicit support by the references to female leaders in texts such as Rom 16:1-16, 1 Corinthians 1:11, Colossians 4:15 and Philippians 4:2-3 and the role of St Mary Magdalene as 'apostle to the apostles' (Luke 24:10, John 20:11-18)

and implicit support by what St Paul says about the abolition of the distinction between male and female in Gal 3:27-28.

- Enables us to make coherent sense of the overall biblical picture of the role of women in the purposes of God.

Thus it has been argued that story of the creation of Eve in Gen 2:18-25 indicates that according to God's original intention women were not meant to be subordinate to men. Subordination was a result of the fall and has been overturned by Christ in whom women have been given back their equality with men. Having women bishops is appropriate because it reflects this restored equality.

- Takes the logic of the biblical material relating to women and applies it in a new cultural and historical context.

For instance, Kristen Aune maintains in her essay 'Evangelicals and Gender' that:

The principle used by Jesus and the authors of the New Testament was to work within the societal structures of the time, primarily to aid evangelism, but transform them in the light of the gospel.

Applying this principle today, she says, means accepting women in leadership roles within the Church:

Given that Western societies enshrine gender equality in law, ministry needs to involve women alongside men at all levels. To forbid women leadership or preaching roles would be to violate Paul's principle and to hinder evangelism. Many people reject the church not because they object to the gospel, but because of the church's record of oppressing women (and, historically, non-white people): because the gospel has been seen to be not good but bad news for women. This immediately creates a barrier which prevents them from listening to any presentation of the gospel that Christians might give.

All these examples would be challenged by those opposed to the Church of England having women bishops, but what they indicate is the kind of arguments that would need to be accepted in order for the ordination of women bishops to be a theologically permissible development.

(ii) Does it takes tradition seriously?

We cannot simply read the biblical text as if there had been no other Christians before us and as if God had not been at work through his Spirit maintaining his Church in truth. God has made us part of a historical community and we have to listen carefully to what God has had to say to us through the other members of that community in the past and act accordingly.

In terms of the debate about whether there should be women bishops this means that a permissible development is one that:

- Shows awareness of what the traditions of the Church (as manifested in the totality of its life) have to tell us about the role of women in general and the role of women in ordained ministry in particular;

It is important here to build on all the traditions of the Church, but not to give disproportionate attention to marginal traditions.

- Shows that it has understood the reason(s) for the existence these traditions;

It is not enough simply to note *what* the traditions of the Church have said. Critical reflection on the significance of these traditions also demands an awareness of *why* they said it. For example, if it could be shown that the tradition of having a male only episcopate was based on a faulty exegesis of the Bible, or on a mistaken belief in female intellectual weakness, or was a response to a specific cultural context which no longer exists, the case that it is a tradition that should be upheld would be weaker than if it could be shown that it was a tradition based on accurate biblical interpretation, a proper estimate of female psychology and a set of theological principles that apply regardless of cultural context.

- Builds on the Church's existing traditions rather than simply rejecting them.

For the debate about the ordination of women as bishops, what this means is that it would need to be shown that such a move by the Church of England did have the character of an organic development, building on existing traditions in such a way as to be an evolutionary rather than a revolutionary change.

If the main theological reason for attending to tradition is a conviction that the Holy Spirit has been at work down the centuries maintaining the Church in truth, it follows that an approach that simply rejects the traditions of the past is theologically questionable. What is required is an approach that is genuinely a *development* of what has gone before.

(iii) Does it take reason seriously?

Reason in this context means both the general human capacity for rational thought and the mind of a particular culture. It therefore follows that a legitimate development:

- Is one that can be shown in rational and coherent fashion to be rooted in Scripture and tradition in the ways outlined above;
- Will enable the Church to respond creatively and persuasively to the issues raised by contemporary culture and contemporary Christian experience.

In the case of the debate about the ordination of women bishops, this means that such a development will be one that both builds on Scripture and tradition in the ways previously described, addresses the belief in our society that equal opportunities for women are a moral good and the conviction of some women within the Church of England that they have a vocation to the ordained ministry and responds to the experience of the ministry of women priests in the Church of England since 1994.

c. Is proper provision made for the reception of this development?

For a development to be viewed as legitimate it will also need to be received by the Church as a whole. Reception does not simply mean the acceptance of a decision that has been made. Rather, it has come to be used in theology to mean that process of discernment whereby the people of God decide whether a decision that has been made has been in accordance with the will of God.

With regard to the ordination of women this means that the Church of England's decision in 1992 to ordain women to the priesthood was not the end of the matter, but the beginning of a process of discernment involving not only the Church of England, but the Church as a whole. As the 1993 House of Bishops report *Bonds of Peace* put it:

The Church of England made its decision to ordain women to the priestly ministry of the Church of God as one part of the Universal Church using its own decision making structures, in consultation with the wider Anglican Communion and in knowledge of the different practices of its ecumenical partners. Discernment of the matter is now to be seen within a much broader and longer process of discernment within the whole Church under the Spirit's guidance.

We now enter a process in which it is desirable that both those in favour and those opposed should be recognised as holding legitimate positions while the whole Church seeks to come to a common mind. The Church of England needs to understand itself as a communion in dialogue, committed to remaining together in the ongoing process of the discernment of truth within the wider fellowship of the Christian Church

The concept of reception raises three issues in respect of the debate about the ordination of female bishops.

- (1) Is it right for a particular church to act on its own? Would it not be better for a church to wait for an ecumenical consensus to exist before introducing a development rather than making the development and then seeing whether the development is eventually received?
- (2) Is it right to proceed with the ordination of women as bishops while the process of reception of the decision to ordain women as priests is still continuing?
- (3) Would a decision to ordain women as bishops in the Church of England mean the end of the process of reception of the ordination of women, or would theological consistency, as well as Resolution III.2 of the 1998 Lambeth Conference, which called on the churches of the Anglican Communion to uphold the principle of open reception in relation to the ordination of women to the episcopate, mean that any decision to ordain women bishops would also need to be subject to a process of reception?

In the case of the decision to ordain women priests, the recognition that the Church of England was entering into a process of reception about the matter led to provision being made for those unable to accept the decision on the grounds that their position was still accepted as a legitimate one within the Church and that the process of reception involved living with diversity.

The question that needs to be considered in relation to the debate about the ordination of women as bishops is whether, in the event of the Church of England deciding to ordain women bishops, similar provision should also be made for those unable to accept this decision and, if so, what form this provision should take.

The range of possible options for such provision is set out in section 5 of *Women in the Episcopate – a digest of the Rochester Report*.

As was noted at the beginning of this paper, the current proposal is that bishops (male and female) would be required to make provision for a male bishop to provide pastoral care and sacramental ministry to those unable to accept women bishops, in accordance with a code of practice to which the diocesan bishop would be legally required to 'have regard'. The male bishop providing such pastoral care and sacramental ministry would not have jurisdiction in his own right but would be acting on behalf of the diocesan bishop.

The debate around this proposal is whether it is sufficient, too generous, or not generous enough.

- Would it allow women consecrated as bishops to exercise a full and proper episcopal ministry along the lines set out at the beginning of this paper?
- Does it include provisions that will allow for a continuing period of reception by making it possible for those conscientiously unable to accept women as bishops to continue to flourish within the Church of England?

d. What would become of the unity of the Church of England?

As we have already noted, one of the roles of a bishop in the Church of England is to hold the church together in unity. According to accepted Church of England theology one of the key factors that holds the Church of England together as a single visibly united church is that all parishes are in communion with their bishops and all the bishops are in communion with each other. In the traditional language of St Cyprian of Carthage the unity of the episcopate is the 'glue' that holds the Church of England together.

Should women be appointed as bishops in the Church of England this will cease to be the case. The glue will melt. There will be parishes who are out of communion with their bishops and bishops who are out of communion with other bishops.

As Cardinal Kasper pointed out to the College of Bishops in 2006, this means that according to its present theology the Church of England will have ceased to be a united church. It will be in internal schism. The issue that this raises is whether it

would be legitimate to proceed with the appointment of female bishops knowing that this would be the outcome.

4. The resources for addressing these issues

Four key Church of England texts:

The Rochester Report - *Women Bishops in the Church of England?* (CHP 2004)
<http://www.cofe.anglican.org/info/papers/womenbishops.pdf>

A summary of the Rochester Report - *Women in the Episcopate – A digest of the Rochester report.*

Resources for Reflection (GS Misc 827 2006)
<http://www.cofe.anglican.org/about/gensynod/agendas/july2006/gsmisc/gsmisc827.rtf>

Women in the Episcopate – An Anglican Roman Catholic Dialogue (GS Misc 885 2008)

From the Anglican Communion:

Women in the Anglican Episcopate, Theology, Guidelines and Practice
 (Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 1998)

Further material on the female bishops debate:

For female bishops

H Harris and J Shaw (eds), *The Call for Women Bishops* (SPCK 2004)
 J Rigney (ed), *Women as Bishops* (Mowbray 2008)

Against female bishops

J Baker, *Consecrated Women? : Women Bishops – A Catholic and Evangelical Response* (Canterbury Press 2003)

The Women's ministry section on the Reform website
<http://www.reform.org.uk/pages/bb/womensministry1.php>

The two key campaigning websites for and against female bishops are:

Women and the Church <http://womenandthechurch.org>

Forward in Faith www.forwardinfaith.com

For the wider theological debate about the roles of men and women in the Church two American websites that are worth looking at are:

Christians for Biblical Equality (www.cbeinternational.org)

The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (www.cbmw.org)