A SUBMISSION TO THE ROCHESTER COMMISSION ON BEHALF OF THE COUNCIL OF REFORM

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The question of women in the episcopate

All Christians acknowledge that the Lord Jesus Christ is head of the Church. It is his Church and, as the Chief Shepherd, he leads and rules his people by his word—the vision in Revelation 1:16, Psalm 2:9/Romans 2:27 and 19:15 extends his authority to all the nations. That word, uniquely revealed to prophets and apostles, we have now as 'God's Word written' (to quote our Articles). It is the supreme authority for the Church. Members of Reform, therefore, believe themselves to be loyal Anglicans in acknowledging the authority and sufficiency of Scripture and in seeking to think and work under that aegis.

Relevant Scriptures (*i.e.*, 1 Tim. 2 & 3, 1 Cor. 11 & 14) appear to draw a clear parallel between the man as head in the human family and a man as presiding over the family of the Church. It is, of course, essential that such headship is exercised ***both*** under the headship of Christ ***and*** in the Spirit of Christ, *i.e.*, sacrificial love and service (as expounded for marriage in Eph. 5: 21-33). But we believe it to be a real and appropriate headship and its weakening or absence leads to a serious diminishing of marriage and family on the one hand and of the church's life and strength on the other. This structure of the family and the congregation, which is endorsed by the Pauline writings as a creation ordinance of permanent significance, is the reason why members of Reform have always been unable to give their conscientious assent to the ordination of women as presbyters. Whatever may be the case elsewhere, in the Church of England the congregation (not the diocese) is the essential unit of church life. Article 19 states: "The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in the which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments be duly ministered…". The presbyter or 'senior man' has a headship in the congregation that the New Testament does not expect

for women. It is unfashionable to say this, but we cannot defer to fashion in preference to the Word of God. There may be greater evils in the modern life of Anglicanism, and we believe that there are, but this too is a piece of disobedience that cannot be overlooked. Members of Reform wish to make it clear that they value and endorse the unique ministry of women in the congregation. Over sixty incumbents who are members of Reform employ women in spiritual ministry in their congregations.

Difficulties with a female presbyterate

We are not, therefore, able to approach the question of the consecration of women to the episcopate on the basis of the affirmative vote which, after several negative votes, the General Synod gave to the ordination of women as presbyters nine years ago. We do not believe that doctrinal questions can be decided by majority voting, and we continue to be convinced that this affirmative vote was a mistaken decision, in which the General Synod departed from the Church of England's commitment to the authority of Scripture (Articles VI and XX), and which the Church will sooner or later have to reverse, as has happened in some other Churches elsewhere (notable the Lutheran Church of Latvia and the Presbyterian Church of Australia).

We are encouraged in this conviction by various other considerations:

(1) The extent to which the synodical debate on the ordination of women to the priesthood was dominated by untheological arguments, such as simply human rights or secular public opinion.

(2) The theory of 'reception', propounded by the Eames Commission and endorsed by the 1998 Lambeth Conference, according to which any decisions taken in favour of the ordination of women are merely provisional until agreement is reached either for them or against them.

(3) The thesis of the House of Bishops' *Second Report on the Ordination of Women to the Priesthood* (1988), that the ordination of women as presbyters and their consecration as bishops were in principle the same thing, but that their consecration as bishops was undesirable.

(4) The deep divisions caused in the Church of England and

the Anglican Communion by the decision to ordain women as presbyters, and the damage it has done to ecumenical relations.

(5) The difficulty that bishops often have in placing women clergy, and the deterrent effect that the progressive feminising of the Church tends to have upon male ordinands.

The episcopate and its reform

Turning, now, more directly to the subject of the episcopate, we agree with the report of the House of Bishops that the ordination of women as presbyters and their consecration as bishops are in principle the same thing. We cannot accept the thesis of Bishop Kirk and others that the apostles themselves instituted the episcopate and the presbyterate as two distinct offices. In the New Testament (especially in Acts 20:17, 28 and Titus 1:5, 7) the titles 'presbyter' and 'bishop' are given to the same people, and the separation of roles came somewhat later. When the episcopate first emerged as a separate office, from the late first century onwards, the bishop could be realistically thought of as having an enhanced responsibility for the presbyteral tasks of ministering the Word and Sacraments and exercising pastoral care, besides performing what were now the exclusively Episcopal tasks of ordaining and (in the Western Church) confirming. This is still the case in some countries today, though hardly in England. Here, dioceses are so unusually large that bishops have to spend much of their time on administration, to the detriment of more important teaching and pastoral activities, and their laity scarcely get to know them. We have become so used to living with bishops at long distance that it is thought of as normal, but in our view it is desirable for something much more like the primitive situation to be restored in England too.

Difficulties with a female episcopate:

(1) the same objections magnified

But any approximation to the primitive situation would be grossly distorted if women were consecrated to the episcopate. The early Church did not even have women presbyters, and every objection to the ordination of women as presbyters is magnified when applied to the consecration of women as bishops. The Presbyterian theologian J.J. von Allmen argues in 1972 ('Women and the Threefold Ministry', in

Bruce and Duffield eds., *Why Not?)* that the office to which headship really and unmistakably applies is that of the bishop. The former Bishop of Chester persuaded some Evangelicals in the General Synod that they could conscientiously vote for the ordination of women as presbyters because the real sticking-point ought to be their consecration as bishops. And it is a historical fact that the qualifications demanded for the episcopate have sometimes been not just greater in degree but different in kind from those demanded for the presbyterate: in the Eastern Orthodox Church to this day, only single men can become bishops, though married men can become priests. We do not press these considerations, because we believe that the offices of presbyter and bishop are in principle one and the same. But it is clear that the objections that prevent us from recognising women presbyters would even more emphatically prevent us from recognising women bishops. It would be a still more flagrant repudiation of the teaching of the apostle on male headship. It would be a still more arrogant assertion of the 'right' of women to be ordained (nobody has such a right), claiming now a right for them to be consecrated bishop. It would violate the idea of 'reception', compounding the problem by taking a further step before the issue of women presbyters has itself been settled. And it would deepen the divisions and alienations that already exist, by pouring salt into the wounds. The episcopate, instead of being a focus of unity, would become a focus of division. Whether the Church of England and the Anglican Communion could long survive such a development is a very open question. The increasingly rapid decay and disintegration of the Anglican Churches in the USA and Canada, which pioneered these ecclesiastical adventures, suggest that the answer is 'No'.

Difficulties with a female episcopate: (2) additional objections

Besides magnifying the existing objections to a female presbyterate, the consecration of women bishops would also be faced with objections peculiar to itself. This arises not out of any essential difference between the two offices, but out of the particular duties that bishops alone perform. Bishops preside over dioceses, which contain many parishes; they confirm the laity in those parishes; they ordain, institute and

license clergy for those parishes, and receive from the clergy an oath of canonical obedience. Anglo-Catholic clergy have already broken communion with bishops who ordain women presbyters, on the grounds that they have performed heretical acts. Evangelical clergy have on the whole not done this, contenting themselves with being out of communion with the women presbyters concerned. But the advent of women bishops would change matters. We believe that many, if not all, members of Reform would be unable conscientiously to accept confirmation, ordination, institution or licensing from a woman bishop, or to make an oath of canonical obedience to her, since this would be to recognise the headship which she was improperly exercising; also that they would be unable to regard as truly ordained the clergy, male as well as female, whom a woman bishop had ordained. The least that an Evangelical would require, if living and working in a diocese where the bishop was a woman, would be the ministrations of a PEV.

Contingency planning

Of course, there would not at first be a woman bishop presiding or assisting in every diocese, still less a woman archbishop at Canterbury or York. This would simply be the goal of their ambition. Nevertheless, when women bishops were approved, the writing would be on the wall. In those circumstances, Reform would probably have to add its voice to those asking Parliament and the Monarch not to confirm the legislation until it had been agreed to give the dissentients a separate province, and when this had been conceded the members of Reform and their PEVs would probably join it as a body. We venture to add, that the loss to the other two provinces, both numerically and financially, would not be slight.

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