

Article reprinted from *Cross+Way* Issue Spring 2005 No. 96

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THE ROCHESTER REPORT PROVIDING FOR OPPONENTS

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If legislation goes ahead to ordain women as Bishops what will evangelical opponents do?

I take it as read that evangelicals opposed to the consecration of women as Bishops are so because they believe that Scripture does not allow women to be presbyters. I hope we are not sexist, though I do not doubt that this is how others see us.

There is a view expressed in the Rochester report that the Apostle Paul could not have imagined what the world of today would be like. But we, as Anglicans believe that the Bible is not just the word of men but the Word of God. We believe firmly that God did know what life would be like today and that His Word stands forever. We are not dissenters, nor continuing doubters; we are part of the overwhelming majority of the Church of Christ through history who have held that only men should occupy the office of presbyter.

The Rochester Report sets out four possible ways in which the Church might make provision for those who believe this innovation to be wrong. How might evangelicals respond to these? I will consider three of the options and an alternative approach in this article and consider the fourth option, a new province, in the next article.

A code of practice.

This is a dead duck. Apart from the fact that this does nothing to meet the principles of those opposed, the experience of Church Society Trust, in patronage work, is that codes of practice are honoured as much in the breach as in the observance. Some are scrupulously fair and follow them to the letter. Others have never read them. Many new Bishops do not feel bound by decisions made by their predecessors. And a few handle them the same way they handle the Bible – ‘it is all a matter of interpretation’, which means ‘this is what I think it should have said’. It is sad to say it, but if the provision is not in legislation it will not be worth the paper it is written on.

Extended ministry

The report describes two possible forms of extended ministry. In both there would be provision made in every Diocese of a male Bishop who would exercise Episcopal ministry to those who request it in the eventuality of a female Bishop being appointed as Diocesan Bishop. The difference between the two alternatives is that in one the parish petitions the Diocesan Bishop for this provision and in the other they petition the Archbishop. This is a peculiar distinction since it seems to rest on the fact that if the Diocesan is a woman no parish would wish to petition her for the oversight of another, but would be willing to petition the Archbishop. For this to work the Church must undertake not to allow a woman to become an Archbishop.

This option will certainly not satisfy Anglo-catholics, but it may be acceptable to some evangelicals. After all we do not believe that Bishops are essential to the Church, rather they are for the good of the Church. In the past some evangelical Churches have often survived for years with only minimal contact with their Bishop. We wish most of all to be left alone to get on with gospel ministry and can quite happily do without all the politics and structures. Moreover, whilst remaining personally convinced that it is wrong for women to be in positions of oversight many do not wish to make this a cause for breaking fellowship, especially with those who claim the same

commitment to Scripture and to gospel ministry. The provision of acceptable oversight in this way will enable us to continue our own ministry in good conscience. Indeed it may be of positive benefit since we could well find that those assigned to provide such oversight are more orthodox theologically.

It also has to be admitted that evangelicals have been content to minister with rampant liberals as their Bishops, why should we suddenly kick up a fuss when a woman is a Bishop, particularly if that woman were otherwise orthodox, even evangelical?

The first problem that many will see with this approach is that this is not alternative oversight, just extended. Those who feel more strongly about the role and value of episcopacy will see most acutely that they are in fact still under the authority of a female Diocesan Bishop. Secondly, those churches pursuing this option could find themselves increasingly isolated. Thirdly, could the place of conservative evangelicals really be secured in the long term? We know already that there is a strong bias in some Dioceses against Oak Hill College because of its *perceived* bias against women. We know from statements made by those involved in such appointments that some consider that conservative evangelicals cannot be Diocesan Bishops because there is a perception that they cannot minister to the whole church, whereas apparently revisionist Bishops can.

Extended Episcopal ministry would safeguard individuals and churches for a time, but it is hard to see how this could work in the long term. The one possibility is that it will provide breathing room during which we can seek to persuade others of the rightness of our views and to grow churches.

A different approach

The next option to consider is not one set out in the Rochester report. Many see the issue of women's ministry as important but not the most important issue facing us today. The whole Anglican Communion is being torn apart by a revisionist agenda, particularly in relation to sexual ethics, and we have many Bishops in this country who are open or closet revisionists. To focus on the single issue of women Bishops will have the effect of making it appear that this is the most important matter. In addition, many believe that given this wider conflict over sexual morality now is not the time to drive a wedge between those who agree on issues of sexual morality but disagree about gender roles.

These wider issues have not yet reached the point where there are clear structural changes being pursued within the Church of England, although the development of such structural has already begun in the United States and Canada. Therefore, at this stage, the preservation and promotion of biblical orthodoxy is being pursued by other means. There is no particular co-ordinated response but the work that is being done proceeds from various common commitments and has been initiated mostly by larger evangelical churches. There are initiatives in terms of recruitment, training for ministry, church planting, fellowship, teaching and so on. In general these are developing through evangelical networks that are non-denominational. These things are not really new, evangelicals have operated in this way for perhaps the last 200 years. However, there is now reason to think that if the Church of England continues its present rate of decline these networks may emerge as a focus of continuing evangelical work. Alongside all these broader things is the particular Anglican concern to try to provide the benefits of Episcopal ministry that many now find themselves lacking. How this develops remains to be seen but with the apparent success of initiatives such as the Anglican Mission in America there does now seem to be a sense that something can be achieved, even if not in an identical way. Moreover, the recent Primates meeting has specifically called for a Panel of Reference to be established by the Archbishop of Canterbury 'to supervise the adequacy of pastoral provision' made for those 'in serious theological dispute with their diocesan bishop'.

Despite the attractiveness of this approach there are still problems and potential problems with it. There is, first of all, a danger that it may appear to make the issue of faithfulness to Scripture in matters of gender roles of less importance than faithfulness in sexual expression. Many believe that the two things are linked and our failure as Christians to uphold the total biblical picture of gender, role relationship and the proper place of sexual conduct lies at the root of both these and other problems.

A further danger is in the relationship of evangelicals to law. The forebears of Church Society were not only proud of their adherence to the laws of the Church of England but were prepared to take action against those who broke such rules. But we also know that in earlier generations, especially during the evangelical revivals, the Church actually tried to use the law to suppress gospel preaching. There were disputes and divisions at the time as people had to decide how to respond to this. With the benefit of hindsight, who was right? I don't think it is possible to say. There were many men and women who heard the gospel because of the lawlessness of evangelical preachers. They established new groups that flourished and spread the gospel widely. Yet the fear of the conformists was also vindicated, many of these groups became sects, sometimes driven by strong personalities, some drifted into gross error and heresy and many over the course of time seem to have decayed even further and more dramatically than the church they left behind. Our vision for episcopacy and the value of a connectional church is that this should provide real discipline and safeguards against error. This may seem a bit of a pipe dream at present, but we see the dangers if such checks and balances are eroded. Many are acutely conscious of this and for this reason wish to see any further developments within a wider Anglican context so that there is at least some continuity and external check, albeit rather loose and entirely voluntary.

If all else fails in relation to provision for the opponents of women's ministry, and if the Church of England finds itself more out of kilter on other issues with the orthodox majority within the Communion then I can see this option gaining more and more momentum.