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**WOMEN BISHOPS AND A RELIGIOUS SOCIETY**

By David Phillips

In 2006 and 2007 Church Society responded, jointly with Reform and the Fellowship of Word and Spirit, to two different working parties on Women Bishops. We responded positively to proposals then being considered to make provision for those who are opposed. In particular we were arguing for an extension of the current arrangements for flying Bishops such that parishes would petition a regional panel for oversight. An agreement would then be reached between the parish and the panel over who should provide that oversight. The legislation would have allowed the Bishop to have jurisdiction, including over matters such as appointments, discipline and ordination. Though some progress was made it never reached legislation and in particular one set of proposals (called T.E.A.) was hijacked in the House of Bishops.

As the legislation went forward the idea of a religious society has arisen. The irony is that religious societies are historically monastic and they were much diminished at the Reformation partly because of the corruption within them and because they were not accountable to the Diocesan Bishop, or even to the civil authorities. In general they were accountable directly to Rome. Nevertheless, religious societies give a useful historical precedent and they are being considered in other settings such as mission societies and for the Church Army. They illustrate that the idea of a Bishop having jurisdiction over a strict and well-defined territory is a modern fiction rather than a historical reality.

The Bishop of Dover spoke warmly in favour of a Religious Society last year and the Bishop of London made definite proposals to the Revision Committee, but neither made much progress. Parishes, and possibly individuals, would become members of the Religious Society. By some means or other the Society would then be responsible for providing some degree of episcopal oversight for those parishes. The Society would thus need to have Bishops who were associated with it. They could be existing Diocesan or Suffragan Bishops, they could be retired Bishops, or they could be consecrated specifically for the work of the Society.

Such a Religious Society is very similar to the concept of a Panel as we were proposing four years ago. There is nothing to stop such a Society being founded now, but what needs to be resolved is what sort of oversight the Bishops could exercise and what is the standing of such Bishops in relation to the rest of the Church.

**Through Legislation**

Attempts have been made to ensure that the legislation to consecrate women as Bishops would make provision for the existence of a Religious Society (possibly more than one). Parishes could by resolution affiliate to the Society and that by doing so jurisdiction would transfer in respect of certain functions (ordination, discipline, appointments) to the designated Bishop. This has failed, so far. However, it is still possible that pressure from Diocesan Synods will lead the General Synod to re-consider the matter.

It will be seen immediately that the result of such an arrangement could look a bit messy. In all other respects a parish would remain part of the Diocesan structure. In relation to the Diocesan Synod, Board of Education etc they would relate as at present. Finance is a sticking point since inevitably some money would be required to be diverted to fund the new arrangements. No-one is pretending it would be pretty. When we made representation at one of the committees a few years ago one of the Bishops said that it sounded like we were removing all the best bits of oversight, and

we had to agree this was the case.

### **Through a Code of Practice**

Without action by Diocesan Synods the door has been closed on legislative provision. However, it is possible that the Code of Practice currently being drawn up could be based on the existence of a Religious Society. The Code would recognise the Society and allow situations under which a Diocesan Bishop could delegate oversight to a Bishop from the Society. But, this would be delegated authority and if the Diocesan Bishop were a woman most of those opposed to the consecration of women would be unable to accept this.

However, whilst the Code is still being considered, and the possibility of legislation still remains the idea of a Society is being actively considered. It may even be that if it was brought into being one or two sympathetic Diocesan Bishops might allow an experiment to take place to see how things would work.

### **If all else fails**

If this legislation goes through without adequate provision, then those who cannot accept women Bishops will have to act. If they baton down the hatches they will slowly die and will not be replaced by like minded people. Some may up sticks and leave. The better course is to work together to bring about what is necessary independently of what is being provided. At this stage the creation of a Religious Society is worth pursuing because there is still a window of opportunity, however small. If the window is slammed shut, or proves too small, and the legislation goes ahead a Religious Society may still prove a useful model for the future.

If you have reached the end of these three articles, well done, they are hardly the most riveting subject matter. However, I want to re-iterate that the legislation to permit the consecration of women as Bishops has not yet been agreed, despite how some seem to talk. Until the Final Approval debate at General Synod, probably in 2010, it is not certain that it will go ahead, and the lack of adequate provision makes it more likely it will fail. If it does fail there will most likely be a backlash, but those who have repeatedly opposed adequate provision will bear the lions share of the responsibility.

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